

TO USE “HE/SHE” OR “THEY”: THAT IS THE QUESTION

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Abstract: *This paper aims to underline the close connection between language and culture. Linguistic interaction is not only a series of sentences from a speaker to a hearer, but it also involves the cultural context which influences the interactants either to use political correctness or not. In recent years, native speakers as well as English teachers have been forced to deal with the abundance of terminology contrived so that people would not be offended by a ‘biased’ language which ignores/rejects their gender, ethnic origin, or sexual orientation. We try to show how sometimes an ‘unbiased’ language can have comic implications from a lexical-semantic point of view, but the goal of this discussion is to point out or even eliminate certain inequalities in society and to make the students understand these word-creations. The last part of this paper examines a questionnaire given to Romanian students which is meant to be a survey of their attitude towards the use of language with political correctness. The findings reveal the students’ opinions on gender, on societal restrictions and on (ab-)using language.*

Keywords: *political correctness, sexist language, equality, discriminatory practices, gender identity terms*

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Introduction

Communication between/among people supposes not only the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, but also good knowledge of culture and societal norms proving that language is inextricably linked to the mentality of the people involved in interaction, to the events and phenomena occurring in that particular society, to the lifestyle a group of people chooses, to the people's traditions and values (Tsykalyuk & Shchukina, 2022). The paper deals with the issue of political correctness – how this has caused a great debate and how it is generally perceived as sounding exaggerated and artificial, how this changes and/or hides the meaning and deteriorates the respective language. Political correctness is of great importance for TEFL since teachers aim at producing proficient users of English who are supposed to not only communicate fluently in English, but also to understand the cultural setting of the target language, as well as the intentions of the interlocutors.

Plančić, Zanchi and Čudić suggest that PC raises the students'/ learners' awareness of specific social issues such as tolerance for race, gender, sexual orientation (2018, p. 56). There have been certain changes in people's feelings and behaviour, therefore, we tried to emphasize some issues that have been neglected before or insufficiently researched. Teachers of EFL are aware that without a good knowledge of PC, learners would not be able to communicate efficiently and would face intercultural catastrophe and/or blunders. Learners will know how to use PC when they are systematically exposed to it, when they are taught how to use certain expressions or idioms. Learners need to have access to (social) media, to be presented with reading and listening materials. This type of learning is highly motivating for advanced learners who are provoked by the new information, and whose competences are enhanced. The aim of this paper is to show how political correctness conforms to social matters, how it advocates for the already approved views, and how it denounces discrimination in language and in behaviour. Since the 1980s, PC has already swept across America, and has also gained huge interest in Europe, consequently teachers in TEFL should teach their learners how to use the right words in the right situations. On the other hand, learners should be made aware of the weirdness of certain ways of expression which seem to abuse language.

Political Correctness

The term “political correctness” appeared for the first time 1793 in a US Supreme Court decision in the case *Chrisholm vs. Georgia* in which Justice James Wilson emphasizes that it is not politically correct to say “people of the United States”, and this should be replaced with “The United States” (Tokarev, 2016). Despite its earlier appearance in the English language, “political correctness” has been used more often since 1960s, having been defined by Noam Chomsky as a

healthy and correct expansion of moral concern (Burrige & Allan, 1991, p. 90). The term was also adopted by the American New Left taken from the Soviet and Chinese ideologies in which the term indicated whether their members followed the doctrine of the party or not. Because of this, the term acquired a negative connotation and referred to those members who strictly obeyed the ideology of the party and whose behaviour was considered ultra-correct.

We can see that the meaning of the term from 1960s does not correspond to the current definition, as it changed dramatically in the 1980s when, in university campuses, one was expected to be politically correct – which meant one was supposed to use a bias-free language and adapt to certain speech codes established by some professional societies. People were made aware of their discriminatory practices and expressions which had previously appeared to be neutral (Talbot, 2007, p. 754). A new legislation led not only to the development of a bias-free language, but also to a social change that promoted equality for women, for homosexuals, for ethnic groups, or sexual or cultural diversity. In the 1980s political correctness launched a new fashion (Zhou, 2018, p. 66): it was politically correct to recycle paper, to oppose the wearing of fur coats, to reject American consumerism (seen as one of the effects of American capitalism), to support women's right to abortion (a practice which has lately been considered as an act of breaking the foetus' right to be born). In the 1980s, political correctness became a pejorative term to denote the feminists, the Marxists, or the leftists because of their views on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or environmental issues.

