Sociolinguistic Factors in the Perception of Politically Correct Language

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Abstract

Because of the social and political weight attached to language surrounding race, gender, religion, and sexuality, and the various repercussions that may follow from what hearers might deem inappropriate, it is crucial that ESL language teachers are aware of the words that are considered taboo or insensitive and can communicate the consequences of using such language to their students. It is also important to understand that the usages of these terms are not always neutral and may send any number of messages about the beliefs and behaviors of the speaker. ESL teachers must understand the potential consequences, positive or negative, that certain speech may have on an audience so they may explicitly communicate this to their students. In this paper, I have examined the history of politically correct language, the many definitions that have been assigned to the term, the goals, successes, and failures of users of PC language, and the various ways in which PC language can be perceived both positively and negatively. I conclude the paper by proposing a study that would aim to find a correlation between politically incorrect language and audience.

*Keywords:* politically correct (PC), taboo, euphemism, solidarity marker, power
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A 2000 study carried out by the Advertising Standards Authority, the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Broadcasting Standards Commission, and the Independent Television Commission aiming to discover which types of language were deemed most offensive by audiences without any given context found that derogatory language towards minority groups (e.g. people with disabilities, homosexual men and women, ethnic minorities, and people from less common religious faiths) were “towards the top of the scale of severity” (Allan & Burridge, 1991, p. 108); more than 50% of respondents rated certain slurs, such as nigger, pakí, Jew, and cunt, as unacceptable for transmission in any context. In contrast, only 38% believed fuck should never be broadcast. As Allan and Burridge (2006) point out, the use of racial and ethnic slurs has taken the place of traditional swear words in being considered the ultimate in obscene. In fact, those who use such slurs may even face legal consequences.

Because of the social and political weight attached to language surrounding race, gender, religion, and sexuality, and the various repercussions that may follow from what hearers might deem inappropriate, it is crucial that ESL language teachers are aware of the words that are considered taboo or insensitive and can communicate the consequences of using such language to their students. Though ESL curriculum in America typically dictates that the most progressive terms for certain people and concepts are taught, it is important to also understand that the usages of these terms are not always neutral. For many, using this language at all may send any number of messages about the beliefs and behaviors of the speaker. ESL teachers must understand the potential consequences, positive or negative, that certain speech may have on an audience so they may explicitly communicate this to their students.
History of Politically Correct Language

In order to fully understand the various associations made with the term “politically correct,” one must first have a brief understanding of its history. Though usage of the term “politically correct” did not become mainstream until the 1980s when affirmative action hiring policies, revision of school curricula, and speech guidelines for non-discriminatory language first began (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 91), its origins can be traced further back. Most attribute its American beginnings to English translations of Maoist literature (in which context it meant not just “doing the right thing” but also “thinking the right thoughts”); it emerged in the 1960s alongside the American New Left (Hughes, 2010, p. 62; Cameron, 2012, p. 127). According to Cameron (2012), this term became both a marker of in-group identity as it was understood as a joke among group members: it functioned to “differentiate the New Left from the Orthodox Marxism it had rejected, and on the other hand to satirize the group’s own tendency towards humorlessness, self-righteousness, and rigidly orthodox ‘party lines,’ poking fun at the notion that anyone could be (or want to be) wholly correct” (p. 127).

However, this ironic aspect of the term was not understood by those who were not part of the group and was thus taken seriously. Since then, extreme examples of attempting to point out the ridiculousness of “PC language” (e.g. black coffee and manhole as phrases with racist and sexist undertones, respectively) have been pervasive in the media (Cameron (2012) and Allan and Burridge (2006) look on the truth of these examples with skepticism). Therefore, Cameron states, the typical negative perceptions many have of the concept of politically correct language in discourse is “largely the achievement of its critics” (p. 128) and has been perverted from its original meaning.
Definitions of Politically Correct

In order to further discuss ‘politically correct’ language, we first must define what exactly the term refers to in present-day contexts. According to the 2003 Marquarie Dictionary (2003, as cited in Allan & Burridge), it refers to “conformity to current beliefs about correctness in language and behavior with regard to policies on sexism, racism, ageism, etc.” Linguists with a less moderate approach, who see language as a driving force of political change, may be more likely to agree with Lakoff’s view that politically-correct forms are “devised by and for, and to represent the worldview and experience of, groups formerly without the power to create language, make interpretations, or control meaning” (2000, p. 91).

