

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS – A CHALLENGE TO EFL TEACHING



*Bisera Plančić, Željka Zanchi **

Pomorski fakultet, Filozofski fakultet, Split

The authors examine the concept of the so-called “political correctness” as a result of political and social changes in the contemporary world, primarily with regard to how it affects the language, focusing on the importance of teaching it to EFL students. As non-native speakers of English, students can sometimes be completely unaware of the sensitivity of the issue in the target language cultural setting as it may not be quite so pronounced in their own society. We therefore consider it necessary to acquaint the students with the problem, its origins, developments and implications.

The aim of this paper is to highlight and explore the arguments of both supporters and opponents of political correctness in language, trying to propose the best ways of presenting the issue to EFL students, making them fully aware of the problem and its implications, at the same time teaching them to use the language in a civilised and inoffensive way, avoiding the inappropriate terms.

Key words: politically correct speech, prejudice, sexism, racism, euphemisms, abusive language, approved language

INTRODUCTION

The issue of political correctness, which has been in the focus of interest for quite some time now, and one of the topics frequently considered and discussed all over the world, is very important for EFL teachers as their task is to produce competent and proficient users of English, enabling their students to successfully communicate and understand the cultural settings and background of the target language. This is also supposed to raise the teachers’ and, consequently, the students’ awareness of certain social issues such as diversity, flexibility, tolerance, democracy, etc., none of which can be overemphasised in a humanistic approach to education. Political correctness, as applied to the use of language and choice of words, has caused a lot of heated argument and has divided people, not only linguists, into its ardent supporters and detractors. While the former defend it on the grounds that it can effectively combat intolerance, prejudice and injustice by replacing straightforward and

* Bisera Plančić, profesor engleskog jezika, Pomorski fakultet, Split; e-mail: bisera@pfst.hr

* Željka Zanchi, profesor engleskog jezika, Filozofski fakultet, Split; e-mail: zzanchi@gmail.com



frequently offensive terms referring to race, ethnic origin, physical and mental disabilities, etc. by neutral, inclusive and therefore more acceptable words, the latter object to it as merely an instrument of political control and manipulation and an impediment to the freedom of speech. They base their argument on the fact that things are sometimes taken too far, many expressions generally accepted as ‘politically correct’ sounding awkward, unnatural and ridiculous, arguing that political correctness frequently obscures the meaning and is directed against clarity, thereby deteriorating the language.

While the language traditionally used to refer to various minority or identity groups obviously represents a sensitive area, as indeed it does in English (and other languages as well), the gender concept does not seem to be creating as many problems in Croatian. Due to the nature of the Croatian language, gender is, in the majority of cases, clearly morphologically indicated. Consequently, it may be difficult for the Croatian learners of English to understand why it should represent such a disputable issue in English. This is also the reason why feminists in Croatia do not have much to complain about as there have always existed parallel distinctive terms referring to the members of both genders (*glumac – glumica; pjevač – pjevačica; redatelj – redateljica; student – studentica; učitelj – učiteljica*, etc.), some of which recently coined in order to fill the void, as well as to meet the increasing requirements of political correctness, e.g. *sudac – sutkinja; psiholog – psihologinja; arheolog – arheologinja*.

As regards the issue of ethnicity, the Croatian words ‘*crnac*’ and ‘*crnkinja*’, used to refer to black persons of male and female genders respectively, have never had any pejorative or disparaging connotations, which is why the Croatian students find it difficult to understand why these terms, or their English equivalent (‘*Black*’) should not be acceptable as well.

The same could be said to apply to the disabled, covered by the Croatian word ‘*invalidi*’. As in the case mentioned above, no one seems to have had any problems concerning the word and its usage, not even the segment of the population in question. The disabled population in Croatia do not seem to be bothered by linguistics as their immediate concern might be to solve more important problems, e.g. having access to facilities for the wheelchairs in public places and creating conditions enabling them to lead a normal life. Not having such problems, or perhaps having to deal with issues that were in the Anglo-Saxon world solved a long time ago, Croats may somewhat lack the awareness of this kind of linguistic requirements and subtleties in English, all the more so because the ‘politically correct’ terms keep changing all the time and are not easy to keep up with. This is why Croatian speakers of English in particular, while having the best of intentions and not wishing to insult anyone, may find themselves in awkward and embarrassing situations just because of literal translations from their own language.

