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THE POLITICIZATION OF LANGUAGE NORM

The term *political correctness* (PC) has become part of the vocabulary of contemporary life both in Britain and, more especially, in the US, accommodating both negative and positive connotations. On the one hand, people have been able to demonstrate their progressive outlook by reference to it, but equally, and increasingly, people have been able to use it to distance themselves from what they see as the ludicrous and the demeaning.

According to literary historian Ruth Perry, the phrase seems to have been adapted from earlier Soviet and Chinese usage where it indicated one who toed the party line (Qtd in Battistella, 2005: 90). American use of the term is reported as early as the 1960s in the Black Power Movement and the New Left, and it has been suggested that the American adoption of the term reflects the prominence of Mao Zedong as a cultural icon of the 1960s (Perry in Aufderheide, 1992: 72). By the 1980s, however, PC had become associated with so-called speech codes, which included both the professional societies' guidelines for bias-free language and campus speech-codes. Since its popularization in the 1990s, PC has broadened to include a wide range of ideological issues, referring to any sort of categorization or practice that seems liberal. Thus, it has been applied to nonlinguistic topics as diverse as affirmative action, Americans with Disabilities Act compliance, airline screening procedures, the use of women in combat, and the reality of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Although the term is most commonly associated with the use of euphemistic language, which is the main concern of this paper, only a cursory glance at relevant literature, particularly in the US, would indicate that this is only one dimension. There are two other dimensions (Lea, 2009: 7) that are arguably, more important, particularly in terms of their impact on higher education. The first of these is the steady rise in forms of multicultural curricula, and the ways that these have challenged traditional notions about the content and purpose of education. The other dimension concerns access to higher education, and the ways in which admission and participation are managed and monitored.

Feminism

There is no question that English, just like Romanian, is historically a male-oriented language. The terms in English, for example, that are gender-specific have a strong tendency to be derogatory toward women in contrast with available terms for men. There are a number of contrasting pair words in English, where one is male-specific and the other is female-specific. But the female term has acquired a connotative meaning distinctly different from that of its partner. As Cameron says, feminists have discovered that "many languages have an underlying semantic or grammatical rule where the male is positive and the female negative, so that the tenets of male chauvinism are encoded into language" (Cameron 1990:13).

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Male	*Female*
courtier	courtesan
master	mistress
sir	madam
adventurer	adventuress
bachelor	spinster
lord	lady
priest	priestess
god	goddess

All the terms above are etymologically connected, but the scope of the female-specific term is different from that of the male-specific term, being used to refer to someone of lower status and frequently having an overlaid sexual connotation. The terms "courtier" and "courtesan" now have meanings which seem so far apart that the original connection will come as a surprise to many. The male term has retained its meaning of someone attached to court, but the female equivalent now has the meaning of a sexual servant or prostitute. In the cases of "master" and "mistress" and "sir" and "madam," the male term has retained its associations of power and prestige, but while the female term can still have this core meaning, it has acquired a sexual and non-prestigious meaning. "Adventurer" and "adventuress" are similar in that adventuress has a sexual connotation, as do the other female terms. Regarding the terms "bachelor" and "spinster," the former has the positive connotations of freedom and independence and still having all your choices open to you. "Spinster" is now rarely used since it seems to have acquired the insulting meaning of "old maid" referring to someone who is unable to find a husband, by implication because they are too ugly or too sour. In the case of "lord" and "lady," "lord" has retained all its status, while "lady" can be used of any adult female in certain contexts. It is considered polite to refer to any adult female stranger as a "lady," whereas it is not possible to use "lord" for adult male strangers. "Lady" can also be used to form compounds such as "cleaning lady" and "lollipop lady," whereas "cleaning lord" is clearly an impossible item. This indicates not only the semantic deterioration of the term "lady" in comparison with "lord" but the even greater decline of the term "woman" which is avoided in certain contexts, in case it sounds rude.

People do not find the term "man" when used for adult males potentially insulting as they do "woman" used for an adult female. The term "woman" itself has acquired connotations of low status and sexuality. The negative connotations of "woman" are evident from the way that people will try to avoid using it — hence the use of the word "lady" to partner "man," in expressions like "I am your lady, and you are my man" in pop song lyrics.

If we consider the two final pairs in the above list, "priest" and "priestess" and "god" and "goddess," we find that although they are equivalent terms they do not have the same connotations. "Priest" refers to someone who has power and status within the established Church, whereas "priestess" refers to someone who organizes religious ceremonies in a cult outside the Christian faith. It has fairly negative connotations for most speakers. In the same way "goddess" refers to a deity that belongs to a low-status cult and not to an established religion.

