

THE FEAR TO TALK

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Abstract. This paper deals with one of the most controversial phenomena of modern society – political correctness, manifested in language and behaviour. It focuses on the restrictions which it imposes on people's social and cultural life, the bans that are enforced against a particular language and the possible prosecution in case of refusal to use politically correct language. It deals with facts that show arising dominance of minority groups over the majority.

Keywords: political correctness; bias-free language; language and punishment

I. Introduction

The censure imposed by politically correct language governs with pressure and violence and kills free speech. Although according to the proponents of political correctness, it is a language by means of which we practice tolerance and express understanding towards people thoroughly different from us in terms of gender, colour, race, status, age and a number of other reasons, it is a language that deprives of expressiveness, results in the fear to talk on controversial issues, makes things vague and leads to ridiculous word formation. Justification for those who create the words, phrases and rules of the so called bias – free language is that the use of a particular language shapes attitudes. Allegedly, the careful selection of vocabulary shapes a mindset of acceptance of all forms of difference to make them comfortable and uninhibited about their behaviour and lifestyle.

II. Constructed Languages and Bans

Reasoning behind the use of politically correct language is quite well-grounded. Over the centuries various groups of outcasts, who were chased, prohibited, who went underground, nowadays are free to express themselves, to show their otherness. So far, so good. But gradually these groups have become so powerful, they are given not equal but exclusive rights and in a way everyone who is straight, white, young, even male is guilty of being such.

There comes a new Orwellian time. Similarly to Newspeak in *1984* by Orwell, language is not left to develop itself by its natural processes but it is designed to serve the ideological needs of some minorities. Newspeak is a constructed language

with limited vocabulary and restricted grammar. A lot of words are removed from Newspeak thus hoping to eliminate the concept they represent. With this language a thought that contradicts the principles of Ingsoc (English Socialism) becomes unthinkable or this is one of the forms of thought control that is imposed on people. One structural change results in others. So,

“The whole literature of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron – they will exist only in Newspeak versions, not merely changed into something different, but actually changed into something contradictory of what they used to be.”

This prophetic statement has already become a reality. Literature has not been spared from political correctness. It is already affected by the trend to eliminate allegedly offensive language.

Last year, a school district in Mississippi removed *To Kill a Mockingbird* from its curriculum on the grounds that there is some language in the novel that makes people uncomfortable. The book was also temporarily removed from a school library in Virginia along with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by M. Twain with the allegation that the language in the novels was divisive. A number of similar acts have been committed.

A sincere talk about controversial issues, about history is becoming less and less possible. The bans on literature are the first step to limitations and deprivation of liberties.

In my opinion, the bans on the remarkable global achievements in culture can lead to new “dark ages” when reading was qualified as harmful and a reason for mental disorders. What is happening nowadays is spiritual impoverishment in favour of political correctness.

III. “Scary Free Speech”

Minority groups’ demands concerning language are flourishing on campuses and social media. Rights are also given to regulate and exclude the speech of their community members. Free speech is defined as “scary free speech”¹ Some superficial arguments are provided to prove that someone’s feelings are hurt by debates or talks or just expressed opinions in order a lot of topics and particular vocabulary to be forbidden. This turns out to be oppressiveness exercised by minorities that even lack the criteria what is harmful or what is debate about harmful. The free-speech advocate Wendy Kaminer says, “It’s amazing to me that they can’t distinguish between racist speech and speech about racist speech, between racism and discussions of racism.”²

These groups that define themselves as “underprivileged” use the same energy they fight against to gain the rights to demonstrate their otherness. They try to silence those who express different views by means of language. They or their advocates impose bans on vocabulary. They exclude words and phrases that

contain ethnonyms, they change pronouns, they coin new vocabulary that could be defined as ridiculous. Steven Pinker gives an interesting example of a guide on the politically correct language and the negative reaction that it provokes.

“The Los Angeles Times” Guidelines on Racial and Ethnic Identification” for its writers and editors ban or restrict some 150 words and phrases such as “birth defect”, “Chinese fire drill”, “crazy”, “dark continent”, “stepchild”, “WASP” and “to welsh”.

