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MORPHOLOGICAL PRODUCTIVITY AND CREATIVITY IN A POLITICALLY CORRECT LANGUAGE: A CASE STUDY OF LEXICAL INNOVATION

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Abstract: *The aim ascribed to this paper is to analyse the phenomenon of a politically correct language from a morphological perspective. It is argued that productive morphological processes, such as suffixation, compounding and prefixation as well as creative ones, for example blending, alienation, analogical extension, etc. are amply relied on to tackle the phenomenon of a negative semantic change, being an underlying reason for generating politically correct terms. It appears that morphological creativity is more prevalent in the PC language than morphological productivity due to its greater attention-grabbing potential.*

Key words: *productivity, creativity, euphemism.*

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of the politically correct language (henceforth PC language) has usually been researched from the viewpoint of sociolinguistic and cultural studies. However, the perspective taken in this paper is a morphological one, which amounts to undertaking an analysis of politically correct lexical innovations with a view to describing the way in which both regular and irregular morphological processes contribute to the formation of the lexical stock of the PC language. The items to be discussed below have been derived from *The official politically correct dictionary and handbook* (updated edition) (Beard and Cerf, 1994).

The structure of this article is as follows: first, political correctness as a linguistic phenomenon is presented and the notions of morphological productivity and creativity are discussed. This is followed by the morphological analysis of lexical innovations in terms of their being either productive or creative, that is either adhering to morphological rules, or not being governed by them, respectively.

2. Political Correctness as a Linguistic Phenomenon

It goes without saying that the principles underlying the formation of the PC movement were aimed at increasing tolerance and being non-oppressive as to one's ethnicity, race, religion, sex, age, physical characteristics, etc. through the choice of non-offensive, i.e. neutral, words, known as a PC language. One of

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the most fundamental assumptions behind using this kind of language was the belief that language controls thought, at least to some extent, known as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Holmes, 1992). It means that our word choice has an impact on how we perceive reality as well as other people. Consequently, according to PC advocates, oppressive language promotes intolerance and, for this reason, it should be avoided. For example, sexist language promotes sexism and in order to avoid it the proponents of the PC movement introduced numerous gender-neutral terms, such as *chairperson,* or *freshperson* to replace *chairman* and *freshman*, respectively, regarded as politically incorrect on the grounds of excluding women. On the other hand, if a certain word has got positive connotations, it possesses the capacity of making human behaviour tolerant and sympathetic towards others. Thus, according to PC advocates, the adjective *acceptional* < *accept* + *exceptional*, coined to refer to the child with a learning disability points to the fact that this is a child with a special need for acceptance (Beard and Cerf, 1994).

In view of the above, PC language generates a constant need for the formation of novel lexemes that could replace well-established vocabulary items considered to be inappropriate, or offensive. Consequently, new lexemes attributable to PC attitudes have been created over the past few decades. A politically correct language is abundant in euphemisms used to replace straightforward terms, or definitions, e.g. *motivationally deficient* for *lazy,* to serve the underlying purpose of promoting tolerance. It needs to be emphasised that such a course of actions is usually only temporarily effective, as euphemisms may turn into undesirable words themselves, which is the phenomenon known as a euphemism treadmill (Pinker, 1994). Thus, an initially neutral term, known as an orthophemism, gradually acquires negative connotations, as it starts being used as an insult and, in consequence, it becomes an unwelcome term itself, i.e. a dysphemism. Then it is exchanged for a politically correct term, i.e. a euphemism, gradually entering common use and initially functioning as a neutral expression. After some time it acquires negative connotations in the same way as its predecessor did[1] and the whole cycle starts again. This was in fact the case with the term *retarded people*, initially functioning as a euphemism for words, such as *morons, imbeciles,* etc., which subsequently became an unwelcome expression itself to be replaced by *mentally challenged* in the PC language.

It can be seen that this word replacement strategy resolves the problem of a negative semantic change just for a limited period of time, as an endless cycle of word exchange results in a growing number of dysphemisms. Moreover, according to O'Neill (285), "constant changes in terms, though a nuisance, would not be a serious problem if the new descriptors chosen as politically correct terms retained the old terms' clarity and accuracy". However, in the author's view this is not happening. Instead, the drive for politically correct language leads to the devolution of language, understood as drifting towards increasingly vague terms, which results in dishonesty and obscurity. These evasive and imprecise lexical items are frequently the outputs of either productive or creative morphological operations to be discussed in the next section.

