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POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND *BEQUEMLICHKEITSTRIEB*

The so-called **political correctness** (henceforth: PC), as a social and linguistic phenomenon first received publicity in American media in the early 1970's when the *National Organization for Women* proposed a number of language revisions such as, for example, *chair* or *chairperson* instead of *chairman* or *suffragist/suffragette*.¹ But, it was as early as in the 1960's, that the Civil Rights movement had already demanded people of Afro-American origin to be called *black* instead of *Negro*.² The new phenomenon found recognition first of all in revision of words and terms concerning ethnicity or race.³ According to PC language black people are to be called African-Americans, whereas the preferred term for the people of oriental origin is Asian-Americans. Accordingly, Indians are to be referred to as Native Americans and white Australians should be referred to as non-aboriginals. Generally, the word *race* should be replaced with *ethnic origin* and *ethnic minority* with a roundabout expression *culturally different group* (on this issue, see Stapińska (1998:19)). This trend, clearly linked to women liberation movement, resulted in a number of lexicographic publications such as, for example, *A Woman's New World Dictionary* (1973).

One could say that the PC movement shows increasing tolerance, respect and sensitivity for a diversity of race, sexual preference, nationality, religion,

¹ Very frequently new words are coined to support or oppose the rights of women or to neutralise sex-specific terminology and, in general, to fill gender gaps in the vocabulary. Some of the terms, like *herstory* (as opposed to *history*), are serious attempts to highlight through word play the previously undervalued contribution of women to civilisation.

² It is worth mentioning that the then pejoratively loaded word *negro* earlier replaced even more pejoratively marked words such as, for example, *nigger*, *coon* or *wog*.

³ Positive and negative examples illustrating PC movement in reference to *people with disabilities*, *racism* and *sexism* are presented, for example, in „Fenomen *political correctness* a nauczanie języka angielskiego” by Stapińska (1998).

age, physical handicap, alternative lifestyle or any situation or view that might differ from one's own. The body of politically incorrect terms and their preferred alternatives concerning physical handicap includes among others:⁴

mentally handicapped	– <i>people with learning difficulties</i> – <i>people with learning disabilities</i> – <i>learning-disabled</i>
physically handicapped	– <i>physically different</i> – <i>physically challenged</i> – <i>people of different abilities</i> – <i>people of other abilities</i>
confined to a wheelchair	– <i>wheelchair user</i>
deaf and dumb	– <i>hard of hearing</i>
suffering from	– <i>person who experienced</i>
slow learners	– <i>with special needs</i>

Notice that the word *differently* is often used as a qualifier to avoid negative connotations of a great number of other expressions such as, for example, (Stapińska 1998:16):

cripple	– <i>differently abled</i>
sado-masochistic	– <i>differently pleased</i>
small/fat	– <i>differently heighted/sized/weighed</i>

It is often claimed in relevant literature that the aim of political correctness is to suppress all kinds of behaviour or statements, which might be considered offensive, prejudicial or stereotypical – anything that might intimidate people or make them feel uneasy.⁵ There are numerous examples of linguistic prejudice against equal treatment of men and women, for example the words *spinster* and *bachelor* define people who are not married and, according to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, the word *bachelor* means “an unmarried man” whereas *spinster* is defined as “an unmarried woman, usually one who is no longer young and/or seems unlikely to marry”. Another interesting couple of words is that of *king* and *queen*. Every, even non-advanced speaker of English knows the principal meaning of these two words, however not everyone realises that *queen* may also be used in the sense “elderly male homosexual”. Similarly, describing someone as *wizard* can be considered a compliment whereas one

⁴ Examples are taken from Freeborn (1994).

⁵ Politically correct language should be *non-sexist* which means *gender-neutral*. The issue of linguistics and sexism in a society is discussed in Romaine (1989). The examples of *sexist terms* and their *gender-neutral* alternatives are presented in Miller and Swift (1980).

cannot say the same about its female counterpart, that is *witch* because it is definitely negatively loaded (on this issue see Gross-Kołodczek (1998:30) and Kleparski (1990)).

For a certain period of time it was seen as merely a college issue but now PC movement seems to be overwhelmingly present in everyday life of many Anglo-Saxon countries and the United States of America, in particular. Moreover, the principles of PC seem to be spreading onto other regions of the globe including Poland with the rise of such linguistic oddities as, for example, *kochający inaczej* (literally: *loving in a different way*), meaning “homosexual” or *sprawny inaczej* (literally: *able in a different way*), used in the sense “disabled”.

