

Political Correctness: Where Linguistics and Politics Meet

by Boran Göher & Ümit Altar Binici

Almost every culture had groups it considered as “outsiders” or “the others”. Considering that people have a great tendency to ridicule, demean, or otherwise insult these outcast groups, it is no surprise that many words and phrases have appeared in various languages to serve this exact purpose. Of course, it is not just using these words and phrases these groups of others are insulted. People have found many ways to insult and exclude them using their regular vocabulary as well. This usage of language has always gone hand in hand with discrimination against these minority groups. Although it has been the norm for most of history, in recent times, especially during and after the 20th century, discrimination against these groups became an increasingly shunned activity. Consequently, the usage of exclusive and derogatory language also began to be met with disdain.

For about the last 30 years, this new wave of inclusive language stripped of derogatory terms against minorities has been called “politically correct language” and the movement itself took the name “political correctness”. Although the previous sentence gave a loose definition for the term, political correctness is not so easily defined in reality. One person’s definition can be vastly different than another’s and many are unable to or refuse to define the term in exact words. Several political analysts have even commented that this vagueness benefits the politicians who choose to use the term. A part of this confusion and vagueness no doubt arises from the interesting history of the phrase.

The earliest widespread usage of the phrase dates back to the '70s when left-wing university students used to the term to refer to other leftists who they believed were adhering too strictly to the doctrine of their political ideology, sacrificing morality or reason in the process. In a rather interesting fashion, the term kept its original usage, but not the original users. From the mid-'80s to the late-'90s onward the term gained traction among right-wingers in the USA who were satirizing or criticizing leftist actions they thought were infringing on their free speech. The term became an immediate “hit” in American politics after its resurgence in the late-mid '80s and has not left the sphere of political debates for almost thirty years, although it has had some ups and downs in popularity in certain periods. Over these 30 years, the term has not gone undergone such drastic change, but it would be appropriate to say it is now used in a somewhat broader manner than in the past. At the time of its resurgence political correctness was often mentioned in racial topics. Today, in addition to topics concerning racial minorities, it is also used in topics relating to gender, sexual and romantic minorities, and neurodivergent people. It is important to note that however the history of political correctness doesn't exactly align with the reconstruction of language to be more inclusive and less insulting towards minorities.

The inclination to eliminate derogatory terms about a group of people who you've started to empathize with is much older than political correctness and was not seen as inherently political until much later in history. For example, words like idiot or imbecile were widely accepted medical terms in the 19th century. These terms eventually became frequently used slurs and some people advocated against their use stating that their use degraded innocent mentally disabled people. This was thought to be only slightly political at the time, however, and not the epicenter of a political firestorm the action is thought to be today. When the same process started happening regarding racial minorities or LGBTQ+ people however, it was immediately branded as political by the American right-wing. Overall, this was no surprise to anyone. After all, the very existence of these people is political to American right-wingers.

This way of thinking and eventually the term political correctness spread to the UK from the USA and then to mainland Europe. The proponents of this view would have you believe political correctness is simply a way to silence your political opponents with no actual benefits to anyone. The truth, however, might not be so simple.

By now, it should be no surprise to anyone that some think the language we use affects our perception of the real world as well. This school of thought is almost more than a century old and has substantial psychological and philosophical work behind it. In addition, many studies find that oppressed minorities have much better chances of success in life and lower suicide rates when they feel accepted within a group even if sometimes the society at large may not be so accepting. There is no doubt that a part of acceptance toward these groups is using language that doesn't dehumanize or exclude them. One particularly powerful example is about transgender people; studies show that even if the family is not explicitly supportive if they avoid misgendering or deadnaming, the act of referring to a transgender person with their pre-transition name, their transgender child, those children have a much lower chance of attempting suicide. One other example is how challenging male-dominant and heteronormative language in business circles allows more gender and sexual minorities to access upper positions in their careers.

Despite all this, opposing political correctness for political leverage has become more popular than ever. Back in 2016, one of the main talking points of Donald Trump was how "...This political correctness is just absolutely killing us..." referring to the US, and how he didn't "...frankly have time for total political correctness.". Of course, even if he didn't explicitly state it, it would be easy to see Trump doesn't believe in political correctness. After all, publicly calling Mexicans rapists and making fun of a disabled person on national television aren't very politically correct. At the time, many people considered this kind of action political suicide, but it appears they were wrong as Donald Trump was able to halt the Democrat Presidential Race wins. Upon retrospective inspection, many political writers argued his anti-PC behavior was actually a boon to his popularity. His supporters often praise him exactly because "He says it like it is.". Unsurprisingly, Donald Trump's anti-PC crusade has sacrificed society's most disenfranchised people in favor of gaining a bigger voter base. Anti-PC statements have also been used in Europe and are seen as a reason for the recent traction of alt-right parties on the continent.

Considering all this, it should be evident that being anti-PC and setting yourself up as campaigning against a phantom enemy who is trying to silence you are too powerful for the right to give up on them, even if there's no substance behind it. And the left doesn't seem to be giving up on reforming language to be more inclusive and less demeaning, either. With the conditions as such, It seems debates on political correctness will continue to dominate politics for a long time to come.