Meanwhile, “politically incorrect” language is often thought of as “anything that may be interpreted as discriminatory or pejorative” (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 90). In alignment with this idea, Cameron (2012) goes so far to say that “PC” language does not exist at all; to her, that such language is a manifestation of mere civility and sensitivity to the feelings of others (Cameron, 2012, p. 125). Due to its historically negative connotations (to be examined further below), she asserts that most who actually employ supposed “PC language” do not refer to it as such; only “opponents” to its use invoke this term as a way of calling negative associations to the minds of the audience and thereby discrediting the views of the speaker (p. 123). Thus, she only uses the term in quotation marks (p. 135).

Goals of Users of PC Language

These aforementioned definitions of PC language hint at the common goals users of such language might have and the beliefs they typically espouse. Noam Chomsky has described the increasing use of PC language as a “healthy expansion of moral concern” (Allan & Burridge,
2006, p. 90). Others believe that if we wish to be sensitive to others, the first step is describing them accurately, and that vague terms or unnecessary euphemisms demonize (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 98). In a more radical perspective, Allan and Burridge (2006) state that politically correct language may be the product of the resentment of those who are “looking for someone to blame” for the increasing dominance of the handful of people who are already rich and powerful due to the “globalization, rationalization, privatization, and reorganization” that regularly takes place (p. 106). They note for some users, PC language may be borne out of American guilt and shame for “subjugating, enslaving, marginalizing, and…extinguishing other peoples” (p. 106). Cameron believes that, contrary to popular belief, non-“ist” language will not evolve naturally and must be pursued actively; by enforcing linguistic change, inequalities that are embedded into our daily language and therefore tacitly accepted as “natural” will become more apparent and up for questioning (p. 139). Though the finer points of these goals may differ slightly, the overall purpose of employing such language seems to be either to cause (or at least reflect) political and social change.

Factors in Success of PC Language

To what extent have the aforementioned goals of the PC movement been achieved? Despite the opposition to the adoption of many PC terms that has historically been evident in the media, Allan and Burridge (2006) note that changes in linguistic behavior have been widespread in response to the emergence of political correctness, even in cases where the shift in meanings and connotations was due to deliberate efforts (p. 90). However, it is difficult to determine whether this success can be attributed more to personal decisions to consider alternative linguistic choices in a concerted effort to be more sensitive, or whether it is more a result of
recommendations by “linguistic authorities” (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 101). That being said, the former seems more likely; though formal speech codes have been imposed by some (e.g. certain college campuses, certain publishers), ultimately they must be vague so as to allow for their use in certain appropriate contexts. As regulations of PC language in everyday conversation are somewhat unenforceable, it seems that changes in behavior are most likely due to changing attitudes.

Cameron (2012) mentions that the patterns of failure and success in the persuasion of others to adopt PC language are associated with three factors: civility, accuracy, and fairness. When a linguistic shift toward a more “PC” alternative is proposed, if it is seen as a matter of being “civil” (i.e. avoiding offending others in an immediate context), it is more likely to be adopted than if it contains “radical implications” such as challenging well-established and widely-accepted hierarchies (p. 135).

Accuracy, also known as “clarity” and “transparency,” is noted by Cameron (2012) as “the highest value to which language-users can aspire…in communicating meanings from one person to another” (p. 136). Consequently, as certain politically incorrect language can unintentionally misrepresent and mislead speakers (e.g. using generic masculine terms when talking about a group containing both males and females, such as Everyone must remove his shoes) and can therefore confuse listeners and should be avoided. For example, since both men and women exist, a description of the world that is not gender inclusive is inaccurate (Cameron, 2012, p. 136). When PC language forms are in accordance with Grice’s cooperative principle (in particular, in accordance with the maxim of manner) such as in these examples, speakers are more inclined to adopt them, as it helps them to avoid ambiguity and obscurity of expression
Once again, Cameron notes, this “appeal to accuracy” and “better communication” does not have radical implications and does require speakers to challenge their own perceptions of the world, contributing to its persuasiveness (p. 137).

Lastly, the concept of fairness, or parity, contributes to the ease with which a politically correct form is accepted into the lexicon. According to the concept of fairness, any two groups “should receive identical or at least parallel treatment” (Cameron, 2012, p. 137). For example, the titles Mr. and Mrs. would be considered unequal in these terms: while Mrs. reveals marital status, Mr. does not (p. 137). Once again, Cameron notes the relatively “unthreatening” nature of such an analysis; it merely asks that language be “clear, unbiased, and sensitive to the feelings of each addressee,” which are principles most speakers abide by already (Cameron, 2012, p. 138), but does not demand that speakers consider how such language came to be in the first place.

