

UDC 802.0

Linguistics

## THE CONCEPT OF POLITICALLY CORRECT LANGUAGE

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**Բանալի բառեր.** քաղաքական բարեկրթություն, տերմին, լեզվաբանական, անարգական, խտրականություն, մեղմանություն, կոպտասացություն, արգելք, փոխարկություն, հռետորական հարց, դերանուն:

**Ключевые слова:** политическая корректность, термин, лингвистический, оскорбительный, дискриминация, эвфемизм, дисфемизм, барьер, метафора, риторический вопрос, местоимение.

**Keywords:** political correctness, term, linguistic, offensive, discrimination, euphemism, dysphemism, hedge, metaphor, rhetorical question, pronoun.

## ՔԱՂԱՔԱԿԱՆ ԲԱՐԵԿՐԹՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԳԱՂԱՓԱՐԸ

Ա.ՂԱՀՐԱՄԱՆՅԱՆ

Սույն հոդվածում պարզաբանվում է քաղաքական բարեկրթություն հասկացությունը, ինչպես նաև դրա օգտագործման անհրաժեշտությունն ու կարևոր առանձնահատկությունները: Անդրադարձ է կատարվում նաև քաղաքական բարեկրթությունն արտահայտելու հիմնական միջոցներին ու դրանց սահմանումներին: Նշվում է նաև այդ միջոցների դերն ու նշանակությունը քաղաքական բարեկրթության արտահայտման ժամանակ:

Հոդվածում ներկայացվում է քաղաքական բարեկրթության հիմնական գաղափարը, ինչպես նաև գործածության նպատակներն ու արտահայտման ձևերը:

## КОНЦЕПЦИЯ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИ КОРРЕКТНОГО ЯЗЫКА

А. КАГРАМАНЯН

В этой статье автор рассматривает понятие политически корректного языка, а также необходимость его использования и главные особенности. Исследуются способы выражения политически корректного языка и их определения, не остаются без внимания влияние и функции в политически корректном языке.

Вместе с тем, в статье представлена основная идея политически корректного языка, цели употребления и формы выражения.

*This article clarifies the notion of political correctness, as well as the necessity of its usage and the principle features. The ways of expressing political correctness and definitions of these ways are also touched on, considering their influence and functions in politically correct language use.*

*The concept of politically correct language, as well as the purposes of its usage and ways of expression are also presented in this article.*

Political correctness is involved with developing a way of thinking that will diminish the use of inappropriate language in politics as well as negate some forms of discrimination. It prevents recognition of differences among gender, religion, belief system, sexual orientation and nationality. Political correctness is undoubtedly very important for politicians since in this way they will produce competent and proficient speeches and will be able to successfully communicate and understand the cultural settings and background of the language. It is also supposed to raise the politicians' awareness of certain social issues such as diversity, flexibility, tolerance, democracy, etc.

The aim of this article is to examine and reveal the main features of politically correct language and some of the ways of expressing political correctness.

Political correctness is a unique phenomenon that seems to have emerged in the United States in the 1980s as an attempt to change social attitudes by replacing or even eradicating discriminatory and offensive terms from the lexicon.

According to Allan and Burridge<sup>1</sup>, politically correct terms are suitable expressions which speakers choose in order to refer to dispreferred terms. Another use of politically correct language is provided by Cameron<sup>2</sup>. She writes that political correctness means to give certain groups the opportunity to define how they would like to be called by others and to emphasize their self-identity.

The concept of politically correct language has not originated recently. To comment on the development of the notion, Duignan and Gann's words can be used: "Political correctness rose to prominence in the late 1980s but grew out of postmodernism and cultural revolution of the 1960s"<sup>3</sup>. Atkinson<sup>4</sup> adds that it started with a few voices but grew in popularity until it became unwritten and written law within the community. The reason why political correctness came to existence was to prevent people from talking offensively and thus to protect them from being talked offensively about as well.