3. Morphological Productivity and Creativity

As Bauer (2001) maintains, there have been many attempts at drawing a distinction between morphological

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productivity and creativity with the result that scholars discussing the topic differ vastly in their views. The basic distinction between these two concepts is that morphological productivity is rule-governed and its outputs are predictable, while morphological creativity is not controlled by a set of specific rules and, consequently its outputs cannot be predicted from its inputs. For example, the derivation of nouns from adjectives by means of the suffix *-ness* is productive because it follows the rule, stating that *-ness* can be attached to both native and Latinate bases in order to create deadjectival nominalisations whose meaning is 'the quality/state of being A' (where A stands for the base). On the other hand, clipping is regarded as a creative morphological operation, as there is no specific and uniform rule to follow to produce the following clippings: *Liz* < *Elizabeth, bus* < *autobus* and *gym* < *gymnasium*. In other words, a rule which could be applied to the above cases and which would place the restrictions on the input, determine the shape of the output as well as its semantics does not exist, consequently, it can be stated that clipping is unpredictable.

Generally speaking, simplexes, i.e. monomorphemic words are said to be formed by creativity (Baayen and Lieber, 1991). Aronoff (1976) labels simplexes, such as acronyms and blends, as oddities and excludes them from the domain of word-formation. Mayerhalter (1981) adds to this list shortenings, back-formations and half-compounds (that is compounds containing an empty morpheme, such as *cranberry*) and refers to these formations as secondary simplexes. Bauer (2001) agrees that simplexes are the result of morphological creativity and proposes that their formation is the first possible type of creativity that can be distinguished.

Another kind of creativity that Bauer (2001) talks about is not morphological as such, as it is meaning extension, including metaphorical extension, which can be exemplified by the extension of meaning of *bypass* to a blood vessel from a road. The third type of creativity is that involving the use of certain patterns on an individual basis, or the extension of patterns which are not productive.

Yet another attempt at drawing a borderline between productive and creative morphological operations has been made by Schultnik (1961), who has proposed that words which are consciously created cannot be outputs of productive morphological operations, consequently, they must be instances of creativity, which means that productivity is automatic, whereas creativity is not. As Bauer (2001) acknowledges, the problem with this proposal is that it is empirically as well as otherwise unworkable to determine which coinages are conscious and which are unconscious ones, thus this criterion seems to be of no use.

When trying to look into the relationship between productivity and creativity, Lyons (1977) proposes that these are complementary terms, which suggests that they are two distinct ways of coining new lexemes, while for Van Marle (1985) creativity is a hyperonym of productivity. Bauer (2001: 64) advances a claim that "creativity and productivity should be taken as hyponyms of innovation". In his opinion, it is virtually impossible to define productivity in terms of rule-governedness, as it is frequently rule-governedness that is regarded as a function of productivity. Instead, he proposes that the distinction between productivity and creativity can be made on the basis of generality and predictability present in the former but missing from the latter one. He further emphasises that these differences are rather of degree than of kind, saying that "the

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more such predictability there is, the more general the specific statements that can be made about the pattern of innovation as a whole and the closer the innovation is to being productivity rather than creativity" (Bauer, 2001: 66). Consequently, it seems justified to perceive the difference between creativity and productivity in terms of a cline and prototypical values rather than definite categories.

All in all, in the discussion to follow the basic distinction made by Bauer (2001) is maintained, which is tantamount to classifying those morphological processes which are predictable and liable to being generalised about as productive, while the ones characterised by the absence, or modest presence of the above mentioned features are termed as creative.

4. Data and Methodology

As remarked in the introduction, the source of politically correct lexical innovations is *The official politically correct dictionary and handbook* from 1994 (updated edition) by Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf. Altogether the corpus consists of 110 lexical items not attested in *OED* (online version). Therefore, it has been assumed that these lexemes have not been institutionalised and, consequently, can justifiably be regarded as genuine lexical innovations.

5. Lexical Innovations Coined by Productivity

As for productive morphological processes that have generated lexical innovations in the corpus under discussion, we can distinguish suffixation (20 occurrences), compounding (17 occurrences) and prefixation (8 occurrences), constituting 41 per cent of the lexical innovations, which amounts to 45 lexemes.

With regard to suffixation, the most frequently used suffix is *-ism* (17 occurrences) which forms abstract nouns from other nouns as well as adjectives and can denote a state, condition, attitude, theory, or system of beliefs (Plag, 2003). Derivatives ending in *-ism* are by far the most frequent, as they are quite useful from the point of view of PC movement, being usually employed to coin a term standing for the kind of discrimination, or unfair treatment. They may be exemplified by the following coinages:

(1)

kingdomism 'discrimination against flora by fauna'

successism 'the tendency to value certain members of society more than others because they have achieved success'

Besides, there are just two other suffixes that have been used, namely *-ist* (two occurrences), and *-er* (one occurrence):

(2)

ableist 'offensive, or insensitive to the disabled (about language)'

diseasist 'insensitive and offensive to those who are ill (about language)'

fisher 'fisherman'

The suffix *-ist* is used to indicate a belief, that its referent is an adherent of (Adams, 2001), which is the case with *ableist* and *diseasist* which denote features of the language promoting *ableism* 'oppression of the disabled' and *diseasism* 'oppression of those who are unwell', respectively. As for *fisher,* the agentive suffix *-er* has been used to replace *man,* regarded as politically incorrect because it excludes women.