Factors Contributing to the Failure of Adoption of PC Language

However, despite the good intentions cited by its proponents, PC language is not always perceived positively. This is partly due to the misrepresentation of the term at the height of its popularity by the media particularly by the conservative right (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 92). Though a particular political stance is not the prerequisite to using PC language use as it once was (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 95), those with conservative attitudes seem to associate PC language with opposing political parties, and therefore resent PC language use more than those who hold more liberal positions do. Conservative sources have called PC language a variety of names, including “‘a stifling example of academic orthodoxy’; ‘Stalinist orthodoxy’; ‘liberal fascism’; ‘a growing intolerance, a closing of debate, a pressure to conform to a radical program
or risk being accused of …thought crimes’” and of having ‘a hidden radical agenda’” (Lakoff, 2000, p. 96).

However, Cameron (2012) points out that objection to its use typically are more related to language than to the underlying social issues (p. 120). Therefore, though the association with political agenda does play a role in negative perceptions of PC language, I will focus more on the sociolinguistic factors that are at work in its opposition for the purposes of this paper.

**Negative Perceptions of PC Language**

Though Cameron cites civility, accuracy, and fairness as some of the concepts which contribute to the acceptance of PC language, she also notes that opponents of such change may cite these exact same notions in justifying their lack of support for it. Such critics claim that advocates of PC language are hypocritical; though they assert their desire to increase civility and sensitivity, they themselves are guilty of being uncivil and insensitive--for example, when reacting harshly to a person using a politically incorrect term unknowingly (Cameron, 2012, p. 138).

According to such critics, use of PC language may also result in a decrease in accuracy. For example, they often mention that the non-use of the feminine suffix –ess actually “[destroys] a linguistic distinction” (Cameron, 2012, p. 138); to use the same term for two groups between which there is actually a difference may lead to confusion. This kind of linguistic behavior may therefore be viewed as uncooperative, as it can be seen as ambiguous or leading to obscurity of expression (Grice, 1989).

Finally, some who resist this surge of language change cite unfairness as their main objection. If, according to the principle of fairness any two groups should receive equal
treatment, they say, then why should some groups be allowed to reclaim terms that are/were seen as politically incorrect and use them freely, while other groups are not allowed to use these same terms? Straight white men often claim that they are “damned whatever they do,” while those belonging to traditionally marginalized groups can “get away with” using language that would be criminal if it were coming from their mouths. Not only does this violate the principle of fairness in their eyes, but also that of civility (Cameron, 2012, p. 162).

**PC language as a loss of linguistic power.** To some, the mere existence of “politically correct language” signifies a loss of linguistic power. As Cameron (2012, p. 120) states:

> by calling traditional usage into question, reformers have in effect forced everyone who uses English to declare a position in respect of gender, race, or feminism…Choice has altered the value of the terms and removed the option of political neutrality.

Because many terms are now seen binarily, either politically correct or incorrect, people are now forced to declare their position regarding political issues where they did not have to previously. Additionally, some may argue that “offensiveness is never an intrinsic quality of a word,” certain words should be allowed to be used provided they are used appropriately given the context (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 104). Speakers like to believe that they have omnipotence in language: that everything they express is intentional and what is conveyed is no more and no less than what they intend. Unfortunately, as Cameron (2012) points out, this belief was likely an illusion to begin with (p. 120).

**PC language as taboo.** Given that speakers want to believe they have omnipotence in their language choices, it stands to reason that those who see the emergence of PC language as contributing to the list of taboos will oppose its use. Not only does the need to speak politically
correctly mean that certain words are off-limits, but even words that look or sound similar have come to be frowned upon (e.g. niggardly). The temporary discussion of the taboo nature of nitty-gritty suggests that one can claim a term is politically incorrect even without evidence (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 103). From such examples, challengers of the benefits of PC language make a slippery-slope argument; in their view, every word is potentially be in danger of extinction regardless of its etymology or meaning.

Those who consciously recognize their diminishing lack of control over their word choice may begin to perceive the movement as repressive and violating their right to free speech. Allan and Burridge (2006) even cite the self-censorship that results from taboo as one of the reasons political correctness has been so successful in getting people to change their linguistic behavior; those who fail to use PC language face dire consequences, including “being lumped together with true bigots with malevolent motives” and having “doubts…raised about your basic moral commitments” (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 102). Consequently, people have deduced that the safest course of action is taking the PC route, regardless of whether or not they advocate the cause. Further contributing to the perception of taboo as useless, Farb (1970) notes, a number of taboo words have not shown a strong correlation with any “degree of refinement” in English-speaking communities (p. 79).

