

NOTES & COMMENTS

The *Style Manual's* Politics

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The release of a new Commonwealth government *Style Manual* is not normally a major event on the publishing calendar. In 1988, though, a new edition attracted media attention for its chapter on 'non-sexist' language. No longer was it acceptable to use language that made women invisible, stereotyped them, trivialised their activities or portrayed them as subordinate to men. Six years later we have a fifth edition of the *Style Manual*. Unlike its predecessor, the fifth edition did not generate media interest. They missed a story. What it has to say about the appropriate choice of words is an interesting barometer of how the language has changed since 1988, and a foreboding sign of what might be to come.

Some of the fourth edition's suggestions have not caught on. We still don't have many fisherpersons, there are more postmen than postal delivery officers, the ombudsman has not become the ombud, the leader of the jury remains better known as the foreman, we continue to step over manholes rather than access holes and, where they exist at all, tea ladies have not become tea attendants. What is more noticeable, though, is how widespread non-sexist language has become. Where once most people – like for instance the authors of the third edition of the *Style Manual* – used the generic 'he' without giving the matter a second thought, now most writers are very careful in using 'male' words to describe humans in general. This part of the language has been politicised. Using non-sexist terminology acknowledges the feminist claim that women are discriminated against through language; using the old terminology is an act of defiance against the new language orthodoxy. The act of making 'sexist' language a political choice is an important part of promoting change. Using 'sexist' language invites trouble, so for many of us – whatever we think of the theory underlying 'non-sexism' – it makes life easier to phrase things in a 'non-discriminatory' way. Sometimes it does not seem to be worth going to the barricades over a pronoun.

The fifth edition of the *Style Manual* is interesting because it seeks to politicise and change many more areas of the language than just those referring to the sexes. It has several new targets – racist language, treatment of 'ethnolinguistic minorities', portrayal of

people with disabilities, and portrayal of people in relation to age.

The emphasis in these sections is on the often unnoticed ways in which discrimination is expressed in language. For example, the headline 'TURK, 39, DENIES MURDER CHARGE' is racist because the ethnicity of 'in-groups' charged with crimes is rarely emphasised. Similarly, to talk about an 'ethnic' Australian is potential-

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ly pejorative, because all Australians have an ethnic group, not just the non-Anglo Australians to whom the label 'ethnic' normally applies. And those who had just gotten used to saying 'first name' instead of 'Christian name' need to re-educate themselves again – 'first name' is not appropriate to the naming procedures of some cultural groups in Australia. Use 'personal name' or 'given name' instead. We must avoid, too, 'obscuring the presence' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. According to the *Style Manual* expressions such as 'Captain Cook discovered Australia' or describing Australia as 'terra nullius' can be 'quite insulting'.

New sensitivity is required in discussing people with disabilities. If I had phrased that last sentence 'New sensitivity is required in discussing the disabled' I'd already have been insensitive. To describe someone as disabled is to 'describe them only or merely in terms of their disability'. Sometimes this sensitivity requires us to be aware of some very subtle nuances of meaning. Even those who think themselves well-versed in the sensitive use of language can fail to meet the standards of the *Style Manual*. For example, while it is appropriate to describe blind people as 'visually impaired', it can be inappropriate to describe the deaf as 'hearing impaired'. Why? Because some profoundly deaf people have their own language and consider themselves a separate group from hearing people. Portrayal of people in

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relation to age is also a minefield of hypersensitivities. We are to avoid stereotyping older people (note that: 'older people', not 'the old' or 'the aged') as frail or a burden on society. Similarly younger people (not 'inexperienced youth' or 'juveniles') should not be stereotyped as rebellious, immature, or always vibrant.

