Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, **13**, 2 (2021) 130–146

DOI: 10.2478/ausp-2021-0017

Rectifying Language? Snarl Words and Politically Incorrect Language

Imola Katalin NAGY
Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania (Cluj-Napoca, Romania)
Department of Applied Linguistics, Târgu-Mureş
nimolkat@gmail.com

Abstract: Confucius was asked what he would do if he were a governor. He said he would rectify the names to make words correspond to reality. In this study, we wish to approach the problem of language changes that led to the emergence of concepts such as snarl words and purr words, as stated by S. I. Hayakawa, to refer to highly connotative language or politically correct and incorrect language. Can language be correct or incorrect politically? Should we ban words just because we perceive them as threatening social harmony? Should language be rectified and by whom? Or should we agree with Confucius, who believed that names, i.e. words should be used appropriately in the sense that if names are not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. What is correct in language and what is not? Can language be outlawed at all? Have words changed so drastically or has the surrounding reality changed? Should we use language correctly or appropriately? Can the shaping of new nomenclatures and decreeing words as undesirable or imposing meaning changes induce social harmony, or such attempts will only lead to a pandemic of euphemisms and nothing more? We try to look into the ways in which words are doomed for being politically, socially (or perhaps emotionally?) incorrect. We gather a corpus of such banned words and/or meanings and analyse the ways their perception has changed over the past years.

Keywords: snarl words, purr words, politically correct, language, meaning

1. Introduction

In his *Analects*, Book XIII, Chapter 3, verses 4–7, the Chinese philosopher Confucius states that social disorder often stems from failure to perceive, understand, and deal with reality, and, fundamentally, social disorder may stem from the failure to call things by their proper names; and his solution to this is the rectification of names. Confucius believed that names, i.e. words, should be used appropriately in the sense that if names are not correct, language is not

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

in accordance with the truth of things. Whenever words fail to name what we see, there is need for rectification. In this article, we will attempt to approach the problem of language changes that led to the emergence of concepts such as snarl words and purr words, as stated by S. I. Hayakawa (1947), to refer to highly connotative language or politically correct and incorrect language. The relationship between language and the world, words and objects has always been an evergreen field of debate for linguists. Language is the most important of all the tools humankind has created, as language has helped people develop and build up civilizations. "However, like any other tool, language can be abused, used not to build but to destroy, not to communicate but to confuse, not to clarify but to obscure, not to lead but mislead" (Lutz 1989: 1–2).

2. Snarl words vs purr words

We approach the problem of language changes that led to the emergence of concepts like *snarl words* and *purr words*, as stated by S. I. Hayakawa (1947), to refer to highly connotative language, more recently called politically correct and incorrect language, in order to look into the ways in which words are doomed to be politically, socially (or perhaps emotionally) incorrect. If language can be used for political purposes, this must be done by having an action-oriented approach to language and by exploiting all the emotional potentials of language. Hayakawa (1947) calls the words with strong negative connotation *snarl words*, while the words with strong positive connotation are called *purr words*. Purr words and snarl words convey the person's feelings and attitudes and not features of the words themselves. Here are some examples of present-day snarl and purr words:

– Snarl words: *wars*, *poverty*, *racism and ethnocentrism*, *hate speech*, *hate crime*, *discrimination*, *racist*, *thought criminal*; *totalitarianism*, *authoritarianism*, *fascism*, *dictator*, *genocide*, *ethnic cleansing*, *holocaust*, *cold war*, *national*.

– Purr words: *globalization*, *optimization*, *profit*, *peace*, *democracy*, *welfare for all*, *globalized*, *new*, *pro-choice*, *pro-active*, *activism*, *integrate*, *open*, *inclusive*, *innovative*, *neutral (climate neutral*, *gender neutral*, *net neutrality)*, *digital*, *inclusive*, *multi-tasking*, *up-to-date*, *green*, *international*, *multicultural*, *-friendly*, *digital*, etc.

3. Definition and history of political(ly) correct(ness)

The adjective *politically correct* (hereinafter referred to as PC), which gave rise to the emergence of the noun *political correctness*, is related to "a belief that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities (as in matters

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

of sex or race) should be eliminated".[1] Its synonyms are *dogmatic, orthodox*, or *right-on* (British), while its antonyms include *heretical*, *unorthodox*, *politically incorrect*. It also carries the meaning of being respectful of marginalized ethnic groups, genders, etc. *Encyclopedia Britannica 1992 Book of the Year*, describes PC as: "[A] pejorative term to describe a loose connection of feminists, Marxists, multiculturalists and deconstructionists together with their assorted leftwing position on race, sexual orientation, class, the environment and related issues" (cf. Benassi 1997: 46). Today, a significant amelioration can be spotted, as today *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines political correctness as:

> language that seems intended to give the least amount of offense, especially when describing groups identified by external markers such as race, gender, culture, or sexual orientation. The concept has been discussed, disputed, criticized, and satirized by commentators from across the political spectrum. The term has often been used derisively to ridicule the notion that altering language usage can change the public's perceptions and beliefs as well as influence outcomes.[2]

