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ABSTRACT

**A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON
POLITICAL CORRECTNESS.
A CASE STUDY ON CANCEL CULTURE
DISCOURSE**

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INTRODUCTION

The phrase “political correctness” has become part of the modern lexicon, not only in English, but in other languages as well. The term appears more and more often in the news, in the discourse of politicians, on social media and even in everyday speech. We also keep hearing phrases such as: “cancel culture”, “woke”, “affirmative action” (all of which are linked to political correctness) sometimes in the discourse of people who are not entirely aware of what these terms actually mean. The fact that there are so many different, sometimes opposite opinions regarding this phenomenon points to the fact that this is both a complex and sensitive topic, while its being discussed so much is an indicator of relevance.

I first came upon the phrase over fifteen years ago, when I read an article written by H.R. Patapievici entitled “The American Communism” (1996). My curiosity was stirred and I began to look for books, articles and interviews on this subject and the more I read, the more I realised what a challenging topic it was. I quickly noticed there was no general consensus as to what political correctness was, what it did, how it worked, where and how it had started, not to mention the fact that there were some who denied its existence altogether. My own perception and understanding of political correctness have drastically changed in the last fifteen years, which was why I wanted to research this phenomenon.

Field of Research and Research Methods

When I decided to conduct this study on the cancel culture discourse derived from political correctness, I thought I would be able to do it from an exclusively linguistic perspective and use the research methods and instruments typical for linguistics. However, I quickly realised that, before doing such an analysis, I would have to clarify the meaning of the main concepts (political correctness and cancel culture) and so I decided to include a section on the emergence and evolution of these phenomena. This is why the present research is multidisciplinary, i.e. it incorporates elements specific to several fields of study, such as: linguistics, discourse analysis, history, political sciences, philosophy or logic and it operates

beyond the linguistic framework, using research methods and instruments employed by the other disciplines.

The present study is divided into two main sections. The former is a historical inquiry into political correctness and it describes the emergence and evolution of the phenomenon. This part of the research has a non-linguistic background and it presents the different manifestations that political correctness has had so far as well as the ideas which have influenced it and shaped it into what it has become. I believe this section to be important as it clarifies the meaning of the main concepts and illustrates the features of these phenomena. Moreover, the fact that some of these characteristics are reflected in the discourse that will be later analysed makes this part of the research linguistically relevant as well.

The second section of the research is a case study on the cancel culture discourse derived from political correctness and is divided into three parts: the presentation of the immediate contexts in which the texts were created, the description of the linguistic characteristics of the texts and the analysis of these features. This section incorporates elements of different branches of linguistics (morphology, syntax, lexicology, semantics, pragmatics, rhetoric), but also of discourse analysis and logic.

Research Objectives and Questions

The main objectives of this research are to explain what political correctness and cancel culture mean, to analyse several instances of the discourse promoting cancel culture and to identify the linguistic characteristics of this kind of discourse.

In recent years there have been more and more attempts of “cancelling” people and/or their work for politically correct reasons. Some of these attempts have been successful, others have not. As a linguist, I have been particularly interested in the discourse promoting this kind of behaviour and I wanted to find out whether it might have some specific linguistic features. However, I realised that before identifying the linguistic features of the cancel culture discourse derived from political correctness or even before analysing the cancel culture instances, one should have a very clear understanding of what political correctness and cancel culture mean. This can be challenging for two main reasons. First of all, both concepts are problematic because of their different, sometimes opposite interpretations, their lack of literal meaning, as well as their various transformations. Secondly, the academic research on political correctness is scarce and the one on cancel culture is non-existent. This is why I have decided to introduce the non-linguistic part, which explains what the two concepts stand for. Moreover, I believe it is important to know the origins as well as the evolution of these phenomena, especially because

some of their features (the pathos, the moral element) are reflected in the discourse. This section of the research will address the following questions:

Research Question 1 (Main Question): What is political correctness?

Research Question 2 (Main Question): What is cancel culture?

Research Question 3 (Secondary Question): What are the origins of political correctness?

Research Question 4 (Secondary Question): How has political correctness changed over time?

The second part of the research is a case study on the cancel culture discourse derived from political correctness and it focuses on the following questions:

Research Question 5 (Main Question): How does cancel culture manifest itself?

Research Question 6 (Main Question): What are the linguistic features of the cancel culture discourse?

Research Question 7 (Secondary Question): What are the arguments for supporting cancel culture present in the cancel culture discourse?