As a consequence, feminists have decided to intervene in the construction of meaning. Some of them have tried to alter the way that words about women mean, and others have tried to chart the new words which have been developed in feminist theory, but which have not appeared in dictionaries. For example, Mary

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Daly (1981) suggests that one of the ways to combat the trend of pejorative words referring to females is to use those words and disrupt their meanings. She takes words such as "dyke," "virago," or "crone" and she suggests that they should be capitalized, making them into words with the same magnitude of importance as God and the Queen. She states that by referring to herself as a Dyke rather than as a lesbian, a woman will rewrite the negative sense which is implicit in the term.

Feminists have also constructed dictionaries; for example, Jane Mills traces the etymologies of words associated with women in *Womanwords* (1989) to investigate how definitions of women have changed over time. Maggie Humm has compiled *A Dictionary of Feminist Thought* (1989) in which she lists many of the terms which are omitted from conventional dictionaries. Kramarae and Treichler have also produced *A Feminist Dictionary* (1985) which attempts to provide a witty world-view countering that proposed by conventional dictionaries.

On the other hand, the use of masculine nouns to refer to human beings in general is strongly objected to by feminists. Dictionaries and style guides now recommend the use of "firefighter" instead of "fireman," "postal worker" instead of "postman," "law enforcement officer" instead of "policeman," and "the average person" instead of "the man on the street."

Compounds with *–man* can also indicate that you expect a man in a certain occupation or situation. This type of problem is presented by such a word as "congressman." Here the alternatives are "congresswoman," or "congressperson." Unfortunately, there remains in English a large body of gender-specific terms – "manhole," "freshman," "fisherman," "manslaughter," "manmade" – that are far less susceptible to modification. Many such "man" words are in fact unexceptionable because their etymology is not connected to man the male. "Manacle," "manicure," and "manufacture," for example, come from the Latin for "hand," and thus are only coincidentally sexist (Maggio, 1991: 173).

Ethnic minorities.

The Africans who were taken from their native lands and sold as slaves in North America were first referred to as "Negroes," a word that simply means "black." It is derived from Spanish and Portuguese "negro," and ultimately from the Latin "niger." This word was in frequent use as late as the 1960s (Tottie, 2002: 200) but now it is considered offensive. Like "Negro," the word "colored" has been discarded as a reference to black people and is now considered offensive too: the two words survive in the names of associations such as the *United Negro College Fund* and the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*. Instead the terms "black," spelled either with lower or uppercase *b*, or "African American," are used. "Black" has the advantage of parallelism with "white," whereas "African American" indicates a geographical and cultural affinity.

The variety of English spoken by African Americans used to be referred to by linguists as "Negro English," but terminology has changed here as well, first to "Black English" and then to "African American Vernacular English" (AAVE). Another term is "Ebonics," used by some politically motivated speakers of AAVE who claim that their dialect is an African language.

The label "Oriental," which used to be applied to persons of South and East Asian ancestry, has been abolished because of racial overtones, and "Asian" is nowadays the accepted designation. Similarly, it is considered more politically correct to refer to a Jewish person as "a Jewish man/woman" than as "a Jew." The word "Jewess" is considered offensive.

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All persons living or coming to the US from South America or Meso-America are technically referred to as "Hispanics" or "Latinos"; people coming from Spain are not normally referred to as "Hispanic," however. Like other Europeans, they are defined as "Caucasian," a term that puzzles many Europeans. Especially in California and the Southwest, the term "Anglo" is also used for English-speaking white people.

Alternative denoters.

In its attempt to remove terms with built-in judgments or terms that had accrued a social stigma, the PC movement preferred "an artificial currency of polysyllabic abstract substitutions" (Wajnryb, 2004: 209). Thus,

> "drug addiction" became "substance dependence"; "failing student" - "underachiever"; "old maid" – "career woman"; "senile person" – "Alzheimer's victim"; "garbage collector" – "sanitation worker"; "janitor" – "custodian"; "housewife" – "homemaker/domestic engineer"; "crazy" – "dysfunctional"; "bum" – "homeless person"; "poor" – "financially challenged"; "travel agent" – "destination counselor"; "cleaner" – "environmental hygiene engineer"; "lavatory cleaner" – "sanitary engineer"; "meter maid" – "parking enforcement adjudicator"; "prostitute" – "sex surrogate"; taxi driver" – transportation expediter"; "undertaker" – "condolence counselor."

PC has often been satirized by introducing absurd euphemisms designed to free the language of the slightest taint of bias. Two authors, Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf, have made much capital out of these absurdities with their *Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook* (1993). Among the examples they cite:

> "custody suite" for a "prison cell," "chemically inconvenienced" for "intoxicated," "alternative dentation" for "false teeth," "stolen nonhuman animal carrier" for "milkman," "short" for "vertically challenged," "dead" for "biologically challenged," "client of the correctional system" for "prisoner," "woperson/wofem" for "woman," "information choreographer" for "librarian," "meat coordinator" for "butcher."