The term *political correctness* sprang from the Marxist tradition,

> which claimed the ability to perform scientific analysis of social and political events, and thus allowed for the possibility of being correct or incorrect in one's analysis. The party line, as defined by the ruling elite in communist regimes, invariably claimed correctness, of course, and invented elaborate *ex post facto* rationalizations for even the most radical policy changes. Soon, however, the concept of PC was adopted by opponents of Marxism to ridicule the dogmatism and obvious opportunism of communist regimes, as, for instance, in George Orwell's brilliant satire *Animal Farm*.[3]

The term *political correctness* was used as early as 1921; however, the ideological concept was invented 27 years earlier

> as a criterion of Marxism Leninism. In 1894, Lenin created *партийность* 'partiinost', which meant partisanship, party membership, party-mindedness, party spirit, or party truth, and in the early twentieth century the term was associated with the dogmatic application of Stalinist and Communist Party doctrine. This sense was later promoted by the Chinese

1 https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/politically%20correct.
2 https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-correctness [Last accessed: 28 June 2021].
3 https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/sociology-and-social-reform/sociology-general-terms-and-concepts/political-correctness [Last accessed: 28 June 2021].

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

> communist leader Mao Zedong in his 1963 essay *Where Do Correct Ideas Come from?*, which equated *correct* with *the disciplined acceptance of a party line*. (Phumsir–Tangkiengsirisin 2018: 448)

In the 1970s, the terms were adopted and started to be commonly used by Western left-wing politics. Political correctness claims its essence from the critical theory of the neo-Marxists, representatives of the Frankfurt School, which is why the current is also called cultural Marxism. In his book *Essay on Liberation*, Herbert Marcuse, a prominent representative of the ideological current known as the Frankfurt School, stated the need for a radical reform of values through the relaxation of taboos, cultural subversion, critical theory, and a process of linguistic revision aimed at a methodical reversal of meaning. Experts believe that this theory is at the root of political correctness, as highlighted by Ioniță (2014: 35).

4. PC language and euphemisms

The term *euphemism* designates a soft word or phrase that replaces a lexeme referring to taboo, uncomfortable or harsh issues that people might find offensive, embarrassing, or unpleasant. PC language and euphemisms have at least one other thing in common, i.e. the reorientation of lexeme semantics: they obscure cognitive meaning, lessen the significance of negative associated meanings, and deemphasize uncomfortable connotations: e.g. it is very difficult to talk *about dead people* or *death tolls* after warfare situations and the usage of *collateral damage* takes some of the pressure off.

The promoters of PC have succeeded in replacing Standard English with a form of Newspeak. In the dystopian world of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the government controls everything, including language. Newspeak designated by the State as the standardized official language is devised to meet the ideological needs of English Socialism. "In the year 1984 there was not as yet anyone who used Newspeak as his sole means of communication, either in speech or writing. […] It was expected that Newspeak would have finally superseded Oldspeak (or Standard English, as we should call it) by about the year 2050" (Congdon 2002: 1).

Orwellian Newspeak words were divided into three distinct classes, the A, B, and C vocabularies. All the words in the B vocabulary were compound words and were ideologically engaged. A great many were euphemisms (words like *joycamp*/forced-labour camp or *Minipax*/Ministry of Peace, i.e. Ministry of War, meant almost the exact opposite of what they appeared to mean). Some typical examples of Newspeak are: *blackwhite*, *crimethink*, *goodthink*, *hate crime*, *thought crime*, *doublespeak*, etc. As compared with Orwellian Newspeak, which is assumed to be ideologically engaged, PC newspeak is assumed to be neutral;

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

nevertheless, we must look into the meaning change suffered by one of the fetish words of PC discourse, *neutral*. While traditionally *neutral* means *neither good nor bad, not taking part or giving assistance in a dispute or war between others, not aligned with or supporting any side or position in a controversy*, *of no particular kind, characteristics*, etc., in PC semantics, neutral always refers to the good, the desirable, the ideal state of affairs (e.g. *climate neutral*, *gender neutral*, etc.). Purr and snarl words, and PC language as a form of prejudicial language are a form of *doublespeak*, called by Hayakawa (1947) *oververbalization*.

> Doublespeak is language that pretends to communicate but really doesn't. It is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable. Doublespeak is language that avoids or shifts responsibility, language that is at variance with its real or purported meaning. It is language which conceals or prevents thought; rather than extending thought, doublespeak limits it. (Lutz 1990: 1)

The word *doublespeak* combines the meanings of *Newspeak* and *doublethink*. This is language which attacks the very purpose of language, communication between people. This is indeed language which, in Orwell's words, is "designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" (cf. Lutz 1989: 7, Orwell 1946). Snarl words, purr words, PC language, Newspeak, and doublespeak are all affective or emotional language, based on banning some words and promoting others. But the question is: can we ban words which cover undesirable facts? Can we change the surrounding reality if we change the words or change semantics? Were the dictionary writers to take a position on the inclusion of a word according to whether the term indicated by it is desirable or occurs in the field of language, they would not include such words as *COVID-19*, *pneumonia*, or *leprosy* (see also Kontra 2016: 654–655).[4] But obviously, this is simply a utopistic approach to the nature of words and their relationship with the world.

