POLITICS

AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Are we too politically correct?
Or have we simply been conditioned to project a neutral
and upstanding point of view while private prejudices
run rampant between the lines?

BY **CHRISTINA KO**

Welcome to 2019, where political correctness is a beautiful illusion. We have been trained so well to speak carefully, to use the right terms, that turning on that social sensitivity filter as the situation calls for it is as easy and seamless as remembering not to use profanities when you're with your parents.

There's been a lot of talk about the excessive political correctness we all feel obliged to conform to these days. The correct terms for race and sexuality seem to change constantly, and even choosing a Halloween costume for yourself or your children is a real minefield. Feel free to make an off-colour joke among friends, but to do so on social media (even on fast-disappearing platforms like Instastories) signifies a serious problem.

Most days, I think this is a pain in the butt — ass, tush or whichever term I'm currently allowed to use to refer to my posterior. On other days — days in which certain Italian designers take to Instagram to stereotype and slander an entire country — I think to myself, there's a reason we need to be careful about what we say; it's a slippery slope that takes us from "pain in the ass" to calling a country's worth of people an "Ignorant Dirty Smelling Mafia", as one half of this designer duo did a few years ago, an incendiary comment that preceded a cancelled fashion show, an industry outcry and a global furor.

It's probably true that as a world, we've gotten a little bit too linguistically sensitive, to the point that using the correct terminology has come to trump actual politically correct thought. Be racist, sexist, ageist — just don't say it out loud.

Months ago, I interviewed a "non-binary drag queen" who objected to being described as "born female" or "biological female", suggesting that the "right wording" was "assigned female at birth" and whose email signature file stated "my pronoun is they/them". I understood the rationale, especially after speaking to them at length about the violence of language, the stereotypes it reinforces, and the need for terms that connote more fluid designations — but as I reread the article, all the "theys" and "thems" both confused me and detracted from the flow of the story, as well as their message.

Beyond the idea of personal accountability for the words we use, how does the idea of political correctness apply to brands or industries? A couple of years back, American beauty magazine *Allure* decried the use of anti-ageing and banned it from the magazine altogether, trying in its way to force a change in the industry and its obsession with youth — or at least, to get it talking. And talk people did, accomplishing the magazine's goal of getting people to question the whole culture of anti-ageing. But where there's a question, there isn't always an answer, and in this case, there's also been no study on the change of sentiment. As someone who was never quite offended by the systemically ageist connotations of the term anti-ageing, I did wonder — is something politically incorrect if it's never really offended anyone? And does eliminating the term so neatly also eradicate the culture with which it's associated? After all, though it plays a big part in reinforcing stereotypes, political correctness is also not just about language.

Amid the anti-government protests that have swept Hong Kong, luxury brands have scrambled to add the suffix "SAR of China" to the special administrative region on their list of shipping destinations — lest they anger the monied

mainland Chinese public — after netizens took offence when Versace released a shirt that listed Hong Kong and Macau as standalone territories. Politically correct? Yes. Politically neutral? Not quite.

Most global luxury brands want to disassociate themselves from these polarising political battles altogether, but the linguistic clarification comes with certain implications, depending on how you look at it: those in the pro-government camp question why this designation wasn't made clear from the get-go while those standing on the side of democracy see the action as fearful pandering; others simply didn't notice, didn't care then and don't care now. You can't win. In which case, is it really better to stay silent on issues, leaving the public to infer what they wish?

A number of studies, undertaken in the last two years with American consumers, suggest that being politically partisan is a factor that customers do take into account, with a majority preferring to buy from brands whose views align with theirs rather than brands that stay neutral. There are obviously politically correct examples — animal lovers have long supported Stella McCartney's vegan leather and faux fur pieces, while many customers in 2017 were aghast when Nars rescinded its cruelty-free mantra in order to enter the Chinese market, where animal testing is required by law.

Last year, Nike took a chance by choosing ousted NFL star Colin Kaepernick as the face of its campaign, with the slogan, "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." Kaepernick's career took a nosedive after he kneeled during the playing of the American national anthem, as a form of protest against racial injustice. The campaign noise was immense — conservatives burned their Nikes and stock prices fell more than three percent on that trading day. But, as Nike founder Phil Knight told *Fast Company*: "It doesn't matter how many people hate your brand as long as enough people love it... You can't be afraid of offending people." A year on, sales are up and brand value is up.

It's a telling moment for marketers, who have often advised megabrands to stay safe with their activism, whether it's supporting children, a third-world country or a litter of puppies. But millennial marketing, with its focus on strong storytelling, emotional appeal and even gentle controversy, is changing that game.

Maybe it's about time. After all, if political correctness is nothing more than a safe PR statement and a protective shell that fools nobody, why do we bother? I'd take good intentions and bad jokes over a word-perfect opinion any day. Ⓐ

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