However, since the 1990s political correctness has been the focus of international debate – newspapers or magazines, books, talk shows are no longer the only ones that approach political correctness, academic panels also discuss its merits or even its challenges/ dangers and public and political figures' ignorance of PC has been strongly rebuked (as in the case of former president Donald Trump). Despite its name, PC has nothing to do with politics, even though politicians, particular, are expected to use politically correct language, which is meant not to hurt or despise others.

Political correctness has been defined as a social code which is connected not only to language, but also to the behaviour and opinions of those who intend to avoid offending people who belong to different minority groups. PC's goal in language is to eliminate the vocabulary which could hurt people's feelings by making them feel excluded, offended, and discriminated. The definition implied that PC meant to be inclusive. This means that it is not enough to use a bias-free language, but also that one should use language as a reflection of one's thoughts and ideas. The theory behind this definition of PC originates in Sapir-Whorf hypothesis¹ that language represents thought, and it may even control

1. The hypothesis of linguistic relativity, also known as Sapir Whorf hypothesis, preaches

one's thoughts (Pinta & Yakubu, 2014, p. 81). Furthermore, using language to hurt somebody is a form of violence. Consequently, the language representing thoughts of violence may control the thought of violence, for instance. This form of violence despite being passive can have the same effects as the active form of violence. Therefore, if we change the language we think in, this language will have as effect a change in the way we think. This hypothesis will have a beneficial effect on society as the offending lexis as well as the conflicts from society will be removed. In this way, language can build through PC non-violent methods for the resolution of conflicts (Shedrack, 2004).

Pinta and Yakubu (2014, p. 82) consider that forms of discrimination like racism, sexism and homophobia are projections implied by society, and all attempts to exclude others have been gradually imposed. In their opinion, PC implies that people were not born with these forms of discrimination, but they were manipulated to believe in these values by the society in which they had been brought up. In other words, their attitudes are dictated by the politically incorrect language they use. Consequently, their attitude can change if people make conscious efforts to change the societal projections by using a politically correct language. Equally, PC does not mask the truth, the true reality, it does not mean to censor people's way of expressing themselves; it encourages people to be tolerant, to be inclusive and open-minded. When one is politically correct, one is not prevented from saying what he/she wants to say; one is taught into rejecting stereotypes and into embracing difference and diversity.

Political correctness may be categorized in English in the following types according to these issues: race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, profession, etc.

a) Gender Perspective

As far as gender is concerned, women have fought throughout the last two centuries to have equal rights with men, thus even the titles of jobs and occupations were changed, i.e. the nouns ending in *man* in domains considered to be dominated by men have gained female suffixes, such as *-trix*, *-ess*, *-ette*: *poetess*, *authoress*, *manageress*, *usherette*. Gender seems to create the same problems in Romanian as it does in English, therefore, the Romanian learners of English find it easy to understand why this should represent a debatable issue

the principle according to which language influences the speakers in their perception about the world and their thoughts, hence the relation between language and thought. The term "Sapir Whorf hypothesis" is just a misnomer for many linguists since Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf never wrote any work together and never developed a hypothesis together, but they both believed that there is a connection between language and culture, be this strong or weak. Throughout history, this idea was referred to as 'strong hypothesis' (also called linguistic determinism) in which language determines people's decisions and thoughts, or 'weak hypothesis' in which language influences thoughts and people's decisions.

