

“DIMITRIE CANTEMIR” CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

ANNALS OF “DIMITRIE CANTEMIR” CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

LINGUISTICS, LITERATURE AND METHODOLOGY OF TEACHING

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Notes on the Volume from the Editors

As language teaching strategies, programs, and procedures are continually experiencing reassessment, new ideas keep surfacing. This issue of Annals of “Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University. Linguistics, Literature and Methodology of Teaching is meant both to disseminate the Erasmus+ Project VIR_TEACH: A VIRTUAL Solution for a comprehensive and coordinated training for foreign language TEACHERs in Europe (Ref. 2018-1-ES01-KA203-050045) and to carry the modern teaching methods’ review forward to address the contemporary age of digital communication in the twenty-first century. The expanding complexity of the means of communication and the openings created by technology put language skills to new applications. In addition, the challenges of intercultural communication have opened new perspectives on the central role that foreign languages have come to play in the advancement of contemporary societies and thus impact on foreign language learning and teaching. The Erasmus+ Project VIR_TEACH project is devoted to the creation of a digital tool to improve the postgraduate certificates on Masters on Education (Foreign Languages) and provide teachers and researchers with open-source tools and resources. In bringing together contributions on the ESP teaching in various fields and Multicultural Approaches in teaching foreign languages in the current era of globalized creation, we seek to stress the importance of improving and adapting teaching methods to nowadays challenges.

Intercultural Communication Language: Euphemisms, Racism, Sexism, and Political Correctness

Ramona MIHĂILĂ¹

Abstract. *The present article is part of a course that intends to make the students familiar with differences and similarities of pluralism and individualism of the people belonging to a wide range of cultural backgrounds, taking into account the values provided by anthropology, high and popular culture, sociology, business, and international relations. The course is designed for teachers who teach in secondary schools and high schools and tries to identify the ways that people behave in terms of individualism and collectivism in multilingual and multicultural societies, the activities of the art, literature, music, theater created by culture versus the contemporary trends of popular culture. The present article focused on teaching euphemisms and political correctness represents one of the activities of the Vir_Teach (A virtual Solution for comprehensive and coordinated training for foreign language teachers in Europe) project, funded by the Erasmus+ programme; Parteners: Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University, University of Burgos, (Spain), UC Leuven Limburg (Belgium), Szczecińska Szkoła Wyższa (Poland) and Universidade Lusófona, (Portugal).*

Keywords: Euphemisms; Political Correctness; English for Specific Purposes; Teachers' Training.

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1. Theoretical Approaches

Globalization has changed the way people interact in different social and cultural environments. Technology has led to different codes of behavior for almost all the people in the world. The most important goal of intercultural communication is to make people aware of the cross-cultural boundaries and the similarities or the differences within these spaces. Marilyn Leask says that “traditionally, two definitions of culture are distinguished, one coming from the humanities, the other from the social sciences. In a discussion of culture, teaching in the context of modern foreign languages education at advanced level, I argue: that the (one) focuses on the way a social group represents itself and others through its material production, be they works of art, literature, social institutions, or artefacts of everyday life, and the mechanism for their reproduction and preservation through history” (Kramersch 1996: 2). The other refers to the attitudes and beliefs, ways of thinking, behaving and remembering shared by members of that community” (Kramersch 1996: 2). (...) Whichever definition of culture one might adopt, and the two definitions are not necessarily exclusive, it soon becomes clear, that given their characteristics (...), new technologies have a considerable impact on groups of people, how they present themselves, and communicate, and share ideas, thoughts, memories, attitudes, beliefs etc. with each other”(Leask 2012: 19).

Norbert Pachler has written studies and books concerning teaching foreign languages at beginner and advanced levels and concludes that in “the wake of culture being viewed as a socially diverse phenomenon, observation and data collection, particularly through first hand experiences with target language speakers and the target cultures have come to the fore in modern foreign language teaching and learning. Indeed, the endeavor of imparting a modern foreign language is increasingly becoming modern foreign language *education* rather than merely knowledge or skill acquisition (Pachler 2002: 77).

Thus, communication in a cultural environment is directly connected with education and Johan le Roux analyzes the effective formal education that should be about values, assumptions, feelings, perceptions and relationships and “no education can take place without interpersonal communication. Effective teaching can thus be qualified in terms of relating effectively in the classroom. Effective education thus also presupposes effective communication skills. Communication as the means and indeed the medium of education is therefore crucial to school success in culturally diverse education. Teachers should therefore be sensitive to

the potentially problematic outcomes of intercultural communication in the culturally diverse class. Communication may be a useful source of intercultural knowledge and mutual enrichment between culturally diverse students if managed proactively by the teacher (le Roux 2010: 37).

