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**POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AS A PERSUASIVE
TOOL IN U.S. PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA’S
SPEECHES ON LGBT RIGHTS AND
SAME-SEX MARRIAGE**

PhD. THESIS SUMMARY

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Introduction

Political correctness (commonly abbreviated PC) is a unique sociolinguistic 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.

Ever since its emergence, political correctness has been subject to intense public debate. There are hundreds of books and perhaps thousands of essays and journal or newspaper articles published on this topic most of them focusing on its social, ideological or cultural facets. Few of them have approached the topic from a linguistic perspective, the most comprehensive work belonging to Geoffrey Hughes (2010). The issue was also tackled by notable linguists such as Norman Fairclough (2003b) and John Searle (1993), as well as David Crystal (2005, 2007).

Initially concerned with education and the curriculum, it has gradually permeated many other fields such as mass-media, politics, entertainment, etc., as a novel and “correct” approach to most delicate matters.

Since it has been subject to numerous changes over time, the concept has proved to be very hard to pin down. Conservative thinkers generally consider it to be a form of censorship, commonly associating it with Orwellian “Newspeak” or depicting it as “cultural Marxism” (Buchanan 2001), “Liberal McCarthyism” (Dickstein 1994) or a “new authoritarianism” (Jenkins 1992). Contrariwise, other thinkers do not espouse either of these views, arguing that political correctness is nothing but a myth (Wilson 1996; Feldstein 1997), while others (Fish 1994; Cummings 2001; Fairclough 2003b; Crystal 2005, 2007; Hughes 2010) attempt to adopt an objective approach to this issue. Geoffrey Hughes, for instance, provides a definition of PC that best encapsulates the concept. According to Hughes, from “its

first manifestations in America, political correctness has had a double agenda, being a combination of freedom and constraint” (2010: 284). Discussing the terms “political” and “correctness,” he argues that the “ ‘political’ aspect involved opening up new cultural horizons,” while “ ‘correctness’ brought conformity in accepting new agendas, new limits on freedom of expression, and a general avoidance of certain controversial topics” (2010: 284).

Political correctness is a unique phenomenon in that it has had a tremendous impact not only on language but also on the American mindset. As Loury points out, what is certain about the impact of political correctness is that “how minority groups are addressed and the scope of appropriate discourse has changed during the past two decades” (1994: 132).

Context of the study

The past decade has been characterized by the Western society’s growing interest in sensitive issues such as race, religion, ethnicity, gender, xenophobia, gay rights and same-sex marriage, all of them being the main foci of political correctness.

Interestingly enough, same-sex marriage has gained unprecedented public acceptance – especially in the United States – over the last few years, the year 2013 having marked a cornerstone for its legalization. Same-sex marriage is now legal in seventeen states in the United States and the District of Columbia. What is striking is that in a very short time span, more precisely from 2009 to 2013, there was a significant shift in public opinion over this issue. Thus, according to a Gallup poll conducted in 2009, only 40 percent of the American population agreed to the legalization of gay marriage. By contrast, in 2013 – according to a Gallup poll carried out in July 2013 – 52% of Americans were in favor of a law that would legalize gay marriage in all the American states. The poll shows that Americans have started to perceive homosexuality not as a choice but as a part of one’s personality. A Washington Post/ABC News poll taken in 2013 showed that the percentage of Americans in favor of gay marriage legalization grew to almost 60 percent. It is worth

mentioning that 81 percent of Americans supporting gay marriage legalization are under 30.

Referring to the issue of gay marriage legalization, Republican pollster and political consultant Whit Ayres argued: “On no issue in American life have opinions changed as fast as they have on gay rights” (Cockerham 2014).

Of all the political leaders who have played a vital part in the crystallization of this highly controversial matter, the one that stands out as a stalwart defender of the rights and liberties of the LGBT community is President Barack Obama.

In May 2010 President Obama became the first American president who endorsed same-sex marriage. In February 2011 the President announced that the Department of Justice would no longer defend the constitutionality of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), a federal law passed by President Bill Clinton in 1996 according to which marriage was defined as between one man and one woman. This law grants married couples more than one thousand protections and privileges, and affirms the right of the American states banning same-sex marriage not to recognize such marriages licensed in other states. In September 2011 President Obama officially ended the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell policy (which allowed gay people to serve in the military but banned them from openly declaring their sexual orientation and from engaging in homosexual activity), thus allowing gay people to serve openly in the military. In May 2012 the President publicly expressed his support of same-sex marriage in an interview with ABC News.