Concerning the replacement of offensive expressions, Cameron<sup>5</sup> comments on the linguistic changes caused by political correctness. She points out that the use of language reflects sensibilities and changes in society such as the result of the social struggle against discrimination. Replacing words which are considered to be politically incorrect with those regarded as politically correct is something that has to be fought for.

In the broadest sense political correctness can be thought of as meaning dissent tolerance. However, ironically, one of its obvious outcomes appears to be putting pressure on those unwilling to use it. Thus, Umberto Eco calls political correctness the number one enemy of tolerance. In his book "Five Moral Pieces" Eco writes: "Think of the phenomenon of political correctness in America. This sprang from the desire to encourage tolerance and the recognition of all differences, religious, racial, and sexual, and yet it is becoming a new form of fundamentalism that is affecting everyday language in a practically ritual fashion and that works on the letter at the expense of the spirit and so you can discriminate against blind persons provided that you have the delicacy to call them the sightless, and above all you can discriminate against those who do not follow the rules of political correctness"<sup>6</sup>.

According to Crystal<sup>7</sup>, organizations became afraid of being criticized by the public and hence they started avoiding politically incorrect language so that they were not accused of being offensive. As a result, offensive words were banned from use even in contexts which did not evoke anything racist, for example. Similarly, the generic use of *man* became attacked too. According to Romaine<sup>8</sup>, this can be illustrated on the word *black*. Even expressions such as *black market*, *black sheep*, and *black ball* started to be avoided as well.

In a more focused and properly linguistic sense, the principal function of politically correct neologisms is often viewed as replacing biased judgmental expressions devaluating individual's race, sex, sexual orientation, age, health condition, social status, appearance, etc, with neutral units, which do not possess negative connotations, by means of introducing changes on the lexical level, e.g. *poor countries* > *undeveloped* > *underdeveloped* > *the Third World* > *less developed* > *developing*, or morphemic, i.e. replacing sexist morphemes *-man* (*chairman*, *businessman*, *salesman*) or *-ess* (*stewardess*) by their neutral counterparts: *chairman* > *chairperson*; *spokesman* > *spokesperson*; *stewardess* > *flight attendant*, etc, as well as replacing the traditional use of the syntactic-semantic structure of generic anaphoric *he/his* pronoun in cases where sex is not indicated by the combined *his/her* or plural pronoun *their*.

<sup>1</sup> Allan, Keith and Burridge, Kate. *Forbidden Words. Taboo and the Censoring of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> Cameron, Deborah. *Words, Words, Words: The Power of Language*. In *the War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate*. London: Routledge, 1998, p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> Duignan, P. and Gann, L. H. *Political Correctness: A Critique*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, 1995, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Atkinson, J. M. *Heritage Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversational Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Cameron, Deborah. *Words, Words, Words: The Power of Language*. In *the War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate*. London: Routledge, 1998, p. 152.

<sup>6</sup> Eco, U. *Five Moral Pieces*. New York: Harcourt, 2002, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Crystal, David. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 177.

<sup>8</sup> Romaine, Suzanne. *Language in Society: An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 125.

Defenders of politically correct language claim that it is a civilizing influence on society, that it discourages the use of words that have negative or offensive connotations and thereby grants respect to people who are the victims of unfair stereotypes. In this view, the purpose and effect of politically correct language are to prevent bullying and offensive behavior and to replace terms loaded with offensive undertones with allegedly impartial words. So, for example, people are discouraged from referring to someone with a mental disability as *mentally retarded* and instead encouraged to refer to him as *being differently abled* or as *having special needs*. Similarly, one can no longer refer to *garbage men* or even the gender-neutral *garbage collectors*, they are *environmental service workers*.

One of the ways of expressing political correctness is the use of euphemism, which, as defined by McArthur<sup>1</sup>, is commonly understood to mean a word or an expression which is delicate and inoffensive and is used to replace or cover a term that seems to be either taboo, too harsh or simply inappropriate for a given conversational exchange.

