

Editorial

Few speeches could match the drama of it all. On a balmy Wednesday afternoon on the 28th of August 1963, 260,000 people joined the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom to hear what many argue was the greatest speech of the 20th century. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' message became transformative in fighting against racism. Racial segregation at that time involved various derogatory terms, but *colored* wasn't as pejorative as it would be for Americans now. Even the very organisation that coordinated the famous March on Washington, i.e. the National Association of Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), used *colored* as an appropriate term to describe 'dark-skinned people'.

Seven months later on 20th April 1964, 8,000 miles south of Washington, another giant of the 20th century's human rights movement, Nelson Mandela, gave his now famous speech from the dock where he used his sheer presence to intimidate a judge into commuting his death sentence into 27 years of imprisonment. Nelson Mandela often spoke about the Coloured Community in Cape Town with affection. The Cape Coloureds form a proud and distinctive cultural group, descended from the Khoisan, European and Nguni peoples, and Malay slaves bought to the Cape by the Dutch when the latter controlled the Dutch East Indies in the 18th century. A significant minority have retained the Islamic faith that their ancestors practiced in Asia, and their heritage manifests itself in the architecture, cuisine and cultural traditions of the Cape. They would be wounded if anyone said that the term *coloured* was pejorative.

How different it all is in Britain. In 2011 football pundit Alan Hansen caused a twitter storm when he said on TV, 'I think there's a lot of coloured players in all the major teams and there are lots of coloured players who are probably the best in the Premier League.' He was forced to apologise for using the word *coloured*, although nobody was indicating that he was racist, just that he had used an inappropriate word to describe black people.

In early 2019, Amber Rudd, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, faced the same

humiliation. During a discussion on BBC Radio 2, about Members of Parliament being abused, Ms. Rudd said, 'It's worst of all if you're a coloured woman. I know that Diane Abbott gets a huge amount of abuse.' Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott immediately hit back on Twitter criticising the use of *coloured* as an 'outdated, offensive and revealing choice of words'. Like Mr. Hansen eight years earlier, Ms. Rudd had to apologise unreservedly to Ms. Abbott.

The language of public speech is perceived to be a relatively uniform entity. While various accents and grammatical differences between speakers are expected, we assume that the basic conceptual content communicated via individual words is interpreted similarly by all parties involved. In order to end up with similar interpretations of the same word, the speakers involved would have to have experienced the world in maximally similar ways. We know that this is impossible in practice. We also know that while most of the typical meanings of a word are shared between speakers, a great deal of variation in meaning exists, too.

The case of *coloured* highlights the level of sensitivity that is needed when dealing with a word that has developed different evaluative connotations for different speakers, despite sharing the same referential meaning 'of or belonging to any group of dark-skinned people' (OED Online). Refusing to acknowledge individual language differences can lead to misunderstanding and conflict. It also creates a powerful machinery for policing language which ultimately diverts attention from addressing more urgent discrimination problems experienced by people of colour.

This issue includes fair and balanced consideration of the many issues related to the naming of an emerging variety of English from China and, in particular, whether we should call it 'China English' or 'Chinese English'. And the examination of English varieties from China continues in the issue with work on linguistic landscapes in Chaoshan and Hong Kong English. Other topics include the language of 'pick-up artists', English education in Thailand, language choice when publishing in Translation Studies, an application of

Construction Grammar to the use of English modals verbs, and reviews of several recent books.

Finally, it is with great sadness that we acknowledge the passing of our dear friend and colleague David Graddol. Two of David's books, *The Future of English*¹ (1997) and *English Next*² (2006), represent some of the best work in understanding how English today can remain relevant in the future, and both publications are freely available from the British Council. David served as a co-editor of this journal from 2008–2012 and was an active member of *English Today*'s editorial

board since 2012. Our heartfelt condolences go to his family and everyone whose life David touched.

Notes

- 1 https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/pub_learning-elt-future.pdf
- 2 https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/pub_english_next.pdf

The editors
