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## Euphemism, political correctness and language change:

### The case of 'people first'

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**Abstract.** This article is devoted to a linguistic denomination so called politically correct language, which had a considerable influence on modern English and was broadly adopted in English-speaking countries. In addition, this article discusses the present problem of the use of politically correct language within the bounds of intercultural communication. Studying the use of politically correct language facilitates intercultural communication and helps to understand better the role of a language in society, the interrelation between a language and culture. Besides, the article deals with a 'people first' approach and its impact on language change

**Keywords.** Euphemism, racial political correctness, gender political correctness, social political correctness, physical political correctness, language shift. 'People first' language, noun modification, media language.

### I. Introduction.

Language is a mirror of national customs, values, traditions. The language of any nation is first and foremost a testament to its past and culture. When learning a foreign language, along with the language, we need to study the way of life, mentality, worldview, culture of the people. Therefore, in recent times, scientists and political scientists have been drawing attention to the specificity of the value of cultural and civilizational differences between peoples. Socio-pragmatic and linguo-cultural study of language units, which are one of the main carriers of ethnocultural values, has become one of the main directions of modern linguistics.

Linguo-culturology studies language as a cultural phenomenon. This means seeing the world through the national language. In this process, language is seen as an expression of a separate national inner world. Its main goal is to discover the inner world and culture of the people through language. Linguo-culturology is a discipline "focused on the study of the cultural factor in language and the language factor in man" (V.N. Telia).

**Euphemism.** We know that human speech activity is largely based on ethical norms. The use of other words and phrases instead of words that are morally or culturally forbidden or considered inconvenient is called euphemisms (Greek "euphemo" - meaning "I speak well, softly"). Most of us use similar words every day. The term "euphemism" in English was first coined in 1656 by T.W. Mentioned by Blaunt in Glossography and describing the phenomenon of euphemism as "a good or favourable interpretation of a bad word". The use of euphemisms in speech stems from a desire to communicate successfully.

In the linguistic literature, euphemisms are given different definitions:

- H.Fowler "Euphemism is a more gentle, vague phrase used instead of a harsh and unpleasant truth".

- "Euphemism is a way of replacing an insulting or intimidating word with another softer term," Keane J. said.

- E. Partridge "Euphemisms are expressions used to reduce the negative impact on the listener or to make a good impression on the listener."

- L. Krysin "Euphemism is used in communication in order to avoid communicative conflicts, not to arouse communicative discomfort in the listener."

Euphemisms are the main devices of political correctness. Euphemisms have always been resorted to avoid and camouflage life's hardships by using more polite, and indirect expressions not to hurt one's feelings.

1.1 *pass away* is a euphemism for *die*

1.2 *senior citizens* or *Golden agers* are euphemisms for *old people*.

1.3 He is a *special child* is a euphemism for *disabled* or *retarded*.

1.4 *Our teacher is in the family way* means *pregnant*.

L.P. Krysin in his work "Euphemisms in the modern Russian language" identified three main functions of the use of euphemisms:

- 1) softening a word that is rude and unpleasant to the listener;
- 2) truth-covering, camouflage;
- 3) hiding the truth.

**Political correctness.** The study of political correctness is considered one of the actual problems in modern sociolinguistics and was investigated mainly in the works of well-known US experts such as D. Adler, A. Bloom, D. Souza, D. Leo, D. Taylor along with Russian linguists such as A.V. Ostroukh, Y.L. Gumanova, S.G. Terminasova did a significant number of scientific research to this topic.

This linguistic phenomenon has been the subject of research in the scope of various levels and concepts: political, psychological, sociological, philosophical, linguistic, cultural, etc., The phenomenon

of "political correctness" has penetrated to all spheres of Western life societies.

## Difference Between Euphemism and Political Correctness

Some people may not know about distinguishing features between euphemism and political correctness. However, there are certain differences between them. For example, whereas people used to make use of the phrase "disabled person," it is now advised politically correct to say "person with disabilities." This change in phrasing does not mean to be euphemistic or an indirect way of expressing something unpleasant or undesirable. Instead, politically correct language expresses something in a more direct and respectful way.

Political correctness differs from euphemism in that it is not a figure of speech and does not utilize figurative language. In fact, political correctness is considered avoidance, almost to an extreme, of expressions or actions that people perceive as exclusive, marginal, or insulting to others who face discrimination or disadvantage of some kind. Therefore, the purpose of politically correct phrasing is not to replace words with others that are less offensive or inflammatory. Instead, the goal of political correctness is to avoid such indirect expression altogether. It is the desire of people for courtesy, tact, humanity that is the basis of the theory of political correctness. This is also the main the motive for the creation of euphemisms, therefore the phenomenon of euphemism is inextricably associated with the theory of political correctness.