Research Methods

The present research is mostly qualitative, but the case study also includes quantitative measurements to support the findings. In the first part I am using the historical method in order to understand what political correctness is by tracing its evolution, including the emergence of cancel culture. The sources used in this section are: history books, documentaries, interviews, memoirs and articles.

The second part of the research takes the form of a case study containing eight subcases. I have decided to use this approach so that I could describe and analyse the discourse which promotes cancel culture in context and I have chosen to focus on the impact that cancel culture (which is a contemporary phenomenon) has on books, writers and translators by selecting eight situations which I consider relevant due to the fact that they illustrate different ways in which cancel culture can manifest itself.

The Corpus

For the historical inquiry on the evolution of political correctness I resorted to history books, various articles, several dictionaries of philosophy (to help me understand the evolution of certain ideas) and a few interviews.

The selection of the corpus for the case study ended up being a rather long process. The first step was to decide on the subcases that I was going to include. I initially searched the Internet for as many accounts as possible which contained the phrase “cancel culture”. Due to the fact that the phrase is rather new, all the articles I found were mostly published between 2019 and 2021. However, I quickly realised that there were many other instances of cancel culture described by the media without being named as such so I started to look for stories on censorship and on successful or unsuccessful attempts at boycotting people and/or their work.

I would like to mention the fact that the present research does not include all the occurrences of cancel culture that I could find. I have selected only eight subcases taking into account three different aspects: their diversity (I have chosen situations which illustrate various ways in which cancel culture may affect books, writers or translators), the quantity of available information (I have picked those cases on which I could find a lot of information that was corroborated by several, reliable sources) and their recent occurrence (I favoured the most recent instances of cancel culture for two reasons. First of all, I consider these cases to be more relevant, due to the fact that the phenomenon of political correctness in general and that of cancel culture in particular are in a state of perpetual transformation. Secondly, I was interested to see how cancel culture affects writers who are still alive).

Once I had decided on the subcases, I had to choose the texts for the linguistic analysis as well as those which would help understand the contexts in which the discourse was created.

The empirical material used as basis for the linguistic analysis includes public statements belonging to people or organisations who openly support cancel culture. These statements have been published either in various newspapers and magazines or on the organisation’s official webpage or blog. Although I initially found them on social media (most of them are publicly available on Facebook or Twitter), I did not use those versions for my analysis; I used the official ones. However, I believe that examining this discourse in connection with the social media response would make an interesting topic for research. In the end, I selected fifteen texts taking into account four aspects: their relevance (they openly support cancel culture derived from political correctness), their being public (I have chosen only official statements), their language (most texts are in English; I have also used two texts that had been originally written in French and which I translated into English as well as an article translated from Dutch which had been published by several newspapers) and their availability (I have selected those texts I was able to find).

As far as the description of the contexts is concerned, the selection of the articles was based on three different factors: the reliability of the information (I have selected only those

pieces of information which appeared in several newspapers or magazines), the quantity of information (I have selected articles which were more detailed) and the repute of the newspaper or magazine in which the article was published. I had initially considered taking into account the degree of subjectivity but decided against it because all articles were more or less subjective and more importantly because my focus was on the discourse promoting cancel culture, not on the discourse of the media concerning cancel culture or those who promote it. This would make, in my opinion, another intriguing research topic. I also thought about including articles published in Romania, but I soon realised that they contained the same information as the ones I found in the foreign press, so I preferred those accounts written by journalists who were present at the events they were describing.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

The research is structured into five chapters.

Chapter 1 represents the introductory part of the study. It explains the choice of research topic, it briefly describes the field of research, it announces the main objectives and research questions, it presents the methods used to conduct this multidisciplinary research and it justifies the selection of the corpus.

Chapter 2 presents both the theoretical and the analytical framework for analysing political correctness and the cancel culture discourse derived from political correctness. This chapter also describes some of the most relevant research on similar topics and the challenges I faced, especially when establishing the analytical framework. Political correctness is a complex and problematic concept due to its various interpretations as well as to its lack of literal meaning and its constant transformations. These difficulties together with the scarcity of academic information as well my desire to use a method of analysis which is not politicized have led to the decision to employ a four-stage model of analysis, which borrows elements from several fields. The first stage is the presentation of the larger, historical context, which traces the evolution of political correctness since its emergence to the present day and which explains the development of cancel culture. I believe this part to be essential in understanding what political correctness and cancel culture are, which is why, although this segment of the research is descriptive in method, it is also explanatory in nature. The case study includes the other three stages and is divided in three parts: the first one is purely descriptive and it introduces the contexts in which the discourse was created, the second one is also entirely descriptive and it presents the linguistic characteristics which appear in the texts, while the last part contains the

analysis of the linguistic findings as well as that of the arguments the authors use to support cancel culture. This analysis is grounded in pragmatics, rhetoric and logic.

Chapter 3 encompasses a historical perspective on political correctness.

The concept of political and ideological correctness emerged in Russia at the end of the 19th century and was applied in and perfected by all communist countries over the following century. Its most likely progenitor was that of “партийность” (partiinnost), which meant “party-mindedness” or “party spirit”, i.e. acting in accordance with the party’s interests. The concept of “partiinnost” had been used by several philosophers before Lenin, but it was he who first weaponised it and its antonym, “non-partiinnost”. Lenin had realised long before 1917 that if a small revolutionary party were to seize and especially to maintain the power, it would have to stifle all kind of debate (which could cause criticism and lead to factionalism) and make it impossible for its decisions to be questioned. Thus, partiinnost became a socialist idea, non-partiinnost a bourgeois one; partiinnost was the expression of ideological purity, non-partiinnost reflected ideological deviation; partiinnost was correct, non-partiinnost was incorrect.

The political party spirit (politicheskaya partiinnost) slowly mutated into political correctness (politicheskaya pravil’nost’) which affected not only the political sphere, but every single aspect of people’s lives.

Political correctness was present in the media, which was affected by censorship and could not publish any articles that were politically incorrect. Glavlit (the Main Directorate on Literature and Press) and Gosizdat (The State Publishing House) made sure that every printed article expressed the correct opinions, because according to the Bolsheviks, the purpose of the press was to educate people. Not only was censorship applied to the publication and dissemination of ideas, but the party also made sure that the journalists understood what was politically and ideologically correct. Topics that were considered incorrect included: information on the grain harvests, inflation, natural disasters happening in the Soviet Republic, the living standards outside socialist countries, reports on different shortages in the Soviet Republic, the names of the political police operatives and even names of certain political personalities which appeared on a special list.

Soviet literature and history were also affected by political correctness. Social realism was declared the literary policy in Soviet Russia and its purpose was to describe reality not as it was, but as it should be and to teach people the correct way of thinking by providing a lot of examples. All the works which were considered to deviate from the party line were partially or entirely censored. The censor’s job did not consist in telling the difference between what was true and what was false, but between what was useful and what was potentially dangerous. The

Narkompros (The People's Commissariat for Enlightenment) was set up immediately after the October Revolution and it dealt with the administration of public education. When the Bolsheviks came to power, more than half the population of the country was illiterate. Lenin wanted the people to be able to read so that they can have access to written propaganda, but, at the same time, their knowledge had to be kept limited and supervised lest they should question what they read.

Art could not escape political correctness and also needed to be disciplined. The plays that were performed on stage reflected the interests of the party, the famous musical pieces were renamed so as to fit in with the communist ideology; there was an increase in the number of paintings depicting industrialised scenes and in portraits of the communist leaders. In architecture social realism manifested itself through monumentalism, while the film makers set up to create a whole socialist mythology.

In science two major phenomena took place. The first one was its infusion with nationalism and aggression due to Russia's victory in 1945. Russian scientists as well as Russian ordinary citizens became the fathers of the greatest inventions the world had ever known. The second major and perhaps more important change was that of applying the Marxist-Leninist ideology to science. The scientists who managed to do that were rewarded with successful careers, while those who criticised these theories were sent to labour camps.

Political correctness was also present in the New Penal Code (adopted in 1921), which criminalised any intention of opposing communism. The law became preventive, i.e. it was not only about judging acts which had been committed, but also about *anticipating* acts which *might* be committed in the future.

Chapter 3 provides a lot of examples of political correctness applied in Soviet Russia and in Maoist China. Similarly to its Russian counterpart, the Chinese political correctness arose mostly from the need to impose the general party line. However, it was also influenced by the Confucian tradition, in which the revered master was never to be questioned by its disciples and from which Mao borrowed the idea of having his sayings collected and published for posterity. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao became the absolute authority in all fields, his cult surpassing even that of Stalin. He also took one step further than any other communist leader before him by using the youth to form the Red Guards and get rid of his political adversaries. The young members of the Red Guards burnt books, destroyed the buildings with ancient architectural symbols, robbed houses, vandalized monuments, defiled the graves of those whose names were written in the Latin alphabet, demolished mosques, Tibetan temples and monasteries, humiliated and tortured their teachers. The streets were renamed. Schools

were closed. So were museums. All the scientific and cultural magazines ceased their activity and all the books published before 1966 were withdrawn from bookshops and libraries.