Criticism.

Critiques of *political correctness* see it, in Battistella's opinion, as (a) thought control; (b) nihilistic relativism; (c) damaging to the clarity, specificity, and precision of language; (d) trivial accommodation toward groups portrayed as cultural victims; and (e) a distraction from any serious agenda of social and economic progress (Battistella, 2005: 96). Which is quite an indictment. The extent to which language informs how we approach certain issues is an open question, of course, but the view that associates *all* socially motivated coinage with thought control, victimization, and damage to precision is much too simplistic. When naming becomes variable, speakers must decide what form to use. New usage reduces the privilege of one set of speakers to use their norms without fear of embarrassment or discomfort.

A telling example can be found by looking at the set of terms *crippled*, *handicapped*, *disabled*, and *physically challenged*. One can argue that *disabled* is the optimal choice on the basis of conciseness, accuracy, politeness, and connotation. The first two choices (*crippled* and *handicapped*) reflect views of disabilities that today have negative connotations. The term *crippled* focuses on the debilitating effect of an affliction on one's body, and it is inaccurate in that afflictions that were once crippling are, in light of medical and social advances, often less debilitating today. Even organizations that have historically used the adjective in their name are dropping it. The term *handicapped*, while less offensive than *crippled*, carries the

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connotation of being held back in some competitive enterprise (we talk of *social handicaps*, *golf handicaps*, and *racing handicaps*) and is unwelcome by some people with disabilities. As both public policy and social attitudes have shifted from seeing disabilities in terms of individuals' conditions (*crippled*) to their prospects (*handicapped*) to their situation (as requiring reasonable accommodation), language has evolved as well. On the other hand, *physically challenged* seems less than optimal since it is both long and somewhat euphemistic, representing disability almost as an opportunity to test oneself. Euphemisms call attention to a speaker's connotation and so the term singles out the disabled in the same way that disparaging usage might. As Schwartz notes, in many contexts such alternatives as *physically challenged*, *physically* (or *mentally*) *different*, *differently abled*, *exceptional*, and *special* may suggest "that disabled people belong to a different or uncommonly rare species or that having a disability is an exciting adventure" (Schwartz, 1995: 74-5).

Despite criticism, the PC movement's influence has been profound, perhaps not on what people think, but certainly on what they say in public. And its influence continues, despite the scorn heaped on it. Along with the surrounding publicity and controversy, it did raise public consciousness about the offensiveness of negatively loaded words, which had hitherto only been registered as such by women and minorities, who knew from their own authentic personal experiences that the language that described them was contributing in significant ways to the raw deal they were being served.

Conclusions.

Over time, naming etiquette evolves, like all other aspects of language. This evolution will often reflect preferences of those named and may also often aim at inclusiveness. While the initial phases of change often make language problematic, the end results of culturally neutral language can be to expand community with terms that are neither insults nor euphemisms. In any event, treating usage change as mere identity politics misses two key points: that usage changes as social attitudes, preferences, and situations do and that there is a distinction between new terms that attempt to be inclusive and terms that call attention to groups by euphemism. The practical problem is that different speakers draw the line in different places between what they perceive as inclusive and what they perceive as oversensitive euphemism. But the merits of various neologisms should be treated individually rather than merely dismissed as language manipulation. And as individuals, we use language best when we understand the alternatives, the logic, and the consequences of our choices, having in mind "the creation and maintenance of an environment for effective communication" (Mills, 2005: 64) between ourselves.

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RÉSUMÉ

LA POLITISATION DES NORMES LINGUISTIQUES

L'accent mis sur l'«exactitude politique», les dernières vingt années, a imposé dans la conscience du public la précision des termes utilisés en communication. Tandis que la grammaire et la prononciation sont perçues comme des marques de l'éducation, les mots employés par un individu ou un autre relèvent, le plus souvent, de ses convictions politiques. Certains linguistes apprécient que l'utilisation du langage traditionnel renforce les privilèges et distinguent dans les tendances de renouvellement un changement absolument nécessaire. Il y a d'autres linguistes qui considèrent que les normes anciennes n'ont pas perdu leur valeur et les tentatives d'éliminer les aspérités qui défavorisent certaines catégories sociales ne font qu'accentuer inutilement certaines sensibilités et imposer des agendas politiques. L'approche des normes linguistiques en tant qu'ideologie politique offre une motivation solide à tous ceux qui désirent se conformer à un modèle de l'intelligence, de l'éducation, du caractère et se mettre au service de la cause nationale ou des valeurs politiques prépondérantes.
Key words: *political correctness, feminism, ethnic minorities, euphemisms, criticism.*

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