Unlike other euphemisms, politically correct euphemisms try to convey a positive connotation and are formal business style. According to V.V. Panin can be divided into two groups similar euphemisms. The first group

includes euphemisms that are used to eliminate various types of discrimination. For example, "low-income people", "chairperson", "African-American", "golden ager", "visually challenged", "differently sized" and others. To the second group include the so-called "ideological euphemisms" used in avoidance of negative consequences in economics and politics. Among such euphemisms stand out: 1. euphemisms that distract from negative economic consequences: "recession", "downsizing"; 2. euphemisms, aimed at covering up the inhuman policy of the state, especially aggressive military operations: "conflict", "pacification", "operations" for designation of military operations [Panin, 2004, p. 74-82].

In Russia, the term "political correctness" has come into use relatively recently, although the idea itself arose in the United States at the end of the 20th century. The exact date of the appearance of the concept of "political correctness" remains controversial issue. It is believed that the term was first proposed in 1975 famous feminist Karen de Crowe, President of the American National Organization for the Defense of Women's Rights. Political first correctness as a belief system spread to higher education institutions in the United States, and then in all other areas of American society. Subsequently, this concept began to be widely used in pages of newspapers and on television [Shemshurenko, 2013, p. 2].

We can observe a frequent use of expressions of politically correct language in the speech which has become an integral part of interethnic relations throughout the world today. Mostly, societies in English-speaking countries necessitate to maintain successful interpersonal and intercultural reciprocity. Political correctness is constantly being implemented into societies in Western countries. This

approach is believed to ensure the peaceful coexistence of people of different beliefs and nationalities as well as different backgrounds in the same area.

## Why do we need political correctness?

High level of social culture, together with the political, social, and commercial interest towards individual necessitated the use of politically correct language.

The political correctness is always helpful when one intends to find new means of linguistic locution instead of those that hurt the feelings and dignity of the individual, infringe his human rights with the usual linguistic impracticality or directness concerning race and gender, health and social status, age, appearance, etc.

According to Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis the language we use influences greatly our thinking process which measures our perception of reality. Thereby, language forms our reality and tells us how to think about and react to that reality. Indeed, the main point of its use in speech is based on such qualities as attentiveness, kindness, respect, and care of people.

**Racial political correctness.** The USA and Great Britain have always given a significant consideration to the resolution of interethnic and intercultural problems. African users of English were always displeased with the negative connection with the word «black». The word «negro» has been changed before it turned into the modern version «Afro-American». A similar situation was observed while naming the native population of America:

Red Indians → Native Americans  
→ First nation.

A non-politically correct adjective «Oriental» for people from Asia also caused large negative displeasure among Asian people. They took this “wrong” adjective as humiliation by Europeans. «Oriental» is replaced with a more neutral word «Asian». Asians and Africans can be called such a politically correct term as «Non-whites». Before the correct version of «Jew» was accepted, the word got a dismissive meaning as it was often used in the phrases «dirty Jew», «jew boy», «jew store» and the verb forms «to jew, to jew down». Thereby, today it is replaced with the correct version «Jewish person».

Accordingly, language changes are forwarded against racial and ethnic abuse and require a thorough review of some names of certain peoples and ethnic groups which are perceived as offensive and humiliating for some reasons.

### Gender political correctness.

Initially the names of some professions had a masculine gender such as "policeman", "postman", and "chairman". Now in PC language the names of job titles simply go by the gender-neutral titles "police officer", "letter carrier" and "chairperson" or "chair" as well as with terms having a broader application, such as "humankind" substituting "mankind". A gender-neutral job title is one that does not specify or imply gender, such as *firefighter* or *lawyer*. Morphemes pointing to gender such as the suffix –man or –ess are also being forced out of the language. Words with these morphemes are being replaced by others: chairman (chair) → chairperson; spokesman → spokesperson; cameraman → camera operator.

**Social political correctness** is widely used in the language not to infringe the human rights of an individual with a person's usual linguistic tactlessness and

straightforwardness. The use of offensive nicknames and inappropriate jokes are prohibited. Norman Fairclough claimed that "changing language is not enough on its own, we must also change society..." The organization charts of many American colleges have a list of various types of discrimination: «ethnocentrism» – discrimination of other cultures, «lookism» – the creation of standards of beauty and attractiveness, «ableism» – suppression of people with physical disabilities, «heterosexism» – discrimination of people of non-traditional sexual orientation.

