P.C., p.c. or PC?

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Recently I asked my third-year students studying English at Matej Bel University whether they had heard about Political Correctness but they looked at me as if I came from the planet Mars. On the other hand, they knew what PC was.

P.C., p.c. and PC

Nearly every young child nowadays knows PC and if you ask them what it is, they will answer a bit irritated but without any hesitation: „Personal computer, how come you don`t know?!" But is it just that?

/pi: si:/ may bear many meanings simply because these four phonemes are polysemantic, so p.c. can stand for:

- post card, or
- the abbreviation of per centage while

P.C. in British English stands for police constable, e.i. a policeman of the lowest rank and its female counterpart is W.P.C., the woman police constable.

PC can mean personal computer and/or small computer that is used by one person at a time, in business or at home (Longman, 2001, p. 1041).

PC is also described as Politically Correct but what is that and do we need it? What is all fuss about?

Dictionaries and Web

Britannica Dictionary[1] characterizes Political Correctness as "conformity to a belief that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities should be eliminated." Longman (1993, p. 1018) says that political correct means to be "correct according to a set of liberal opinions, e.g. that black people and women should have equal chances to get jobs, education, etc." We have to be careful with the language as far as "liberal" means left-winged, communist or socialist… Oxford Encyclopedia English assumes that PC is "conforming to a prevailing body of liberal opinion, especially in avoiding language, behaviour, etc., which might conceivably be regarded as discriminatory or pejorative to racial or cultural minorities or as reflecting implicit assumptions"[2]. Bloomsbury Good Word Guide's attitude is much more critical to PC that presents "a more positive image of negative or undesirable qualities such as dishonesty or failure, with the substitution of such euphemisms as *ethically disoriented* for *dishonest* and *deficiency achievement* for *failure*. Of American origin, PC is often regarded in Britain as unacceptable interference with English usage and the natural development of the English language."[3] Hutchinson Encyclopedia depicts PC as:

"Shorthand term for a set of liberal attitudes about education and society, and the terminology associated with them. To be politically correct is to be sensitive to unconscious racism and sexism and to display environmental awareness. However, the real or alleged enforcement of

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[1] http://www.britannica.com/dictionary
[2] http://www.heritage.org/Research/PoliticalPhilosophy/HL337.cfm
[3] http://www.bloomsbury.com/dictionary

PC speech codes at more than 130 US Universities by 1991 attracted derision and was criticized as a form of thought-policing."[4]

I think that Macmillan Encyclopedia (2001) summarizes it in a right way claiming that Political Correctness is simply

"a concept, originating in the USA, based on the observation that language contains words and phrases that express such prejudices as racism, sexism, and hostility to homosexuals; to avoid the slightest risk of giving offence, it is argued, extreme care must be taken to avoid all such phrases. Most reasonable people would accept that such words as "nigger," "yid,"[5] and "pansy"[6] are offensive and should not be used. However, the extremes of PC can easily lend themselves to ridicule (e.g. by insisting on such terms as *humankind* and *differently abled*, to replace the traditional *mankind* and *disabled*). The term is now widely used in a pejorative sense to indicate overzealous liberal attitudes in general."

The truth is that (usually American) PC nowadays sees everything in terms of gender, race, class or age and everyone who refuses to see the world through these lenses is branded with a hateful name. So for example, Shakespeare is judged by the current criteria of the 21st century and is called a misogynist[7] because, they say, he does not render women with respect in his plays. Unfortunately, those who say that forget and completely ignore Shakespeare's plays in which female characters are morally and intellectually superior to their male counterparts. The keepers of PC demand that people see only certain things in certain ways and this makes PC a powerful form of censorship, a pervasive form of anti-intellectual thought-control, an ugly form of racism, a hypocritical form of absolutism.

Here are two different tables – they differ in content: Table 1 shows the short two-column list of words that are considered impolite and can offend black people or other minorities. The other column points expressions that are viewed as politically correct.
The second table shows absurdity of misusing PC in any kind of way.

