

## Argumentative euphemisms, political correctness and relevance

### PhD Thesis Project

#### 1. Background Overview

As a policy of prescribing and proscribing certain types of (linguistic) behavior, political correctness, was initially conceived as a strategy of overtly contradicting previously held assumptions regarding expected social behavior, by communicating new sets of assumptions with the purpose of bringing out subconscious biases of people to awareness, thereby making them aware of things, which could potentially trigger axiologically unfavorable responses and connotations in different individuals.

In line with Whorfian views on language, culture and thought, which hold that language influences our worldview, conditions all our thinking about social problems and, generally, shapes ontological reality, proponents of political correctness insist that the use of sexist or racist language promotes corresponding types of thought and call for introduction of novel euphemistic expressions, substituting previously used terms with the purpose of mitigating potential face-threatening acts, avoiding discrimination and including all society members by treating them equally.

In the broadest sense political correctness (henceforth PC) can be thought of as meaning “dissent tolerance”. However, ironically, one of its obvious outcomes appears to be putting pressure on those unwilling to use it. Thus, Umberto Eco calls PC the number one enemy of tolerance. In his book “Five Moral Pieces” Eco writes: “Think of the phenomenon of political correctness in America. This sprang from the desire to encourage tolerance and the recognition of all differences, religious, racial, and sexual, and yet it is becoming a new form of fundamentalism that is affecting everyday language in a practically ritual fashion and that works on the letter at the expense of the spirit - and so you can discriminate against blind persons provided that you have the delicacy to call them the “sightless”, and above all you can discriminate against those who do not follow the rules of political correctness”. Thus, PC can be viewed as an attempt to enforce and legalize behavior that was previously supposed to be governed by the rules of etiquette and politeness (hence “political” correctness as opposed to “linguistic tact”).

In a more focused and properly linguistic sense, the principal function of PC neologisms is often viewed as replacing biased judgmental expressions devaluating individual’s race, sex, sexual orientation, age, health condition, social status, appearance etc. with neutral units, which do not possess negative connotations, by means of introducing changes on the lexical level e.g. *poor countries* > *undeveloped* > *underdeveloped* > *the Third World* > *less developed* > *lesser developed* > *developing* or morphemic – replacing “sexist” morphemes *-man* (*chairman, businessman, salesman*) or *-ess* (*stewardess*) by their neutral counterparts: *chairman* > *chairperson*; *spokesman* > *spokesperson*; *stewardess* > *flight attendant* etc., as well as replacing the traditional use of the syntactic-semantic structure of generic anaphoric *he/his* pronoun in cases where sex is not indicated by the combined *his/her* or plural pronoun *their*. One of the most recent fields for linguistic revision has been the introduction of the so-called “people-first” language, e.g. *people of color, people living with disabilities, a person who uses a wheelchair*: e.g.: “Very few companies bothered to market cosmetics to women of color in those days. My first day at Revlon was like a dream come true. They hired me to market a new line of hair-care products designed especially for people of color” (from “Chicken Soup for the Soul” <http://www.chickensoup.com>).

Upon closer scrutiny, we suggest that PC shows all signs of a commercial strategy viewing an individual as a potential customer, passenger, patient etc. – a consumer of a commercial product. The purpose of PC in this respect can be viewed as stimulating one to purchase by being attractive to all sorts of consumers, as

demonstrated by such airline notions as *first-class*, *business class* and *economy class*; shops for *petites* and *plus sizes* or *Renoir Collections*; *family-size tooth-paste* and *Jumbo packs of detergents*; hedged English *best before* found on food-product packages vs. straightforward Russian *goden do* (*good until*). As a commercial strategy, widely exploited to incite potential clients towards the consumption of a product, political correctness appears to fit very well into the definition of prototypical manipulative communicative behavior, put forward in Saussure & Schulz (to appear), as it meets at least one of the (necessary but not sufficient) preconditions for being manipulative – information conveyed by the utterance must be of *benefit* to the speaker.

Lexico-semantic and even grammatical types of politically correct hedging have been exploited by governments for decades, which was already informally noticed by G. Orwell in 1946. Thus, *collateral damage* has become a politically correct substitute for *innocent civilians*, *accidentally killed as a result of military actions*; *post traumatic stress disorders* replaced *combat fatigue* and *shell shock*.

