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THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS ON ENGLISH

The increasing number of ethnic groups, different minority groups (racial, sexual), as well as the greater presence of women in social and governmental spheres makes people be more cautious, correct and respectful while communicating.

The present paper is devoted to the phenomenon called political correctness – a phenomenon that enjoys popularity mostly in English speaking countries and that has had a noticeable impact on modern English. As the spectrum of the problems generated by political correctness (PC) is wide, we shall turn to some of them within the frames of our paper.

One of the best current definitions of PC is that mentioned by Edward S. Herman: "PC is the challenge of dissidents and minorities to traditionally biased usages and curricula, as perceived by the vested interests in existing usage and curricula and those seeking a basis for attacking the current challenges". (Herman, Chomsky, 1988:405)

However, it is not the only definition given to the term. In the paper we shall try to cover briefly such aspects of PC as the origin of the term, the abuse of its use, the necessity of the phenomenon in society, its positive and negative sides, its effects on language, as one of the crucial tools if one wants to be 'politically correct'.

According to Webster's Universal College Dictionary, "PC is the ideology that shows sensitivity, tolerance, and respect for another's race, gender, sexual preference, nationality, religion, age, physical handicap, especially if it differs from one's own." (Webster, 1997) Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines PC as "the principle of avoiding language and behaviour that may offend particular groups of people (*sometimes disapproving*)". (Hornby, 2003)

J. Bekwith and E. Bauman define PC as a net of interrelated ideological views, which question the bases of university education – traditional education plan, views to objectivity of the gained knowledge, giving

importance to cultural, gender, class and racial differences. (Bekwith&Bauman, 1995)

Primarily the phenomenon of PC started as neutral and was aimed at diminishing all types of discrimination. At that time the agenda of the PC were women's studies, black studies, etc., for the origin of the term is closely connected with the Civil Rights Movement and the birth of modern feminism in America.

Today, however, the term PC, which initially could mean everything for everybody, now is in danger to mean nothing, and moreover its role in society may become dangerous itself. If looked more thoroughly its dangers become more apparent. By creating a well-thought and correct terminology for this or that ethnic group, we deliberately separate them from the main culture of the given country. This, in its turn, may bring to run the risk of creating situation of 'cult ethnicity'. Thus, many are coming to recognize that PC may have gone too far and a new sense of balance in promoting language reform is emerging. And many are leaning away from linguistic reforms by pointing out its obvious limitations in solving society's ills. Forbidding and discouraging certain terms or certain kinds of speech may bring to a gap between groups which must deal with other issues that already divide them. The emergence of language in general is associated with the communication. Thus, the purpose of language is to be a bridge between people, through which they come to mutual understanding.

One of the key programmes of PC in language reforms has been the effort to replace old terms with new ones, primarily euphemisms: for example, some reformers insisted that euphemisms 'disabled' and 'disadvantaged', which have hardly replaced 'crippled', be themselves replaced with 'differently abled' or other such euphemisms.

The tendency of being politically correct has its impact on writers too. Writers and public speakers are supposed to use 'inclusive' language and chose terms accurately. The question of whether to use PC is more than a mere linguistic problem: it is politically biased. The above-mentioned enables us to state that PC as a term is multidimensional, as it covers all spheres of human life. As the meaning of the concept of PC expanded, it became hazier and hazier and it has virtually no meaning at all.

The central topics of the debates concerning the problem of PC (especially in the USA) has become the problem of *multiculturalism* and the problem of *speech codes*. The idea of *speech codes* was introduced

by the American sociolinguist T. Bell; according to Bell speech codes are norms of behaviour, which should be followed by a person, whereas some of these norms are norms of *speech* behaviour – codes of the given language. *Multiculturalism* is defined as a philosophy of education, highlighting the unique contribution of different cultures to the human history. The proponents of multiculturalism call for the necessity to educate not on the basis of eurocentric culture, even more the students should be considered according to their gender and race.

Thus, the phenomenon of PC is connected with the speech behaviour norms in Modern English. The phenomenon mainly refers to the restrictions of use of this or that word or phrase in this or that situation.

In other words PC became the weapon against verbal discrimination called verbal harassment–hate speech. To avoid this kind of discrimination new PC terms are created, which mean certain forms of discrimination: 'ableism' – discrimination of persons with physical disabilities and illnesses, 'ethnocentrism' – discrimination of cultures different as to the dominating, 'heterosexism' – discrimination of persons with non-traditional orientation, 'lookism' – the creation of standards of beauty, discrimination of those who lack such standards, etc. The main trend in English now is its inclusive character – tendency not to offend anyone by using this or that word.

Further in the paper we shall follow the choices of The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook that focuses on semantic labels dealing with race, gender, and disadvantage groups.

The word 'sex' has been replaced by the neutral 'gender', and the words 'man' and 'he' are avoided, being replaced by the neutral 'person'. It was the burgeoning of the feminist movement in the 1960's and 70's that utilized this idea when it launched the campaign to eradicate gender-based terms from the language.

The so called 'sexist language' is the language that embodies, affirms, or reinforces discrimination against women or the particular subordination of women to men. Thus, the theory of 'sexist language' is aimed, first of all, to put an end to the male/female discrimination. The use of 'man' and 'he' to refer both to males and females means that maleness is more fundamental than femaleness, 'subordinating' femaleness to maleness. The convention of using 'man' or 'men' and 'he' or 'his' to refer to people of either sex makes the problem of sexism the most difficult bias to avoid, for example, 'mankind' – 'human beings, humanity, humans,

humankind', 'man-made' — 'artificial, synthetic'. One of the vivid evidences is the danger of giving priority to one of the personal pronouns 'he' or 'she'. The preference of any of these gives superiority to either of the genders respectively. In the result, the pronoun 'they' became the subject of discussions, as a neutral pronoun pointing to no gender and both genders simultaneously. To be politically correct, however, does not mean to distract formally correct grammar. One of the objections to use 'they' as a neutral pronoun filling both genders, is the inappropriateness of its number. What is 'singular' can never be denoted by plural. Even people, not so much concerned about 'correct grammar', will not stay astray if they do not understand whether one speaks about one or more than one persons. Attempts were also made to replace both pronouns 'he' and 'she' by 's/he', this, however, didn't work. Some prefer changing the category of number or simply avoiding personification. Thus, a sentence like *A doctor should be careful that he does not misdiagnose* can be changed either into *Doctors should be careful that they do not misdiagnose* or *A doctor should be careful not to misdiagnose*.

When changing pronoun 'he' or 'his' into 'they' and 'their', another problem is with 'someone' and 'everybody'. The proponents of this view prefer a sentence like *Everybody should button their coats* to a more accepted variant *Everybody should button his coat*.

The problem of sexism extends as to using gender-neutral terms for occupations, positions, roles and titles. Terms that specify a particular sex can unnecessarily perpetuate certain stereotypes when used generically. You should avoid 'businessman', 'chairman', 'congressman', 'cameraman', 'fireman', 'policeman', 'spokesman' and use instead 'businessperson', 'chairperson' or 'chair', 'member of Congress', 'operator', 'firefighter', 'spokesperson' respectively.

The National Organisation for Women was among the first to propose such language revisions as 'chair' or 'chairperson' instead of 'chairman', and the form 'Ms.' — as a marital status independent form instead of 'Mrs.' or 'Miss'. So when addressing Mrs. Harrow you should use Ms. Harrow unless Mrs. is her known preference. However, in time this forum expanded into radical lesbians calling themselves 'womyn'. Not all revisions but some of them survived and now exist in our vocabulary.

The second largest group of words corrected are terms referring to persons of definite nationality, race or ethnic group. Many of the words previously used now are considered as politically incorrect and offensive.

This brought to the emergence of such notions as 'ethnocentrism' — suppression of cultures different from the one dominating, and 'eurocentrism' - false understanding of Western, European culture, as being more progressive.

Thus, in the center of the problem is how to call the representatives of different nationalities and ethnic groups. The word 'negro', for example, in 1930-40s was written in capital letter 'Negro' to stress the equality of negro inhabitants to other ethnic groups. However, with the emergence of Civil Rights Movement the word 'Negro' was replaced by 'black', as 'Negro' was associated with slavery, as well as it was of foreign, Hispanic, origin; the term 'black' alongside with white, showing the equality of these races. However, the term 'black' (first created in 1880) was not accepted and today 'African-American' is the most acceptable variant, underlining the origin of 'black Americans'.

It is more preferable to use the terms 'indigenous person' or 'native American' instead of the word Indian. Indian properly refers to people who live or come from India. The same happened to the word Eskimo, which was replaced by the word 'Native Alaskan'. 'Hispanic', as a word more frequently associated with poverty, was replaced by 'Latino' or 'Latina', 'Chicano' or 'Chicana' (about Americans of Mexican origin) or a more general term — 'Spanish American'. The same happened to 'Oriental' replaced by 'Asian'. The word 'Jew' was replaced by 'Jewish person' as recently it acquired negative connotation connected with the phrases 'dirty Jew', 'Jew boy', 'Jew store' or verbs 'to jew, jew down' which mean to bargain or cheat. Jewish people themselves are offended when the '-ish' is dropped and they consider the speaker anti-semitic. Japanese people hate being called as 'the Japs' the abrupt truncation that was applied to them during World War II, when Japan and the USA were at war and therefore enemies.

The next group to be discussed includes words that reduce age discrimination. The concept of aging is changing as people are living longer and more active lives. So a new term 'ageism' has been created in this connection in order not to offend elderly people. One should avoid mentioning age unless it is relevant or avoid using 'old', 'elderly' or 'aged' using instead 'senior', 'mature', 'older persons'.

Another problem is with the substitution of terms referring persons with disabilities or illnesses. Terminology that emphasizes the person rather than the disability is generally preferred. 'Handicap' is used to

refer to the environmental barrier that affects the person. For example, *Stairs handicap a person who uses a wheelchair*. While words such as 'crazy', 'demented' and 'insane' are used in facetious or informal contexts, these terms are not used to describe people with clinical diagnoses of mental illness. 'Challenged', 'differently abled' and 'special' are preferred by some people, but are often ridiculed and are best avoided. Almost every kind of disability is ironed out by certain terms, like:

Person who uses a wheelchair for wheelchair-bound,

Person living with AIDS or PWA for AIDS sufferer,

Person with Down syndrome for Mongoloid,

Aurally challenged for deaf,

Visually challenged for blind,

Mentally challenged for retarded and so on.

Then short people became known as vertically challenged, bald people as follically challenged or hair-disadvantaged, fat people as differently sized, etc.

Recently the term 'homosexual' to describe a man or woman is increasingly replaced by the terms 'gay' for men and 'lesbian' for women. Homosexual as a noun is sometimes used only in reference to a male. Such terms as 'queer' or 'dyke' that are usually considered offensive have been gaining currency among homosexuals in recent years. However, it's still prudent to avoid these terms in standard contexts.

The reason of creation of the terms reducing social discrimination is a kind of a tendency of ironing out the problems of social inequality of people. So the word 'the poor' turned into 'the needy', 'the deprived' into 'the socially deprived' and 'the disadvantaged' into 'low-income people'.

The above-stated allows us to arrive at the assumption that political correctness is the requirement of equal public respect for all ethnic groups, genders, lifestyles, sexual orientations and the like. Yet it restricts sometimes severely, the substance of what can be said. 'Equal respect' requires the comprehensive restructuring of society and language as well, so that protected groups in fact enjoy equal status.

As a rule the politically correct terms play the role of subjective evaluation, adding irony and a shade of scorn to what is said. This can only be justified by the conservativeness of the writer or the speaker, or by the fact that they don't manage to follow the lexical changes of PC. On the other hand if we become so fearful of the word itself that we dare

not pronounce it, we are simply giving the word even more power, because then it becomes even more of an insult when it is pronounced, giving those who pronounce it even more control. So terms that associate people with particular races, cultures and nationalities do not unite people, but only serve to divide them further than they already are.

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