**PC language as euphemism.** Where there are taboos, there are euphemisms to “skirt” them (Farb, 1970, p. 79). To many opponents of PC language use, the renaming of people and concepts that seems to be a central component of PC language is not so much calling them by more accurate or precise terms; rather, it is seen as a way to avoid calling to mind negative connotations associated with these people and concepts (i.e. euphemistic). Although euphemism
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can be viewed in a positive light, as a way to “upgrade” whatever it denotes, it can also be seen as negative, used to “blur reality” and to “deceive” (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 96). This viewpoint is admittedly extreme, and is mainly espoused by those on the far right, who see the use of euphemism as a way to remove the stigma from groups or concepts that have rightly been stigmatized.

When seen as euphemistic, many may question the value of PC language at all. After all, as Pinker (2007) notes, euphemisms are destined to become “tainted by their connection to a fraught concept, prompting people to reach for an unspoiled term, which only gets sullied in its turn”—a concept he refers to as the “euphemism treadmill” (p. 320). Why should we have to essentially relearn our language when it is only bound to change again?

**PC language as language change.** The idea of the euphemism treadmill hints at the idea that language change is typically useless, and is therefore negatively perceived. As PC-driven language seems to be the result of direct linguistic intervention, it tends to be even more contentious than most euphemism. As Allan & Burridge (2006) point out, “speakers typically dislike being told to change their linguistic habits, which they see as an attempt to manipulate their thinking.” (p. 90). It is for this reason that attempts at language prescription have failed time and time again throughout history (p. 233).

Allan and Burridge (2006, p. 101) point out that though many beg for words to once again be associated with their “true meaning,” what constitutes “true meaning” is subjective. People typically do not want words to be used in their original, etymological sense; rather, they base what is “true” on their linguistic upbringing.

**PC language as loss of political and social power.** Indeed, what we are raised with tends to dictate our perception of what is “right.” Perhaps that explains the indignant reaction of those
who are challenged to change their speech. Lakoff (2000), however, attributes a more negative motivation to those who do not shift toward the more sensitive linguistic forms: biases generally disadvantage those who do not have social or political power, thus allowing those who have always been in power to retain their ability to exert authority over others (pp. 88-89). Resistance to PC-driven language change, she continues, is based on the fear that “groups formerly without language control are achieving it” (p. 89). Unlike in the past when those belonging to higher socioeconomic classes and majority groups were able to define minority groups as they pleased, disadvantaged groups are now giving themselves their own meanings, effectively taking power away from those who “formerly possessed these rights unilaterally” (p. 91). Cameron (2012) agrees: as the amount of “truth” someone speaks is typically thought of as a function of how much power they hold, then any view of PC language as legitimate would imply that these groups do indeed, hold power (p. 122).

**Uses of Politically Incorrect Language**

Though use of politically incorrect language can have a number of negative consequences, some still find it useful in certain contexts. In fact, even in this era of heightened PC etiquette, Allan and Burridge (2006) note that there exists a “flourishing lexicon of bigotry,” a large proportion of which is of American origin (p. 100). However, according to Allan and Burridge (2006) this is to be expected, as offensive language “always seems to thrive on social sweetness” (p. 100). In this section, I will examine the various contexts in which politically incorrect language is used and the various purposes it may serve.
Breaking Taboos

Certain psychological benefits have been associated with using forbidden words and phrases (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 252). For instance, a certain psychological gain in “letting off steam and expressing extreme emotion” tends to occur when using expletives or taboos. When a society deems a word taboo, it establishes an environment of guilt and repression, which “encourages the exhibitionist” to go to extra lengths just to use the taboo words (Farb, 1970, p. 83); there exists a certain thrill in the transgression and violation of linguistic taboos (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 252). Pinker (2007) agrees, noting that brain scans have revealed more metabolic activity when people are exposed in writing or speaking to taboo words (p. 331).

Using Banter

Allan and Burridge (2006) note the prominence of taboo terms in joke-telling (p. 252). More specifically, jokes “almost always” include instances of “bigotry, sexism, racism, ageism, and all the other politically correct –isms” (Adam & Newell, 1994, p. 12, as cited in Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 252). Interlocutors may take advantage of the fact that offensiveness is not an inherent quality of any word; provided their addressee will not regard their expressions as offensive, they can use them freely, jokingly, and affectionately. The flippant nature of the act of joking may “detract from the seriousness” of the terms, causing them to be interpreted more lightly than they would in a different context (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 99).

Establishing Solidarity

One concept that is relatively prominent in politically incorrect language use is that of reappropriation. Often, historically disadvantaged groups begin to define themselves in terms that were at one point seen as derogatory (e.g. gay, deaf), often to send the message that they hold enough power to do so; thus, the label itself sends a message. It is important to note that
only those within the disadvantaged group have “natural cover”; that is, members outside of these groups may only use this term because they belong to the group, while those who do not belong to the group may not refer to them using the terms that the groups use to refer to themselves (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 99). This exclusivity further contributes to the empowering of these groups.