5. Can affective language be a tool for manipulation?

The kind of attitude that Hayakawa (1947) calls *two-valued orientation*, which sees things in two terms only, without nuances, without accepting the possibility of middle ground and the kind of language this thinking promotes, can be used

4 Word bans were part of lexicographical policies in communist regimes, such as leaving out all references to Transylvania when defining entries which named realia linked to Transylvania such as *kaláka* (cf. Kontra 2016). Other words purged from dictionaries were lexemes deemed reactionary or obsolete, i.e. not suiting, not fitting official propaganda.

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

for political purposes (Hayakawa 1947: 126). And this is the essence of using language for manipulative purposes: resorting to emotions is of utmost importance, as emotional memory is one of the most stable types of memories, emotions are stronger and more direct than logical reasoning, wherefore they are easier to model (cf. Moiseeva 2020). Louis de Saussure (2005: 16–17) talks about local and global manipulation strategies in his study entitled *Manipulation and Cognitive Pragmatics: Preliminary Hypotheses*. Among local strategies, the researcher includes production of fuzziness, rhetorical questions, presuppositional assertion, misuse of concepts, and pseudo-mystical discourse, while global strategies encompass spreading and repetition of specific connotative words, i.e. words that under normal circumstances trigger implicatures (or presuppositions) with symbolic weight; generalization of a new terminology; elimination of some lexical items from public discourse; unmotivated or misleading analogies; acronyms, abbreviations, numbers; naming of elements of the everyday environment.

The analysis we have conducted upon the corpus has led to the conclusion that some of the most effective tools of manipulation are, in fact, the means used by PC language to redesign language: euphemizing, substitution of concepts, reconfiguration of word semantics, generalization and implicatures, spreading connotations, word bans, misleading analogies. These are, in fact, the social processes that take place during the course of implementing and imposing politically correct discourse and language: the PC Newspeak appears as a transcendent-like dogma created and imposed by benevolent and over-competent language users who have a superior skill of perceiving which word is good and which word is bad, and they try to eradicate all bad words for the sake of the speakers, to establish and maintain social harmony.[5]

5 Besides these strategies, we can also re-read what Orwell wrote in 1946 about the *bad way* and eluded semantics of English language: "As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house" (Orwell 1946). What is more, he also offers a list of such linguistic *swindles and perversions*, i.e. *tricks* with which the meaning of words and language can get completely derailed, a list which foreshadows some of the semantic tactics of PC language: "OPERATORS OR VERBAL FALSE LIMBS. These save the trouble of picking out appropriate verbs and nouns, and at the same time pad each sentence with extra syllables which give it an appearance of symmetry. Characteristic phrases are *render inoperative*, *militate against*, *make contact with*, *be subjected to*, *give rise to*, *give grounds for*, *have the effect of*, *play a leading part (role) in*, *make itself felt*, *take effect*, *exhibit a tendency to*, *serve the purpose of*, etc., etc. The keynote is the elimination of simple verbs. Instead of being a single word, such as *break*, *stop*, *spoil*, *mend*, *kill*, a verb becomes a *phrase*, made up of a noun or adjective tacked on to some general-purpose verb such as *prove*, *serve*, *form*, *play*, *render*. […] Simple conjunctions and prepositions are replaced by such phrases as *with respect to*, *having regard to*, *the fact that*, *by dint of*, *in view of*, *in the interests of*, *on the hypothesis that*; and the ends of sentences are saved by anticlimax by such resounding commonplaces as *greatly to be desired*, *cannot be left out of account*, *a development to be expected in the near future*, *deserving of serious consideration*, *brought to a satisfactory conclusion*, and so on and so

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

6. Corpus analysis

Our aim is to conduct a qualitative corpus analysis for pursuing in-depth investigations and explorations of linguistic phenomena that can be spotted in politically correct language usage. For this purpose, we have construed a corpus of politically incorrect and politically correct linguistic units. We have based our linguistic investigations on actual instances of written communication: this qualitative corpus analysis includes the computer-aided retrieval of authentic examples of the language phenomena under investigation (relying on dictionaries, glossaries, articles, websites, etc.), further interpreting these data in depth by applying some lexico-semantic and pragmatic criteria to a broad range of linguistic units. The corpus under analysis in this ongoing research includes multilingual reference texts in the topic of political correctness. The research