In The Oxford English Dictionary<sup>2</sup>, euphemism is defined as a figure of speech which consists in the substitution of a word or expression of comparatively favourable or less unpleasant associations, instead of the harsher or more offensive one that would more precisely designate what is intended. Wardhaugh<sup>3</sup> adds that the unpleasantness of certain subjects, such as death, dying, or criminality, is neutralized by euphemistic expressions. Euphemisms also make some occupations and tasks sound more pleasantly. According to Andrews<sup>4</sup>, the term *sanitation engineer*, for example, is a more pleasant substitution for *garbage collector*.

Euphemisms are also used in order to be kind, to avoid offending other people, hurting their feelings, and humiliating them. They are more acceptable terms in certain social situations. On this account, Burridge<sup>5</sup> writes that it is more convenient to say that a person is *chronologically gifted* or *experientially enhanced* rather than *old* as the latter is not a respectful term and can cause offence to the person.

As discussed above, euphemisms are used as substitutions for dispreferred expressions. However, many expressions which are euphemistic at one point often degenerate into dysphemisms as they gain negative connotations. The explanation of the term dysphemism is provided by Burridge who defines it as follows: “It is the offensive counterpart to the sweet-smelling euphemism”<sup>6</sup>. Allan<sup>7</sup> adds that dysphemisms are offensive either about the denotatum or to the audience, or both. For example, instead of saying *I’m off to have a piss* at a formal dinner party, a speaker should more conveniently say *Excuse me for a moment*.

According to Cameron<sup>8</sup>, although dysphemisms referring to African-American people are thought to be offensive labels, they can be in fact acceptable and perceived as positive among members of the labeled group. As Allan<sup>9</sup> notes, the word *nigger* can be provided as an example here. This word is generally perceived as derogatory. Despite the fact that the word *nigger* should be marked as typically offensive, it is perceived as positive when used among members of the African diaspora. Romaine<sup>10</sup> states that in addition to this, by using such terms in a positive way, African-Americans attempt to create a positive image for blackness.

<sup>1</sup> McArthur, T. The Oxford Companion to the English Language. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 387.

<sup>2</sup> Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. London: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 323.

<sup>3</sup> Wardhaugh, Ronald. An Introduction to Sociolinguistics. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 240.

<sup>4</sup> Andrews, Larry. Linguistics for L2 Teachers. 1st edition. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2008, p. 128.

<sup>5</sup> Burridge, Kate. Blooming English: Observations on the Roots, Cultivation and Hybrids of the English Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 222.

<sup>6</sup> Burridge, Kate. Blooming English: Observations on the Roots, Cultivation and Hybrids of the English Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Allan, Keith and Burridge, Kate. Euphemism, Dysphemism, and Cross-Varietal Synonymy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Cameron, Deborah. Words, Words, Words: The Power of Language. In the War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate. London: Routledge, 1998, p. 152.

<sup>9</sup> Allan, Keith. Natural Language Semantics. 1st edition. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001, p. 155.

<sup>10</sup> Romaine, Suzanne. Language in Society: An Introduction to Sociolinguistics. 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 125.

Another way of expressing political correctness is the use of hedges. There are several different definitions of hedges corresponding to different types. According to Wardhaugh<sup>1</sup>, verbal hedges could be words or phrases used to mitigate the significance of an utterance in order to save a speaker's face. Face-saving in this sense refers to a speaker's attempt to avoid having other people lose respect for you, as well as being the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself. Furthermore, hedges could be used to express ambiguity or to avoid giving a promise or direct answer. They are used unconsciously in everyday speech, whereas for example in political debates, they could be used consciously to diminish or empower someone or something. Coates<sup>2</sup> defines hedges as linguistic forms such as *I think*, *I'm sure*, *you know*, *sort of* and *perhaps* which express the speaker's certainty or uncertainty about the proposition under discussion. By diminishing the force of an utterance, one also diminishes the risk of offending the other speaker, and hedges are devices used to do this. Furthermore hedges signal politeness and a positive attitude towards the other speaker. Such signals could be tags like *you know* or *isn't it?* which are used when the speaker expects a certain answer or just seeks confirmation about the utterance.