Defying such politically correct sensibilities, the Economist allows the use of variants of “he” for both males and females (as in “everyone should watch his language”), and “crippled” for disabled people.

“One side says that language insidiously shapes attitudes and that vigilance against subtle offense is necessary to eliminate prejudice. The other bristles at legislating language, seeing a corrosion of clarity and expressiveness at best, and thought control at worst, changing the way reporters render events and opinions.”.

IV. Bias-Free Language Guides

A lot of guides how to use language not to offend someone’s sexual, racial, religious and so on sensibilities have appeared. They are quite typical of university communities and are often subjects for debates. The vocabulary they cover is in flux and what is preferred currently next year might become irrelevant, so some of them are updated when necessary in order to meet the new trends. Full of absurdities is the Bias-Free Language Guide of the University of New Hampshire. The authors of this guide argue that when compiling it they have applied the principles of “Diversity, Inclusion and Equity”. It means that all regardless their differences are treated with respect and words and phrases are included that do not demean or exclude people on the grounds of their race, sex, ethnicity, age, people with certain physical or mental distinctions. In this guide a lot of our daily vocabulary and language constructions are qualified as verbal aggression or as inappropriate and outdated and other words and phrases are offered. Some of the dictionary entries may sound justifiable but others are quite an enigma why should be avoided by the users of political correctness. Some of the curious examples in the section *Race, Ethnicity, Culture and Immigrant Status* are:

“Preferred: U.S. citizen or Resident of the U.S.

Problematic: American

Note: North Americans often use “American” which usually, depending on the context, fails to recognize South America.

Preferred: international people

Problematic: foreigners”

in the section *Women and Gender* are:

“Preferred: parenting, nurturing (or specify exact behavior)

Problematic/Outdated: mothering, fathering. Unless gender is specifically implied, avoid gendering a non-gendered activity”.

in the section *Age, Class, Size* are:

“Preferred: person of material wealth

Problematic: rich

Being rich gets conflated with a sort of omnipotence; hence, immunity from customs and the law. People without material wealth could be wealthy or rich of spirit, kindness, etc.

Preferred: people of size

Problematic/Outdated: obese*, overweight people

“Obese” is the medicalization of size, and “overweight” is arbitrary; for example, standards differ from one culture to another.

Note: “Fat”, a historically derogatory term, is increasingly being reclaimed by people of size and their allies, yet for some, it is a term that comes from pain”³

The University of New Hampshire President Mark Huddleston distanced himself and the educational institution from the guide and said that this is not the official policy of the university where free speech is encouraged. He is “troubled by many things in the language guide, especially the suggestion that the use of the term ‘American’ is misplaced or offensive,”⁴ Huddleston said in a statement posted on the school’s website. According to the New Hampshire Senate majority leader Jeb Bradley the school “should concentrate on educating students to compete in the 21st century economy rather than taking political correctness to farcical levels.”⁵

It is difficult to assume the position of the authors of the guide who unjustifiably try to replace long-used words with newly coined ones which are weird and result in blurring of concepts and restriction of one of the fundamentals of democratic society – free speech.

V. Language and Punishment

Despite the defence by some representatives of the academic circles, movements to qualify behaviour and free speech in which opinions are sincerely expressed as hostile and offensive to some groups are becoming increasingly strong and influential. The free expression of views is likely to be qualified as hate speech. In Canada, last year a bill which criminalized speech that might be found anti-transgender was introduced. “Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has announced a bill that would criminalize anti-transgender speech, with violators receiving up to two years in prison.”⁶ Morality will not be legislated only by introducing legislation that will help guarantee transgender and other gender-diverse people the right to live

according to their gender identity, free from discrimination and protected from hate speech. Straight people who disagree and speak freely are likely to be prosecuted.

In my opinion, our society is threatened by moral ambiguity which leaves us in a state of not knowing what is right and what is wrong.

VI. Newly Coined Pronouns

Another tyranny is the fierce struggle to impose particular pronouns which to replace the traditional ones. Minority groups whose sexual identity does not fit into traditionally defined gender ones are extremely sensitive to the gender of pronouns. There are a lot of examples of proposed newly coined pronouns, but the most popular are *ze* (she and he simultaneously) and *hir* (his/ her). But these pronouns are not limited to individuals with non-heterosexual orientation. It is these groups of people who want to impose the use of the said pronouns for machines with artificial intelligence, asexual imaginary beings, for God in the monotheistic religions and the like, considered by them to be sexually neutral.