forth. PRETENTIOUS DICTION. Words like *phenomenon*, *element*, *individual (as noun)*, *objective*, *categorical*, *effective*, *virtual*, *basic*, *primary*, *promote*, *constitute*, *exhibit*, *exploit*, *utilize*, *eliminate*, *liquidate*, are used to dress up a simple statement and give an air of scientific impartiality to biased judgements. Adjectives like *epoch-making*, *epic*, *historic*, *unforgettable*, *triumphant*, *age-old*, *inevitable*, *inexorable*, *veritable*, are used to dignify the sordid process of international politics, while writing that aims at glorifying war usually takes on an archaic colour, its characteristic words being: *realm*, *throne*, *chariot*, *mailed fist*, *trident*, *sword*, *shield*, *buckler*, *banner*, *jackboot*, *clarion*. Foreign words and expressions such as *cul de sac*, *ancien regime*, *deus ex machina*, *mutatis mutandis*, *status quo*, *gleichschaltung*, *weltanschauung*, are used to give an air of culture and elegance. Except for the useful abbreviations *i.e.*, *e.g. and etc.*, there is no real need for any of the hundreds of foreign phrases now current in the English language. Bad writers, and especially scientific, political, and sociological writers, are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones, and unnecessary words like *expedite*, *ameliorate*, *predict*, *extraneous*, *deracinated*, *clandestine*, *subaqueous*, and hundreds of others constantly gain ground from their Anglo-Saxon numbers. The jargon peculiar to Marxist writing (*hyena*, *hangman*, *cannibal*, *petty bourgeois*, *these gentry*, *lackey*, *flunkey*, *mad dog*, *White Guard*, etc.) consists largely of words translated from Russian, German, or French; but the normal way of coining a new word is to use Latin or Greek root with the appropriate affix and, where necessary, the size formation. […] The result, in general, is an increase in slovenliness and vagueness. MEANINGLESS WORD. In certain kinds of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning […]. Many political words are similarly abused. The word *Fascism* has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies 'something not desirable'. The words *democracy*, *socialism*, *freedom*, *patriotic*, *realistic*, *justice* have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another. In the case of a word like *democracy*, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic, we are praising it: consequently, the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using that word if it were tied down to any one meaning. Words of this kind are often used in a consciously dishonest way. That is, the person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different. Statements like *Marshal Petain was a true patriot*, *The Soviet press is the freest in the world*, *The Catholic Church is opposed to persecution*, are almost always made with intent to deceive. Other words used in variable meanings, in most cases more or less dishonestly, are: *class*, *totalitarian*, *science*, *progressive*, *reactionary*, *bourgeois*, *equality*." (Orwell 1946)

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

is based on corpus construction, sampling by word mining and extraction of relevant lexical patterns and semantic analysis. The steps of corpus construction have been the following: 1. running a keyword search to identify and compile texts for the corpus (keywords used for this step have been *political correctness*, *politically correct*, *PC language*); 2. collection of written texts in digital form (authentic language materials based on communication acts such as newspaper articles, magazine articles, websites, word lists, advice columns on how to use language sensitively, essays, textbooks, opinion articles; 3. engagement in the qualitative analysis of these texts, extracting keywords around which the message of these texts is built, i.e. concordancing and sorting only keywords relevant to the topic and analysing their context and signification. Thus, after generating raw keyword lists, quantitative concordance outputs have been explored, i.e. in our study we have focused not on function words but rather on content words (noun phrases and adjectives mainly), lexis and context of usage of linguistic units that appear to be perceived as politically correct, comparing the meanings of uses of such units with others which have been described as incorrect. We have relied on different types or samples of writing, attempting to explore semantic issues and emotional tone. We have not run quantitative analyses, we have not intended to use frequency analysis, although we are aware that such steps could be further performed, perhaps combined with sentiment analysis, combining text mining and opinion mining techniques. In this study, we have focused mainly on English texts.

In this article, we analyse these terms by taking into account the criterion of the semantic processes which occur in the creation of politically correct terminologies. In the case of politically correct and incorrect word usage, we deal with pairs of words (sometimes series of PC variants), out of which one is perceived as being harmful from the viewpoint of sensitivities, and all the others emerging from the desire to correct insensitive or exclusive verbal behaviours.

The language which created and promoted PC language is English, especially American English, although some principles and phenomena have rapidly spread in other languages as well. While some principles may be considered as useful, such as shifting the perspective from the disability to the person (*the disabled / people with disabilities or disabled people*), some other phenomena may signal the fact that English-speaking cultures cope with realities such as dying, aging, being ill, putting people in difficult situations, poverty, lack of intelligence or willingness to work, committing crimes, acting illegally, being different or acting differently than the standard. This tendency to avoid naming such things in a straightforward manner, and trying to embellish or enhance things that are perceived as sensitive, belittling, leads to a linguistic embroidery which has the purpose of meliorating meanings but very often targeting words which have not undergone a process of pejoration.

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

From the viewpoint of lexico-semantic phenomena and word formation techniques, we have spotted the following (The first unit listed is the politically incorrect variant, while the second is the one which has been described as politically correct.):

– Using synonyms: *fat/overweight*; *forefathers/ancestors*, *forebear*; *manpower/personnel*, *human resources or staff*; *jungle/rainforest*; *swamp/wetland*; *disabled/inconvenienced*; *suicide/autoeuthanasia*, *spiritually dysfunctional*, *voluntary death*;

– Using a (circular) definition: *negro/black*, *coloured*, *Afro-American*, *African-American*, *people of colour*, *skin-melaninated*, *sun people* (Sometimes slight modifications of dysphemisms can make them acceptable: while *coloured people* is considered dysphemistic, *people of colour* does not carry the same connotations); *white/melanin-impoverished*, *member of the mutant albino genetic-recessive global minority* (one of the many implicatures is that being white is the same as suffering of albinism, this compound being the only case making use of the noun *minority*, elsewhere doomed as culturally insensitive), *mutant albino genetic-recessive global minority*, *person of non-colour*; *hyperactive children / child with an attention deficit disorder*, *attention deficit disordered children*; *incorrect / alternative answer*; *lie/misspeak*, *inoperative statement*, *carefully crafted*, *nuanced answers*; *liar / a person creative with the facts*; *falsifying official documents / cleaning up the historical record*, *false testimony / testimony that is fixed by omission*; *minority group / numerically challenged group*; *a woman / person of gender*; *disability / human difference*; *insanity / mental activity at the margin*; *individuals with a disability / people with special needs*; *physically disabled / physically challenged*, *physically different*; *unemployed / in an orderly transition between career changes*, *indefinitely idled*, *non-waged*, *occupationally dispossessed*, *vocationally deprived*;