Within the category of compounds it is possible to distinguish two distinct types: compounds created through concatenation of independent lexemes (6 instances) and compounds created by the replacement of its politically incorrect constituent, which is usually a head (11 instances). The former category is represented, among others, by 3a) while the latter by 3b):

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(3a)
botanical companion 'favourite tree, or houseplant'
domestic incarceration survivor 'housewife'
copper woman 'native American woman'
(3b)
batchild 'batboy'
milkperson 'milkman'
snowhuman 'snowman'

While compounds from 3b) are semantically transparent, especially once one realises the principle governing the head substitution, compounds from 3a) are highly unintelligible, which can be regarded as an instance of the devolution of language discussed in section 2.

Another type of compounding to be encountered in the corpus are compounds made up of combining forms (7 occurrences):
(4)
carbocentrism 'belief that carbon-based life is the only possible basis for the development of human beings'
phallogeneric 'belief that men are the driving force of society'
cerebro-atmospheric 'airhead'

Combining forms are usually of Greek or Latin origin and they are used in constructions that are considered to be half-way between derivations and compounds (for a detailed discussion of the nature of this phenomenon see, e. g. Plag (2003), or Bauer (1983)). Consisting of foreign elements widely used in science, these formations have a scientific appeal, conferring, at the same time, high prestige on their users, which has got a psycholinguistic effect of emphasising the importance of the cause that PC language is dedicated to.

Two other types of compounds which proved to be relatively infrequent are phrasal compounds (2 occurrences) and particle compounds (1 occurrence), exemplified by 5a) and 5b), respectively:
(5a)
right-to-be-sheltered laws 'law stating that local authorities are obliged to ensure a free bed to anyone who requests it'
right-not-to-be sheltered laws 'law stating that local authorities have no right to insist on anyone giving up sleeping in the street'
(5b)
underhoused 'homeless'

These two types of compounds are infrequent in English (Bauer, 1983), therefore, they are modestly represented in the sample.

As for prefixation, only 8 instances have been attested, the most representative of which are derivatives taking negative (6a) and reversative prefixes (6b)[2]:
(6a)
nonwaged 'unemployed'
nonfacile 'resulting in dropping a baby at delivery'
(6b)
degrow, destaff 'fire many employees'

5. Lexical Innovations Coined by Creativity

Creative lexical innovations constitute 59 per cent of the sample, which amounts to 65 instances. Here we can distinguish the following morphological processes (with the number of occurrences provided in brackets): blending (20), analogical extension resulting from morphological reinterpretation (11), alienation (10), internal modification (9), clipping (7) initialisation (6) and abbreviation (2).

First, note some instances of blending:
(7)
womage 'manage' > *woman* + *manage*
msterful 'authoritative (non-patriarchal)' > *Ms* + *masterful*
malestream 'mainstream (attributed to men)' > *male* + *mainstream*
manglish 'English used by men to perpetuate male supremacy' > *man* + *English*
stutterific 'person who stutters' > *stutter* + *terrific*

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Almost all instances of blends are feminist-oriented. They frequently strive to eliminate lexemes denoting masculinity, such as *man,* or *master*, whether they constitute a separate morpheme or not, as they are held responsible for evoking associations with patriarchal society. For this reason, they are replaced, or their continuity is disrupted with a word, or word fragment (splinter), denoting women, note, e.g. *wom* < *woman,* used in *womage*, or *Ms* employed in *masterful* with a view to doing away with the exclusion of women from the society and emphasising the importance of their role. Another strategy used to form blends in the PC language is to substitute a lexeme referring to manhood for a gender neutral morpheme, or splinter in order to voice the criticism of men and their actions, as in *manglish* and *malestream.* There are just two instances of blends in the whole corpus aimed at referring to people's disability, i.e. *acceptional* (mentioned in section 2) and *stutterific*, both pointing to the fact that a disabled person stands out against a society in terms of being unusual and exceptional.