in English because there are nouns which do not have forms for both genders: *manager*, *usher* (= *uşier*), *lecturer* (= *lector*), *university professor* (= *profesor universitar*), *surgeon* (= *chirurg*), etc. And if these words acquire a female form, they are used pejoratively and sometimes have negative connotations. Quite often, certain occupations/jobs used to be ascribed to a particular gender. For instance, the word *secretary* is mostly associated with the image of a woman dressed carefully in sweater sets, wearing pearls, sensible heels, knee-length skirts demonstrating she could be an efficient right hand for a man, as well as a silent maid. Nowadays, the term has been replaced with *personal assistant*, or *executive assistant*, or *office manager* in order to upgrade the person's position and enhance his/her professionalism (Delekta, 2019, p. 154). On the other hand, we do not see many female barbers, or masons or ushers, hence the lack of a feminine variant of these occupations, or if there were such forms, they would sound ridiculous.

Nowadays, Meghan Markle, the Duchess of Sussex, has found herself in the position of being judged by the British media for everything she says or does and the public no longer knows whether she is the victim or the aggressor. She complained in her podcast *Archetypes* that her American way of telling her assistants what she needed or wanted was perceived by her British employees as a “bossy” behaviour – an adjective used negatively to refer to women who aspire to take on leadership roles in a very demanding way – or that the British media called her “ambitious” for marrying Prince Harry – a term which is also offensive (as if it were her intention from the start to marry Prince Harry for a better social position, as if any love feelings were excluded). In the debut episode of her Spotify podcast *Archetypes*, she and her friend, Serena Williams, discussed the double standard society sets for women who want to follow their dreams. Meghan Markle confessed that the education she received in America (an all-girls Catholic school in LA) always empowered girls to go after what they wanted. She blames her education for making her an ambitious woman: “The message to me and my classmates was clear: our futures as young women were limitless. Ambitious? That was the whole point” (Henni, 2022). Furthermore, Meghan Markle complained that she had never felt the negative connotation behind the word “ambitious” until she started dating her present husband. “Bossy” and “ambitious” used to define her behaviour made Meghan Markle consider that she was in reality perceived as “pushy” or “gold-digger” and was generally frowned upon for her attitude. She confessed in her podcast that “ambitious” for men was considered a quality whereas, when the term is applied to her, this changes into a negative and mean word. Her second guest, Laura Kray – a professor at the Haas School of Business and faculty director for the school's Centre for Equity, Gender and Leadership, also confirmed Markle's opinions: research showed that ambitious women were often perceived as

“power hungry, manipulative, not trusted” while ambitious men were generally seen as admirable (Henni, 2022).

We also have to mention that since the summer of 2021, the British Royal Family have undertaken a private inquest of their staff based on allegations that Meghan Markle’s behaviour when she was still a working member of the royal family was perceived as manifestations of ‘bullying’ especially by younger female members of her staff. In the two-year period, while she lived in the UK, Meghan Markle is said to have had at least four personal assistants who all resigned from their position similarly to other personnel from her PR team. The inquiry ended in 2022, but the Royal Family announced that the results will be treated as a private matter, shortly said, they will be kept a secret from the public.

In compliance with politically correct usage of language, the use of gender-neutral forms of expression is strongly advocated; consequently, words containing masculine endings/segments were transformed into gender-inclusive words: *chairman* vs. *chairperson*, *fireman* vs. *firefighter*, *mankind* vs. *humankind*, *policeman/woman* vs. *police officer*, *steward/stewardess* vs. *flight attendant*, *salesman/woman* vs. *salesperson*, *man-made* vs. *artificial*. In addition, indefinite pronouns which were usually referred to with the masculine form (i.e. One needs to know about *his* medical condition.), now are being referred to with both genders (One needs to know about his/her medical condition.) because the sentence states something about the human condition. Feminine Linguistics criticized the use of the masculine form whenever “one”/ “someone”/ “somebody”/ “everyone”/ “everybody” are mentioned, so, the ‘first wave’ of feminist demanded the usage of the personal pronoun “she” to have equal rights with the masculine form “he” as in: Everyone deserves to be happy and do whatever *s/he* wants.