Recently, Michael Byram and Manuela Wagner argue that “language teaching has long been associated with teaching in a country or countries where a target language is spoken, but this approach is inadequate. In the contemporary world, language teaching has a responsibility to prepare learners for interaction with people of other cultural backgrounds, teaching them skills and attitudes as well as knowledge” (Byram, Wagner 2018: 140).

The American Heritage Dictionary defines euphemism as “the act or an example of substituting a mild, indirect or vague term for one considered harsh, blunt, or offensive.” Edward Hirsch goes further and explains that euphemism has its roots in a Greek word meaning the “use of auspicious words”. The poetic use of euphemism, substituting one word for another, using words of good omen, probably has its origins in magical practice. (...) Euphemisms sometimes provide away of voicing something – erotic, religious, political – that cannot be said or written directly. Euphemism gets around the censors, which can be personal, social, or political sometimes internal, sometimes external” (Hirsch 2014: 222).

Pass away and *depart this life* are well-known euphemisms for *die*, *loo* is a modern euphemism for *toilet* and many of the milder oaths are euphemisms for swear words, or to avoid the profane use of the names of God and Christ. People use a euphemism again, instead of saying *Go to hell*, they say *Go to blazes* (hell fire). Morris, in the *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage*, quotes this letter that illustrates the changing ways in which **poverty** has been publicly referred to: “*I used to think I was poor. Then they told me I wasn’t poor. I was **needy**. Then they told me it was self-defeating to think of myself as needy. I was **deprived**. Then they told me deprived was a bad image, I was **underprivileged**. Then they told me underprivileged was overused, I was **disadvantaged**. I still don’t have a dime. But I sure have a great vocabulary.*” (Jules Feifer)

Another example provided by Lynn Schneider concerns the fired employee: “If you are offered a **career change** or an **early retirement opportunity**, a **career** or **employee transition**, or you are being **involuntarily separated**, or if personnel **is being realigned** or there is a **surplus reduction in personnel**, or the staff **is being re-engineered or right sized**, or if there is a **workforce imbalance** correction then: You’re fired!” (*Boomer Lit Author and Reviewer*).

Merriam Webster Dictionary offers an explanation for the etymology of the word *Euphemism* that derives from the Greek word

euphēmos, which means “auspicious” or “sounding good.” The first part of “*euphēmos*” is the Greek prefix *eu*, meaning “well.” The second part is “*phēmē*,” a Greek word for “speech” that is itself a derivative of the verb *phanai*, meaning “to speak.” Among the numerous linguistic cousins of “euphemism” on the “eu-” side of the family are “eulogy,” “euphoria,” and “euthanasia”; on the “phanai” side, its kin include “prophet” and “aphasia” (“loss of the power to understand words”).

The use of a particular kind of euphemism is currently referred to as **political correctness** or being **PC**. These are expressions, which relate to people and society, and political correctness is a concern not to use language that might be perceived as offensive by particular members of society. Thus the term *people with learning difficulties* was felt to be better than *mentally handicapped* and the phrase *senior citizens* was preferred to *old age pensioners*.

Becky R. Ford argues that the term “*political correctness* (PC) has been used since the 1930s in Maoist China, where it meant fall in line with the Communist Party’s politics. In the 1980s, there was a revival of the use of the term. For some, PC now primes the prohibition of speech that is seen as derogatory toward historically marginalized groups, and well as the encouragement of more multicultural perspectives. Others see PC in a pejorative sense, thinking of liberal extremism. Since the start of the liberal PC movement in the 1980s, people ranging from sensationalist conservative politicians to serious and thoughtful academics have raised concerns about the negative consequences of PC. Those in support of PC claim that using more inclusive language representing more diverse voices in college classrooms helps improve the lives of members of marginalized groups. On the other hand, many professors and university health professionals have raised concerns that PC culture is too extreme, and the norms are preventing students from developing critical thinking skills. Despite the fact that the debate has been going on for nearly 30 years, little has been resolved” (Ford 2017: 19).

In *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (2006), Keith Allan and Kate Burridge analyze the “visual euphemisms that replace objects or concepts that are considered unpleasant. They say that visual euphemisms are commonplace; for example, low-calorie salad dressing (usually oil-free) is presented in shapely, slender-waisted bottles. The shape, the cleverly altered spelling and reversed coloring on some of the packaging sends out the message *non-fattening* loud and clear.”