### Physical political correctness.

The physical group of euphemisms includes the names and characteristics of people who have physiological and mental difficulties, as well as problems concerning age and appearance. The words «paralyzed», «disabled», «crippled», «blind», «deaf», «retarded» and similar political correctness taboos calls for using new names to neutralize unpleasant straightforwardness and reduce the psychological pressure on a person suffering from a physical disability.

Euphemistic replacement medical terms are used to avoid psychological stress: Insane asylum (psychiatric hospital) - mental home, mental hospital, mental health clinic; Terminal Home – hospital (hospice), etc.

Politically correct language is inherent in any printed edition, as censorship strictly investigates the use of certain words and expressions in information and analytical texts. Thus, a number of English and American newspaper editions, such as "The Los Angeles Times", The Guardian, The New York Times, "The Fox News", "The Mail Online", "The Daily Beast", "The Sunday Times", "The Times", "The Daily Mail", "The Independent" during 2008-2015 were a source of research.

Much work has been done to implement politically correct language into society. Many changes and appropriate approaches were introduced to linguistics to establish politically correct language as the standard of Modern English.

### The 'people first' proposals

The early 1990s witnessed several publications in psychological and educational literature, proposing a 'people first' approach. The main idea of the approach was to replace premodified nouns (disabled people) by postmodified nouns (people with disabilities). Many governments and state agencies accepted and followed the proposal. They overtly changed their names accordingly. For instance, in 2006, The American Association on Mental Retardation changed its name to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. Between 1933 and 1987, the organization was called the American Association on Mental Deficiency. When it was founded in 1876, it was named the American Association of Medical Officers of Institutions for Idiotic and Feebleminded Persons.

Before a 'people first' approach was introduced to society, non-politically correct terms were replaced numerous times by a succession of lexical euphemisms, and now it was time for a syntactic euphemism—from pre- to postmodification. According to this approach, the person is put before the disability—for example, one says 'a person with a disability' rather than 'a disabled person.' Indeed, it sounds less offensive.

Besides, the 'people first' proposal is also based on the idea that postmodification automatically takes the emphasis away from the disability.

non-PC language	PC language
Disabled person	A person with (who has/having) a disability
Mentally ill person	A person with mental illness
The retarded	Children with mental retardation
Mongoloid	A child with Down Syndrome
Amputee Person	People with an amputation
Deformed Person	People with a shortened arm

Another version of the 'people first' approach suggests using the post modifying relative clauses that include transitive verbs *have* and *use* in the "right" expressions.

non-PC language	PC language
Stroke victim	Individual who had a stroke
Deaf and dumb/the deaf	People who are hearing impaired
Suffering from multiple sclerosis	People who have multiple sclerosis
Cripples	People who are mobility impaired
Cripples	People who use wheelchairs

## Possible reasons for the prevalence of non-PC syntax

Newspaper headlines are still using the non-PC language for 2 reasons. On one hand, the newspapers need to sell their stories with 'catchy' phrases to attract the readers, on the other hand - to save space. The 'people first' language, by contrast, is not interested in saving space. The phrase 'a person with a disability' is longer than 'a disabled person.'

Examples of non-PC headlines:

- a. Bipolar youth spent time in 14 state facilities (04/07/07)
- b. Learning center is a haven for disabled adults, children (01/02/03)
- c. Time may run out for blind clockmakers (06/04/06)
- d. Mentally disabled adults receive ABCs in romance (02/14/06)
- e. Florida teen gets 3 years in drowning autistic boy (11/09/02)
- f. Romania still mistreats mentally ill youths, report says (05/10/06)

The purpose of newspaper headlines is to sell. Direct headlines sell better than euphemistic ones. Like a brief headline, a non-euphemistic headline is more sensational—it makes news.

2. Another motivation behind the use of non-PC language may be the need for linguistic variation and the need to avoid repetition. Consider the following:

- a. Recreation manager Peter Murphy said the donation will be used for the group's Cognitive Youth Program, which assists autistic children and children who are mentally retarded.
- b. Katy residents expressed concern about transportation for those with special needs, such as the mentally retarded.

The non-PC forms may here be used to avoid the repeated use of the end-heavy postmodification.

## Discussion

In English linguoculture, the prohibition of the use of words and expressions indicating inferiority, human damage is ubiquitous. The protection of the rights of people with disabilities, people with genetic or hereditary diseases, people with mental and physical disorders is common among the inhabitants of this linguoculture. The study revealed that there were large numbers of politically correct units aimed at treating people with any physical or mental disabilities in a human way. So, if we start to refer to others more respectfully, even despite all their oddities and imperfections, we will soon stop noticing all these shortcomings! Which means the world will be a little kinder. And if it really is, it's definitely worth it.

These principles reflect changes in society, as well as a broad attempt, is being made to create a politer or sensitive world for all of its members

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