During recent years, various animal-rights activist groups and ecolinguists have been advocating the introduction of euphemistic substitutes, replacing terms, allegedly denigrating their referents: *pets* > *animal companions*, *nonhuman animals* or *involuntarily domesticated free-living nonhumans*.

Over the past two decades PC as a trend of language development has stimulated many questions, doubts, much controversy and criticism, which is illustrated by the joke-generation potential PC expressions possess: *amphibian American* – *frog*, *osmotically challenged* – *thirsty*, *creatively re-dyed* – *stained*, *motivationally challenged* – *lazy*. The book «Politically Correct Bedtime Stories» by a Chicago writer/actor James Gardner in which the author rewrote the most famous fairy-tales in a politically correct language became the number one best-selling title in New York, Toronto, Oxford, Singapore and Sidney. In the foreword the author of the book makes the following disclaimer: “If, through omission or commission, I have inadvertently displayed any sexist racist culturalist, nationalist regionalist, ageist, lookist, ableist, sizeist, speciesist, intellectualist, socioeconomicist, ethnocentrist, phallocentrist, heteropatriarchalist, or other type of bias, as yet unnamed, I apologize and encourage your suggestions for rectification” Gardner (1994).

It appears that in the English-speaking linguistic culture proponents of PC expect it to be perceived through an ontological conceptual metaphor. Similarly to conceptual metaphors like “Argument is war” and “Time is money” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), political correctness is introduced as a medical remedy. Concepts associated with PC are structured to make up a culture-specific (genre) frame, which includes such “medical” concepts as: (verbal) hygiene, prescription and proscription. Similarly to new medical drugs, PC was developed/devised as an antibiotic treatment/cure/assault/attack on biases-symptoms/diseases/viruses. It stimulates certain types of behavior, prevents and mitigates face-threatening acts, is used and applied to language like a patch/band-aid to a wound. In the US, for example, PC expressions have recently replaced such “politically incorrect” notions as *fear of being in public* > *a social anxiety disorder* and *naughty children* > *individuals with ADHD* (*Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder*).

In our thesis, we intend to make an attempt at demonstrating that just like the so-called “conduit metaphor” hides inferential aspects of human communication, highlighting the “positive” aspect of PC as the ultimate remedy and cure for such diseases of society as racial, ethnic etc. discrimination and bias, runs the risk of hiding other aspects of this linguistic policy, inconsistent with this metaphor.

Previous accounts of linguistic political correctness (e.g. Rees 1991, Beard 1993, Allen 1995, Bush 1995, Cameron 2002, Klotz 1999, Smith 2002) tend to consider mitigation of potentially face-threatening acts to be the principal function of the linguistic forms - “euphemisms with attitude” Rees (1991), which are typically associated with PC. All previous studies of linguistic PC were carried out within the framework of the code model of communication. To the best of our knowledge, no prior research on political correctness within the inferential communication paradigm initially put forward by H.P. Grice and developed into a fully-fledged cognitive pragmatic theory of communication by D. Sperber and D. Wilson has so far been undertaken.

Our research in the areas of cognitive pragmatics assumes the theoretical hypothetical-deductive framework of Relevance Theory, a brief outline of which is presented below. Within this theoretical framework, we intend to propose a working definition of what linguistic political correctness entails in terms of conceptual representations addressees of politically correct utterances make in certain contexts and in terms of information (linguistic, logical and encyclopaedic) these representations provide access to.

## 2. Relevance Theory

The dominant paradigm over the past several decades has been the code model of communication, according to which a sender encodes a thought in a linguistic message which is transmitted by some medium to a receiver, who in turn decodes the message to produce some replication of the original thought. It was initially proposed by the mathematician C.E. Shannon and later was further developed by linguists K. Bühler and R. Jakobson. While the code model may accurately represent some physical communication processes, it was unable to explain the psychological dimensions of human communication. In particular, there is no adequate explanation in any theory of coding of the importance of inference at all levels (from simple gestures, through figures of speech such as hyperbole and irony, all the way to complex symbolic representation and institutional language), whereby what is communicated is something other than what is encoded in the message. Relevance Theory, developed by D. Sperber and D. Wilson, provides a pragmatic account of the process of communication, including especially the role of inference. According to D. Sperber and D. Wilson (2004): “Relevance theory may be seen as an attempt to work out in detail one of Grice’s central claims: that an essential feature of most human communication is the expression and recognition of intentions (Grice 1989: Essays 1-7, 14, 18; Retrospective Epilogue)”. Similarly to Grice’s views, in Relevance Theory communication is an act whereby the speaker makes his intentions overtly accessible to the addressee (Grice 1989; Sperber & Wilson 1995 chapter 1). Utterances are understood as stimuli which allow the hearer to infer the speaker’s intentions. This perspective requires an explanation of communication to be based on a cognitive theory which incorporates an explicit account of intentions. Sperber & Wilson (1995) found this in the Representational Theory of Mind proposed by Fodor (1975; 1987a; 1994; 1998). Fodor’s theory takes intentions to be symbolic mental representations, which have syntax not unlike that of a natural language; hence, this theory has also been called the Language of Thought Hypothesis (Fodor 1975).

Relevance Theory (henceforth RT), is a cognitive pragmatic psychological theory of ostensive-inferential communication, at the core of which lies a definition of relevance and two principles, which guide hearers towards the speaker-intended interpretation: (1) according to the cognitive principle of relevance, human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance while according to the second, communicative principle of relevance (2): every ostensive stimulus communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Sperber&Wilson 1995: 260).

Ostensive stimuli achieve relevance by means of conveying information, which produces positive cognitive effects in cognitive systems of their addressees. These effects may be of three kinds: contextual strengthening of previously held assumptions, contextual contradiction and elimination of previously held assumptions and contextual implications, which arise only as a result of combining new information with previously held assumptions. In other words, the hearer has certain expectations regarding the relevance of the communicative act and in his search for the possible relevant interpretation of the speaker-intended meaning, he is guided by the presumption of optimal relevance, according to which, (a) the ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee’s effort to process it and (b) the ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator’s abilities and preferences (Sperber&Wilson 1995: 270).

The fundamental insight of Relevance Theory was that human cognition takes place in a balancing act between processing effort and cognitive effects. Thus, the more cognitive effects a stimulus produces, the more relevant it is. The relevance of incurred cognitive effects is inversely proportionate to the amount of cognitive effort applied to the processing of the stimulus – the more cognitive effects the processing requires, the less relevant the stimulus will be to the addressee.

In ostensive-inferential communication, the senders of ostensive stimuli intentionally provide evidence to the addressees, that by sending the stimulus, they demonstrate an intention to make a certain set of assumptions mutually manifest to all participants of a communicative act and intend the audience to arrive at certain conclusions. The sets of assumptions can be communicated explicitly or implicitly as well as strongly and weakly and the communicator is attributed two intentions: an intention to inform the hearer of something, which is called the *informative intention* and the intention to inform the addressee of this informative intention - the *communicative intention*.

In RT it is claimed that utterance interpretation involves three main stages. During the first stage, because linguistic expressions vastly underdetermine the real content of the message the speaker wants to convey, the meaning of a sentence is considered as an incomplete logical form – an output of the linguistic processing that takes place in the language module. The second stage is the development of this logical form into a complete propositional form as a result of a number of inferential subtasks such as reference and deictic assignment, homonymy disambiguation, enrichment, etc. Sperber and Wilson call a fully propositional form an explication if it is mutually manifestly intended to be conveyed by the speaker. The third stage is the derivation of implicatures (implicated premises – the implications that logically follow from the propositional form provided by the speaker and the contextual assumptions retrieved from it by the hearer, and implicated conclusions – the implicatures derived by the hearer by contextualizing the new information together with the contextual assumptions that have become manifest).

In general, within the cognitive framework of RT, the goal of communication is not seen as direct modification of thoughts, but rather as increasing the mutuality of cognitive environments.