First and foremost, the use of PC language implies being polite and tolerant to others. However, by many language users PC may be seen as overly sensitive in trying to avoid offending anyone to the point of funniness (see, for example, *history/herstory* commented on in footnote 1). The main argument that is advanced against it is that the phenomenon of PC is becoming so significant that ordinary native speakers of English, let alone foreign speakers of English, are no longer certain if their everyday language used in everyday situations is acceptable. Everyday experience shows that a number of new terms such as, for example, *vertically challenged* instead of *short* or *himmer* instead of *him or her*, which were primarily designed to be accurate, may in fact cause confusion, and the confusion is not necessarily of purely linguistic nature.

Of course, the original intentions of PC advocates were sound and honourable. Nevertheless, a great number of changes introduced and – worse still – fervently advocated are often too funny or difficult to be accepted by ordinary language users. The examples of new terminology which may be considered as designed to make people laugh include:⁶

ugly	– <i>asthetically challenged</i>
stupid	– <i>intellectually challenged</i>
old	– <i>chronologically challenged</i>
under a dictatorship	– <i>constitutionally challenged</i>
broke	– <i>financially challenged</i>
dead	– <i>metabolically challenged</i>
illegitimate	– <i>socially challenged</i>

One gets the impression that American English in particular, displays a fondness for positive feelings. Therefore, one hears that nobody is a failure but rather experiences *deficiency rating*. In a likewise manner, nobody says they were close to death but simply *felt the power of life*. Likewise, in economy, firms with shares falling on the stock exchange do not make losses but rather *have no*

⁶ Examples are taken from Gross-Kołodczek (1998).

profits. Those candidates who did not get a job are said to be *chosen negatively*. In the dynamic language of business each problem is considered a *challenge* and making employees redundant is expressed in a roundabout manner as *company adjustment to the proper size* or *downsizing*.

It needs to be mentioned that critics have been describing PC as a type of new social code that needs to be obeyed to gain acceptance of a particular social circle. Beyond doubt, PC with its aim of limiting prejudice, has in turn become a form of intolerance itself. Thus, one may conclude that the PC movement reflects inefficiencies in coping with problems of prejudice and intolerance. For example, one could ask the following question: *How can we make some social changes if we can not talk about problematic issues using their real names?* From a social point of view PC – to a certain degree – is a part of a problem which had only its name changed instead of being solved. However, one may also say that at least one aim of the PC movement has been achieved, that is people have become more aware of the fact the language they use may be a tool of intolerance.

From a purely linguistic point of view, language may ultimately be viewed as an adaptable tool-kit, the elements of which change, disappear, either suddenly or gradually, acquire different forms and alter their meanings while others constantly flow in to fill in the gap (see Kleparski (1983:11)). The history of the English language, which in its beginnings was of highly inflecting type, has shown – during the last thousand years or so – a remarkable tendency towards economy. Notice that it would be very interesting to analyse the phenomenon of PC language from the point of view of economy principle, being part of the earlier viewpoint by which language development is essentially due to two conflicting tendencies, that is **ease versus clearness**, the best formulation is that which is easiest to find and easiest to understand.

The principle of economy may be summarised by the dictum that the more complicated a linguistic signal (as articulation, as acoustic structure or as perception), the less economic it is as a means of communication and the lower its frequency in existing linguistic structures. To put it in simple terms, the principle of least effort decrees that speakers tend to work no harder than they have to in order to make themselves understood.⁷ Obviously, uncritical adoption of the principle of economy alone sounds preposterous since it altogether misses the function of language to symbolise and express certain emotional shades and attitudes. However, it seems that a great number of linguistic coinages resultant from the PC movement seem to be utterly at odds with the **Bequemlichkeitstrieb**, that is economy principle which is otherwise so much evident in the enormous productivity of such economy-bound mechanisms as blending, clipping, acronymy, especially at work in American English.

⁷ On this issue see, for example, Bolinger and Sears (1981:14).

Obviously, one must accept the fact that any form of functional approach to the analysis of PC language automatically presupposes the necessity of taking into consideration extralinguistic situations, needs and preconditionings.

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