

# **Idioms to Avoid For More Inclusive Communication**



# “Sold Down the River”

Originated in the States around the Mississippi River during slavery and connotes deep betrayal. The demand for labour on the rapidly expanding cotton plantations of the Deep South led to many slave owners separating male slaves from their kin and shipping them down the Mississippi to slave auctions. Being “sold down the river” was seen by many as a death sentence due to the harsh conditions on the plantations.

# “Blacklist”

“Blacklist” equates black with bad and white with “good”. Words like this contribute to systemic stigma caused by using the same terms that describe the color of our skin as a delineation between good and bad.

Some have adopted Allow List/Deny List to avoid perpetuating the idea that “white” is good and permitted and “black” is bad and forbidden.

# “Mumbo-jumbo”

Mumbo-jumbo is used to describe (and often dismiss) language that is hard to understand, as in, “I don’t care about all that legal mumbo-jumbo.” It was also used to dismiss the spiritual beliefs and rituals of colonized peoples and has become a general pejorative term for ritual and superstition.

Mumbo-jumbo comes from the West African language Mandinka. The term is a British approximation of “maamajombo”, a masked male figure who functioned as an arbiter of marital disputes in the polygamous society. The costumed man would dance and chant and shout outside the dwelling and then rule on the dispute.

“Gibberish” and “nonsense” are replacements free from racist and condescending connotations.

# “Master Bedroom”

This example is not truly an idiom but it is a term that is in common everyday usage. The term “master bedroom” came into popular usage around 1926 due to its inclusion in a Sears catalogue. The reference, however, is to the Antebellum South of the United States of America. It’s true that “master” predates the slave era and the historical connotations were often sexist than racist (the bedroom of the male head of household even though it was shared with his spouse), but the American context has led to the replacement of the term with “primary bedroom” in many North American real-estate markets. A more inclusive language is developed step by step.