

# Diversity Notes

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## Wait, What Did You Just Say?

Language is a living, changing and evolving medium, but over time, words create innuendo. Unconventional usage becomes slang or takes on a completely opposite meaning from the original. In interacting with individuals different from ourselves, we attempt to use language in ways that are not offensive, hoping that our intended audience understands the meaning we're trying to convey.

This year, NIKE, the famous footwear company, celebrated Irish culture and St. Patrick's Day by introducing a new sneaker in the United States called the Black and Tan. Ah, Black and Tan, the foamy concoction that is half pale ale, half Guinness Stout. What a wonderful celebratory gesture and appreciation for Irish culture. Not!

What the creator failed to account for is the historical context of the Black and Tan. The original Black and Tans were an ad hoc military group that committed atrocities against Irish civilians; the "tan" referred to the khaki of their uniforms. After many apologies following the public relations nightmare that ensued, NIKE recalled the shoe.

As with any phraseology that has evolved into present-day communications, the "back story" of how a phrase acquired its meaning can influence the meaning itself and impose an entirely different conceptual framework to the communication than intended. Much

has been written about whether the etymologies below are true or merely folklore, but this isn't about their historical validity; instead, it is an opportunity to remember that our choice of wording affects our professional environment.

- How many times have you or a colleague asked if someone could "hold down the fort?" For example, "Could you hold down the fort while I go to..." You were likely asking someone to watch the office while you go and do something else, but the phrase's historical connotation to some is negative and racially offensive. To "hold down the fort" originally meant to watch and protect against the vicious Native American intruders. In the territories of the West, Army soldiers or settlers saw the "fort" as their refuge from their perceived "enemy," the stereotypical "savage" Native American tribes.

- "Going Dutch." Likely you or your colleague meant that each person pays for his or her own meal. The historical meaning: a negative stereotype portraying the Dutch as cheap because they will invite you to a meal but then not pay for it.

- "Rule of thumb." This is an acknowledged and generally accepted benchmark. Many women's rights activists claim this term refers to an antiquated law, whereby the width of a husband's thumb was the legal size of a switch or rod allowed to beat his wife. If her bruises were not larger than the



width of his thumb, the husband could not be brought to court to answer for his behavior because he had not violated the "rule of thumb."

- There is no absolute verification as to the historical roots of the word "handicap." However, many disability advocates believe this term is rooted in a correlation between a disabled individual and a beggar, who had to beg with a cap in his or her hand because of the inability to maintain employment.

Choose your words thoughtfully. Now that you know the possible historical context of the above phrases, perhaps you will understand why someone could be offended by their use. Let us agree that language will continue to evolve with continually improving consciousness and respect for others. ■

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John M. Robinson".