The terms “political correctness” and “politically correct” entered the American vocabulary through the Maoist African-American community in the 60’s, when hard-line communism had started its decline. The worldwide upheavals which took place in the late 60’s brought to light the need for a drastic change within the political Left, which did not have a clear, alternative model for socialism but believed there was an urgent need for changing society and that this transformation should be absolute and universal. Their interest shifted from the working class, which had obviously failed in bringing about the revolution, to the oppressed in general (with a focus on the minority groups) and looked for heroes to the leaders of China, Cuba or Vietnam. However, the concept suffered a major transformation at that point: in the communist regimes in which it had originated, it carried a fixed meaning, but once it had started being used in a democratic society, it became a highly ambiguous phrase, with no specific content.

Paradoxically enough, the collocation “political correctness” gained popularity in America in the 80’s and the 90’s, just after the collapse of the communist regimes in Europe. Up to this moment the term had had a rather limited usage, occurring in the discourse of the New Left, the African-American community and the feminist community, but the controversial debate which took place in the American universities in the late 80’s and the early 90’s turned it into a topic of interest in the entire country. There were several aspects regarding political correctness in the universities that were either being promoted or criticised, such as: multiculturalism, the positive discrimination measures, the semantic and lexical changes and the changes in the curriculum.

From the American campuses political correctness has spread in two directions. First of all, it has expanded beyond the American borders. Due to globalisation and the technological developments, the phenomenon has spread to other continents. In Europe it has found a fertile ground especially in the Western countries, which are more open to left wing ideas and more attracted by the millenarian myth. This is mostly due to the fact that Western Europeans tend to view the totalitarian regimes of the last century quite differently. While fascism is condemned (for very good reasons), communism is treated with impunity and there are many people, especially intellectuals, who claim that communism was just a failed experiment and that socialism should be tried again in a different form. On the other hand, the Eastern European countries which were at some point members of the Soviet Bloc and which experienced the Marxist-Leninist version of political correctness seem to be more reluctant to embracing the

new variant. Secondly, political correctness slowly expanded beyond the universities and the topics of race, gender or disability and included new areas of interest such as: disease, addiction, mental disorders, animal rights, the environment and the list keeps getting longer. In recent years, the term has kept appearing in the discourse of the extreme Right, which have turned it into a weapon that they use to justify their own political incorrectness.

Chapter 3 also includes a short history of cancel culture. Although there may be several other types of cancel culture, the present research focuses exclusively on the one derived from political correctness, which I defined as a way of boycotting people and/or their work on account of either having expressed politically incorrect ideas or not being as politically correct as others.

Chapter 4 comprises the case study on cancel culture discourse and is divided into three main parts.

The first one is a presentation of the immediate contexts in which the discourse was created and is divided into eight parts. One is on the #DisruptTexts Campaign in America, one is on decolonising the curriculum campaign in the British universities, one is on decolonising Shakespeare both in the U.S.A. and the U.K., one is on the disappearance of Mohammed's name in a Dutch translation of Dante's "Inferno", one is on replacing certain words in the French translation of Agatha Christie's novel "And Then There Were None", one is on the burning of thousands of books in Canada, one is on the various campaigns against J.K. Rowling and one is on the choice of translator when translating Amanda Gorman's poetry into Dutch.

The second part of the case study presents the linguistic characteristics of the texts. I have looked for the morphological, syntactic, lexical, semantic and pragmatic features which appear in all texts or in most of them. The morpho-syntactic features of these texts are: the nominal style, the abundance of attributes and predicatives, the doubling, the preference for the first person pronouns and pronominal adjectives and for the present tenses and the occurrence of the passive voice. The lexical characteristics include: the long words formed through derivation, compounding and conversion, the presence of pretentious words and of acronyms, while the semantic or pragmatic features are: the words belonging to specific semantic fields (such as human rights and political correctness, morality, certainty/totality/authority, safety and destruction), the words lacking precision, the metaphors and the modal verbs.