“While teaching politically correct language,” says Maryna Tsehelska, “a teacher should clearly differentiate between sexist language, pejorative language and taboo language.” Sexist language is a term that labels the use of male-dominated phrases suggesting that members of one

sex are less able, intelligent, and skillful (...); pejorative language is the use of words or phrases disapproving or suggesting that something is no good or of no importance (labeling nationalities, aged people, etc.); taboo language includes words or phrases which are likely to offend somebody—certain words referring to sex or sexual organs, excretion, and people's nationality or race can be particularly offensive. (Cambridge International Dictionary of English 1995). Avoiding these words and phrases means using politically correct language.

2. Euphemisms. Examples and Exercises*

2.1. Underline the euphemisms in the following sentences. Then rewrite the sentences in more direct language

1. This house is a handyman's dream/ideal for the DIY enthusiast.
2. Tom bought a pre-driven car for two hundred dollars.
3. After the laboratory experiments, the scientists sacrificed the mice.
4. The sanitary engineers will form a union next year.
5. His supervisor said he had been terminated because of too many absences.
6. The press secretary admitted that he had made an erroneous report.
7. There is a mirror in the little girl's powder room.
8. The steelworkers were considering a work stoppage in two days.
9. The infantry executed a withdrawal after the surprise attack.
10. "We'll have to let you go, Tom", said the managing director.
11. "The kindest thing to do would be to put Blackie to sleep", said the vet.
12. There is no chance that a revenue enhancement measure will pass during this session of Congress.
13. A man is helping police with their enquires.
14. New Prices!
15. The police seized a quantity of adult films.
16. He admitted he is between jobs.
17. The consultant urged the company to make a downward revision in production costs.
18. The car was not up to scratch.
19. The new coffee machine left a lot to be desired.
20. His neighbor has just met his maker.

2.2. Here are some difficult topics which English people often use euphemisms for. Match them to the sentences and decide what the sentences really mean in straightforward English

a) alcohol, b) birth, c) crime, d) lying, e) obesity, f) prison, g) strike, h) toilet, i) unemployment, j) warfare, k) stupid, l) old

1. Would you like to wash your hands?
2. At the end of the evening, the minister seemed to be tired and emotional.
3. John Davis has been resting since his widely-acclaimed performance as Prince Hamlet.
4. When the lawyer questioned him closely, his client was economical with the truth.
5. There were two hundred casualties in the battle for control of the pass.
6. The union of teachers is organizing a day of action tomorrow.
7. His uncle's a guest of Her Majesty for two years.
8. Their cassette recorder fell off the back of a lorry.
9. When is the happy event going to be?
10. The actress is getting on.
11. Jenny's got a bit of a spare tire these months, hasn't she?
12. Unfortunately, he is not the sharpest pencil in the box.

2.3. Match the euphemism on the left with what it stands for on the right

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1. an approved school | a) to get drunk |
| 2. cash flow problems | b) to lock someone up (in prison or a mental hospital) |
| 3. cuddly | c) prostitution |
| 4. to drown one's sorrow | d) in the habit of stealing |
| 5. to have a liquid lunch | e) underwear |
| 6. intelligence agencies | f) a penal institution for minors |
| 7. light fingered | g) financial trouble |
| 8. the oldest profession | h) fat |
| 9. to put away | i) spying organizations |
| 10. smalls | j) to drink a lot of alcohol in the middle of the day |

2.4. Some expressions introduced for PC reasons have become a part of standard English now. Underline that one you think is the more PC expression in each case? Why?

1. African American – Black American
2. children with special needs – educationally subnormal children
3. a fireman – a firefighter
4. hearing-impaired – deaf

5. a housewife – homemaker
6. a refuse collector – dustman
7. slum – substandard housing
8. an unmarried mother – single parent
9. Third World countries – developing countries
10. gratuity – tip
11. secretary – assistant, personal assistant
12. suspect – person of interest
13. problem – issue
14. illegal immigrants – undocumented workers
15. enhanced interrogation – torture
16. four letter words - swear words)
17. Pre-owned - used, second-hand)
18. Environmental assistant - sweeper or janitor)

