

# White Future

- What images do you associate with the phrase “White future”?
- What images do you associate with the phrase “Black future”?

*If we say the future looks black then we mean it doesn't look good. In school did your teachers ever say “you will get a black mark for doing that”? And what they meant was that it wasn't a good mark! Is black always associated with bad things - and by association are black people bad?*



## Issues addressed

- How values are transmitted through language
- Stereotypes and prejudice
- The dangers of using language in an uncritical way

## Aims

- To be aware that language is not value-free.
- To be aware of how language may reflect discrimination against minorities.
- To learn to appreciate the importance of using non-discriminatory language.

**Time:** 45 minutes

## Group size

Any number which can be broken down into working groups of 6-8

## Preparation

- One large sheet of paper and marker per group
- An enlarged copy of the table pinned up so everyone can see it

## Instructions

1. Divide the group into sub-groups of 6 to 8 people.
2. Ask each group to find a place to work in the room.
3. Give a piece of paper and a marker pen to each group and ask them to copy the following table:

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4. Explain that this activity is about the language we use and that they must think of expressions which include words such as white, black, Indian, Roma (Gypsy), Jew, Arab, Russian, etc. As they come up with an expressions think about how the word is used. If the phrase has a positive connotation write the phrase in the first column, if it has a neutral connotation write it in the second and if it has a negative connotation in third. For example, the expression “The future looks black” refers to an uncertain and troubled future so put it in the third column. In England we talk about “an Indian summer” when the weather is good in the

early autumn. Indian would go in the first column. Allow about 15 minutes for this part of the activity.

5. Now ask the groups to look at the phrases in the third column, the ones with negative connotations, and suggest alternative expressions. Write them down in the fourth column, which can be titled “alternative language”.
6. When the groups are finished display the work sheets and ask each group to read out the different expressions they have found

## Debriefing and evaluation

The evaluation should be centred around the expressions found:

- Which column was the fullest?
- What kinds of words do we find in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd columns?
- Since language is not neutral, what values does our language reflect about our own culture and about other cultures?
- Is it important to use a language which does not carry negative connotations about other cultures?
- Why?
- If so, how should we change our language?

## Tips for the facilitator

If the group is an international group, it may be interesting to divide the participants into groups according to their mother tongue in order to make a comparative analysis.

Sometimes the debate that occurs after this activity turns into the discussion about “politically correct” language. This is not the purpose of the activity, but rather to reflect on why it is more common to give positive connotations to the word “white” than to the word “black” or “gypsy” and vice-versa. However, if the question is raised, you should deal with it rather than ignore it.

Often participants argue that when they use expressions such as “She’s in a black mood”, meaning a bad mood, they are not thinking about black people and they are not discriminating against anybody. In this case it is important to differentiate personal attitudes from the values transmitted by the language. Very often we use phrases without being aware of their origins and therefore the values implicit in them. This is a similar debate to the discussion about sexist language in many idioms.

## Suggestions for follow up

Ask everyone to be aware of how they use language and of how others use it, when talking, in the media and in advertising. Have a competition to find examples of phrases which are used deliberately to further prejudice or discrimination, or to find the origins of commonly used phrases.

You can take an even deeper look at the role of the media in transmitting and perpetuating prejudice and in ‘Media biases’(page 124) or if you enjoy words and puns, look at ‘Eurojoke contest’ (page 76) to explore the implications of telling jokes both for those who tell them and those against whom they are told.