The last part of the chapter includes the linguistic analysis as well as that of the arguments presented by the authors of the texts in order to promote cancel culture. The linguistic analysis is grounded in pragmatics and rhetoric and has revealed several characteristics: obscurity, the amplified pathos, the presence of several binary structures and a constant

pendulation between certainty and avoiding responsibility. The analysis of the arguments has shown that some of the texts lack justification and others have an obscure, highly emotional and ideological line of reasoning.

Chapter 5 summarises the findings of the research and suggests other aspects of cancel culture and political correctness that might be worth exploring.

CONCLUSIONS

The present research has shown that political correctness is a complex phenomenon which is very difficult to understand, first of all because it cannot be defined with precision due to the fact that its meaning is not literal and secondly because that meaning keeps changing on account of the mutations and the expansion of the phenomenon itself.

As a concept, political correctness emerged in communist Russia, where it denoted loyalty to the party and it affected all the areas of life as well as all the other Eastern and central European countries which were under Soviet influence. Political correctness became an obsession during Mao's regime where it arose from the same need to impose the general party line, but was also influenced by the Confucian tradition of the old, respected master, who was never to be questioned. The phrase entered the American vocabulary in the 60's via the discourse of the New Left and the African-American community who adopted it from the English translation of "The Little Red Book", which contained Chairman Mao's quotations. It spread to the feminist circles and then, in the late 80's – early 90's, it became well-known due to the debate which took place in the universities. The American political correctness began as an attempt to help people belonging to different minority groups, who had been marginalized or discriminated against, but its agenda slowly spread to other areas of interest. Due to globalization and technological developments, it reached other continents as well. In recent years political correctness has become part of the discourse of the extreme Right politicians and of totalitarian world leaders, who have turned it into a pretext to justify their political incorrectness or even criminal acts.

As far as the cancel culture discourse is concerned, I have used this phrase to denote the discourse which promotes cancel culture. The case study I have conducted contains eight subcases which illustrate different ways in which cancel culture may affect the world of books, writers and translators. Books can be replaced from the curriculum (Homer's "Odyssey", medieval literature, etc.), they may lose some ideas in the translation (Mohammed's name in Dante's "Inferno"), they can be sanitised by having different politically incorrect words replaced with synonyms (the changing of the title and the replacement of several words in the

French translation of Agatha Christie's "And Then There Were None") or they may even be burnt (the flame purification ceremony in Canada, during which almost 5,000 children's books were burnt "for educational purposes"). People can also be boycotted either for having expressed politically incorrect ideas (J.K. Rowling's popularity dropped after she had said that biological sex was real) or for being less politically correct compared to others (the need for an African-American translator for the work of an African-American artist).

The case study has revealed that the texts produced in the contexts mentioned above display a lot of common linguistic characteristics. The morpho-syntactic features of these texts are: the nominal style, the abundance of attributes and predicatives, the doubling, the preference for the first person pronouns and pronominal adjectives and for the present tenses and the occurrence of the passive voice. The lexical characteristics include: the long words formed through derivation, compounding and conversion, the presence of pretentious words and of acronyms, while the semantic or pragmatic features are: the words belonging to specific semantic fields, the words lacking precision, the metaphors and the modal verbs.

The analysis of these linguistic features has revealed four main characteristics of the cancel culture discourse: the lack of clarity, the amplified pathos, the presence of several antonymic binary structures and a constant pendulation between certainty and avoiding responsibility. The second part of the analysis has identified the fact that the arguments for supporting cancel culture which appear in the texts are enveloped in a lot of emotion and they follow an ideological reasoning.

Taking into account the fact that the second part of the research is a case study, its results cannot be generalised, which is why one direction for future research would be to study this phenomenon and this particular kind of discourse on a larger scale. I think it would be interesting to see how cancel culture affects other spheres, not only literature, but also architecture, music, visual arts, language, the cinema, the theatre or even advertising.

Moreover, seeing as cancel culture discourse has not been the subject of any academic research so far, I believe it would be worth comparing and contrasting to other types of discourse, particularly the ones produced by the Marxist-Leninist or the Maoist political correctness (the wooden language), but also the discourse of the French Revolution, the Puritan discourse (or other kinds of religious discourses), the discourse of moral correctness of the political Right and even the fascist discourse.

KEY WORDS:

Political correctness, cancel culture, cancel culture discourse, historical inquiry, the millenarian myth, utopia, partiinost, correct party-line, social realism, value relativism, the PC debate, multiculturalism, positive discrimination, case study, linguistic analysis, obscurity, pathos, binary pairs, certainty, avoiding responsibility

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