

Roots of political correctness in the US

This page offers you basic background information on the PC movement in America. You may find it helpful in doing the tasks on the Intercultural page in Topic 4. On the next page you'll find extra tasks, including cartoon analysis, and a look at the German language and political correctness. (Look up any words you don't understand in a dictionary.)

Starting in the 1970s, after major progress had been made in achieving equal rights for women and ethnic minorities in the US, the civil rights movement sought to make a difference in the area of **language**. Many felt that by creating new terms and/or avoiding others, more people – i. e. everyone who *wasn't* a white male – would feel fully and properly represented in American society. Why? Because those people would no longer feel offended by certain old terms. And that is the central idea behind 'PC': *To avoid using terms that could offend others*. Here are two central goals of the PC movement as regards making certain areas of language less offensive to as many people as possible:

1. To do away with terminology reflecting a *white, European and/or Christian* world view:

- Native tribes in North America no longer wanted to be known exclusively by a name given to them by a *European* explorer – and explorer who *falsely* thought he had landed in India. So the term *Native American* became a more modern, more politically correct alternative to *Indian*.
 - At the same time, black became *African-American*.
- Note:* The PC terms are most important in *formal, written contexts*. In everyday conversation, it is common for people of all races to use both the old and the new terms.

2. To make a person's *gender* a non-issue, especially in the job world:

- The idea that a job must always be seen from the perspective of a certain *sex* – usually the male sex – seemed extremely outdated, it was felt. So, *inclusive* language was needed that didn't *exclude* anybody from any particular job: *flight attendant* replaced *stewardess* as a gender-neutral term, and *policeman* became *police officer*, etc. This became particularly noticeable in job ads, which were suddenly written in a way that didn't automatically assume only the member of a certain sex could do a certain job.

In the two above areas, the PC movement has been very successful in America. Most people have become so used to thinking in a PC way that it has become second nature: "Am I using the right language around my female/gay/lesbian/ethnic colleagues?" Or: "Is my new joke PC enough, or will people think I'm racist/homophobic/misogynist/ageist?" These are questions Americans asked themselves more and more. In a *third* area, however, there has been much controversy as to whether the PC movement has gone too far. The controversy surrounds this idea:

3. To take away *negative connotations* about personality (e.g. regarding health issues or appearance):

- Instead of saying someone is *blind*, a PC alternative would be *visually challenged*.
- Or: Instead of saying someone is physically or mentally handicapped, one could say he/she is *physically challenged* or *mentally challenged*.
- According to this logic, a short person would be *vertically challenged*, and so on.

Advocates of PC say this use of *euphemisms* (i. e. phrases that make things 'sound better') is the logical next step in creating a more inoffensive vocabulary. Critics, on the other hand, say it's more of a joke than a sign of respect; that words like *blind* or *short* are perfectly neutral, as opposed to a term like *Indian*. And anyway: Who's to judge what's 'acceptable' and what not, they ask? This debate is far from over in the US.

1 Discussion

What is your opinion of the following subjects?

- the main idea behind the PC movement
- the three concrete goals for language improvement described above

FACT FILE

PC language has become a fact not only in the US, but also in the UK and many other countries. In Germany, for instance, PC is commonly used, but the debate has never been as heated as in the US.

2 Two cartoons with a PC theme

Cartoon 1:

This cartoon deals with the subject of euphemisms as described on the previous page.

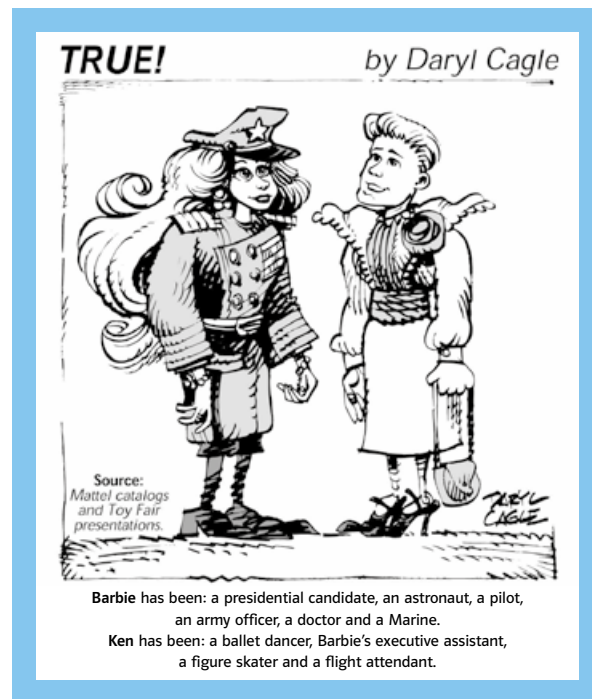
1. Explain which words are euphemisms, and which words they replace.
2. Why is this cartoon poking fun at euphemisms?



Cartoon 2:

This cartoon is based on the famous 'Barbie' and 'Ken' dolls for children, which came on the market over 50 years ago.

1. What do you know about the original dolls? What are their messages to young girls and boys regarding the sexes?
2. Now explain the new versions of the dolls in the cartoon in terms of political correctness.



3 Political correctness in German expressions

a) Discuss the German sentences below. In which ways are they politically incorrect?

1. **Stellenanzeige:** „Busfahrer mit Erfahrung gesucht.“

2. **Mutter/Vater zu Kindern:** „Ihr benehmt euch ja wie die Zigeuner!
Ich nehme euch nie wieder mit in ein gutes Restaurant!“

3. **Ein leitender Angestellter zum anderen:** „Wir brauchen eine neue, junge und hübsche Sekretärin.“

4. **Eine Freundin zur anderen:** „Mensch, ich hätte gerade so Lust auf eine Schachtel Negerküsse!“

5. **Zu einem italienischen Freund, der gerade einen Witz erzählte:** „Du Spaghetti-Fresser, du! Immer wenn du aus Italien zurückkommst, hast du gute Witze im Gepäck!“

6. **Ansage:** „Alle Schüler sollen sich in der Turnhalle versammeln.“

7. **Ein Mann zu einem Mann:**
„Eine Freundin, Sarah, hat neulich bei der Lufthansa angefangen.“
– „Und wie gefällt's ihr als Flugbegleiterin dort?“

b) In groups, make the problematic expressions politically correct. If you feel there is no improvement for certain expressions, explain why not.

Lösungen/Lösungsvorschläge

1

1. Individuelle Antworten

2

Cartoon 1:

1. 'The comfortable' is a euphemism for 'the rich'. 'The moderately impoverished' is a euphemism for 'the poor'.
2. *Lösungsvorschläge:*
The cartoon is trying to ask the question: How much PC is too much? Will society soon reach a point when everyday words like 'rich' and 'poor' are no longer acceptable and need to be replaced by euphemisms? What 'old' words will be left to use?

Cartoon 2:

Lösungsvorschläge:

1. The Barbie and Ken dolls went on the market in the late 1950s/ early 1960s. This was a time when the roles of the sexes were still extremely traditional. The message to girls: You must be white, blond and slim. Your goal in life is to be attractive to men. The message to boys: Barbie (= all girls) wants you to look strong, blond, and masculine.
2. In the new versions of the dolls in the cartoon, the sex roles have been reversed. Barbie has become an independent woman. She has had job experience in areas usually associated with men. Ken has done jobs usually associated with women and/or gay men. He doesn't feel the need to be 'big and strong' for Barbie anymore.

3

a) *Lösungsvorschläge:*

1. Die Anzeige bezieht sich nur auf Männer.
2. Es ist nicht in Ordnung, „Zigeuner“ als Beispiel für schlechtes Benehmen zu nehmen. Der politisch korrekte Begriff ist „Sinti“ und/oder „Roma“.
3. Die Männer sprechen nur von einer Frau, wenn es um die Stelle als Sekretär/-in geht. Außerdem: Wieso müssen Frauen immer hübsch, aber Männer nicht immer gut aussehend sein? Das ist sexistisch.
4. „Negerküsse“ ist für viele Deutschsprachige absolut politisch inkorrekt, genauso wie „Mohrenköpfe“.

5. Auch wenn es hier nett gemeint ist, eine Person aus Italien auf Spaghetti zu reduzieren ist beleidigend; Deutsche möchten auch nicht als „Krauts“ bezeichnet werden.
6. Hier ist die Rede nur von männlichen Schülern.
7. Hier wird automatisch davon ausgegangen, dass eine Frau, die für eine Fluggesellschaft arbeitet, „nur“ als Stewardess arbeiten kann.

b) *Lösungsvorschläge:*

1. „Busfahrer/-in“ oder „Busfahrer/Busfahrerin“ wäre richtig gewesen.
2. Man braucht sich nicht auf irgendein Volk zu beziehen, um seinen Kindern zu sagen, dass sie sich schlecht benehmen. Einfach auf solche rassistischen Verweise verzichten.
3. Die Männer hätten sagen sollen, sie brauchen eine qualifizierte Person, egal ob männlich oder weiblich, für die Stelle als Sekretär/-in.
4. Wie schon bei Satz 2 bemerkt: Man braucht keine rassistischen Verweise für eine Süßigkeit oder für irgend etwas anderes; man sollte immer nach neutralen Begriffen suchen, die schon im Sprachgebrauch sind, wie etwa „Schokokuss“ oder „Schaumkuss“.
5. Wenn man schon kumpelhafte Ausdrücke benutzt, dann sollte man keine Begriffe verwenden, mit denen ein Mensch mit Essen verglichen wird.
6. Hier ist die Rede nur von männlichen Schülern. Es hätte „Alle Schülerinnen und Schüler...“ heißen sollen.
7. Der eine Mann hätte fragen können, was Sarah bei der Lufthansa genau macht. Oder nur fragen können: „Und wie gefällt's ihr dort?“, d. h. ohne die Stellenbezeichnung zu erwähnen.