

# Political Correctness as a Monolingual Language in the Era of Multiculturalism

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**Abstract-** Political correctness may be defined as what is correct and appropriate to include in oral or written public verbal formulations. Thereof, it may create, allegedly, a monolingual language in multicultural societies. The aim of this paper is to expose the ambivalence of the Israeli education system toward political correctness in the era of multiculturalism. On one hand, there is seemingly nothing more respectful than simply adopting political correctness as it is in our education system: the idea that language shapes reality, and eventually may directly affect changes in our discourse and indirectly exert a positive influence on rectifying social injustices towards social sectors, suits the ideals of the educational process. But on the other hand, educationists have raised some serious objections against the idea of political correctness, seeing it as hypocrisy and a way of ignoring the multicultural reality.

**Key words:** Political Correctness; multiculturalism; education system.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Political correctness may be defined as “what is correct, from a political point of view, to include in oral or written public verbal formulations” (Carmel, 2000). There is no unanimous opinion regarding the origin of the expression. Nir (1998) believes that it originated in the literal translation of its Chinese equivalent appearing in Mao’s Little Red Book entitled “Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse Tung,” which was the source of politically acceptable and correct social utterances. During the Cultural Revolution in China, which took place between 1966 and 1976, learning the quotations from the Little Red Book was compulsory both at school and at work, where passages from it were read and learned by heart regularly. Quotations from the book were also included in all publications, including academic ones. Chinese citizens were bound by law to carry the booklet wherever they went, incurring heavy penalties such as floggings and imprisonment in work camps if they were caught without it. However, the prevailing opinion is that the expression “politically correct” originated in the United States during the Fifties, derived to a large extent from the ideology that emerged from the “flower children” movement: although the flower children movement initially started as a protest movement against the Vietnam War and its atrocities, it soon grew into an ideological movement with a new world view of society and life. The flower children appealed to people to change their belligerent ways and adopt a culture of love and brotherhood. Accordingly, they demanded to uproot from the language potentially or actually offensive expressions considered as discriminating against various sectors of the society. Therefore, political correctness would relate to the unemployed with more sensitivity (calling an unemployed person as being ‘between jobs’ for the moment, but not ‘unemployed’); it would also attempt to eliminate sexism

from the language (changing the ‘electronic secretary’ at the other end of the telephone line into an ‘answering machine’); it would relate to old age more gently (the old would become ‘senior citizens,’ old age would change to ‘the golden age,’ etc.); disability would be treated in a similar way (invalids would be known as ‘physically challenged’ individuals). The substitute expression would help to construct a new reality that would serve to correct and perhaps elevate the status of an individual considered weak or physically handicapped: a change in the way language refers to an individual would elevate him from the status that has immobilized him in his weakness, resulting in an amelioration of the individual’s status.

The political correctness movement is based on the idea that although language reflects the social reality of a given culture, the opposite is also true: a change in discourse, in conceptualization and in style can impact social attitudes. This view is consistent with Whorf’s hypothesis (1956), which states that the language we speak shapes our way of thinking and our way of looking at the world. The insight that can be derived from this hypothesis is that a change in the discourse is likely to engender changes in our social values in general and a change in our values regarding our attitude toward discriminated and disadvantaged individuals in particular. The far-reaching repercussions of Whorf’s hypothesis are expressed by what he called “the theory of linguistic relativity” – the idea that every language has a model of the world embedded in it without which the speakers of the language would not be able to comprehend reality. The theory of linguistic relativity, then, is not simply a linguistic theory, but has implications for all areas of thinking and human endeavor since these are both dependent

on and derived from the socio-linguistic load people carry with them.

Consequently, one should not wait until the social ethos changes: one may and should use all available resources to expedite desirable processes of change. Language is one of the resources with the potential to enable social change, and not to merely fulfill the instrumental function of human communication (Nir, 1998; Choi & Murphy, 1992).

Israeli multiculturalism At the turn of the last century, the term 'multiculturalism' became a cardinal term both in the academic and the public discourse of western democracies including Israel (Reingold, 2005). There are those who discuss multicultural societies emphasizing the demographic sense of the word, that is to say that in a specific political entity there live different ethnic and cultural groups side by side (Sever, 2001), while others prefer to call this demographic aspect "pluralism" (Katz, 1998). However, the more common and important meaning of the concept of multiculturalism is ideological (Reingold, 2005).

The issue of multiculturalism has received much attention in the Israeli education system since the inception of the State, when the first great waves of immigration began arriving in the country. The intermingling of cultures – traditions, languages, customs and norms of behavior - required the leaders of the country to forge the "cultural fusion" that would change this great ingathering of exiles into one people. The decision to establish a free, compulsory state education system was intended to create a suitable tool to achieve this purpose; the 1953 state education law was passed in the Knesset to give formal sanction to the decision: "The aim of state education is to establish elementary education in the country on the values of the culture of Israel..." Education based on the culture of Israel was stated in the law, as one can observe, as the chief aim of compulsory education. This formulation expressed the dream of the leaders at that time to build the unifying machinery for creating an Israeli culture that was at that time in its formative stage.

As the years passed, criticism of this policy favoring cultural uniformity began to surface, with oriental writers at its forefront. Most of the criticism was directed at the domination of the European Zionist narrative concerning the absorption process of the new immigrants and the sidelining of Orientals from cultural, political and governmental positions. The critics held that the melting pot policy worked in favor of the Ashkenazi population in all areas concerning the distribution of resources, in education, land ownership and location of settlements. The critics claimed that Jewish nationalism is an integral part of the Zionist narrative. This

new oriental narrative also claims that the Zionist narrative has excluded the oriental narrative because Zionism has been repressing Orientals for a long time (in the political and not qualitative sense of the word), and therefore only in a situation of multicultural thinking can the oriental narrative co-exist with the Zionist narrative (Shmueloff et al. 2007). The Pedagogical Secretariat of the Ministry of Education has responded to these claims by placing topics such as "The Unity of Israel," "Year of the Hebrew Language," "The Four-Hundred-Year Anniversary of the Expulsion of Jews from Spain," and "Cultures of the Communities" as the yearly central topics to be discussed in the education system; it also responded by selecting other subjects for discussion that were chosen from new fields of interest at specific times that highlighted Israel as a multicultural, multi-lingual and multi-national society.

Debate on giving preference or special treatment (as affirmative action) to immigrant communities has evolved. Some even argued that affirmative actions would likely have the opposite effect of what was intended: it would harm these communities since the majority culture would become hostile to them, so that the gap separating the two would be greater than ever. On the contrary, it is precisely the effort to integrate the immigrants in the society that would encourage them to acquire the new customs of their hosts, thus preserving national unity. One of the advocates of this approach, In order to achieve mutual respect among the different cultures, the authorities must change their mono-cultural policy guided, for example, by such things as ethnocentric education and assimilation into a policy favoring multiculturalism (Reingold, 2005) and hence political correctness became a tool for that matter.

#### ***Political correctness and the Israeli context***

The status of 'straightforwardness' (doogriut) was formed during the Thirties and Forties among the first generation of Sabras (native Israelis), and later (in the Fifties) became an important element of the Israeli cultural style. At this stage of the Jewish state's existence straightforwardness was not perceived as a lack of manners or as potentially offensive, but as directness and sincerity of speech. Although straightforwardness was perceived as somewhat rough, it was tolerated for its good and sincere intentions. (Catriel, 1999; Rosenblum & Trigger, 2007; Rosenthal (2005). In the first few years of the fledgling state, straightforwardness acquired additional value because it helped to construct the character of the "new Jew," known as the sabra. Whereas the Jews in the Diaspora were occupied with the challenge of survival, so that in their contacts with non-Jews they were often compelled to shuffle and beg, the new Jew in the Land of Israel could afford, like the rest of Israeli society, to say

whatever he wished because in the new order of things there was mutual trust, equality and social solidarity.

The major erosion that subsequently occurred in the image of the sabra and in his value system also eroded people's tolerance of straightforwardness and its hubris. With time, the sabra became much more open, unafraid to express his feelings and sensitivities to others. Accordingly, as an indication of this change, a new word now replaced straightforwardness to describe the qualities of the sabra in his new reincarnation: the Yiddish word 'firgun' (pronounced feergoon) – expressing a 'softening,' 'rooting for,' or even a willingness to express laudatory approval for others (Rosenblum & Trigger, 2007).

This process of change in the sabra's discourse, that is to say the transition from a somewhat offensive straightforwardness to laudatory approval of the other, was to a large extent the harbinger of the first signs of political correctness in Israeli society as well.

The aim of the present review is to point out the ambivalence of our education system toward political correctness that may be characterized as an attitude of respectful suspicion. Seemingly, there is nothing more natural for our education system than adopting political correctness as it is: the idea that language shapes reality, and may eventually bring about changes in our discourse directly, and indirectly exert a positive influence on social injustices, suits the ideals of our education system. But on the other hand, educationists and other thinkers have raised serious objections against political correctness, perceiving it as hypocrisy and a way of ignoring reality.