Paradoxically, President Obama’s promotion of LGBT rights and same-sex marriage, on the one hand, and the increasing public acceptance of this issue, on the other hand, occurred at a moment when political correctness seemed to have vanished from the public arena, which appeared to be a highly plausible hypothesis, given the negative connotations the term has accrued. However, studying the types of discourse that politically correct vocabulary has permeated, Geoffrey Hughes (2010) arrived at the conclusion that official discourse contained the highest degree of politically correct terms. Consequently, there was strong likelihood that President Obama’s

speeches on LGBT rights and same-sex marriage contained a high degree of politically correct terms.

Research objectives

Starting from Geoffrey Hughes's (2010) findings, I have selected a linguistic corpus comprising ten scripted speeches on LGBT rights and same-sex marriage delivered by President Barack Obama between 2009 and 2013.

Given the fact that political discourse in general, and the political speech in particular, has persuasive ends (Fairclough 1989, Fauconnier 1994), the present study started as an attempt to reveal the ways in which President Obama employs politically correct vocabulary in the selected speeches and to what ends. Since such an undertaking involved a prior insightful look into the complex phenomenon of political correctness, my endeavor revolved around the following research questions:

- 1) What is political correctness? When, where and why did it emerge?
- 2) How has political correctness evolved in the U.S. over the years?
- 3) How is political correctness used by U.S. President Barack Obama in his speeches on LGBT issues and same-sex marriage? To what ends?
- 4) Since political correctness seems to have redefined morality and values, could it be perceived as a dangerous phenomenon or, on the contrary, as a considerable change for the better?
- 5) What is the ultimate goal of political correctness?

During my research, however, I have discovered, much to my surprise, that the politically correct terms that occurred in President Obama's speeches were incredibly few, which led to the following hypotheses:

- 1) Political correctness – more precisely, politically correct vocabulary – is no longer used in official discourse.
- 2) It is President Obama's choice to scarcely use politically correct terms in the selected speeches.

3) Political correctness has transcended the vocabulary level, becoming hard to detect.

As regards the first hypothesis, I was aware of the fact that the corpus I had chosen to analyze was not representative enough to confirm it. From my vantage point, however, there was little likelihood that this hypothesis was plausible since it contradicted Hughes's (2010) findings.

In the second case, the question that arose was why President Obama would choose to avoid using politically correct vocabulary in his speeches. One possible answer was that, given the fact that political correctness currently has strongly negative connotations, President Obama does not intend to compromise the integrity of the U.S. Presidency by endorsing such a criticized issue.

As far as the third hypothesis is concerned, I considered that the selected corpus was representative enough to verify it. Consequently, the main objective of my research has been to reveal the fact that political correctness has evolved into a highly subversive, hard-to-detect tool by transcending the vocabulary level.

Scope and methodology

Starting from the basis of language as an instrument of doing things and helping create and change meanings (Taylor 2001: 6), discourse analysis is considered an adequate modus operandi showcasing how language is a tool when it comes to referring to matters such as gender, matters entailing from the submitted research questions. The way in which these troublesome matters are tackled within the various discourses speaks volumes of the broader, practical questions of discourse analysis which underlines the positions of power and the generation and representation of identities and images (Fairclough 1995b: 24).

Given the fact that gender is usually tackled implicitly or indirectly, a proper discourse analysis will try to reveal the various hues and specific contextual meanings that an investigation centered on the content will not be able to provide.

Last but not least, Fairclough suggests that discourse analysis can be interpreted as “a barometer of social processes, movements and diversity” (1995a: 209) and that any text can provide substantiation of social modifications.

Since my investigation focuses on revealing that political correctness functions as a highly persuasive device in President Obama’s speeches on LGBT rights and same-sex marriage, the analytical framework I have used is centered upon Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995a, 1997; van Dijk 1997, 1998a, 2001, 2006), placing great emphasis on the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of language.