– Using a hyponym or hypernym: *Oriental/Asian*; *maternal/parental*; *father/parent*, *co-parent*; *wife*, *husband/spouse*; *girlfriend*, *boyfriend/partner*; *nature/environment*; *intelligent/intuitive*; *Merry Christmas / Season's Greetings*;

– Using a hyponym or hypernym and an explicitation: *mother / first biological parent*; *father / second biological parent*;

– Using coinage and substitution of concepts (none of the newly coined words has been listed in dictionaries): *girl/pre-woman*; *breastfeeding/chestfeeding*; *manage/womanage*; *amen/awomen*; *history/herstory*; *actor*, *actress/actron*; *mankind / Earth children*; *efemcipated* = emancipated especially as it applies to the liberation and empowerment of women; *ego-testicle worldview* = men's point of view on all issues; *manhole/femhole* (= a replacement for the word "manhole" to dramatize the linguistic and cultural erasure of women in the electrical and sanitation trades); *woman/wofem*, *womban*, *womon*, *womyn*, *woperson*;

– Using euphemisms or meliorating roundabouts: *illegal immigrants / undocumented immigrants*; *wrong/inappropriate*; *shell shock (World War I) → battle fatigue (World War II) → operational exhaustion (Korean War) → post-*

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

traumatic stress disorder (Vietnam War); *ignorant / knowledge base non-possessor or factually unencumbered*; *stupid/cerebro-atmospheric individual, intellectually challenged*; *boring/charm-free, differently interesting*; *ugly / cosmetically different*; *old / chronologically gifted, experientially enhanced, longer-living, mature, senior, seasoned*; *blind / optically inconvenienced or challenged*; *dead / metabolically challenged*; *limited English proficient students / linguistically diverse students*; *illegal acts / inappropriate actions*; *a child with a learning disability / acceptional child*; *hard-of-hearing, deaf / aurally inconvenienced, aurally challenged, visually oriented*; *stupid, insane / cerebrally challenged, mentally challenged, selectively perceptive*; *mentally retarded / developmentally challenged, developmentally inconvenienced*; *physically or mentally disabled / differently abled*; *mentally retarded or physically disabled / exceptional, uniquely abled, special*; *psychologically disturbed, crazy / emotionally different*; *nearsighted, or farsighted, or blind / optically inconvenienced, optically challenged, unseeing, non-sighted*; *having a speech impediment, mute / orally challenged, vocally challenged*; *having no physical or mental disabilities / TAB or temporarily able-bodied person, temporarily able*; *disease/condition*; *retard / late developer, chronic underachiever, less prepared individual, mentally challenged person*; *psychotic or psychopath / socially misaligned*; *people who for the moment at least are not homeless / non-vagrant homed, temporarily homed* (the presupposition is that not being homeless is only temporary); *homeless / residentially flexible*; *anti-social / difficult to serve*; *cigarette smoking / assault with a deadly weapon*; *drug addiction / pharmacological preference*; *alcoholic, a drunk / person of differing sobriety, substance abuse survivor, person of stupor, wino*; *a prisoner / client of the correctional system, guest in a correctional institution*; *convict / socially separated*; *felons / criminalized populations* (the implicature is related to an emphasis on being criminalized by others, relief from personal responsibility); *prison cell / custody suite*; *patient, inmate, prisoner/guest*; *poor / differently advantaged, economically exploited, economically marginalized, low-income*; *a loser, a failure / individual with temporarily unmet objectives, incompletely successful individual, uniquely-fortuned individual on an alternative career path*; *lazy / motivationally deficient, motivationally dispossessed*; *misbehaviour / negative attentive getting*; *poor speller/orthographically challenged*; *sloppy / specially organized, non-traditionally ordered*; *incompetent / specially skilled, uniquely proficient, differently qualified*; *malpraxis / diagnostic misadventure of high magnitude, therapeutic misadventure*; *mistake/misadventure*; *death/dysfunction, failure to fulfil one's wellness potential*; *kill or assassinate/neutralize* (again, an interesting case, taking into account the positive connotation of *neutral* in PC); *dead, wounded* or *destroyed / no longer a factor*; *corpse / non-living person*; *alive / temporarily metabolically abled*; *recession (or depression) / meaningful downturn, period of economic adjustments, period of negative economic growth, temporary interruption of economic expansion*; *losses / negative cash flow*; *an obese or fat person /*

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

alternative body image, *differently sized*, *horizontally challenged*, *big-boned*, *larger-than-average citizen*, *person of size*, *person of substance*, *physically challenged*, *heavyset*, *heavily laden*; *false teeth / alternative dentation* (*alternative* is usually the euphemism for *false*); *uneducated*, *illiterate / alternatively schooled*; *accident/ anomaly*; *murder / arbitrary deprivation of life*; *war / mutually empowering shared experience*; *broken home / dysfunctional family*;

