



thumbsuck

It may surprise those critics of English-language newspapers (there don't seem to be any critics of Afrikaans newspapers) that, middle-class and white male dominated as they are, they have for some time tried to play the politically correct ball. Reminiscing through the Argus Company's stylebook circa 1976 (that "year of momentous change" and other clichés) Thumbsuck came across detailed advice on "referring to the races" for reporters and subs (who, we all know, were mostly middle-class white, albeit younger, men).

"The company's newspapers," the stylebook intoned, "are expected to avoid giving offence when classifying races in news reports". Thus, reporters were not to describe Africans as Natives, Bantu or Kaffirs (this edition was before the time of "Plurals").

The political intricacies (or insensitivities) of the period, however, allowed such references (to Bantu and the like) in direct quotations from speeches (when presumably, if one follows the logic here, they must have been less offensive).

Further, African men or women were NOT (the stylebook's caps) to be called "Native boy" or "Native girl" and the term "watch boy" (he who guards the premises) was also banned. The more common "garden boy" is not mentioned, but presumably was frowned upon — although it is still in common usage in "polite" white circles to this day.

The stylebook also advised that the term "non-White" was "rapidly becoming objectionable". Too rapidly, as it turned out, for the author of said text who, a few paragraphs later, recommends reporters:

- "give the names of non-Whites in news reports" and,
- "avoid the practice which dismisses non-Whites as ciphers".

To be fair, this stylistic oversight had been corrected by the 1977 edition.

Of course, matters have become more complex of late and journalists now have to cope with a range of "isms" that extend beyond the sensibilities of race, such as ageism and sexism. A recent (1993) edition of *Working With Words* by Americans Brian Brooks and James Pinson (St Martin's Press, New York) has a chapter on the "isms" by contributor Jean Gaddy Wilson.

Thus, in that land of the terribly politically correct the headline

Grandmother wins election as mayor

is incorrect because it is both ageist (it focuses unduly on age) and sexist (it focuses on a woman's tie to her family rather than the appropriate accomplishment — being elected mayor).

Further, one is also no longer allowed the escape clause afforded by speeches to Argus journalists in the 1970s. Quoting a woman as describing herself as "only a Jewish mother" is wrong, notes Wilson, because it uses a stereotype, and it is "not the journalist's job to perpetuate that stereotype" — even if that is the source's preferred description of herself.

Wilson's advice to writers? Follow one simple rule of writing or speaking to eliminate most biases: "Ask yourself: 'Would I say the same thing about an affluent white man?'"

Ironic that the maligned male should become the yardstick of correct writing. But there is truth in the advice: which reader has read a report describing a male accused as blond, well-built and confident in his Pierre Cardin creation?

For your enlightenment (it really is a rather good book and worth acquiring) American Indians no longer say "Ugh", Eskimos (the correct terms are Inuit or Native Alaskan) no longer rub noses (apparently they never did), African Americans are no longer "soulful", white Americans aren't "pale faces" and, sadly, women are no longer "statuesque", "full-figured", "pert" or "petite". But, to be fair, men aren't "jocks", "beefcake", "hunks", "stallions" or "studs" either.

Where does this leave the writer? (Sir) Peregrin Worsthorne in *Review* a few issues back commented that much depended on the surrounding culture. He had had a number of pieces rejected in America as being politically incorrect that were published, however, in Britain. "Over here," he noted, "one can be as politically incorrect as one likes so long as the writing is up to scratch. Style in these matters is all."

Personally Thumbsuck believes South Africa leans toward the American model and style will not save us here.

There have been some attempts at getting our thought processes into line. The "Ministry in the Office of the President" recently released guidelines on describing the disabled (handicapped is incorrect). Thus

epileptics should be referred to as "persons with epilepsy" and one no longer writes of "persons suffering from a ..." but rather "persons with a ...".

And we're all learning. In a similar "blaps" to that of the Argus in the 1970s the Ministry release, having noted that handicapped is a no-no, lists the preferred form of "retarded" as "persons with a mental handicap".

It is, naturally, bad form to poke fun at these well-intentioned attempts.

But we're not as bad as Hong Kong with the looming handover. Says one SA sub working there: "I was abruptly told not to use the phrase 'Tiananmen Square massacre'. It's the 'Tiananmen Square crackdown'."

Public Service radio lives up to its civil service name, judging by the problems Thumbsuck had in trying to reach an AM Live journalist.

Phone call #1: Put through to a number that rings till it cuts off.

Phone call #2: Put through to the same number, despite a request to reach said journalist's secretary.

Phone call #3: Main switchboard operator says he is not permitted to take messages.

Thumbsuck: "This is absurd. Put me through to your boss so I can complain."

Ring, ring...

"Hello, television here. No, we don't do complaints. I'll put you through."

Music, music...

The world's greatest news tip-off died on the line with Thumbsuck.

So now you know why, contrary to international trends, SA's newspapers still routinely beat radio to the stories. Auckland Park's bureaucracy is as bad as ever.

LOST

FATHER CHRISTMAS SUIT

Will the person who borrowed a father Christmas suit from Mrs Clayton/Salem Club last year Please return ASAP. Telephone 22526 or 22412.

Grocott's Mail, November 28 1995