VII. The Language of Feminists

Speaking of politically correct language we cannot help mentioning the language defended by feminists. For them, women are seen as a social construct in a society which favours the male sex over the female. They assume that if men behave with them as men this will result in equality. One of the fundamental principles of feminists who are concerned with language is that sex bias can be found also in language – both in semantics and in syntax. The fact, called language sexism relegates women and is found in the way in which language treats women and in the way women are taught to use language.

What is considered here is the point of view of feminists. For them, in our culture sexist language still exists despite all the efforts to introduce new words to replace the old ones. A lot of words, when referred to women contain negative connotation although the equivalent word for males is semantically positive. “The word for women assumed negative connotations even where it designated the same state or condition as it did for men. *Spinster* and *bachelor*, for example, designate an unmarried adult but when this word is marked for males it is positive while when it is marked for females is negative. The only variable is that of sex and this variable is crucial to the semantic system.”

In the titles with which women are addressed (*Miss*, *Mrs*) their marital status is emphasized. *Ms* is the preferred title and by using it the speaker can undermine the traditions of a patriarchal order and to avoid labeling related to marital status. Also, the gender specific titles for occupations and the use of pronouns exclude women when discussing a topic which refers to both sexes. So, to avoid linguistic discrimination, there are some simple rules:

- to use *humanity* instead of *mankind*;

- to replace all occupational titles containing man with gender neutral – *chairperson* instead of *chairman*, *firefighter* instead of *fireman*, etc.;
- to use *person* instead of *man*;
- to use plural to avoid gendered pronouns and adjectives (Everyone is free to give their own opinion).

A lot of women would approve of such vocabulary and are prone to use it but they distance from the military, radical forms of feminism. Most of nowadays feminists are involved in petty, silly causes – stealing the doll of baby Jesus by a topless protester at Vatican, the crazy calls of Jenny McDermott to kill all male babies. And not by chance according to the readers of the Time magazine the most annoying word for 2014 was “feminist”.

“Feminist’ is winning the Time magazine poll of words to ban with 45% of the vote.”

I could say that the approach of the nowadays feminists is nothing but meaningless and repulsive. In fact what the early fighters for women’s rights have fought for has already been achieved. Currently, we observe only extremities.

VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would say that we have been brought up in a different language environment from the described above. Although we were not familiar with the requirements of political correctness we learned how to speak and behave in a way correct for a particular social situation, how to address people politely and show that we care about other people’s needs and feelings. We learned uncensored literature which did not make us less tolerant.

Nowadays, milieu with abridged and replaced vocabulary, banned talks, safe spaces and avoidance of free speech represents the privileges that minority groups enjoy. This situation reminds of a situation typical of a totalitarian society where there is neither freedom, nor equality.

NOTES

1. <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2015/03/23/infantilized-college-students-need-safe-spaces-to-avoid-scary-free-speech/>
2. <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2015/03/23/infantilized-college-students-need-safe-spaces-to-avoid-scary-free-speech/>
3. <https://www.girardatlarge.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Bias-Free-Language-Guide-Inclusive-Excellence-073015.pdf>
4. <https://www.unh.edu/unhtoday/statement-unh-president-mark-huddleston-bias-free-language-guide>
5. <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2015/07/30/unh-president-troubled-over-language-guide-that-deems-term-american-problematic.html>

6. <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2016/05/23/heres-the-punishment-canadians-found-guilty-of-anti-transgender-speech-could-soon-face>

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СТРАХЪТ ДА ГОВОРИШ

Резюме. Тази статия разглежда едно от най-спорните явления на съвременното общество – политическата коректност, изразена в езика и поведението. Фокусът е върху ограниченията, които политическата коректност налага на социалния и културния живот на хората, забраните, които се прилагат спрямо определен език и върху възможното съдебно преследване в случай на отказ да се използва политически коректен език. Посочват се факти, които говорят за зараждащо се доминиране на малцинствените групи над мнозинството.

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