Table 1 Common politeness or so-called PC language

Non-PC language	PC-language
colored	African-American
old, aged people	senior citizen
mankind	humanrace, humankind
steward/stewardess	flight attendant
chairman	chair, chairperson
problematic(al) children	children at risk

Table 2 (Over) PC language or misunderstanding of what PC language is

Non-PC language	PC-Language
unemployed	in orderly transition between career changes
jobless	unwaged

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[4] http://www.encyclopedia.com

[5] Jew(ish); derogatory; /jid/
[6] A word abusing gay; pansy /p{nzi/
[7] /mi'sodZinist/ = the one who hates women

postman	postperson
blind people	unsighted, persons with visual impairments
deaf	acoustically deprived
disabled	differently abled
handicapped	disadvantaged, challenged (in some way)
rheumatic	orthopaedically unstable
ugly	aesthetically challenged, cosmetically different
person who washes cars	vehicle appearance specialist
watching a girl walk by	street harassment
fat	horizontally challenged
small	vertically challenged
old	chronologically gifted
clumsy	uniquely co-ordinated
shoplifter	non-traditional shopper
history	herstory
personality	perdaughterality
evil	morally different
drunk	sobriety deprived
fireman	firefighter
crazy	emotionally different

Two Levels of PC

Political Correctness is seen at two parallel levels: one is deep-seated, an ideology that can pervade academic studies in history, in literature, in philosophy, psychology and sociology; and the other is skin-deep, a matter of choosing one´s words carefully. There were so-called *speech codes* (obligatory observances of recommended words) until recently in some American universities. This is the sort of popular understanding of PC; the deeper reading, with its intellectual consequences perhaps invites a distinctive term *correctitude* (instead of *correctness*). Now it must be crystal clear that Political Correctitude (or Ideological Purity) breeds campus wars, infects the curriculum and sometimes wrecks careers, so it might be compared to the witch hunt or communist hunt in the 1950s in the USA.

Political Correctness relates to a number of societal sins, or inadmissible *–isms*, and deals with *don´ts* and *dos*, so thus, we have:
   - **racism** – you can say *black people* but *Afro-American* or *Afro-Caribbean* is more acceptable;
   - **sexism** – avoid using *history* and use *herstory* instead;
   - **ageism** – our grandparents are not *old age pensioners* because the are *senior citizens*;
   - **ableism** – do not dare to call anyone *handicapped*, choose saying that they are in some way *challenged*;
   - **heightism/sizeism** – though it might sounds absurd, Snow White is accompanied by seven *growth-impaired persons*.

Professor W. Nash of Nottingham University distinguishes two sorts of PC *–isms*:

Primary *–isms*

It seems that following these recommendations makes you not just share the feelings of others but you will feel virtuous on your own account as well. However, the primary *-isms* are still racism and sexism because they reflect current conflicts in society, struggles for

recognition and rights by people hitherto neglected or oppressed. A primary *–ism* reflects a will to do justice, although, one can argue that good will can have peculiar results. Overconsciousness of racism leads to a sometimes absurd delicacy about using the word *black*, as in *blackball*, *black economy*, *blacklisted*, *blackmail* or *blackleg*; overconsciousness of sexism leads to the censorship of the word *man*, even in compounds and familiar idioms.

Secondary *–isms*

Other *–isms* are secondary and they reveal a disposition to feel good: while the feeling good is in the imgination of the speaker; the sensitivities of the sufferers are rarely as acute as those of the people who pity them. I do not know that the blind people feel any better for being called the *unsighted*; that the deaf cherish the phrase *acoustically deprived*; that the handicapped read into that word connotations of *cap* in hand; that the person in a wheelchair wants to be called *disadvantaged*, or the disabled *differently abled*; that we improve the lot of the jobless by describing them as *unwaged* or *in orderly transition between career changes*. These things are not expressions and phrases of Political Correctness but foolish euphemisms bringing no comfort and showing little respect for the oppressed ridiculing them in contrary (Nash, p.43, 2003). Professor Nash says: "Let us love one another; and let us not be too disposed to be offended by a casual word, when each day´s newspaper tells of the same fresh outbreak of the Cain-and-ableism which is ravaging this planet." (ibid.)

A Kiss

A six-year-old boy "has been punished by his school in America for sexual harassment after giving a girl classmate a kiss on the cheek." (Jones, 2001, p 49) This is not a joke: it did happen in the USA two years ago when a young school boy was found guilty because of stealing a kiss in the school corridor...