The cognitive pragmatic Relevance Theory has been found compatible with such sociologically motivated aspects of language as phatic communication (B. Clark, V. Zegarac), linguistic politeness (V. Escandell Vidal, M. Jary), insults (B. Clark, J. Mateo, F. Yus) and compliments (M. Padilla Cruz). At the same time it has also been deemed asocial by other researchers (among them J. Mey and M. Talbot).

Under the guidance of my research supervisor at the University of Neuchâtel, I would like to attempt contributing to the currently on-going discussion regarding the social/asocial nature of Relevance Theory by exploring ways to apply the natural language RT empirical toolkit to the analysis of linguistic manifestations of political correctness, focusing on English with a complementary account of this phenomenon in typologically different languages. In what follows, we will discuss the types of information, which can be potentially communicated by the use of the utterances, which are interpreted as politically correct.

According to Saussure (to appear), cognitive representations of the individuals involved in a discursive interaction evolve through time. Unlike individual-specific sets of assumptions, which can be relatively easily modified (strengthened, contradicted), culture-specific sets of assumptions remain relatively stable. Information that contradicts them does not change them but tends to be interpreted as incorrect or abnormal. Such cultural representations shared by a social group are representations of the world (shared beliefs, norms, myths or classifications) or representations of other people's public representations (metarepresentations of various discourse types). They are stored in cognitive systems as beliefs and assumptions, which are either descriptions or interpretations of original representations. At the same time these cultural representations can be transmitted, and, by being transmitted from one person to another, "they may even propagate <...> so effectively that, in different versions, they may end up durably invading whole populations. Culture is made up, first and foremost, of such contagious ideas" (Sperber 1996:1). Some of them are repeated and communicated more often than others, which makes these representations relatively salient on people's minds.

Of particular interest and importance to our prospective research are the theoretical claims made in the recent cognitive pragmatic research literature regarding (1) the organizational structure of information or knowledge stored in cognitive systems and (2) the graded nature of salience of such knowledge.:

1. Mental representations are not reproductions of communicated propositions but rather are a generation by the hearer of his/her own objects of propositional attitudes (factual beliefs with propositional and semi-propositional content and representational beliefs with propositional and semi-propositional

content), which are normally related rather closely to the thoughts represented by those propositions (cf. Sperber 1985:51; Sperber 1996:58). Cultural beliefs are representational beliefs. Such representations are constituent parts of larger organizational sets of elements – they are generated and stored according to domain-specific schemas, which have been referred to as “frames”, “scripts”, “plans” and “scenarios” by various linguists (cf. works of C. Fillmore, R. Jackendoff, G. Lakoff, M. Minsky, D. Tannen, L. Barsalou). Concepts, which conform to these schemas are easily internalized and remembered (Sperber 1996: 69) and therefore, we suggest, are also easily evoked.

2. Concepts-representations become salient and foremost on people’s minds due to conventionality, frequency, familiarity, or prototypicality: “while less salient meanings are slow, salient meanings are accessed rapidly and always first, regardless of contextual bias or speaker's intent. Indeed, this sort of 'reflex' is pervasive, irrespective of the fact that it may, at times, be 'stupid' (Fodor 1983), ignoring or resisting sensible behavior” (Giora 2003).

Drawing on RT as our theoretical framework of choice, we believe that, the particular interpretation of a particular utterance will always depend both on the linguistic form, the context and recognition of the type of intentionality, underlying the production of the utterance. We also believe that consistency of the proposition expressed by the utterance with background assumptions about reality and about desirable states of affairs – moral assumptions – are crucial factors determining whether the utterance will receive a "politically correct" interpretation.

For example, members of the same cultural/racial/ethnic or handicap social group, as well as members of another group, which have a proven record of being benevolent to a particular group need not and do not concern themselves with issues of political correctness within the shared linguistic environment and can resort to the use of “politically incorrect/biased” linguistic forms in addressing each other without any detrimental consequences, as in such situations where it is mutually manifest to participants of communicative situations that the speakers’ intentions are benign and the use of allegedly biased expressions does little more than reinforce the sense of belonging together in the same group..

Thus, drawing on the intuition that utterances are processed and interpreted differently, depending on whether they are used as stand-alone expressions or parts of larger narrative sequences and discourses (cf. Maillat 2003: 295), we would also like to argue for the introduction of such notion as discourse PC.