It is in view of the considerations described above that we have prepared what may be called a diagnostic questionnaire for our respective students, trying to establish the level of their awareness of the issue, i.e. to what extent they are already acquainted with it (see Appendix).

Although unofficial and not elaborated in detail, the results seem to have corroborated our initial hypothesis, namely that the average Croatian university students know very little,

if anything at all about the subject matter. As teachers of English, we feel it to be our task to enlighten our students on the subject, explaining and exemplifying the important issues, making them aware of this phenomenon and its implications while helping them to use the language competently and confidently, avoiding possible misunderstandings, primarily those resulting from ignorance.



1 THE ORIGINS OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

What is now called politically correct language has resulted from the civil rights movements, as well as the struggle for women's rights and racial, sexual, age, etc. equality. It came as a linguistic response to the changes in modern society, primarily in the United States, soon to spread to other English-speaking countries and elsewhere. The aim was to use more appropriate, i.e. more neutral language, which would replace words and phrases found offensive by certain groups of people.

Most linguists believe that reality and language are closely connected, i.e. how we perceive the world inevitably reflects on our language and vice versa, the language strongly shapes and determines our view of the world, as well as our beliefs and attitudes. Consequently, the need to include language into social or political reforms becomes imperative.

The problem was brought into focus by feminist movements in the 1970-s and 1980-s. Believing the language to be strongly influenced and coloured by a male-dominated patriarchal culture, thereby emphasising inequality of men and women in society, they strove to eliminate gender-based terms from the English language.

On the other hand, civil rights champions, having objections to the language which reflected ethnic and racial prejudices, demanded the eradication of offensive and disparaging terms commonly used in referring to race, nationality, religion, and culture, seeking to replace them with neutral, inclusive, and non-biased ones.

These movements were subsequently joined by activists concerned with other underprivileged minority groups, fighting against bias and bigotry based on age, ability, physical appearance, sexual orientation, etc., extending to our times and well on their way to becoming a trend or a vogue. More zealous champions of the cause have started pushing things a bit too far, constantly coining new terms and phrases, mostly euphemisms, which are by many felt to be awkward and dissociated from the common sense, more often than not striking one as condescending, offensive, or simply ridiculous. It is due to these that the principles, beliefs, and commendable intentions of the pioneers of the movement are, unfortunately, frequently being compromised.

2 GENDER-BIASED LANGUAGE

The issues most ardently disputed by feminists were, among other things, the traditional perception and representation of women as being inferior, diminishing, even denying their intelligence, potentials, general abilities, and skills.

The most illustrative example of this would be the generic use of the word 'man' in

reference to the human race, or the same word as the ending of compounds denoting various occupations, no longer being an exclusive domain of the male population.

As a result, the following changes have occurred:

fireman / firemen ~ firefighter(s); anchorman ~ anchor; chairman / chairmen ~ chairperson or chair; layman ~ laypersons; policeman / policewoman ~ police officer; tradesman ~ skilled person; postman (B.E.) / mailman (A.E.) ~ mail carrier; foreman ~ supervisor; businessman ~ businessperson; craftsman ~ craftsperson; old master (painting) ~ classic artist

Not only is the compound ending ‘*man*’ to be avoided in the names of occupations, but also the word itself should in many cases be replaced with gender-neutral terms because it is considered to be gender-biased and sexist, as in its different derivations and phrases, e.g. ‘*manning*’ (the preferred term being ‘*staffing*’), ‘*manned*’ (‘*staffed*’), ‘*the working man*’ (‘*worker*’), ‘*the man in the street*’ (‘*people*’), ‘*one man show*’ (‘*one person show*’), ‘*to a man*’ (‘*without exception*’).

The same applies to proverbs of the type: ‘*Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.*’ - where the proscribed ‘*man*’ is to be replaced either with ‘*people*’ or the impersonal pronoun ‘*one*’, so the quoted proverb should read: ‘*Early to bed and early to rise, makes people / one healthy, wealthy, and wise.*’

Feminists also objected to the traditional derivational formation of the female equivalents of occupational titles by adding suffixes *-ess*, *-ette*, or *-trix*, as in the following examples:

manageress vs. manager; poetess vs. poet; actress vs. actor; authoress vs. author; usherette vs. usher; executrix vs. executor

It is for the above reasons that ‘*steward*’ / ‘*stewardess*’ and ‘*waiter*’ / ‘*waitress*’ have been replaced with ‘*flight attendant*’ / ‘*cabin attendant*’ and ‘*server*’ respectively.