Holmes<sup>3</sup> proposes two functions of hedges, the first one is the epistemic modal function, which expresses the speaker's approximation of something and uncertainty. Such hedges could be about and fairly. The second function is the affective function, which is used by a speaker to reduce social distances between the speakers and to create a more casual conversation. Holmes lets the following examples illustrate how sort of could reflect both an epistemic function as well as an affective function:

(1) Context: male student to male interviewer in description task.

He's got a *sort of* a skirty thing on.

(2) Context: one neighbour to another.

Do you think I could *sort of* come and watch a programme on your TV tonight.

Prince, Brosk and Frader<sup>4</sup> propose that there are two different sub-categories of hedges, namely approximators and shields. Approximators are used to create fuzziness within the utterance, for instance *He kind of screamed at her*. Shields are used to empower the speaker's commitment to the truth of an utterance, as in *I think he screamed at her*. Prince, Brosk and Frader claim men use more approximators and women more shields as their communication goals are different. Women use hedges to create a relationship with the other speaker, while men use them to signal uncertainty. For instance, women could hedge to show respect to the hearer by not being too forward about the utterance, while men sometimes hedge because they feel inferior to the other.

What Holmes<sup>5</sup> defines as epistemic modals are similar in function to approximators in the sense that they express the speaker's uncertainty about the utterance. Shields, however, do not have the same qualities as the affective function Holmes describes, as they are used to empower the speaker rather than reduce social distances. Epistemic modals are speaker-oriented and the affectives are addressee-oriented.

Metaphor is one more way of expressing political correctness. According to Charteris-Black<sup>6</sup>, metaphor has long been recognized as an important feature of political rhetoric and as an important means of conceptualizing political issues and constructing worldviews. Metaphors represent our embodied, experiential conceptualization of abstract and complex knowledge of the world, and the choice of such metaphors is therefore crucial for our understanding of social and political events.

Lesz<sup>7</sup> argues that metaphors have an impact on cognitive perception while at the same time even native speakers do not always realize the presence of metaphor in a speech or text. The sum of these two

<sup>1</sup> Wardhaugh, R. An Introduction to Sociolinguistics. Great Britain: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 292.

<sup>2</sup> Coates J. Women, Men and Language. Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2004, p. 88.

<sup>3</sup> Holmes J. Hedges and Boosters in Men's and Women's Speech. Language and Communication. 10th edition. Great Britain: Pergamon Press, 1990, p. 198.

<sup>4</sup> Prince, Ellen, Bosk, Charles and Frader, Joel. On Hedging in Physician Discourse. Norwood/New Jersey: Ablex, 1982, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> Holmes J. Hedges and Boosters in Men's and Women's Speech. Language and Communication. 10th edition. Great Britain: Pergamon Press, 1990, p. 199.

<sup>6</sup> Charteris-Black, J. Politics and Rhetoric: The Persuasive Power of Metaphor. 2nd edition. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 48.

<sup>7</sup> Lesz, B. To Shape the World for the Better: an Analysis of Metaphors in the Speeches of Barack Obama. Norway: University of Tromsø, 2011, p. 21.

valuable features results in its power to influence people's opinions or thoughts and alter their vision on the world. Since politics are closely connected with ideology, metaphors share a great deal in influencing people's political conviction.

Burkholder & Henry<sup>1</sup> note that as metaphor influences how we think and accordingly act, its cognitive function is of major importance to political speech. Politics deals with complex materials that are sometimes difficult to grasp. That is why metaphor is an indispensable and frequently applied figure of speech in political discourse: it helps people to understand complex concepts and functions as a persuasive tool. Metaphor can also invigorate a message or make a speech more memorable, as well as arouse emotional response. The way in which a metaphor transmits an emotional feeling can be illustrated by calling a political leader '*a Hitler*'. The emotions aroused or exemplified by this metaphor have an influence on how the national leader is perceived. The way in which a political leader can thus influence people's emotions is one of the principal reasons why they use metaphors in their discourses.