– Using an acronym: *AIDS/PWA (person with AIDS)*; *venereal disease / STD (sexually transmitted disease)*, which was later replaced by *STI (sexually transmitted infection)*; *BC/BCE Before Common Era*; *AD/CE Common Era*;

– Using contracted forms, usually apocopes: *Founding Fathers / founders*;

– Using non-synonyms or antonyms together with or without *differently*: *bad/different*; *spacey / differently focused*; *wrong / differently logical*; *mistaken / differently opinioned*; *ignorant / differently wise*; *dishonest / ethically disoriented*, *morally different*, *differently honest*; *worst/leastbest*; *dishonest*, *immoral*, *evil / morally different*; *failure / incomplete success*, *deficiency achievement*;

– Using dysphemism or using misleading analogies, i.e. items which induce negative judgement and criminalize the referent: *dominant/oppressive* (although dominant is not necessarily oppressive); *conservative/reactionary*; *hunter/ Bambibutcher*; *rancher / cattle murderer*; *farming / exploiting mother Earth*; *fishing / raping the planet's oceans*, *rivers*, *and lakes*; *lumberjack / tree butcher*; *logger / tree slayer*; *forest management / killing trees*; *marriage / domestic incarceration*, *legalized rape*.

Very often a word is degraded to the status of politically incorrect term, but no alternative is provided (*flush toilet*, *saint*, *black sheep*, *genius*, *brilliant*, *flair*, *exotic*, *violate*). Very often the PC euphemism introduced to replace the uncomfortable word becomes inadequate after a while and is replaced by a new creation; thus, PC words can quite rapidly become obsolete, perhaps due to the fact that they have been introduced artificially; the almost circular movement from *old person* to *senior citizen* and back to *older person* is a symptom indicating that words belonging to the core vocabulary cannot simply be banned and replaced with others. In this case, the phenomenon of linguistic reclamation, reappropriation or resignification has taken place. What is more, it is obvious that in the field of PC word creation we witness the *euphemism treadmill* or *euphemism cycle*, i.e. the process by which a euphemism falls into disgrace, it becomes socially unacceptable and is replaced by a new one. (The term *euphemism cycle* was introduced by Sharon Henderson Taylor (1974), whereas *euphemism treadmill* was coined by Steven Pinker (1994), to describe the process in which terms with an emotionally charged referent, which were once euphemisms, become dysphemistic by association with the referent.)[6]

6 Even *politically correct* seems to have entered this treadmill, as it has started to be replaced by *culturally sensitive*.

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

Although English lexicologists do not operate the division of the lexicon into the *core* or basic vocabulary and the *supplementary* vocabulary, we must mention that many linguists (such as Zsemlyei 2014) have the tendency to talk about these two layers of the lexicon. The core vocabulary (*Der Grundwortschatz*, *Basiswortschatz*, *Gebrauchswortschatz*, *Minimalwortschatz* in German, *fond principal lexical* in Romanian, and *alapszókészlet*, *alapszókincs* in Hungarian) is the essential part of the vocabulary of a language, characterized by great stability, comprising all the words with high frequency, which usually refer to fundamental notions, everyday concepts and which are, in general, the oldest words of the language, with many derivatives and many expressions and phrases. They are known to all members of the language community, and they include the names of: basic actions, body parts, natural objects, phenomena, house and living, numerals, pronouns, kinship names, temporal and spatial comparative words. Words belonging to the core vocabulary are very stable and change with great difficulty. That is why we tend to think that the replacement of words belonging to the core vocabulary, such as pronouns, family members, or basic adjectives, cannot, should not, and will not be replaced by their politically correct alternatives: *he*, *she*, *mother*, *father*, *wife*, *husband*, *old/young*, *good/bad*, *black/white*, etc.; nevertheless, if such an imposed linguistic cleansing will take place, what will happen to the derivates or compounds made up of such units: *motherly*, *fatherly*, *mother tongue*, *mother nature*, *mother-in-law*, *pollen mother cell*, *grandmother*, *motherhood*, *Father Christmas*, *father-in-law*, *father figure*, *grandfather*, *spiritual father*, *fathering*, *midwife*, *housewife* (not to mention idioms and sayings)? In many cases, the reason for banning a word is to avoid discrimination, but the ban imposed on the degraded word and the import of PC alternative(s) practically bring about new levels of discrimination or ranking, such as in the case of replacing *father*, *mother* with *first biological parent* and *second biological parent*, the very usage of *first* and *second* introduces the presupposition that one of them comes first and the other is of secondary rank or importance.

Very often the PC-generated linguistic changes (semantic and lexical changes alike) are fuelled by the fundamental disbelief that all that is old is bad and all that is new is good. As Hayakawa puts it, "language is the indispensable mechanism of human life—moulded, guided, enriched, and made possible by the accumulation of the past, i.e. language deposits the experiences of members of our species" (Hayakawa 1947: 14). Pejoration and melioration rarely work upon core vocabulary and rarely affect the grammar; thus, language evolution has not affected substantially the immutable core vocabulary. The core lexicon is not a set of semantically unstable words, and the Swadesh list,[7] which gathers some of the oldest and most stable semantic universals which are used in the research and analysis of genealogical relatedness of different languages, does include

7 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swadesh_list.

