

Hey, language police: That's so 'special needs'

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When the Journal Inquirer reported the other day about the criminal sentencing of a "mildly retarded" rapist, representatives of groups serving the mentally retarded protested. The complaint was: "People don't use 'retarded' anymore."

They likened it to the "N word" and the name of the football team, the Redskins. These comparisons were false, as the former was always an epithet, the latter always a way of evoking the supposed savagery of aboriginal people.

But disparagement attached to "retarded" only recently. Indeed, until a few years ago Connecticut had the Department of Mental Retardation. What happened?

Children began abusing the word with their peculiar cruelty. But more than that, society declined to enforce standards. Instead those who behaved decently were told to change their terms. As usual government was the first to be intimidated by the special interest.

Language evolves. Over the long term it belongs not just to the dictionary but to everyone who uses it. But capitulation to the slob culture is fairly resented and resisted. What is happening with "retarded" is only what long ago happened with "Jew." People heard "Jew" spoken with sneering contempt so often and were too meek to object that they began assuming the word itself to be disparaging. So now there are few Jews but lots of "Jewish people."

The language police know perfectly well when disparagement is intended and when it is not, know perfectly well that a newspaper story about a rapist with mental retardation is different from the schoolgirl mocking a classmate as "retarded." But today's culture requires the decent people to change, not the miscreants.

This has taken the country "Through the Looking Glass," wherein Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty berates Alice for doubting that words can be so flexible.

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't -- till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."



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"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master -- that's all."

Alice was too much puzzled to say anything, so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. "They've a temper, some of them -- particularly verbs, they're the proudest. Adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs. However, I can manage the whole lot! Impenetrability! That's what I say!"

If news organizations are to be accurate, credible, and understood, they must stick to descriptive reality and not be intimidated by political correctness, avoiding what is merely preferred by elites or euphemistic and vague, like the term coming into fashion for the retarded and others, "special needs," which, by design, conveys little and can mean anything. Old Hump would be very happy with that.

And what do we do when the kids start sneering at each other, "That's so 'special needs'"?

There will always be cruelty. People should stand up against it, not capitulate to it at the expense of the language.

The big problem for the retarded in Connecticut long has been the shortage of group homes for retarded people living with aging parents, who fear that upon their death there will be no familiar and comfortable home for their kids. Those who care about the retarded should worry more about that than about contriving euphemisms.

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