When we talk about the titles we use before surnames, such as *Mrs*, *Mr*, *Miss*, these might be considered offensive for women. *Mr*. refers to men irrespective of their marital status, whereas *Mrs* and *Miss* differentiate between a spinster and a married woman putting the women in an uncomfortable position especially when they feel lonely and depressed if they do not have a life partner. Therefore, *Ms* is used because it is considered neutral and inclusive, as *Mr* is for men. Germans also perceive *Fräulein* as an offensive term for unmarried women, thus the general usage of *Frau* is applied. Romanian native speakers seem not to be disturbed by the use of *domnișoară* (Miss) instead of *doamnă* (Mrs), thus both titles are considered to be a polite form of address for a female interlocutor.

b) Gender identity terms/ sexual orientation

Similarly, certain morphological pairs are now abandoned due to the recent tendency of being gender neutral or inclusive. The headlines in newspapers and magazines have been filled with issues of equality referring to transgender and

non-binary people emphasizing their right to transform words in order to better express their identity. So, *husband* and *wife*, *brother* and *sister*, *son* and *daughter* have been recently replaced by *spouse*, *sibling*, *offspring*, whereas *father* and *mother* are abandoned to the modern usage of *parent 1* and *parent 2*.

The proper terms to define gender identity, including pronouns, show people's acceptance of transgender and nonbinary persons. GLAAD²'s reference guide offers the necessary education and guidance for us on how we should address LGBTQ people. This guide is intended to be used by journalists reporting for the mainstream media or for content creators who want to tell the stories of LGBTQ people as accurately and respectfully as possible. The first step into doing that is to ask people how they describe themselves, ask them about the pronouns they would prefer to be addressed with, and address them accordingly. This guide is defined as a way of respecting them and referring to them in a way that is true to what they are. GLAAD worked for this guide in collaboration with the National Center for Transgender Equality, with the Human Rights Campaign, and the Trans Journalists Association. We have to mention that this guide is mainly US-centred, especially in the Western part of the USA. Among the newest terms frequently used from this guide, we can mention *nonbinary* (refers to people who describe their gender as not belonging to the category of man or woman), *agender* (an adjective meant to define a person who does not identify as any gender), *gender fluid* (not strictly identifying as one gender; sometimes, the person identifies as different genders in different periods, or even identifies as more than one gender at once).

Besides using these nouns and adjectives to define and recognize these individuals, gender identity is also marked through pronouns. When we refer to persons, we use pronouns and getting the right pronouns for all kinds of people is not necessarily a transgender issue. The representatives of GLAAD suggest that getting the right pronouns for transgender and nonbinary people, especially for the youth is a way to let them know that you acknowledge them, that you see them, that you accept them especially when they are often discriminated. Shortly said, by getting the pronouns right, you accept their identity. When we are introduced to transgender and nonbinary persons, we could receive the following answers: "My name is Cătălina, I use her pronouns". If in the

2. GLAAD is an acronym for Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation – an American non-governmental media monitoring organization which was initially founded in New York City to protest against defamatory coverage for gay and lesbian persons in the media and entertainment industry. This organization was founded in 1985 when people wanted to protest against the *New York Post*'s defamatory AIDS coverage which was perceived as homophobic report. Since its foundation, GLAAD has included bisexual and transgender people. In 1987, after a meeting with GLAAD representatives, *New York Times* agreed to change its editorial policy to use more appropriate terms instead of harsher words referring to homosexuality, and soon more newspapers and televisions followed.

beginning this may seem like an awkward situation, knowing each other's pronouns could gradually become a routine and offer more accurate information about your interlocutor. This is extremely helpful in cases when the first names are less common or they are gender ambiguous: Leslie (in English), or Gabi (in Romanian).

The title of our paper is *To Use "S/He" or "They": That Is the Question* because we intended to show that nowadays political correctness also implies a non-sexist language reform which basically banned the use of "he" and "she" from Standard English because "the pronoun *he*, just like *she*, is not gender neutral" (Curzan, 2014, p. 117). A few months ago, I read on the ET Canada webpage about a particular concert (the sixth annual Blue Diamond Gala) held by Jennifer Lopez in L. A. where she was accompanied by her children – her twins (Emme Maribel and Maximilian David Muniz). The singer brought her 14-year-old child, Emme, up on stage for a joint appearance and referred to her daughter by using gender-neutral pronouns "they/them" to introduce her child to the audience. J. Lo said, according to *Entertainment Weekly*: "The last time we performed together was in a big stadium like this and I ask **them** to sing with me all the time, and **they** won't. So, this is a very special occasion. **They** are very, very busy. And pricey. **They** cost me when **they** come out. But **they're** worth every single penny because **they're** my favourite duet **partner** of all time." (Donahue, 2022). Fans and journalists posted the clip to social media, praising the artist for using gender-neutral pronouns for her daughter, Emme, and for not seeming to make an effort. Journalists say J. Lo's statements made a huge difference for the LGBTQ community and showed how much she supports her child in 'their' choice or in 'their' transition to identifying as non-binary. Emme was also praised for joining 'their' mother on stage for a duet of the song "A Thousand Years". 'They' also got onstage to perform a second song "Born in the USA" with 'their' mother.

The 'second wave' of feminists demand the use of a non-sexist language in which sentences like "A rider admits that he likes horses" are considered sexist and/or patriarchal and the version "A rider admits that he or she likes horses" is not inclusive enough, so, the pronoun "they" should be used as a singular pronoun in order to be gender neutral. Again, the representatives of GLAAD explain to us that when a person identifies as nonbinary and appears as feminine (or masculine), people often assume that this person wants to be addressed with "she/her" pronouns or "he/his" which is seen as a wrong presumption. Usually, this kind of people want to be referred to as "they". Consequently, a sentence like "Every student has to read at least one novel to pass his/her exam" should sound in the following way in PC: "Every student has to read at least one novel to pass **their** exam". This sentence highlights the gender sensitivity, but consciously violates the traditional rules of grammar that refers to the subject-verb agreement or to the relation between subject and its pronouns. This

also shows how language changes according to social and political demands. It evolves whenever it feels it has to change in accordance with the humans' needs. So, despite their conflict with traditional grammar, these constructions conform to the new rules of gender neutrality and show respect for what matters to some people.

c) Cultural Perspective

Another example of political correctness is the history behind Agatha Christie's novel *And Then There Were None* which was originally either *Ten Little Indians* or *Ten Little Niggers*. There has been a lot of controversy surrounding the renaming of problematic buildings, so, there was no surprise when films and novels were rebranded. The novel is a continuously best-selling novel in the whole world, and from the start, it was published under two different titles because of the public's sensitivity to the author's choice of a title and because of the rhyme theme present in the book. In the UK, the novel was published under the title *Ten Little Niggers* which was a rhyme from a minstrel song and children's game: "Ten Little Indians" referring to Indigenous North American people. In the USA, the novel had the title *And Then There Were None* because the word 'nigger' was perceived as a racial insult, therefore all references to this word were removed from the book and from the movie. Even in 1939, this title was considered too offensive for Americans (Stein, 2016). Agatha Christie did not avoid using racially loaded ethnic slurs, hence the contemporary renaming of novels or sites. The song became an icon of the black face minstrel shows and were widely known in Europe, where Agatha Christie might have watched them. The UK versions continued to use "Indians" or "Niggers" until 1985 when the word "Soldier" was used for the title and the name of the island. The original name of the island in the novel (Nigger Island) was meant to illustrate how the dark side of people trapped on the island re-surfaces and is the cause for their retribution. The rhymes found by the trapped characters refer to ten figures who die of violent deaths and these depict how fear and racial attitude have been instilled into human beings since childhood when they usually hear nursery rhymes.

To continue discussing Agatha Christie's lack of sensitivity towards racial and ethnic issues, we chose another example from her novel *Endless Night* which refers to a property called Gypsy's Acre. The female protagonist is constantly being scared by an old Gypsy who enjoys frightening people with her stories about presumed curses and ancient traditions. The writer constructs the novel around this offensive image of an ethnical minority, namely: that Gypsies curse people especially when money is involved, that Gypsies are used to migrate from place to place, that Gypsies can instil fear into gullible women and children. Following the intense debate regarding PC, producers, as well as translators of Agatha Christie's movies have for a few years tried to find

new names for settings and other sensitive matters. For instance, the Romanian translation of Gypsy's Acre (in the last episode of Miss Marple series from 2013) avoids the reference to any ethnical group, instead it chooses to transform the name into "Conacul nomazilor" (= Migrant's Acre) without any emphasis on the stereotypes referring to Gypsies.