The use of rhetorical questions is another way of being politically correct. Han<sup>2</sup> states that a rhetorical question has the illocutionary force of an assertion of the opposite polarity from what is apparently asked. According to Koshik<sup>3</sup>, a review of the literature suggests that this interrogative form is as difficult to define as it is communicatively successful.

As Baldick<sup>4</sup> states, rhetorical question occurs frequently in debates, particularly of a political nature, where it is used as a tool to avoid making an outright claim or declaration, but at the same time still being able to make a point. For instance, *Is it not clear that teachers are better than farmers in this regard?* This is a rhetorical question that does not really have a concrete or measurable answer; the answer is often based on individual opinion and assessment. Such questions are quite capable of inspiring new thoughts, ideas and even further debate. It is thus a clever way to avoid coming to an obvious conclusion.

The use of pronouns can also be considered as a way of expressing political correctness. Brown and Gilman's<sup>5</sup> pioneering study showed that the choice of pronouns is affected by the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Addressing someone in the same way as they would address you shows solidarity and equality. Addressing someone with a higher status in a different way than that person would address you shows inequality and social distance. Both power and solidarity are relationships between at least two people, and differences of power can be found in all societies.

According to Karapetyan<sup>6</sup>, the way politicians speak and present themselves is a part of their personality and a way to show themselves as individuals, and so are pronominal choices. Cameron<sup>7</sup> states that the use of personal pronouns can create an image of the politician in question, both negative and positive. In political speeches the pronouns *I*, *You* and *We* are used much more than other pronouns. The use of pronouns *I* and *You* expresses sociable styles and connotes a higher degree of intimacy and solidarity.

Thus, the major theme of political correctness is to tolerate a diversity of cultures, races, genders, ideologies, religions, and alternate lifestyles. Political correctness implies the presence of a sufficient power to enforce compliance with whatever is politically correct.

Among the most frequently used ways of expressing political correctness are euphemisms, dysphemisms, hedges, metaphors, parallelism, rhetorical questions and pronouns.

Euphemism is the substitution of a word or expression of comparatively favourable or less unpleasant associations, instead of the harsher or more offensive one that would more precisely designate what is intended. However, many expressions which are euphemistic at one point often degenerate into dysphemisms as they gain negative connotations. In politics metaphors are used as persuasive devices and as a means of justifying political actions. Hedges could be words or phrases used to mitigate the significance

<sup>1</sup> Burkholder, T. R. & Henry, D. Criticism of Metaphor. Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009, p. 100.

<sup>2</sup> Han, Ch. Interpreting interrogatives as rhetorical questions. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 202.

<sup>3</sup> Koshik, I. Beyond Rhetorical Questions. London: John Benjamins Publishing Co, 2003, p. 723.

<sup>4</sup> Baldick, C. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, R. and Gilman, A. The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity. Style in Language. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1960, p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> Karapetyan, I. Pronominal Choice in Political Interviews. Riga: Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture, 2011, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Cameron, Deborah. The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader. New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 132.

of an utterance in order to save a speaker's face. A rhetorical question is a figure of speech in the form of a question posed for its persuasive effect without the expectation of a reply. The way politicians speak and present themselves is a part of their personality and a way to show themselves as individuals, and so are pronominal choices. The use of personal pronouns can create an image of the politician in question, both negative and positive.

**Տեղեկություններ հեղինակի մասին.**

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Հոդվածը տպագրության է նրաշխարհում խմբագրական կոլեգիայի անդամ, մ.գ.դ., պրոֆեսոր  
Ի.Ա.Կարապետյանը: