

Words and phrases you may want to think twice about using

Historical, cultural context important for phrases like 'grandfathered in' and 'spirit animal'

Priscilla Ki Sun Hwang · CBC News · Posted: Nov 29, 2021 4:00 AM ET | Last Updated: November 30

Have you ever casually used the terms "spirit animal," "first-world problem," or "spooky"? It might be time to rethink your use of these phrases and remove them from your daily lingo.

CBC Ottawa compiled a small list of words, submitted by readers and some of our journalists who are Black, Indigenous and people of colour. We ran some of the words by anti-racism and language experts, who said some of these phrases can be hurtful to various groups of people for their historical and cultural context.

"Being an English speaker doesn't entail that you necessarily know the racist etymology automatically," said Ai Taniguchi, a linguist and an associate language studies professor with University of Toronto Mississauga, in an email to CBC.

Etymology is the study of the origins of words and the way their meanings change over time.

"The fact that you said it, oblivious to the etymology, doesn't automatically make you a bad person."

What you do once you find out a word is racist, sexist or ableist etymology carries more importance, she explained.

"'I didn't know it was racist' does not eliminate the pain of the hearer," said Taniguchi. "As language users, we have the social responsibility to monitor the impact our utterances have on others, especially when it involves a marginalized group."

Anti-racism trainer Jas Kalra agrees.

"It's not so much about political correctness, I think it is about the empirical accuracy and ... if somebody really calls us out on a particular word, we need to stop and say, 'It's not about me,'" said Kalra, who runs Ottawa-based Jas Kalra Consulting and coaches people and organizations on inclusion and diversity.

Blackmail, blacklist and black sheep

"The issue here is that these are all negative terms," said Joseph Smith, an anti-racism trainer and educator. "[It] connotes evil, distrust, lack of intelligence, ignorance, a lack beauty — the absence of white."

This lowering of blackness on the spectrum with regards to value was developed further in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade but it also predates that, explained Smith.

"[Black] became associated with a particular group of people, and that group of people received all that negative connotation. That's why we try to move away from these kinds of terms."

Kalra pointed out the tech industry is now moving away from using whitelist and blacklist, replacing it with terms like block-list or deny-list. Computer code labels like 'master' and 'slave' are also being re-examined.

"If we use the words 'allow-list' [instead of whitelist] or deny-list ... it enhances the true understanding of that word," she said.

Ghetto and inner city

Smith says terms like ghetto and inner city grew out of the industrial revolution in North America. The word ghetto also has a painful historical root in Europe during the Holocaust, and was likely derived from Jewish settlements in Italy centuries ago.

"Ghettos and inner cities were typically seen to be places where less refined people lived — the people who weren't up to date culturally, development-wise," he said.

Meanwhile, from the late 1900s onwards, political rhetoric and media representation showed suburbs as pleasant, quiet and gentle areas, while inner city was seen as dangerous and risky, he explained.

Using these terms implies a negative connotation toward people of a certain socio-economic class (often associated with racialized groups) — typically those who have recently immigrated and often move to large metropolis areas and not suburbs, he said.

Spooky

The term "spook" — used sometimes to refer to a ghost, spy, or something that's strange and frightening (often used during Halloween) — has a history of being an anti-Black slur when white soldiers began calling fellow Black soldiers "spooks" during World War II.

"[It's offensive] because of who and to what it's applied to," said Smith.

Halloween decorations are seen outside a house in Ottawa this year. Spooky, a term often used during this holiday, is linked to a racial slur that was once used against Black soldiers. (Francis Ferland/CBC)

He reminds people a lot is packed into certain terms you may use flippantly.

"There's a history behind it and there's also all these connections that are made to other groups," he said. "It's almost like these terms have tentacles that spread and attach themselves to other things and infect."

Sold down the river

This phrase, now used to mean someone profoundly betrayed or jeopardized one's position, is directly connected to the transatlantic slave trade, Smith said.

"The problem with it, we use it in a lot of spaces," he said. "The negative connotation is hearkening back to a time when enslaved African people would be literally sold down the [Mississippi] river for profit, and seen as chattel, objects that could be used or disposed of at the whims of their slave owners."

Linguist Taniguchi says once we learn the painful history behind phrases like these, we need to commit to being sensitive to others' experiences.

"Language, communication, and free speech are valuable, but these things cannot come at the cost of endangering someone else's rights and pursuit of happiness."

Grandfathered in

Likewise, the phrase grandfathered in — modernly referring to someone or a business being exempt from new rules and continue operating as is — dates back to a 19th century policy called the "grandfather clause," which indirectly stopped Black Americans from voting by limiting eligibility to only those whose ancestors could vote.

"It's also speaking to that patriarchy ... a patriarchic family having supreme power over how things operate and manifest, and them possessing all the power and autonomy to make decisions and dictate the course of the future," said Smith.

"It's re-inscribing the idea of a male-dominated society or world."

"At a meeting, let's say you said 'grandfathered in' — you had no idea that it has racist roots. If a Black person asks you not to use that term, then don't," said Taniguchi.

Spirit animal, powwow and tribe

Given the history and current oppression of Indigenous communities by settlers, explained Taniguchi, metaphors English speakers casually use — such as spirit animal, let's have a powwow, and tribe — can be a painful insult to Indigenous communities.

"[It's] a reminder that their past and culture have always been treated as insignificant by settlers," she added.

Spirit animal has become a term of endearment to describe someone who the speaker deeply relates to or loves, explained anti-racism facilitator Kalra. Some synonyms can be alter ego, idol or soulmate.

However, she notes, spiritual connection and reverence for nature and ancestors is deeply rooted across Indigenous cultures — and the phrase itself turns that concept into a casual catchphrase that isn't widely used, or even used at all, among Indigenous people.

The same idea applies to using tribe and powwow — used to say "let's gather" — casually in conversation by someone who's not Indigenous.

"If a non-Indigenous person says 'this is my tribe,' I don't think it's OK, despite the fact that they're using it presumably in a metaphorical way," said Taniguchi.

Lowest on the totem pole

Totem poles are sacred items, much like headdresses, in Indigenous culture, explained Kalra.

The phrase "lowest on the totem pole," casually meaning something is less important, not only is culturally appropriating the totem pole, but it's contextually wrong.

"In some First Nations communities, being [carved] low on the totem pole might actually be a great honour," she said. "When you're culturally appropriating somebody's cultural symbols ... you're saying that marginalized members of society are free for taking."

Savage

In the modern context, savage has become a word used to describe someone who is fierce, or a situation that is intense — and carries a positive or semi-positive connotation.

It's used a lot in the sports world, explained Smith, especially among men when describing actions, behaviours and thoughts that don't conform to norms.

The problem, he says, is the word's origin: it was used by colonizers who saw themselves as "the epitome of refinement, intelligence, spirituality" and considered Indigenous people, and Black and other people of colour who were forcibly brought to North America, or arrived here soon after colonization, as "savage, brutal, unrefined, and uncultured in comparison to European settlers."

In 2019, an Indigenous educator called out a clothing line for using the word on T-shirts.

"It's important to understand that for Indigenous people, this word is our N-word," said Douglas Stewart at the time.

Gypped and gypsy

When someone says they've been "gypped," they mean defrauded or swindled of something.

But that word, which stems from gypsy, is problematic as it has been used as a derogatory slur against Roma who historically travelled from place to place across Europe, says Smith.

The term perpetuates the stereotype that Roma are lower class, not mature or cultured, and foreigners, explained Smith.

"You're othering somebody," he said.

First-world problem

People have slowly moved away from using the term third world to describe low-income countries, says Kalra, but the phrase first-world problem is still used to convey that something is an issue only to those who live in a country with privilege and wealth.

It can be classist, she said.

"When we're saying first world, we're putting them at the top ... What does it convey?" she said. "Why do we have to use these prefixes, which kind of dehumanize some country or some human being or a group?"

Brainstorm, blindsided and blind-spot

The prefix blind is often used in metaphorical terms like blindsided, blind spot and blind leading the blind, to describe the limitation of sight.

"I can see that being offensive to people who can't see," said Julie Cashman, a member of the disability community and co-chair of Consumer Action Committee, which advocates for individuals with disabilities.

Using the term brainstorm could also be insensitive to those who have brain injuries or are neurodiverse, added Cashman.

"More important is the stigma that it will effectuate about ... disorders [like] epilepsy for example," said Kalra.

Dumb and lame

Dumb is modernly used to describe lack of intelligence, but it was once used to describe someone who lacked the ability to speak. Similarly, lame is now used to describe someone or something that's boring or unexciting, but was also a term used against those who have limitations of movement in their limbs.

Both are highly offensive when describing people in the disability community, but also when used casually, says Cashman.

"People now are using lame as a slang, so they go around saying that's lame," she said. "I don't think they really understand what that means .. they just think it's a cool term, but for me, when I hear that, I definitely know what that term means ... it's something I wouldn't say."

Tone deaf

Though it's used to describe someone who's not able to distinguish musical pitch, or metaphorically as someone who's insensitive to certain matters, tone deaf may not be a kind term to those who have hearing impairments.

Cashman suggests using descriptors like "musically disinclined" instead. Insensitive is another suggestion.

Crippled

This term is used more as a verb to describe a situation, however, it was used historically dating back thousands of years to describe people who are partially disabled or unable to move their limbs. "I've seen that word being used in the Bible," said Cashman. "I think that's very offensive ... I would use maybe disability ... or mobility issue."

"It's ableist," said H el ene Courchesne, co-ordinator of planning and funding with Ottawa-based group ABLE2, which supports people with disabilities. "It's taken out of context and that's when it becomes offensive."

Metaphorically, people can say "overtaken by fear," she suggests.

"It's the pejorative connotation to it. You're not as good as me, you'll never be as good as me," Courchesne explained about using words that can be painful for the disability community.

"Language is very important."