In “The Language War” R. Lakoff (2000) suggest that “politically correct” is an example of the semantic load certain terms may have under certain circumstances, in certain places or times. Considering this, we can generalize that no utterance is a priori “politically correct” or “politically incorrect” and suggest that the term “politically correct” should be applied to interpretations hearers derive in cognitive processing of ostensive stimuli/utterances, since, according to G. Lakoff: “The meaning is not right there in the sentence – it matters a lot who is saying or listening to the sentence and what his social and political attitudes are” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 12). We suggest that an adequate account of “politically correct” interpretations requires an explanation of the cognitive processes underlying their derivation. The importance of context in which utterances are produced and interpreted for such an account cannot be overestimated.

The RT notion of context differs from previous traditional definitions. In RT context is a set of assumptions selected by the addressee in the process of utterance interpretation. This set of assumptions, manifest to the individual, is not simply a “situational context”, neither is it a co-text, which surrounds the processed utterance. Such sets of mental representations (including mental representations of both the situation and the co-text), form an individual’s cognitive environment in which the processing of information takes place. This cognitive environment is not something “pre-selected” or “given”, but constructed online with the purpose of maximizing relevance. In the framework of RT, relevance is taken as given and context is selected to justify that assumption. The hearer, guided by the presumption of relevance, selects the context that will yield an optimally relevant interpretation: it is not given, but chosen by the hearer: “As a discourse proceeds, the hearer works out the contextual effect of the newly presented information in a context retrieved or derived from memory and perception. These contextual effects and new assumptions then become part of the context in which later stretches of the discourse are processed. Selection of a context will be affected by

the twin aims of minimizing processing effort and maximizing contextual effect. Thus relevance theory suggests an answer, not only to the traditional pragmatic problems for which Grice's maxims have been used, but also for the problem of context selection, which... has defeated so many pragmatic theories" Blass (1990: 53).

In line with the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure Wilson (2000), according to which addressees follow the path of least cognitive effort in calculating cognitive effects, consider interpretations in order of accessibility and stop when their expectations of relevance are satisfied, hearers test the presumption of optimal relevance communicated by a "politically correct" utterance, considering whether its most accessible interpretation achieves a level of relevance that satisfies their own expectations of relevance, i.e. enables them to obtain the maximum amount of contextual effects that offset the cognitive effort they have to invest. In order to do so, hearers expand their context, against which the input is interpreted in various directions by including cultural metarepresentations manifest to them into the interpretation process – checking whether the proposition expressed by the utterance is consistent with cultural and moral assumptions about reality and the desirable states of affairs manifest to them, since, as M.-O. Taillard put it in her paper "Beyond communicative intention": "Beyond the informative and communicative intentions lies a highly organized structure of plans and intentions that constitutes much more than just the general context in which communication is produced and understood – it is the driving force behind our interactive and communicative actions" (Taillard 2002: 192). In our thesis we intend to argue, that the extra cognitive layer of mentally metarepresenting cultural (genre) information as being "politically correct" or "politically incorrect" on the part of the addressee, places constraints on relevance of utterances by conveying procedural information, which restricts the range of possible interpretations. In other words, this type of information "makes manifest the direction in which relevance is to be sought" (Sperber&Wilson 1995: 254).

### 3. PC and Ad hoc concepts

One of the central claims we make and aim at developing in our thesis is that most euphemistic PC neologisms are metaphors/metonymies and since, according to G. Lakoff: "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff 1980: 5), these expressions are interpreted as *source* metaphoric representation-domains, which evoke some other *target* representation-domains, on account of the familiarity/conventionality and, hence, saliency of the latter. It is the *target* representation, which makes it possible for hearers to understand and reason about the meaning of the *source* neologism usually in terms of some of the relevant aspects of its conceptual structure (cf. Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez et al. 2001). RT accounts for such kind of language use in terms of the descriptive/interpretive use distinction, by claiming that in certain cases, the relationship between what people say (public representations) and their thoughts (mental representations) is that of interpretive resemblance (Spreber&Wilson 1986, 1995, 1998; Wilson&Sperber, 1992).