The next objection relates to the generic use of the personal pronoun ‘*he*’ (‘*him*’, ‘*his*’). Examples such as: A doctor should treat *his* patients competently and sympathetically. A customer may leave *his* luggage here. or: *He* who can, does; *he* who cannot, teaches. should be rephrased as follows: Doctors / a doctor should treat *their* patients competently and sympathetically. Customers / a customer may leave *their* luggage here. *Those* who can, do; *those* who cannot, teach. - replacing the ‘*he*’ with the more inclusive and neutral ‘*they*’ and ‘*those*’, changing the singular nouns (a doctor, a customer) into plural forms (doctors, customers) in order to retain the agreement between the subject and object. Although a singular noun with the plural pronoun (a doctor – their) is becoming increasingly common, such usage is still disputed by grammarians on the grounds that it is felt to be ungrammatical and rather inelegant, even awkward.

As far as nouns morphologically indicating gender are concerned, as in the following pairs: *husband* and *wife*, *brother* and *sister*, *son* and *daughter*, these tend to be increasingly abandoned in favour of what is thought to be neutral and inclusive: *spouse*, *sibling*,

offspring, though the last has been felt, especially by critics, to be somewhat far-fetched and exaggerated.

When it comes to forms of address preceding surnames, such as *Mr*, *Mrs*, and *Miss*, they were largely considered unfair, putting women in an inferior position. While *Mr*, used as a term of address for men, in no way reveals their marital status, this is not the case with *Mrs* or *Miss*, which is why feminists have insisted that they both be replaced with the newly coined *Ms* (pronounced /miz/) since it is inclusive and neutral, thereby making it fully analogous with *Mr*. Similarly, the traditional forms of address in formal or business letters, *Dear Sir(s)* (B.E.) and *Gentlemen* (A.E.), tend to be abandoned in favour of *Dear Sir or Madam*, which is regarded as inclusive and therefore more appropriate.



3 PEJORATIVE LANGUAGE

3.1. Deracialisation

As far as racial, ethnic, religious, and minority-related issues and references are concerned, there has been a general tendency, ever since the emergence of civil rights movements back in the 1950-ies and 1960-ies, to eliminate not only all insulting and directly abusive terms ('*coloured*', '*nigger*', '*spook*', '*wop*', etc. – the last three falling into the category of taboo language), but also the ones formerly considered acceptable ('*Negro*', '*Oriental*', '*Latino*' etc.). What initially started as an opposition to the terms used to refer to American citizens of African descent subsequently came to encompass all other ethnic and racial minorities, such as indigenous population of America, Italian, Hispanic, Polish, Irish, Caribbean, and other immigrants. Attempts were made to find neutral words and expressions, containing no negative or offensive connotations whatsoever. Thus the acceptable terms in referring to different races and nations are: '*African-American*', '*African-Caribbean*', '*Native American*', '*Asian*', '*Italian-American*', '*Native Hawaiian*', '*Caucasian*', etc.

This trend has come to be known as **DERACIALISATION**, stemming from the fact that many of the originally neutral terms, euphemisms for the most part seemed to have become devalued over time (as is indeed the case with most euphemisms), acquiring derogatory connotations, and had to be eventually replaced with newly coined, neutral and therefore approved words. This accounts for a comparatively long succession of terms such as '*Negro*', '*coloured*', '*black*', '*Afro-American*', '*African-American*'.

3.2. Other minority and different identity groups

Among these the most outstanding are persons with various disabilities (either physical or mental) and people of different sexual orientation(s).