The examples from Agatha Christie's work resemble the ethnic discriminative terms referring to Chinese Americans. If Black people are offended when one uses *eggplant*, *nigra*, *nigga* to define them, persons of Chinese ethnicity are insulted whenever they are referred to as *chink*, *chinky*, *chigga*, originating from the Chinese courtesy word *Chink* and from the Qing Dynasty. During the 1970s, *Negro* and *coloured* were accepted as suitable terms, while nowadays, *African American* and *people of colour* are preferred. Political correctness is the one that prevents people from saying *Paki* for *Pakistan American/British*; *Tacohead* or *Hispanic* for *Latin/Mexican American*; *redskin* or *Indians* for *Native American*.

Besides gaining a lot of attention and interest, PC has also attracted critics and opponents. One of the first opponents was George Orwell, who in the 1940s anticipated the future deterioration of language which seems to suit certain political and social needs, and who considered it an abuse of language. Teachers of EFL should mention to their students some new expressions which have been created by overzealous politically correct persons who have pushed things too far. We have chosen a few of these expressions in order to emphasize their humorous side and to make people amuse a bit. These are meant to demonstrate how clear English words are sometimes replaced by ridiculous periphrasis or euphemisms in an attempt to be trendy, to adapt to the new tendencies.

Dead = metabolically different

Alive = temporarily metabolically able

Bald = follicularly challenged

Short = vertically constrained

Stupid = intellectually challenged

Old age = youth deficiency

In this respect, we recommend teachers and learners avoid using extreme expressions, which would be considered too pompous, exaggerated, or ridiculous and/or absurd. The extreme cases would undermine or diminish the initial good intentions of PC, so, instead of trying not to exclude or offend others, the speaker would in his/her turn be excluded or mocked at by interlocutors or even marginalized and alienated in a society which he/she tried to change and/or improve.

Research methodology

Participants

The subjects in this study were 50 students studying in a bachelor's degree program at "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania. All students were enrolled in English programs. They were students interested in English language, culture and civilization of different ages, genders, and backgrounds. The use of English with political correctness will check the students' interest in being involved in international matters and will enhance their competence of communicating in a foreign language and develop their careers. Their answers will offer us the youth's perception about this phenomenon and their openness to new topics and issues.

Materials

The research instrument was a questionnaire consisting of three parts: general information about the students' background, a 15-item multiple-choice test, and a survey. The Language Attitude Survey was conducted so that we receive more information from the students.

Questionnaire

General Information

This part of the questionnaire was interested in finding important data about the respondents, that is demographic information: gender, age, occupation (besides that of being a student), previous degree, place of birth and current address. All these pieces of information were kept confidential.

Test of the Use of English Containing Politically Correct Words

The second part contained a 15-item test referring to different politically correct terms in English used in different situations featuring two or more choices or even a blank line for their own version. The questions included vocabulary referring to race/ ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities. The choices were adapted from GLAAD recommendations or from the Oxford Dictionary of English Language.

Opinions (Language Attitudes Survey)

The third part of the test consisted of 10 questions that asked the students' opinions and attitudes towards the use of political correctness in both English and Romanian. The questions focused on three main topics: 1) opinions towards the practical use of political correctness in language; 2) attitudes towards the importance of political correctness; 3) limitations or negative attitudes towards the use of political correctness in language. All answers were based on a scale

from 1 to 5. The data showed the degree of opinions and attitudes through the range of mean score values, which were classified into five interval scales: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree.