One of the newest developments in Relevance Theory is the introduction of the notion of *ad hoc concepts* (Carston 2002). Lexical interpretation typically involves the construction of an *ad hoc concept*, which may be narrower or looser than the concept encoded in the "literal" meaning of the utterance.

As we have mentioned above, in RT, the hearer treats the literal meaning as a clue to the speaker's meaning – as assumption schemas/propositional blueprints, which can be inferentially completed by hearers into a full propositional form using contextual information by means of reference assignment, disambiguation, enrichment and loosening of literal meaning. Within this processing model, the "literal" meaning of a communicated lexeme is modified by hearers as a result of the mutual adjustment of explicatures, implicatures and expectations of relevance. Thus, we can say that RT is more concerned with the syntax of the communicated message, than its semantics, which is pragmatically enriched by the hearers during construction of *ad hoc* concepts. According to Barsalou's theory of ad hoc concept formation, on which the current RT model is explicitly based, frames do not deliver ready-made and stable concepts: "instead of viewing concepts as invariant structures that are retrieved intact from long-term memory when

needed, it may make more sense to view concepts as temporary constructs in working memory that are tailored to current situations" (Barsalou 1987:120).

RT offers an account of lexical pragmatics, on which "lexical-pragmatic processes are triggered by the search for relevance, they follow a path of least effort, they operate via mutual adjustment of explicit content, context and cognitive effects, and they stop when the expectations of relevance raised by the utterance are satisfied (or abandoned)" (Wilson 2004). The construction of ad hoc concepts is undertaken in the search for relevance and results from the mutual adjustment of context, content and cognitive effects, constrained by expectations of relevance raised by the utterance itself.

Following Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez et al. (2001), who argue for the necessity of including conceptual metaphoric mapping into the construction of ad hoc concepts, along with disambiguation, enrichment and loosening into the inferential explicature-construction (note that according to the direct-access view assumed by RT, literal meaning is not processed), we can assume that, for example, in interpreting "John is an African-American", AFRICAN AMERICAN\* will be a non-lexical ad hoc concept merely resembling the concept linguistically encoded in the propositional form of the utterance. The explicature, developed from the linguistic content is communicated along with the various implicatures, and in line with Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez's suggestion about conceptual metaphoric mapping, hearers will activate their encyclopaedic knowledge about "Africa" and culturally attribute the quintessential feature of this concept to the constructed ad hoc concept – the continent, where predominantly black people live, who at some point of history were brought to the continent of North America as slaves. This kind of "forced referencing" will, in turn, activate the terms initially used for slaves in the past, which will be attributed as a cultural property of the neologism. The presumption of relevance does not show hearers how to make such connections, however, it stimulates hearers to seek and construct them. In interpreting this novel expression, hearers will generate attributive ad hoc concepts, which will later develop into a salient conceptual entry in their cognitive systems. In order to become such, according to the Optimal Innovation Hypothesis (Giora 2004), the ad hoc concept relies on the activation of the conventionalized previously used familiar terms, which are "copied" onto a new ad hoc concept and this generates extra rhetorical effects, not achieved by the use of the older term they were coined to replace. Following a path of least effort, hearers will start copying into the new concept logical and encyclopaedic properties of the encoded concept until their expectations of relevance are satisfied, at which point they will stop. As a result of conceptual metaphoric mapping involved in the construction of the ad hoc concept AFRICAN AMERICAN\*, all the negative connotations, associated with the previously used biased expressions will be literally "dragged" onto the new PC term, since, according to Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, the intended explicated meaning is to be found always in the metaphoric target, whatever the interaction pattern is Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez (2001).

We suggest that upon hearing a novel expression, hearers immediately realize that the linguistically encoded meaning and the meaning communicated by the speaker's use of this particular string of words differ. They treat the whole string as a semantic unit (single concept) to which they are to assign some content (a token). Only after hearers start accessing this token automatically as a result of frequent use on numerous occasions, does the new euphemistic PC neologism become a cognitively stable, salient and well-understood concept. With enough exposure, the partially understood concept may develop into a well-understood concept-type (as opposed to a temporary token), which may be stored in the hearer's mental lexicon. Thus, the meaning of the PC neologism is only recognized and understood because the salient target concept is listed and activated in the hearer's mental lexicon. In other words, as the word becomes more and more entrenched through repeated usage, hearers will get more and more used to selecting particular areas in order to form ad-hoc concepts.