The second most frequent morphological process which is analogical extension resulting from morphological reinterpretation has its roots in the fact that people tend to perceive multi-syllabic words as being composed of at least two morphemes and, consequently, they strive to find two meaningful elements in them (Coates, 1987). This frequently leads to the form abstraction (Adams, 2001), which takes place when a new form has established itself because speakers reinterpret an opaque mono-morphemic word as a morpho-semantically transparent one and distinguish in it a novel morpheme, used from then on to create new words in an analogical manner. Form abstraction frequently accompanies the process of blending, as a result of which a new splinter emerges, shared by a constituent family (a group of words containing the same constituent):

(8)

abstracted splinter	constituent family
-on from *person*	*actron, waitron, seductron, temptron, seamstron, adultron*

The morphological function of the abstracted form *-on* is to provide non-gender specific attributes for words normally marked for the sex of their referent.

Yet another splinter frequently used in analogical formations in order to eradicate discrimination of women is *fem-* abstracted from *feminine* and used to replace two phonological strings, namely *man*, and *men*, used in words in which they do not constitute a distinct morpheme and are not meaningful at all:

(9)

efemcipated	< 'emancipated'
abdofem	< 'abdomen'
comfemcefemt	< 'commencement'
afemdfemt	< 'amendment'

As can be easily observed, the outputs of this process are completely unintelligible, incapable of conveying the desired meaning and because of that, the purpose for which they have been coined is unattainable. It seems that they constitute an example of language that is characterised by Hanlon (2009) in the following words: "This is a mutant tongue, ungrammatical, littered with pointless and often meaningless words, where the simplest words are rendered impenetrable".

As regards alienation, it should be understood as extending, or replacing a source form, or part of it in an individual and unsystematic way without a subsequent change in meaning (Ronneberger-Sibold, 2010):

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(9)
Wimmin/ wimyn/ womban/ womon/ womyn 'woman'
humyn 'human'

All the alienations are supposed to crack down on the discrimination of women, which is achieved by doing away with the phonological string *man* that might be interpreted as that favouring men and, at the same time, excluding women, even though from a synchronic point of view it cannot be regarded as a separate morpheme, since both *woman* and *human* are monomorphemic.

Internal modification is the next process in the order of frequency and it consists in modifying the internal content of a word, followed by a subsequent change of meaning:
(12)
tey, ter, tem/ve, vis, ver 'he/she, her/his, her/him'
hera 'female hero'
hystery 'history from the point of view of accomplishments of women'
dicktion 'the dictionary written by men'

Gender-neutral pronouns are used instead of conventional ones, on the basis of which they have been created, for example *tey* is a modified version of gender-neutral *they,* while *vis* and *ver* have been based on *his* and *her.* The term *hera* avoids both the male connotations of the word *hero* and trivialising women by adding the suffix *-ine* to *hero,* and it also evokes the impression of power and dignity of the ancient goddess Hera. In *history i* and *o* are replaced by *y* and *e,* respectively, to denote a special kind of history, namely the one told from the perspective of women, while the additional *k* in *dicktion* has been used to refer to a special kind of dictionary, that is the one compiled by men.

As far as the least frequently employed techniques are concerned, these are shortening devices, such as clipping, initialisation and abbreviation, which are present in every kind of jargon[3] and whose presence performs a sociolinguistic function of creating and maintaining group-bonds (Lopez-Rua, 2007). As for clipping, it is represented exclusively by its one variety, namely back clipping, consisting in the deletion of the final part of a word, which is the most productive in English:
(10)
decon 'deconstructionism'
multiculti 'advocates of multiculturalism'

Initialisation should be understood as the process in the course of which the phrase is reduced to its initials (Lopez-Rua, 2007) and it can be exemplified by:
(11)
ha 'human animal'
PLA/ PLWA 'person living with AIDS'
TAB 'temporarily able-bodied person'

Note also the two examples of abbreviation:
(12)
pn 'person'
h'orhs'it 'he or she or it'

6. Conclusion

In view of the above, it is evident that creative morphological processes are more persistently relied on than productive ones, although a high frequency of compounding and suffixation within the former group needs to be emphasised. The prevalence of morphological creativity over productivity should be attributed to the fact that the outputs of the former are more playful than those of the latter and as such they tend to be more catchy, which is tantamount to drawing the publicity to the cause they are striving for. On the other hand, however,

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by their recurring unintelligibility, they blur reality, as in O' Neill's (2011) words, "the politically correct term actually impedes the identification of information that is required to help the person". Thus, the effect it brings about is counterproductive to the original intention for which it has been invented and disseminated.

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Note

[1] O'Neill (2011) claims that it is not the word itself that evokes negative attitudes, but the context in which it has been used and the tone of voice with which it has been uttered.

[2] Yet another prefix that has been attested just once in the sample is *pre-* in *prewoman* 'girl'.

[3] It can be safely assumed that PC language is an example of jargon, understood as a language variety shared by a group of people with common interests and values (Lopez-Rua, 2007).

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