Research procedures

Data collection

We collected the data from 50 students who were studying either in the first or second year of a bachelor's degree programme. The students were asked to fill in the questionnaire and to give it back on the same day.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the questionnaire (the test with the politically correct English; the participants' personal data) were analysed to calculate frequency and percentage. The qualitative data (opinions and attitudes) were also interpreted to make a short survey about the impact of political correctness upon the respondents.

Findings and Discussion

Questionnaire Results

Out of 50 students, the highest score was 13 and the lowest was 4, whereas the average score was 9.24. For the questions regarding gender, 34 students (68%) used politically correct language. They knew the neutral word for certain occupations, such as "police officer", "flight attendant", or "humankind". Only 40% of the students (=20 respondents) used "businessperson" instead of using "businessman". In terms of race and ethnicity related words, 96% of the respondents (48 students) knew that "black" is used with a negative connotation, and that "African American" is the politically correct version. However, only 52% (=26 students) used "Native American" instead of "Indians". For the questions referring to physical disabilities, 74% of students (=37 respondents) used the politically correct version "disabled people/ physically challenged people" instead of "handicapped person", and 86% of the respondents (43 students) used "senior citizen" instead of "old person". Regarding sexual orientation, only 30% of the students (=15 respondents) used "they" or "she/he" in sentences referring to "everyone"/ "one"/ "everybody".

Attitudes Survey

There was a total of 10 questions that the respondents were asked to value with scores from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These are the average scores for some of these statements: "It is important for students to know the

politically correct language” = 4.74; “Politically correct language promotes the equality among people (regardless of their gender/race/sexual orientation/religion)” – 4,86; “It is worth using political correctness” – 3.54; “Political correctness should be advertised/ promoted/ used in the media” – 4,20; “I find it useful for political correct language to be used/ promoted at workplace” – 3.34; “I think political correctness censors the way I express myself” – 2,02; “Political correctness is a non-violent way of accepting other people’s beliefs/ orientation/ opinions” – 4,00; “I think political correctness will help me in my future career” – 3.80; “I think political correctness will create a pleasant environment at my future workplace” – 3,88; “It is alright to use “vertically-challenged people” instead of “short people”; or “temporarily metabolically able” instead of “alive” – 1,22.

Opinions about Political Correctness in English and Romanian

The students’ opinions towards the usage of politically correct language were generally positive. They saw this type of language as a necessary tool to promote equality and to make people understand about other people’s needs and desires.

Conclusions

According to our findings, some students are able to use politically correct terms/ words in correct situations. Their correctness depends on the familiarity of the students with these concepts. The general politically correct terms referring to gender or race are known to students, whereas terms like euphemisms and cases of periphrasis are new to them, hence their incorrect answers. However, the respondents showed positive attitudes towards this topic and consider this type of language as a respectful way of speaking to or about others. Consequently, they consider political correctness (either in English or Romanian) should be introduced in universities and at workplace, but especially on TV, radio, and other forms of media. When asked about the malign effect, PC might have on language (seen as a form of censorship, or manipulation, or abuse of language), students mostly disagree with this idea, not sensing the possible threat of a social and political abuse of language. The respondents perceive political correctness as a non-violent method of reconciling people regarding sensitive issues such as race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. However, the students were aware that PC can only be a limited phenomenon, as only a few categories of persons use it and would like to promote it – the educated people living in urban areas. Furthermore, PC is considered a relatively new phenomenon for most people, hence its limited usage.

The SWOT analysis shows the extent to which young people are receptive to using PC and are aware that this phenomenon can help them in achieving their

career goals and in having a pleasant workplace atmosphere. However, they seem to be less interested in using all expressions considered politically correct as is the case of the amusing examples shown earlier in this paper. They find these words and expressions as useless, since being seen ‘bald’ and ‘short’ is not as offensive as being marginalized as in the case of the people of colour or some ethnic groups. In conclusion, students (young respondents) consider politically correct lexis necessary when this refers to more ‘serious’ issues, such as race, gender, religion, and disabilities, hence their tolerance to these matters is also increased. The ‘minor’ issues such as sexual orientation, or anxieties regarding someone’s looks, intelligence or position are sometimes looked at with scepticism and quite rarely laughed at.

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