

Don't Call the Old "Older"

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Introductory

For a change, my subject this time is not law but political correctness. The excuse is that this is a topic that afflicts our legal system today as it afflicts pretty well everything else. Law depends on words, and the correct use of words. This is now crippled and distorted by the vice of political correctness, under which language is changed to spare people's feelings – in the course of which many people's feelings are outraged. Among them mine.

The feelings of outrage which originally prompted this article were revived by a pamphlet just issued by the charity Help the Aged under the title *Dying in older age: reflections and experiences from an older person's perspective*. So we don't have that respectable thing old age any more, we have older age. Thus is our marvellous English language distorted by cranks.

On June 1 the Thought for the Day item on BBC Radio Four was contributed by Rev. Joel Edwards, General Director of the Evangelical Alliance UK. He began by mentioning the Help the Aged pamphlet, using its full title. I was delighted to note that for the rest of his piece he talked about old age, not older age. Thus he avoided sounding ridiculous. But what does that say about Help the Aged and those running it?

It is dismal to record that nearly everyone seems to be a crank of this sort nowadays. As a specialist in the use of English I am asking for a halt to be called to this particular nonsense about old people. It extends not just to the use of "older", but to the general treatment of senior citizens.

Rubbish about road signs

I am what a young relative calls an "octogeranium". My wife Mary and I have a combined age of 160 years. We are both fond of that warning traffic sign which depicts an obviously-devoted, hunched old couple tremulously crossing the road. We think of it as "our" sign, and giggle when we see it.

An article in the *British Medical Association Journal*¹ presents a different view of this much-loved sign.

"It portrays a silhouette of a man with a flexed posture using a cane and leading a kyphotic woman. The same sign is also used for frail, disabled, or blind people, even though many of these people are not old. The sign implies that osteopaenic vertebral collapse and the need for mobility aids are to be expected with physical disability as well as with advancing age."

Well aren't these unfortunate things to be expected, in some people at least? They are certainly a clear indication of frailty, and the need for drivers to take care when old folk may be in the vicinity. In other words the sign serves its purpose, and does its job. What more can one ask? That is what the schoolchildren who designed it thought, when they won a 1981 competition by doing that.

¹ 20 December 2003.

The four authors of the BMA article take a different view. They say elderly people should not be stigmatised as being impaired or inevitably disabled. Here is the dread voice of political correctness, sounding especially inappropriate in the mouths of doctors. It postulates that it is a *stigma* to be shown as having osteopaenic vertebral collapse, instead of that being a misfortune some people just happen to suffer from. The OED2 defines a stigma as “a mark of disgrace or infamy; a sign of severe censure or condemnation”. It is ridiculous to use that extreme term in this connection. The four doctors should be ashamed of themselves.

They should also be ashamed for wasting public time and money in an elaborate and futile research project to find out what road signs other countries use for this purpose. They discovered that of the 118 countries for which they obtained information (think of the expense that involved), only 35 had a road traffic sign featuring one or more of the elderly, blind, deaf, or disabled categories. So what.

Abolishing the old

I return to the nonsense I began with, the politically correct urge to say “older” rather than “old”. Here I would like to pay a limited tribute to Mr Gordon Lishman OBE, Director General of Age Concern England. I recently wrote the following to Mr Lishman, who had sent me a letter appealing for funds.

“I have received a circular letter from you (which I enclose) addressing me as ‘Dear Friend’. This is irritating as I am not your friend. So far as I am aware, we have never been introduced. Even more irritating is the fact that your letter refers in no less than seven places to “older people”. The word “older” is a comparative adjective, referring to a person or thing that has been in existence longer than a named comparative. Thus a child of three is older than a child of two. There is no comparative named in your letter, so I am at a loss to know what you mean by an “older” person. Older than what?

Of course I know that you mean an *old* person, but don’t like to say so. At the age of eighty-two I freely admit to being an old person. Why shouldn’t I? It’s the truth. There is a tendency nowadays to avoid the truth for fear of hurting somebody’s feelings. This is pernicious, and I will have nothing to do with it. Therefore I shall not be responding to your appeal.”

This was a thoroughly cranky letter, typical of an octogenarian lawyer well past his sell-by date. Mr Gordon

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Lishman, the chief executive of a large national charity, must be a busy man. I would not have been surprised if he had ignored my cranky letter, or it had been filtered out without reaching him by officious subordinates. This did not happen. Instead Mr Lishman sent a patient and courteous reply (Of course it’s his business to cope with cranky old fogies: you might say it’s what he is paid for).

“I see you disliked us addressing you as ‘Dear Friend’; I am sorry for the annoyance this caused. Whilst we personalise the survey for delivery purposes, in order that we keep costs as low as possible we were unable to personalise the letter. If you could let us know of a term that you feel is more acceptable, we will certainly consider any suggestions.

With regards to Age Concern using the term ‘older’ rather than ‘old’, the latter term has been found offensive by some people as it is felt that it implies a certain state of health; that a person is old and therefore not able to partake in activities, events etc. Many people who are in their, for example, seventies or eighties can be as healthy as someone in their forties and it is strongly felt that people should not be categorised by their age as we would not categorise people by the *[sic]* gender or race. In this way the term older has been used to avoid stereotyping people.

I hope this explanation has been helpful as to the reasons why we have used certain terminology in our appeals. Once again, I am sorry for the annoyance and inconvenience caused this was certainly not our intention.

Yours sincerely,

Maggie Holmes

Pp Gordon Lishman

Director General”

No, I refuse to cavil because Mr Lishman did not sign the letter personally. And I have not been able to think of an address term that is more acceptable from a complete stranger than “Dear friend”, even though it denigrates the nobility of true friendship. In the old days one would have said “Dear Sir or Madam”, but that is now regarded as too formal. Today we must have first names and friendship before we have even been introduced. I know which I prefer.

I come to the gist of Mr Lishman’s letter. He justifies calling me an “older” person rather than an “old” person (which is truly what I am) on grounds that are nonsense. Calling a person “old” does nothing more than indicate that he or she has reached advanced years in life. It says nothing whatever about their quality of life, state of health, condition of being ga-ga or otherwise, or anything else. If the term has been found offensive by some prickly idiots then those people should have been told to go away and do something useful with their remaining time on earth instead of annoying sensible folk with silly and crotchety points that have no substance whatever. Instead of that, because so many people take notice and act accordingly, the idiots are in effect changing the English language with their irritating nonsense.

Stereotyping

Then there is that statement that it is strongly felt that people should not be categorised by their age as we would not categorise people by gender or race. This too is the most absurd example of political correctness. There are males and females in this world. We are not going to abandon simple pronouns like he and she because they categorise people as one or the other. Similarly with race. It is not yet regarded even by extremists as improper to describe a person as French or African.

As for stereotyping, it no more stereotypes people to call them old than it does to call them young. Here the following comment by the anthropologist Kate Fox, daughter of the famous anthropologist Robin Fox, is relevant.

“‘Well, I hope you’re going to get beyond the usual stereotypes’ was [a] common response when I told people I was doing research for a book on Englishness. This comment seemed to reflect an assumption that a stereotype is almost by definition ‘not true’, and that the truth lies somewhere else – wherever ‘beyond’ might be. I find this rather strange, as I would naturally assume that, although not necessarily ‘the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but’ stereotypes about English national character probably contain at least a grain or two of truth. They do not, after all, just come out of thin air, but must have germinated and grown from *something*.”²

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² Kate Fox, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* (Hodder, 2004) p. 22 (emphasis in original).