3. Racism and Sexism. Examples and Exercises

- use ‘black’ (of a person’s skin color as opposed to ‘Black’ or ‘Asian’ or ‘negro’ or ‘colored’)
- such words as ‘*businessman*’ (prefer ‘*business executive*’), ‘*foreman*’ (prefer ‘*supervisor*’) and ‘*policeman*’ (prefer ‘*police officer*’).
- opposition to sexism is also one reason for the widespread adoption of the plural pronoun ‘**they/them**’ in the place of ‘**he/him**’. This is both easy to say and **politically correct**
- **Suffixes marking gender - *er (-or)/-ess***: traditionally used to mark male and female (actor/actress)
- These two words are still often used in both forms, but forms such as *authoress*, *poetess*, *murderess*, and *manageress* are considered old-fashioned. If you want to be neutral, you can use the ***er (-or)*** suffix for male or female. *Schoolmistress/master* sound old-fashioned, use *teacher* instead; for *air hostess* use *flight attendant* (neutral) or *stewardess*
- ***man, -woman*** and ***-person***
- Traditional social roles often meant that ***-man*** was used even for roles performed by **women**. Now many people prefer a neutral form for both sexes, if there is one available.

| <i>neutral</i> | <i>traditional male</i> | <i>traditional female</i> |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| bartender businessperson | barman businessman | barmaid businesswoman |

| | | |
|------------------|------------|-----------------------|
| chair(person) | chairman | chairwoman |
| flight attendant | steward | stewardess/airhostess |
| firefighter | fireman | - |
| | fisherman | - |
| head (teacher) | headmaster | headmistress |
| police officer | policeman | policewoman |
| | postman | postwoman |
| spokesperson | spokesman | spokeswoman |

- but opposition to sexism is also responsible for the ‘Ms’ complication. To avoid having to call people ‘Miss’ or ‘Mrs’ anti-sexists use the American ‘Ms’.
- in English, a lot of words are marked as masculine or feminine by suffixes, but many other words have “female” or “male” associations and should be used carefully.

4. “Social” marking of words. Examples and Exercises

Some words, particularly the names of jobs (*barber, burglar, butcher, cheerleader, conductor, detective, dressmaker, farmer, general, hairdresser, secretary, station master, tailor, typist*), are socially marked as belonging to one gender even though the words are neutral in form, e.g. in English, *nurse* was considered so female that if a man was a nurse, he was often referred to a *male nurse*.

Bachelor and *spinster* can both have negative or undesirable associations. Use *unmarried or single (man/woman)* instead. You can use *partner* instead of *fiancé(e)*, especially for someone you live with as a couple but are not married to.

4.1. Avoiding gender specific language. In the following sentences change the words in italics to neutral “political correctness” words with the same meaning. Make any other grammatical changes that then become necessary

1. These young people need to have been physically trained if they apply to be *policemen*.
2. Dear *Miss/ Mrs.* Johnson, I’m writing to you in order to help me with the Sale & Purchase contract.
3. The evolution of *man* was a contentious issue for the 19th century.
4. The *air hostesses* will shortly be moving through the cabin serving drinks and food.

5. In 1969 **man** first set foot on the moon. Neil Armstrong's famous words were: "That is one small step for a **man**, one giant leap for **mankind**".
6. Every **salesman** in the company is required to meet a monthly target. The best of **him** will be nominee for the best **salesman** of the year.
7. Nylon is a **man-made** fiber.
8. The members of the committee agreed to a **man** to elect a new **chairman**.
9. Who was the first **man** to fly in across the Pacific?
10. The **firemen** have been fighting with the blazes for two hours.

4.2. Sometimes political correctness goes to such extremes to avoid hurting others' feelings that it verges on the ridiculous, creating expressions that are excessively convoluted. Can you match the PC expressions on the left with their translations on the right?

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. charm-free | a) ugly |
| 2. chronologically gifted | b) tall |
| 3. cosmetically different | c) disorganized |
| 4. hair disadvantaged | d) boring |
| 5. mentally challenged | e) old |
| 6. nontraditionally ordered | f) bald |
| 7. big boned | g) stupid |
| 8. vertically inconvenienced | h) fat |

4.3. Now can you work out what the rather extreme PC speaker is saying about the different people below? Underline and explain the PC expressions.

1. In his autobiographical book he recalls his experiences as a gentleman of the road.
2. Nell achieved a deficiency on her driving needs assessment.
3. The manager complains that his secretary is temporally challenged.
4. Samantha is larger than the average citizen.
5. The teacher said that John is a child with an attention deficit disorder
6. The employer warned the doorman with sacking if he doesn't stop being a person of differing sobriety.
7. The politician admitted that his mother was an unwaged domestic artist.
8. You should be very careful because he doesn't suffer fools gladly.
9. Unfortunately, his old neighbour is on the streets.
10. The manager asked his secretary if she had considered early retirement.

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* *Note.* Some of the exercises in the article were included in my book *Current Issue. Communication in English*. Bucharest: FRM. 2006

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