When writing, we should avoid giving gratuitous offence. We don't need the *Style Manual* to tell us not to refer to Aborigines as boongs or coons. Words like these are intended to offend, and are taken as being offensive by their targets. But many of the *Style Manual's* recommendations seem designed to stamp out meanings that may never have been there in the first place. To describe someone as 'old' or 'disabled' is not to define them solely in terms of characteristics supposedly stereotypical of the old and disabled. To headline a story 'TURK, 39, DENIES MURDER CHARGE' does not stereotype Turks any more than it stereotypes 39 year olds. It seems to be a flight of fantasy to think that referring to someone as 'old' rather than as an 'older person' or an accused as a 'Turk' could lead to any discrimination against the elderly (can I say that?) or Turks. People do not inevitably assume that because someone is a member of a certain group they have the supposed characteristics of that group. Nor do they necessarily conclude that because a member of a group has a particular characteristic all other members share that characteristic. The authors of the *Style Manual* have very little confidence in our ability to know when generalisations are appropriate and when they are not.

It is tempting to laugh off many of the *Style Manual's* suggestions as silly political correctness. We seem to be dealing in trivia that makes no difference one way or the other. Whether or not we refer to over-65s as 'old' or 'older', not many of them are likely to notice and nobody's view of them is likely to change. No person with a disability is seriously likely to be treated any worse or better by being called that or 'disabled'. That nothing will result from the language trends fostered by the *Style Manual's* authors is an optimistic reading of the situation. By politicising references to so many groups in society the *Style Manual* risks encouraging undesirable political and cultural trends.

Fuss about largely imaginary insults and slights is symptomatic of a wider 'victim culture', in which groups locate the source of their problems in the attitudes of others toward them. There is enough truth in this theory of group failure that it cannot be dismissed out of hand, but unfortunately it is a truth that does more harm than good. For groups who think they've suffered a wrong, in focusing on language they are picking the wrong target. It is not likely that language change is ever going to be a significant factor in improving the status of any group in society. Language is among the last things to change, as people realise that the words they use no longer fit with their experience. If we now use fewer words ending in 'man' it is because it seems incongruous to use that suffix when so many of the people occupying the described roles are women,

not because our sexism has been cured by changed terminology. If people talk about Koories rather than coons it is because they have already come to respect those Aboriginal cultures, not because a word change has washed away their racism. Language change is a reflection, not a cause, of changed attitudes. Our recent history suggests strongly that the best strategy for groups that see themselves as marginalised is to demonstrate why they are worthy of respect. Time spent playing word games is time not spent on superior ways of achieving the same goals.

Attempting to enforce language change may even be counterproductive. Heavyhanded attempts at censorship can easily foster ill-feeling and unleash a backlash from 'oppressor' groups. Recent opinion poll research in the United States, reported in Paul Sniderman and Thomas Piazza's book *The Scar of Race*, indicates that affirmative action programs encourage white racism. In surveys designed to test attitudes toward blacks, white respondents were more likely to come up with racist views if they were asked first about affirmative action than if they were not. Resentment at particular policies can spill over into dislike of groups seen to be getting unduly privileged treatment.

Language change which comes from fear of disapproval rather than genuinely changed attitudes is unlikely to do the 'victims' much good, and insofar as promoting it distracts them from more productive activities or induces a backlash, campaigns for it are positively harmful. But this is not the only reason we should be reluctant to embark on *Style Manual* type endeavours to change the language. The problem here is not so much the proposed language changes themselves, but rather the consequences of encouraging hypersensitivities. If people are persuaded to think the words of others are a significant cause of harm, they will increase the cost of such speech. Those who upset delicate sensitivities risk social censure.

The trouble is that fear of the consequences of giving offence can stop us saying things that need to be said. While some may think our culture is now too frank about sexual matters, there is not much doubt that freer discussion of contraception, sexual disease and the like has helped avoid or lessen many problems of the past. These days some people think fear of being accused of racism hinders proper analysis of the causes of Aboriginal poverty. In the rush to rid ourselves of harmful words we forget that silence can also hurt.

The *Style Manual* itself is not likely to be solely responsible for any of these undesirable possibilities. It has not featured on the best seller lists, and most people who buy it do so for its sensible advice on such matters as punctuation and the use of capital letters. But it is part of a worrying trend toward using language as an instrument of social change. Such a project is doomed to failure, but it can do a lot of damage on the way. ■