Rob Batstone (1995) summarizes the tenets of CDA best: what CDA intends to unearth is how texts are generated so that certain (usually indoctrinating) points of view are embedded subtly and stealthily. Since they are stealthy, they cannot be contested overtly, therefore leading to what Kress dubs the “retreat into mystification and impersonality” (qtd. in Batstone 1995: 198-9).

Due to the strategies employed by CDA specialists, CDA is presently connected to the qualitative method, also taking van Dijk (1993, 1997, 2006) and Fairclough’s (1989, 2012) political discourse investigations as firm bits of qualitative examination.

As van Dijk points out, the lexical style is “a major means of ideological expression in discourse. Depending on any contextual factor [...] language users may choose different words to talk about things, people, actions or events” (1998a: 205). Consequently my linguistic analysis of President Obama’s selected speeches has focused on the word selection and the meaning relations between the words, which are – more often than not – ideologically determined (Fairclough 1989: 116).

Though less clear and more discrete compared to lexical style, sentence syntax is also an extremely relevant indicator of ideological traces within discourse since it tackles word order and plays such an important role in the creation of meaning (van Dijk 1997). I have therefore discussed the utilization of certain syntactic markers such as active vs. passive constructs, nominalization, the way clauses are embedded, and the complexity of certain resonant sentences.

Since the rhetorical devices used in political speeches are known to have persuasive functions, and therefore political significance in a political context of communication” (van Dijk 1997: 35), the present study has also considered what classical rhetoric identifies as figures of style. Thus, special attention has been given to rhetorical tropes and schemes such as antithesis, parallelism, anaphora, epiphora, and alliteration. These figures of speech, alongside with semantic repetition, i.e. repetition operations at the level of meaning (van Dijk 1997: 35) are considered to be one of the most effective strategies employed in order to highlight preferred meanings and thus subtly persuade recipients into adhering to the speaker’s views (van Dijk 1997, 2006).

An outline of the study

The main body of the thesis is divided into four chapters, followed by the bibliography section and the appendices, which consist of President Obama’s scripted speeches on LGBT rights and same-sex marriage. The introduction and the conclusions sections are not listed as chapters per se.

Chapter 1 – *Political Correctness* – tackles the various definitions of political correctness, and its manifestation in the United States, focusing on its origin, on the history of the term “political correctness,” as well as on the ideological aspects of the phenomenon. In addition, some significant concerns of political correctness are underlined, including: affirmative action, speech codes, codes of conduct, and multiculturalism. Also, the benefits and drawbacks of this phenomenon are discussed, the linguistic dimension – more specifically, the PC lexicon – being the main pillar of this discussion. Finally the changes America is undergoing due to political correctness are also briefly sketched.

Chapter 2 – *Language Study and Discourse Analysis* – discusses various approaches to discourse analysis, enlarging upon Critical Discourse Analysis – more precisely, on Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995a, 1997) and van Dijk’s (1997, 1998a, 2001, 2006) analytical frameworks. In addition, the political discourse and its

subgenre – the political speech – are briefly outlined, the connection between language and power, on the one hand, and language and ideology, on the other hand, being considered as well.

Chapter 3 – *Methodology and Analytical Framework* – describes the methodology and the theoretical framework that I have used for my research. It first tackles two of the methods that are most frequently employed in linguistic analysis, namely the qualitative and quantitative ones, and then it discusses the two main pillars of my analysis: President Obama’s linguistic options aimed at persuading the audience, and the rhetorical structures employed in the presidential speeches – more precisely, the figures of speech the U.S. President makes use of.

Chapter 4 – *Political Correctness in President Obama’s Speeches on LGBT Rights and Same-Sex Marriage* – represents my linguistic analysis of the President’s selected speeches on the topic of LGBT rights and same-sex marriage. What I intend to reveal is that the ideology behind the analyzed texts is none other than the ideology of political correctness, at the same time trying to underline the fact that political correctness has shifted from a highly lexicalized and overt manifestation to a subtle, nuanced, and highly persuasive and manipulative tool that President Obama makes extensive use of in order to promote LGBT rights and same-sex marriage.

Conclusions

Although extensively debated and analyzed, political correctness remains a highly complex issue with numerous facets, manifestations and influences.