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

among its members the personal pronouns *he*, *she* and lexemes such as *mother*, *father*, *woman*, *man*, *husband*, *wife*, proposed by a twitter posting for dismissal as they are deemed unacceptable.[8] The derogatory overtones attached rather arbitrarily to these lexemes do not belong to the words themselves but rather to the speaker's interpretation, which depends on the interpreter's or speaker's background knowledge or experience and the representations stored in one's own mental lexicon. Dooming these core vocabulary words seems to be based on overgeneralization and the spread of connotations, which are otherwise not very likely to be assumed by all speakers of all languages.

In an effort to show no disrespect for anyone, promoters of political correctness largely succeeded in reducing the number of names which they have perceived as offensive or inaccurate. By wanting to be less harmful, PC language seems to flout politeness rules (see Brown and Levinson 1987), and they have imposed restrictions and speech codes, by failing to observe negative face. In other words, the constant efforts to reduce threat to positive face and the struggle to emphasize in-groupness, solidarity, and the need to be liked and accepted, i.e. positive face, have inevitably led to a complete disrespect of negative face, i.e. the human beings' fundamental need not to be imposed upon by others.

PC language is always hypercorrect language, as the very purpose of PC is correcting social and linguistic fallacies. However, hypercorrection in linguistics is, in fact, lack of correctness or inaccuracy, and a typical example of such hypercorrection is the usage of *amen* and *awoman*, as a gesture towards gender neutrality and to avoid potential discriminatory connotations of the word *amen* (which has nothing to do with the noun *man*).[9]

7. Conclusions

The most widespread feature of PC is the regulation of speech by banning presumably offensive words and verbal expressions in the public media, as well as public institutions like schools, hospitals, or administrative agencies, notes Geser (2008: 2). "We are left with the following questions: what happens if one sees things politically incorrect? If one observes that the relation between men and women seems to have turned to a narrow minded book keeping, since claims

8 https://gript.ie/united-nations-politically-incorrect-terms-including-husband-wife/.

9 The affix *man* was gender neutral in OE and had (as it still has today) the neutral meaning of person; to express gender, one had to use a composite, such as wifman for woman and waepman for man. Therefore, a compound like *chairman* is a perfectly gender-neutral expression, and the whole discussion about replacing the compounds containing the morpheme *man* (*manpower/personnel*, *human resources chairman/chair*, *congressman/legislator*, *businessman/representative*, *salesman/salesperson*, *man-made/artificial*, *mankind/humanity*, *postman/postal worker*, *taxman/tax officer,* etc.) seems meaningless.

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

of feminism have been trivialized? If one is sceptical of globalism? If one sees the implementation of peace as the established order of the mighty?", asks Klotz (1999: 156) rhetorically.

PC tends to overlexicalize[10] certain preferred areas, although in natural language changes the law of synonymic attraction demonstrates that subjects prominent to all members of a certain community tend to generate a significant number of synonyms. The generation of synonyms in PC fashion makes words stylistically and emotionally marked, which leads to the creation of euphemisms. Word creation in PC languages relies on word coinage, composition by juxtaposition and affixation, inducing new synonymic series, in which *Oldspeak* lexemes are supposed to be replaced by *Newspeak* variants. Among the newly created synonymic relations we mention: *illegal = undocumented*, *false = alternative*, *wrong, bad = inappropriate*, *malfunctional = challenged*, *disease = condition*, *disturbed = different.*

The mechanism of replacement is therefore often based on stigma allotment, oriented towards words and the referents they name. Stigmatized, and thus banned, words carry some induced semantic changes which do not occur naturally, and these changes affect the core vocabulary, the language universals, based on the premise that "if thoughts can corrupt language, language can also corrupt thoughts" (Orwell 1946: 259). PC language might be acceptable in technolects, standardization of terminology (such as the case of *crippled/ disabled*) but hardly acceptable or logical in general language, as it will end up in becoming a *Newspeak* or what the French call *langue de bois*, i.e. a string of ready-made thoughts and ideology-based language units resulting from a process of linguistic purging.

Therefore, the PC language *reform* means acting on the semantics of core lexicon words, aiming to change a lot, very quickly, wherefore it seems to be an outer intervention on language, a top-down process of semantic shift. The ban which is forced upon the usage of *he*, *she*, *man*, *woman, husband*, *wife*, etc. makes us consider PC a form of cultural intervention, which presupposes that language is in crisis and intervention is needed and meant to restore order and normality by habit formation. Language and emotions are two parallel, concurrent systems. There are a lot of overlaps between them; nevertheless, one should not confuse them, and hence attempt to change one in order to automatically change the other. The linguistic system is asymmetrical, as it is based on hierarchical oppositions; eliminating or neutralizing all asymmetries may lead to the

10 Overlexicalization is accompanied these days with a deconstruction or reformulation of previously popular maxims or aphorisms such as knowledge is power, reduced today to information is power, downplaying the significance and importance of acquiring knowledge and implementing the misbelief that it is enough to be informed instead of being educated. Among other similar misconceptions are: all that is new is good, and all that is old is bad; competence is more important than knowledge, etc.