#### ***Acceptance of political correctness by the education system***

The education system's positive attitude toward political correctness is evidenced by the fact that it has adopted political correctness in its educational discourse. For example, the structural negativity characterizing the 'discourse on deficiencies' used by teachers, counselors, principals and parents when discussing children with special needs in the past included explicit words such as 'backward' and 'retardation,' which have been replaced with 'disability' or 'challenged.' Recently, the term 'neurodiversity' has been suggested as a more suitable word to get away from the negativity of the discourse on deficiencies (Armstrong, 2005). While in the previous terminology children with special needs were identified on the basis of what they were not able to do, the new terminology emphasizes what these children are able to do. The rehabilitative class and the remedial class have had their names changed to 'learning

disability classes' or 'small classes,' and special education teachers have been renamed 'integrative education teachers.' An additional example of changes that have occurred in the education system is the renaming of certain jobs and functions out of sensitivity for their status in the system and society. For example, the new 'house father' is none other than the janitor of olden days. Undoubtedly, just being a janitor certainly place janitors, linguistically speaking, at the bottom of the hierarchy of our education system. On the other hand, the term 'house father' elevates this indispensable school job, linguistically speaking, to a key function in the school's social scale. Similarly, the woman who helps a kindergarten teacher keep things in order has been upgraded to kindergarten teacher assistant. Semantically, the new term has liberated her from linguistic (subordination?) proximity to the teacher, assigning her a new independent status.

The Hebrew curriculum for seventh and eighth grades (Hebrew curriculum for state and state-religious secondary school, Ministry of Education, Jerusalem, 2003) also includes the teaching of political correctness: in the section dealing with teaching the word formation system, political correctness appears in one of the paragraphs to be taught. It is accompanied by examples of paired expressions such as 'failed countries' ('medinot nichshalot' in Hebrew)/'developing countries' ('medinot mitpatchot' in Hebrew) and 'large families'/'families blessed with many children' ('merubot-yeladim'/'bruchot-yeladim' in Hebrew). A survey of all the director general of the Ministry of Education circulars of the last decade (1997/8 – 2007/8) shows that the Ministry has adopted the spirit of political correctness, albeit not referring to it by name. Political correctness essentially recurs ten times, but under different headings such as 'the ways of discourse,' 'the culture of speaking' and 'tolerance of the other.' This is especially true of the gender issue. One of the more prominent issues is that political correctness in the gender area is particularly problematic in the Hebrew language due to the grammatical distinction between the genders rooted in the language.

In the 2003 circular, paragraph 4 (d), the director general wrote that the change of the ministry's positions on the subject of genders would include a change "that would express the atmosphere of gender equality both in the use of egalitarian language concerning genders and in the use of egalitarian language concerning genders in communication between teachers and students and among the teachers themselves." The circular also details various ways to avoid offensive discourse when talking about one of the genders. For example, instead of using the imperative form of the verb (which would require a grammatical distinction between masculine and feminine genders), the circular recommends

using an impersonal participial form of the verb or an impersonal infinitive phrase; the gender-sensitive imperative ('ptach/pitchi,' masculine and feminine forms meaning 'open,' for example, would then be avoided so that a command such as 'open the book,' which in the Hebrew imperative has two forms – one for masculine and one for feminine – would be replaced by 'yesh liftoach et hasefer,' which could be translated as 'your book should be opened' or by the more informal 'books open, please!') (ibid, paragraph 4.1.3).

According to Whorf's hypothesis, which claims that our thinking emulates conceptualization, in other words the language we speak shapes the way we think and the way we look at the world, using the masculine grammatical form in speech is likely to affect students to emphasize male superiority over women. Political corrections of language and the use of the term 'gender' instead of 'sex' when the need arises to distinguish between the sexes are not restricted to grammar only. The new terminology reflects society's growing awareness of sexist language and sexism in general. Similar acts were made by The European Parliament that introduced proposals to outlaw titles stating marital status such as 'Miss' and 'Mrs' so as not to cause offence. It also meant that 'Madame' and 'Mademoiselle', 'Frau' and 'Fraulein' and 'Senora' and 'Senorita' would be banned.

The education system's critical attitude toward political correctness side by side with the assimilation of political correctness in the education system, an increasing number of educationists have been voicing some sharp criticism against sweeping and uncompromising demands to use political correctness unconditionally in all situations.

One of the arguments against political correctness is that changing our terminology when speaking about one of the sectors of the population does not ameliorate its condition and contributes absolutely nothing to its advancement. Those who advance this argument believe that the negative connotations attached to certain terms stem directly from the plight in which a particular sector of the population finds itself, and that it is just a matter of time until the new terminology will also be loaded with the same negative associations and connotations attached to its predecessors. An example in support of this argument is the expression "Ministry of Welfare," which today has become loaded with the same negative associations and connotations as the previous expression: "Ministry of [social] Assistance;" although the word 'assistance,' which evokes poverty and needy people, was replaced by a word having a positive connotation – 'welfare,' which connotes comfort, both mental and financial, the change did not help.