As stated in the introductory lines of my paper, the research questions I have endeavored to answer are the following: 1) What is political correctness? When, where and why did it emerge?; 2) How has political correctness evolved in the U.S. over the years?; 3) How is political correctness used by U.S. President Barack Obama in his speeches on LGBT issues and same-sex marriage? To what ends?; 4) Since it seems to have redefined morality and values, could political correctness be

considered a dangerous phenomenon or, on the contrary, as a considerable change for the better?; 5) What is the ultimate goal of political correctness?

As revealed, political correctness has proved to be extremely hard to define and pin down. In my opinion, this happens because its origin and exact source are not known. Furthermore, the term has been subject to numerous changes over the years, its definitions going hand in hand with the evolution of the phenomenon.

If there is one thing that makes the United States truly unique, it is its remarkable cultural and ethnic diversity. America has always taken pride in what could be called its “trademarks” – freedom, equality, open-mindedness, tolerance. However, its history is a testimony to the contrary, the journey that led to their actual fostering being a long and extremely hard one: the Civil Rights movement, the feminist movement, and later on the Latino movement, and the gay and lesbian movement, to name but a few.

Given this unstable social background, on the one hand, and America’s growing diversity, on the other hand, it should come as no surprise that political correctness emerged in the United States as an attempt to increase awareness of and change social attitudes regarding cultural differences. However, since its emergence political correctness has undergone radical changes, gradually evolving from a national concern with education and the curriculum into a global ideology whose main foci are issues regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, religion, ethnicity, xenophobia, disability, AIDS, animal rights, etc.

The way it has attempted to reshape attitudes and behaviors has been by removing prejudicial and offensive terms from the modern lexicon. It has operated significant changes in language, introducing terms that have managed to establish themselves in current usage. Yet, most of the words and phrases used to replace the discriminatory and offensive language have proved to be highly artificial, being considered by many as a corruption of language.

As regards its evolution in the United States, political correctness manifested itself most strongly on university campuses. The implementation of affirmative action, speech codes and codes of conduct caused considerable stir over this issue,

political correctness coming to be perceived as a serious threat to American universities and to the idea of liberal education because of the increasingly absurd constraints that started to be placed on the freedom of expression. Consequently, it rapidly became a major public issue, being widely debated by intellectuals, academics, journalists, and even presidents of the United States. Over the years political correctness has permeated key sectors, such as: mass media, entertainment, politics, multinational corporations, etc.

From my vantage point, political correctness is a Trojan horse – a wolf in sheep’s clothing, which – under the guise of equality, emoting fairness and non-discrimination – actually stands for an insidious and really dangerous ideology. What I understand by ideology is a set of ideas, concepts, beliefs regarding a particular matter, all the way to an overall mindset, targeting key cultural and social cornerstones which have cemented themselves throughout human history as the very foundation of the contemporary society, concepts such as family and marriage.

The question that naturally comes to one’s mind is why would the U.S. President promote the ideology of political correctness? What is the ultimate goal of PC? Could it be to usher in a New World Order? We can but fear how this will translate into the future, when the notions of right and wrong, good and evil, normality and abnormality will have been wiped out not only from Americans’ hearts and minds, but from the hearts and minds of the citizens of this world, as Alvin Toffler (1970) brilliantly predicted.

Importance and contribution of the study

The findings of the present study have revealed the fact that the instruments of political correctness have become so subtle and devious, shifting from a highly lexicalized and overt manifestation to an extraordinarily subtle, nuanced, and insidious ideology that promotes LGBT equality and same-sex marriage. Given the fact that the values promoted by political correctness – equality, fairness, tolerance, empathy – happen to be the same as the ones that lie at the very core of the American

mindset, on the one hand, and as the ones the Democrats hold, on the other hand, this dangerous ideology is rather hard to identify. This, in my opinion, makes it all the more menacing if one takes into account that this phenomenon has ceased to hold public attention, seeming to have faded away.

Since political correctness has evolved into a dastardly tool with which traditional morality and Christian beliefs are being supplanted by an alien ideology that promotes the relativity of values, it is evident that this phenomenon is currently more prevailing than ever. By way of consequence, it is of the utmost importance that the topic be once more brought to public scrutiny.

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