However, not all supposed “politically incorrect” language is used by minority groups. Interlocutors may establish solidarity by using casual language with one another. The more polite language is, the more formal it is considered to be. Therefore, as PC language is often considered as a marker of politeness, one way to indicate a more “casual” or “intimate” relationship would be to waive the need for PC language in communication altogether (Allan & Burridge, 1991, p. 123; Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 252). Use of taboo words is considered highly informal; it can therefore help to “define the gang” and be a sign of endearment. Hill (2008) also notes that use of slurs is sometimes used among men to establish an image of hyper-masculinity (p. 49).

Additionally, the use of taboo words can display in-group solidarity, particularly when distinguishing the in-group from an out-group (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 252). This will be discussed further in “Achieving Political Goals.”

Achieving Political Goals

According to Farb (1970), one way to effectively garner attention is to use taboos freely; such obscenity jolts the audience into listening. Meanwhile, by using taboo, the speaker is able to display “contempt for the standards that…society upholds” and “rebellion against the power structure” (Farb, 1970, p. 85). This strategy has been used frequently by opponents of PC-driven language (Clyne, 1995, p. 111).
Overt politically incorrect language. Overt politically incorrect language is geared toward those who already are sympathetic to the message of the speaker, but also functions to provoke confrontation from groups that are not (Clyne, 1995, p. 111). Overt politically incorrect language typically consists of *us vs. them* concepts to separate in-groups from out-groups. The goal of such talk is to make the in-group “the victim” and the out-group “the enemy” (Clyne, 1995, p. 111).

Covert politically incorrect language. Language that is covertly politically incorrect is often seen as more dangerous, as it is disguised as balanced and is superficially moderate enough to be seen as objective and pragmatic by the audience. Typical linguistic features found in this so-called “tolerant talk” are modals (to resemble an opinion that is not absolute), agentless passives (so as to not assign blame), words of concession (e.g. *but, however* to resemble a balanced opinion), and the phrase *I’m not a racist, but* ... (Clyne, 1995, p. 116). However, the themes of *us vs. them*, victim blaming, and symbols representing majority groups (e.g. whites) as peaceful and minority groups (e.g. blacks) as aggressors, pervade covert politically incorrect speech. By disguising their position as normal and neutral, those who oppose PC language may attempt to regain some of the power they believe they have lost.

The Proposed Study

The study I am proposing would aim to find a correlation between politically incorrect language and audience. More specifically, the study would aim to measure how dedicated users of politically incorrect language are to their opposition. The data would be collected from interviews consisting of questions eliciting language that would leave participants no choice but to make political statements. The interviewers would be members of various groups, both those that traditionally have been thought of as more powerful and those that have traditionally been
marginalized. By collecting background data on the participants, correlations could be drawn between PC language use (or lack thereof) and education level, age, sex, and place of birth.

The results of this study could be used to make inferences as to the pervasiveness of PC attitudes in America. Would even staunch opponents of PC language continue to use non-PC language when directly communicating with someone who is meant to benefit from its use? It is my belief that the aforementioned social, political, and legal risks users of non-PC language face hold more weight than the above reasons for using non-PC language. Regardless of the opinion speakers may have toward PC language, I hypothesize that more often than not, they will employ it when communicating with someone of a minority group.

This study could also be used to validate the findings mentioned in the introduction. Which violation of PC norms do users of non-PC language deem the most serious? For example, I would hypothesize that instances of insensitive language involving gender would be far more common, even when speaking face-to-face with a woman, than instances of insensitive language involving race when speaking face-to-face with someone of a racial minority group. This study could also be used to test the claim that those who use politically incorrect language are typically of lower socioeconomic classes (Hughes, 2010, p. 49)

**Conclusion**

Lakoff (2000, p. 93) points out that based on a search through the Lexis/Nexis News database, the popularity of the phrase “politically correct” peaked between 1991 and 1995, and subsequently subsided. One inference that may be drawn from this data is that language is not judged according to the binary of “politically correct” or “politically incorrect” as commonly as it once was. Therefore, we might assume that forms that once stood out as PC are no longer
marked; rather, these words or phrases are assumed to be the norm and therefore do not require any label at all. Perhaps Lakoff (2000) and Cameron (2012) would then argue that the theory behind the need for PC language is indeed truthful, in accordance with the beliefs of Schopenhauer: “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.”
References


