

Editorial

In 2013 the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam opened after a lengthy period of refurbishment, and this has understandably led to a lot of favourable publicity. More mixed, however, has been the response to its 'Adjustment of Colonial Terminology' drive to alter the long-established English titles and catalogue descriptions of some of the works now on display, in order to avoid giving offence. A search on 'Rijksmuseum political correctness' or similar will bring up reports from CNN, Reuters, many newspapers and a host of organisations and individuals, reporting on the facts of the case and on the varying responses the initiative has provoked around the world. To give an idea of what has occurred, a work painted around 1900, when it was given the title *Young Negro-Girl*, has now been re-titled *Picture of Young Girl Holding a Fan*. The name *Hottentot*, given by Dutch settlers (for whom it meant 'stutterer') to the Khoi people of southern Africa, is proscribed, and also on a long list of names for avoidance is *Mohammedan*, *Muslim* being preferred. The head of the museum's department of history, Martine Gosselink, is widely reported as saying that along with care being needed over the use of the more well-known transparently offensive labels, some less obviously problematic names such as *Eskimo* and *Lapland* must also be reconsidered, these being thought improper by indigenous people and others.

Although the Rijksmuseum's initiative has been under way for some time now, it really came to public attention and started to draw adverse criticism in December 2015, following a conference connected with the digitisation of the Rijksmuseum's collection. The Amsterdam action has been applauded by many in the art world and beyond, and the Rijksmuseum is not alone in seeking to be sensitive to the changing linguistic sensibilities of the public. In England, the *Daily Mail* (14.12.15) reported that a work in the Tate gallery that was called *Head of a Black* in 1827 later became *Head of a Negro*, before changing to *Male Head Study (The Captive Slave)* for a 2005 exhibition and now carrying the

simple catalogue title *Head of a Man*. But among those voicing disapproval has been the art critic Josh Spero, who was reported in *The Times* (14.12.15) as objecting to the 'rewriting of history' and to 'pretending it never happened', and there is disquiet that artists' original intentions when creating and naming their work at times quite removed from the present are being lost.

What should be our position as linguists? There is surely a debate to be had here in our academic community as to a proper intellectual response to changing times. Do we see language diachronically, reflecting a past that should not be ignored or forgotten? Or do we see it synchronically and with a solely modern perspective, and as a tool for today?

This issue of *English Today* sees several articles focusing on English put to use, Botha writing on the teaching of foreign students, mainly from the greater Asia region, in China, Choe on its delivery to Korean students in the Philippines, Pierini on its importance in the commercial world of Italy, and Huang on the (not altogether benign) power of English in Taiwan. The need for local sensitivity in this last case is echoed in Hu's article on the English translation of a public sign in China. Wang too pursues this line with an exploration of lessening concern among Chinese speakers for native-speaker approval of their English, a theme spoken to by the book on language and identities reviewed by Rajagopalan. In the first of a short series of articles for 2016, Murphy, an American-English specialist, ponders the significance of differences between two big native-speaker models; and Vietnam War American slang is the subject of a book reviewed by Coleman. Ebner, in the ongoing series from Leiden University, invites readers' comments on whether the media are to be blamed for any perceived decline in English-language standards, Du and Guan assert the primacy of reading in the Chinese EFL classroom, and Bulley contemplates the English prefix *de-*.

The editors

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