Racism in the English Language

The following article has been excerpted from <u>Racism in the English Language</u>, a booklet that gives neither author nor publisher.

<u>Languages and Culture:</u> An integral part of any culture is its language. Language not only develops in conjunction with society's historical, economic and political evolution, but also reflects that society's attitudes and thinking. Language not only expresses ideas and concepts, but actually shapes thought. If one accepts that our dominant white culture is racist, then one would expect our language- an indispensable transmitter of culture- to be racist as well. Whites, as the dominant group, are not subjected to the same abusive characterization by our language that people of color receive.

Before beginning our analysis of racism in the language, we would like to quote a part of a TV film review which shows the connection between language and culture.

"Depending on one's culture, one interacts with time in very distinct fashion. One example which gives some cross-cultural insights into the concept of time is language. In Spanish, a watch is said to "walk." In English, the watch "runs". In German, the watch "functions." And in French, the watch "marches". In Indian culture of the Southwest, people do not refer to time in this way. The value of the watch is displaced with the value of "what time it's getting to be." Viewing these five cultural perspectives on time, on can see some definite emphasis and values that each culture places on time. For example, a cultural perspective may provide a clue to the development of the negative stereotype of the slow and lazy Mexican who lives and exists in the Anglo value system, where time "flies," the watch "runs" and "time is money."

<u>Color Symbolism</u>: They symbolism of white as positive and black as negative is pervasive in our culture. "Good guys" wear white hats and ride white horses, "bad guys" wear black hats and ride black horses. Angels are white and devils are black. The definition of black includes "without any moral light or goodness; evil, wicked, indicating disgrace, sinful," while that of white includes "morally pure, spotless, innocent, free from evil."

<u>Ethnocentrism or From a White Perspective:</u> Implicit in the English usage of master/slave concept is ownership of the slave by the master; the captives (slaves) were African individuals with human worth, right and dignity and the term "slave" denounces that human quality, thereby making the mass rape of African women by white captors more acceptable in the minds of people and setting a mental frame of reference legitimizing the atrocities perpetuated against African people.

<u>Passive Tense:</u> For instance some history texts will discuss how European immigrants came to the United States seeking a better life and expanded opportunities, but will note

that "slaves were brought to America." Not only does this omit the destruction of Africa societies and families, but ignores the role of northern merchants and southern slaveholders in the profitable trade of human beings. Other books will state that the continental railroad "was built" conveniently omitting information about Chinese laborer who built it or the oppression that they suffered.

Politics and Terminology: "Culturally deprived," "economically disadvantaged" and "underdeveloped" are other terms which mislead and distort our awareness of reality. The application of the term "culturally deprived" to third world children in this society reflects a value judgment. It assumes that the dominant whites are cultured and all other are without culture. In fact, third world children are bicultural, and many are bilingual, having grown up and their own culture as well as absorbing the dominant culture. In many ways, they are equipped with skills and experiences which white youth have been deprived of, since most white youth develop in a monocultural, monolingual environment. Burgess suggests that the term "culturally deprived" be replaced with "culturally dispossessed," and that term "economically disadvantaged" be replaced by economically exploited." Both these terms present a perspective and implication that provide and entirely different frame of reference as to the reality of the third world experience in U.S. society.

Loaded Words and Native Americans: "Discovery" as used in the Euro-American context, implies the right to take what one finds, ignoring the rights of those who already inhabit the "discovered" thing. The white European perspective turns these definitions around to serve the purpose of distorting history and justifying Euro-American conquests of the Native American lands. Euro-Americans are not described in history books as invading Native Americans lands, but rather as defending their homes against "Indian attacks." Since European communities were constantly encroaching on land already occupied, then more honest interpretation would state that it was the Native Americans who were "warding off," "guarding," and "defending" their homelands.

Native American victories are invariably called "massacres," while the indiscriminate killing, extermination and plunder of Native American nations by Euro-Americans is defined as "victory." Distortion of history by the choice of loaded words used to describe historical events is common racist practice. Native Americans as human beings in highly defined and complex societies, cultures, and civilizations, history books use such adjectives as "savages", "beasts," "primitive" and "backward."

Loaded Words and Africans: The generalized application of "tribal" in reference to Africans- as well as failure to acknowledge the religious, cultural and societal diversity of African people- is a decidedly racist dynamic. It is part of the process whereby Euro-Americans justify, or avoid confronting their oppression of third world peoples. Africa has been particularly insulted by this dynamic, as witness to the pervasive "darkest Africa" image. This image, widespread in Western culture, evokes and Africa covered jungles and inhabited by "uncivilized," "cannibalistic," "pagan, "savage" peoples. This "darkest Africa"

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image avoids the geographical reality. Less than 20% of the African continent is wooded, for example. The image also ignores the history of African cultures and civilizations. Ample evidence suggests this distortion of reality was developed as a convenient rationale, for the European and American slave trade and western colonialism.

Qualifying Adjectives: A few final observations. The sports pages of newspapers and magazines call third world athletes by their first names more frequently than white athletes. Many newspaper articles are written in a "we/they" form

Conclusion: To recognize the racism in language is an important first step. Consciousness of the influence on our perceptions can help to negate much of that influence. But it is not enough to simply become aware of the effects of racism in conditioning attitudes. While we may not be able to change the language, we can definitely change our usage of the language. We can avoid using words that degrade people. We can make a conscious effort to use terminology that reflects a progressive perspective, as opposed to distorting perspective.