People with various physical disabilities were once quite legitimately referred to as '*crippled*' or '*handicapped*', the words initially having no negative connotations. However, these have come to be regarded as offensive, as well as some of the terms denoting the kind of impairment (earlier referred to as '*handicap*' and no longer acceptable), especially words



like *'invalid'* and *'invalidity'*, e.g. *'blind'*, *'deaf'*, etc.. Instead of these, more neutral terms have been proposed and have come to be used (*'disabled'*, *'differently-abled'*, *'persons/people with special needs'*, etc. Some of them, however, are rather indirect and periphrastic and therefore frequently perceived as imprecise and unclear (*'visually impaired'* for *'blind'*, *'hard of hearing'* or *'persons with hearing impairment'* for *'deaf'*, *'mentally challenged'*, *'differently-abled'*, or *'persons with special needs'* for retarded persons or the ones with the Down syndrome, etc.). This seems to have caused some dispute, and there is indication that some of the people to whom these are supposed to refer seem to find them derogatory, condescending and therefore even more offensive than the traditional words *'blind'*, or *'deaf'*; words which they had found perfectly acceptable and had no objection to in the first place.

Among numerous identity groups homosexuals appear to have attracted the greatest amount of attention, which may to a certain extent be accounted for by the fact that they have indeed been most exposed to ridicule, contempt, and prejudice. This can be corroborated by an amazingly long list of derogatory terms used to refer to them (*'queen'*, *'queer'*, *'fairy'*, *'poofster'*, *'faggot'*, *'dyke'*, *'gay'*). Although the above words are abusive for the most part, the acceptability of some of them seems to have been varying, rising or abating, depending on the current social and political situations and trends, as well as the degree of acceptance by the groups themselves. The word to have gained ground and stuck, despite the fact that it was once one of the many words intended to be derisive, is the word *'gay'*. Not only has it become the acceptable colloquial and informal equivalent of the formal *'homosexual'*, but it is currently the term favoured by the group themselves and has been in use for quite some time. It might be interesting to note that the adjective *'gay'* is no longer used in its former meaning: it has been completely obliterated and ousted by the newly acquired one, especially in the predicative use. Curiously enough, it has never been converted or back-formed into other parts of speech (noun or verb), as was the case with the participial adjective *'coloured'* which was also used as a noun, assuming the inflectional plural suffix *-s*.

Other groups which have customarily been the target of ridicule, prejudice, and unfair treatment are particularly psychiatric patients and people sensitive to their physical appearance because they are fat, too thin, too tall, too short, or old. Prejudice against the last group is known as *'ageism'*, formed by analogy after the older term *'sexism'*, denoting bias concerning gender. Old people thus came to be called *'elderly'*, and *'older'*, *'chronologically gifted'* or *'chronologically challenged'* (now being only humorously used, presumably not always in the best of tastes as far as the persons in question are concerned!). The approved and indeed the most frequently used syntagm to refer to them is *'senior citizens'* or *'people of the third age'*.

In order not to offend any particular group, former derogatory terms are being constantly replaced with new, acceptable ones, mostly based on euphemism. Taking into consideration that these persons, as all people whose appearance departs from the accepted standards or canons, are particularly sensitive, the new awareness has, in this case as well, resulted in creating new language. Thus *'overweight'* or *'obese'* (usually medical terms) is preferred to the derisive *'fat'*, *'fatty'*, *'roly-poly'* and the like.

The issue of mental health has always been an exceptionally delicate one on account of people involved being embarrassed and ashamed. Therefore, 'mental institution', a term pregnant with negative connotations, is today normally referred to as 'psychiatric hospital' or 'psychiatric clinic' and the expressions which were once acceptable and in normal use, such as 'asylum', 'mental institution' or simply 'institution', not to mention humorous euphemisms ('loony bin', 'funny farm', etc) had best be avoided since they are generally regarded as extremely rude and offensive.



CONCLUSION

The use of politically correct language, which started in English and spread to many other languages, was caused by an ever increasing social and political consciousness that all people should be treated with consideration and respect, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual preferences, etc. Politically correct language reflects all the changes in modern society that have taken place with the growth of awareness of the rights of various minority and underprivileged groups. However, there are many opponents of this language reform who think that the things may have gone too far. Some of them claim that political correctness endangers free speech. Both groups give very persuasive arguments in support of their beliefs.

As EFL teachers we cannot ignore such an important issue and it is our duty to familiarize our students with these changes in order to help them towards a better understanding of the culture in which they might study, work, visit or do business one day. The instruction is also required as the ignorance on the subject might be the cause of great embarrassment and even damage if a person were unaware of the phenomenon in a particular environment. However, when it comes to teaching lexis, the topic is a real gold mine offering a wide range of very useful vocabulary. It is also an exceptionally rewarding topic for discussion as most students are ready to participate and contribute. And, finally, it is a great delight for teachers as they mostly relish the prospect of teaching language and expanding the students' vocabulary, at the same time promoting justice, non-discrimination, and equality.