A second argument against political correctness, derived from the argument stated above, is advanced by Scruton (2000). He criticizes political correctness as immoral and therefore not a worthy educational goal: since political correctness only papers over a troublesome reality, it actually prevents us from really confronting vexing issues and it blurs our awareness of painful social phenomena. It prevents us from directly examining shocking truths and blocks any real possibility of looking in the mirror of our society, not to mention changing our behavior in accordance with universal-humanistic codes. To a very large extent, political correctness deals with a semantic softening of reality: it deals with soothing our conscience by using words that refine reality, that dull our sensitivity and absolve the individual from doing anything real to rectify social injustices. According to Appelfeld (2002), political correctness is mainly a sophisticated intellectual form of repression: all it does is repress our negative feelings and gives the one who uses it a false image of enlightenment and consideration. Political correctness deletes from our lexicon all the negative expressions that reflect our real attitudes and replaces them with positive expressions, which will not arouse the anger of our "super ego," that great repository of the moral imperative. All it asks of us is to speak inclusively (from the expression 'social inclusion') about other cultures, other styles and other values, and never express an opinion or use words that, G-d forbid, could be interpreted negatively in any way. Thus, political correctness is liable to compel us to accept phenomena that should be rightly criticized or outrightly condemned. So, for example, renaming terrorists 'freedom fighters,' 'militants' or 'activists' for the sake of political correctness not only gives legitimacy to murdering innocent people, but it also denies the victims the right to seek redress for the offense committed against them. An additional argument focuses on the tyrannical nature of political correctness: political correctness forces a person to be careful with his speech in order to avoid being criticized for being critical of others. It imposes on its users the adoption of new linguistic coinage instead of the old, reducing people's right to freedom of expression.

Immediately after a person learns to master the secrets of politically correct discourse, he too can join in the criticism of those who adhere to the old discourse: now he can chide others, correct them and even chastise them for deviating from political correctness. This sort of tyranny is also thought justified "since it is directed against those who still haven't seen the light" (Appelfeld, 2002).

Lind (2005) claims that political correctness uses the same methods used by the darkest totalitarian regimes. According to Lind, political correctness is Marxist ideology transferred

from the economic to the cultural sphere. It is no different than Orwellian “newspeak” illustrated in George Orwell’s book 1984, written in 1948 as a clever speculation on the future: “war is peace / freedom is slavery / ignorance is power.” Like big brother, political correctness acts like thought police, terrorizing those who dare deviate from “correct terminology.” Lind warns against the danger of the public lightly dismissing and even scoffing at the phenomenon of political correctness as of no consequence (mockingly admonishing others not to say, for example, “black sheep,” but to correctly say “colored sheep”) without noticing the latent threat of this obligation to our consciousness.

Acting as the word police, political correctness is liable to censor or even disqualify worthy literary and other works of art considered as offensive to one sector or other. For example, if language censorship were applied to classic children’s books such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, in which the expression ‘nigger’ appears more than 200 times, it would almost completely ruin the narrative. Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Mark Twain’s real name) was born and grew in the slave state of Missouri, and therefore his use of the word “nigger” only reflects his upbringing and education. Changing the word to “Afro-American” would be anachronistic and unfaithful to the hero’s upbringing and education, social class and way of speaking (Weisbord, 2005). The exact same thing can be said of the demand to disqualify a song such as “in a white sea, a little group of Blacks picks, in the white cotton field it picks all day long.” Disqualifying the song because of the word “Blacks” would actually censor the memory that in pre-Civil War America cotton picking was backbreaking work performed by African slaves.

Censorship of racial expressions in texts could also act as a boomerang in the education process: the correction of racist expressions would neutralize any chance of criticizing books for racist attitudes embedded in them. For example, Israeli children reading an improved version of *Oliver Twist* (in which Feigin would not be identified as a Jew) would be unaware of his anti-Semitism and would be unaware of the attitudes the author shares with his character (Weisbord, 2005).

## II. CONCLUSION

The major argument of supporters of political correctness is that language is not a neutral and objective tool. It does not merely imitate reality, but it has the power to re-invent reality. On the other hand, the opponents of political reality perceive it as the antithesis of the educational process and

point out its alienation from reality and its potential for alienating people from reality as well. However, both advocates and opponents of political correctness see it as a tool of socialization of the first order with a far-reaching educational impact.

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