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

impossibility to communicate. Language which prides itself in being neutral is fundamentally emotive,[11] it expresses emotions and attitudes, it decrees what is good, what is bad, what is appropriate, it makes moral judgments on semantic aspects, it stigmatizes words to destigmatize groups, it interprets non-emotional texts as emotionally loaded and in need of being even more neutralized through the usage of over-inflated linguistic items.

As George Orwell puts it:

> [t]he inflated style itself is a kind of euphemism. […] The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink. In our age there is no such thing as "keeping out of politics". All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer. (Orwell 1946)

PC has introduced the concepts of *guilty words* and *guilty language* and *good words* and *good language*. Linguistic judgements made upon words make us classify words into *snarl* words and *purr* words, politically correct words and politically incorrect words, or good words and bad words. Nevertheless, we should be careful with allocating the meaning correctly and be aware that snarl words and purr words, emotional words express the *speaker's state of mind* and not facts about something. This means that classifying words into categories, making moral judgements about them will eventually slant the story in one direction, it will induce biases; however, discovering and admitting one's own biases is the beginning of wisdom (Hayakawa 1947: 45–50). What is more, language changes should not rely on moral judgements upon words, and they need not take the form of a warfare against words. PC language does not seem to work in the direction of rectifying language, rather it seems to induce phenomena that will finally lead to what Confucius refers to: the necessity of restoring meaning and making words *name* reality and not (de)*form* reality.

11 Though neutral language is not meant to communicate emotions or to make the listener adopt those emotions. See also the difference between the informative function of language and its expressive or emotive functions or the difference between representative speech acts and expressive speech acts.

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

References

Benassi, Giuliano. 1997. *Political Correctness and Ideology: A Cross-Cultural Linguistic Study*. MA thesis. University of Konstanz.

Brown, Penelope–Stephen C. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Congdon, Lee. 2002. The age of Newspeak. *Virginia Viewpoint* 2002(11). *https://virginiainstitute.org/pdf/2002_11.pdf* (Last accessed: 15 April 2021).

De Saussure, Louis. 2005. Manipulation and cognitive pragmatics: Preliminary hypotheses. In: Louis de Saussure–Peter Schulz (eds), *Manipulation and Ideologies in the Twentieth Century: Discourse, Language, Mind*, 113–146. Amsterdam–Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Geser, Hans. 2008. Political correctness: Mental disorder, childish fad or advance of human civilization? *Sociology in Switzerland*: Online Publications 2, University of Zurich. *https://www.geser.net/pc.pdf* (Last accessed: 15 April 2021).

Hayakawa, S. I. 1947. *Language in Thought and Action. A Guide to Accurate Thinking, Reading and Writing.* New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

Henderson Taylor, Sharon. 1974. Terms for low intelligence. *American Speech* 49(3–4): 197–207.

Hermans, Theo. 2009. Translation, ethics, politics. In: Jeremy Munday (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Translation Studies*, 93–105. London–New York: Routledge.

Ioniță, Mirela. 2014. Political correctness and the right to freedom of speech. In: Iulian Boldea (ed.), *Identities in Metamorphosis. Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue Section: Communication, Public Relations, Journalism*, 34–42. Târgu-Mureș: Arhipelag XXI Press.

Klotz, Peter. 1999. Politeness and political correctness: Ideological implications. *Pragmatics* 9(1): 155–161.

Kontra, Miklós. 2016. Hatalom és nyelv [Power and language]. *Magyar Tudomány* 2016/6. *http://www.matud.iif.hu/2016/06/03.htm* (Last accessed: 15 April 2021).

Lutz, William (ed.). 1989. *Beyond Nineteen Eighty-Four: Doublespeak in a Post-Orwellian Age*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English.

1990. *Doublespeak: From "Revenue Enhancement" to "Terminal Living". How Government, Business, Advertisers, and Others Use Language to Deceive You*. New York: Harper Perennial.

1999. *Doublespeak Defined*. New York: Harper Collins.

Moiseeva, A. V. 2020. Linguistic means of manipulation in the advertising text. *Russian Linguistic Bulletin* 4(24).

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)

https://rulb.org/en/article/языковыесредстваманипулирования-в/ (Last accessed: 15 April 2021).

Orwell, George. 1946. *Politics and the English Language*. London: Horizon. *https://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit/* (Last accessed: 15 April 2021).

— 1989. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Penguin Books.

Phumsiri, Napat–Supong Tangkiengsirisin. 2018. An analysis of the use of English with political correctness: A case study of graduate students in Thailand. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)* 9(4): 447–463.

Pinker, Steven. 1994. *The Game of the Name*. New York: New York Times.

Zsemlyei, János. 2014. *A mai magyar nyelv szókészlete és szótárai* [The Vocabulary and Dictionaries of Contemporary Hungarian]. Cluj-Napoca: Erdélyi Tankönyvtanács.

Online resources

https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-correctness (Last accessed: 13 December 2021)

https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/politically%20correct (Last accessed: 13 December 2021).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swadesh_list (Last accessed: 15 April 2021).

https://gript.ie/united-nations-politically-incorrect-terms-including-husband-wife/ (Last accessed: 15 April 2021).

https://www.etymonline.com/word/amen (Last accessed: 15 April 2021).

https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/amen (Last accessed: 15 April 2021).

https://www.britannica.com/topic/amen-prayer (Last accessed: 15 April 2021).

BDD-A33018 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:38 UTC)