REFERENCES

- Berman, P. ed. (1992): *Debating P.C.: The Controversy Over Political Correctness on College Campuses*. New York, Dell.
- Magner, T. F. (2002-2003): Sexist and Non-Sexist Usages in the English Language, *Studia Romanica et Anglica Zagrabienisa*, XLVII-XLVIII, pp 271- 281.
- Tsehelska, M. (2006): *Teaching Politically Correct Language*, English Teaching Forum, 44, 1.



- Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, (2008). *Non-sexist language* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-sexist_language
- Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, (2008). *Political correctness*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_correctness
- Wilson, J. K. (1995): *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education*. Durham, N.C., Duke University Press.

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENTS aimed at establishing to what extent they are already familiar with the concept of politically correct speech.

Read the following questions carefully. Among the answers provided below circle the one(s) that you consider to be correct. In some questions more than one answer can be chosen.

1. The concept of “politically correct speech” means:
 - a) Compatibility with political views, i.e. publicly and officially proclaimed policy of a particular state / country;
 - b) Selection of neutral words and expressions which no one is likely to find offensive or abusive;
 - c) The so-called “newspeak” typical of politicians.

2. Which of the terms below is / are acceptable when referring to a member of the black race:
 - a) coloured person
 - b) black
 - c) Negro
 - d) African-American

3. Which of the following is acceptable when referring to a member of the white race:
 - a) European
 - b) white
 - c) Caucasian
 - d) Arian

4. Acceptable term(s) for a homosexual is / are:
 - a) gay
 - b) poofter
 - c) queer
 - d) homosexual

5. Which of the following is the most appropriate to denote a person working in a shop:
- salesperson
 - saleswoman
 - salesman
 - shop assistant
6. A blind person is best referred to as:
- visually impaired
 - blind person
 - visually challenged
 - person with sight disability
7. Persons with different degrees of physical disability are:
- disabled
 - invalids
 - handicapped
 - differently-abled
8. An old person is referred to as:
- old person / old man / old woman
 - mature person
 - elderly person
 - senior citizen
9. A mentally retarded person is:
- mentally disabled
 - retarded
 - mentally impaired
 - person with special needs
10. Which of the expressions below is absolutely unacceptable because it offends the person it refers to:
- African-American
 - gay
 - nigger
 - senior citizen
11. Only one of the following terms is acceptable:
- Negro
 - disabled
 - coloured
 - Asian



12. Which of the following titles is neutral and inclusive:

- a) Miss
- b) Ms
- c) Mrs
- d) Mr

13. The appropriate name for the person of South or Central American descent is:

- a) Hispanic American
- b) wop
- c) Latino

14. Which of the following is not acceptable because it reflects sexism:

- a) human race
- b) mankind
- c) human kind
- d) humanity

15. What do you call a person who enforces law and order (a member of the police force):

16. What do you call a person who puts out (extinguishes) fires:

POLITIČKA KOREKTNOST – IZAZOV ZA POUČAVANJE

Sažetak

U radu se razmatra pojam „političke korektnosti“, njegov utjecaj na engleski jezik i implikacije na suvremenu nastavu engleskoga kao stranoga jezika, a predlažu se i načini upoznavanja studenata s ovom problematikom, kao i njihova osposobljavanja da se jezikom služe na civiliziran, primjeren i svima prihvatljiv način. Kao neizvorni govornici engleskoga jezika, studenti mogu biti nesvjesni veće osjetljivosti ove teme u ciljnom jeziku i stoga je važno da se upoznaju kako je došlo do te reforme u engleskom jeziku i koje su njezine posljedice. U članku se analizira kako su antirasistički i feministički pokreti započeli promjene u jeziku radi eliminacije izraza koji vrijeđaju zbog po rasne, etničke, spolne i druge pripadnosti i kako je ta reforma u današnje vrijeme otišla malo predaleko, tako da se predlažu eufemizmi za izraze koji nikoga ne vrijeđaju zbog čega postaju tema satire i podsmijeha.

Ključne riječi: politički korektan govor, seksistički jezik, eufemizmi, rasizam, uvredljiv govor, prihvatljiv jezik