Affirmatice Action

Affirmative action is an expression mainly used in American English and depicts the policy of positive discrimination by employes (Macmillan, 2002, p 23). For those who have not heard the expression positive discrimination must be remarked that it is "the practice of giving special benefits to people from a group that was treated in an unfair way in the past." (Macmillan, 2002, p 1097)

There are many different affirmative programmes in the USA giving preference to people of Afro-American, Afro-Caibbean and/or Hispanic descent, very often well-qualified (and better-qualified) whites and Asians are being chalenged in the courts. (Jones, 2001, p 50)

As far as the USA is well-known for being a country of unlimited possibilities, on the other hand it is also known as the country of "strange" individuals, so only there could happen that a retired eighty-two-year-old doctor had claimed $ 1million because, as she said, a health board had denied her a job on the grounds of age.

All these "strange" cases show plain absurdity of exaggerated PC and misunderstanding of its concept that has shown its dark side to its users.

Conclusion

Political Correctness can be described in many different ways and from different points of view. There is no "only answer" or definition of PC. Some characterize PC as a sort of *philosophy believe in increasing tolerance for diversity of cultures, race, gender, ideology and alternative lifestyles. PC is the only social and morally acceptable outlook. Anyone who disagress with this philosophy is bigoted, biased[8], sexist, and/or closed-minded.[9]* As you can

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[8] Zaujatý, predpojatý.

see this attitude is rather ironical than serious and no wonder because in the course of 1990s PC became more or less misused in order to find "someone" to blame for segregation, racism, sexism etc.

The momentum of this movement came largely fromthe political left, and from the intense debates taking place on college and university campuses. Although there is no defensible ground on which to disagree with its spirit, this movement has been derided as a form of thought police for its demands of adherence to a party line[10]. Anyway, it is important to find the line and choose between expressions of political correctness and foolish euphemisms.

PC was meant to change our language, behaviour and the entire way of thinking in the positive sort of way but it turns out that all „well meant" things might go wrong some day if you take them too seriously.

We should not be afraid to use polite words – common politeness has nothing to do with hypocritical nor evasive thinking. Let us finish this contribution with the professor Nash´s words:

"Ordinary Politeness is a gesture, a more or less automatic response to experience; Political Correctness is a stance, implying a control of experience. In the doctrine of PC, everything is politics, meaning the struggle for power, or, in the current jargon, *empowerment*; and all political relationships are defined in language deemed to be correct (for which, read *obligatory*) or incorrect (meaning *inadmissible*)." (Nash, 2003, p 43)

Resources

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Harlow : Longman, 2001. ISBN 0-582-45639-8

Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture. Harlow : Longman, 1993. ISBN 0-582-23720-3

http://www.bloomsbury.com/dictionary
http://www.britannica.com/dictionary
http://www.encyclopedia.com
http://karljahn.tripod.com/lang/femspeak.html
http://www.sme.sk/clanok.asp?cl=804140
http://www.inzine.sk/article.asp?art=6738
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http://www-personal.um d.umich.edu/~nhughes/htmedocs/pc.html
http://www.heritage.org/Research/PoliticalPhilosophy/HL337.cfm
http://www.artlex.com/Artl_ex/Pm.html
http://www.seanbryson.com/articles/pc_history.html
http://www-users.cs.york.ac.uk/~susan/cyc/p/pc.htm
http://www.gofast.org/argos-spring-1998/article2.htm

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[9] For more information click http://www-personal.um d.umich.edu/~nhughes/htmedocs/pc.html (PC Primer)
[10] http://www.artlex.com/Artl_ex/Pm.htm

JONES, Leo. 2001. *New Cambridge Advanced English*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, pp 49-50, 2001. ISBN 0521 62939 X

NASH, Walter. 2003. *Words and Wisdom*. In : English Teaching Professional, Words and Wisdom, p 43; London : Modern English Publishing, Ltd., Issue 27, June. ISSN 1362-5276

Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners. Oxford : Macmillan, 2002, p 23, p 1097. ISBN 0-333-99093-5

Summary

Článok sa zaoberá pojmom *politická korektnosť* a skúma niektoré jej aspekty v anglicky hovoriacich krajinách. Hľadanie definície politickej korektnosti nie je jednoduché najmä vtedy, keď sa stretávame s rôznorodými prístupmi a postojmi k tejto otázke.