The extra cognitive effort resulting from the need for reinterpretation, invested in processing novel utterances is "rewarded" by a wide variety of cognitive effects – which might include the stabilization of a new item in the hearer's semantic memory. According to Pilkinton (2000), such effects are generated when certain contextual assumptions, made more salient through the processing of other utterances guide the interpretation of metaphors. "The wider context causes certain assumptions within the encyclopaedic entries that are explored to become more highly activated and, hence, makes them easier to process and use in the

construction of further assumptions” (Pilkinton 2000: 190). Thus, we suggest that such expressions as “*motivationally challenged, ethnically homogenous area (ghetto, barrio), geological correction (earthquake), law enforcement officer (policeman), uniquely coordinated (clumsy), residentially flexible (homeless), uniquely fortunate individual on an alternative career path (loser) etc.*” are necessarily metarepresented and processed as interpretive, echoic uses by the addressees. According to Sperber & Wilson (1986, 1988) a representation is considered echoic when it reports what someone else has said or thought and expresses an attitude to it (note the characterization of PC expressions as “euphemisms with attitude” discussed above).

The construction of ad hoc concepts in processing of novel PC metaphors and metonymies is carried out along the same lines, the only difference being that, according to Sperber & Wilson (1986:23), by uttering a metaphor the speaker intends to communicate a complex thought and as a result, metaphor draws from a greater variety of encyclopedic assumptions (conceptual metaphoric mapping) and may yield a greater amount of weak implicatures than a metonymy.

#### 4. PC and Politeness

Of central importance to our analysis of functional feasibility of PC is the question of whether it is inferred in discourse and arises in interaction only when the “politically correct” intention is attributed to the speaker by the addressee or anticipated as the default and, therefore, expected linguistic behavior. Generally speaking, if hearers expect a certain type of linguistic behavior to occur that does occur, and this type of linguistic behavior gives rise to “politically correct” interpretations, PC could be regarded as anticipated. On the other hand, if hearers do not expect a certain kind of linguistic behavior to occur, which nevertheless does occur, and this behavior gives rise to “politically correct” interpretations, then PC could be viewed as inferred. In other words, similarly to politeness (Haugh 2003; Terkourafi 2001), PC could be viewed as anticipated linguistic behavior when the behavior, which gives rise to PC interpretations is expected, while it could potentially be regarded as inferred when the behavior giving rise to PC interpretations does not meet hearers’ subconscious expectation regarding what is relevant in interactions.

Polite linguistic behavior shares certain similarities with PC. Similarly to PC, politeness is not a kind of quality humans are born with. It is culture-specific and needs to be taught. However, unlike PC, politeness has a very long history and culture-specific linguistic forms associated with this type of behavior have become conventions of language – an evolutionary stage, which PC is yet to achieve. In our opinion, unlike fully conventionalized, already salient and unmarked politeness, at the current (non-salient) stage of its evolution, PC has not yet become a matter of social adequacy. It is inferred and therefore always communicated, since interlocutors are still aware of the novelty of this kind of discourse and that is, we suggest, precisely what makes it dysfunctional.

What differentiates linguistic forms associated with PC linguistic behavior from polite linguistic behavior is that utterances interpreted as PC meet all the criteria of being Optimally Innovative (OI) while utterances associated with polite linguistic behavior do not. According to the Optimal Innovation Hypothesis (Giora 2004), people are more willing to start using novel language if the neologisms evoke familiar concepts. An (ostensive) stimulus would be optimally innovative if it involves: “(a) a novel—less or non-salient—response to a given stimulus, which differs not only quantitatively but primarily qualitatively from the salient response(s) associated with this stimulus and (b) at the same time, allows for the automatic recoverability of a salient response related to that stimulus so that both responses make sense (e.g., the similarity and difference between them can be assessable. To the extent that a linguistic innovation allows an insight into some salient meanings while promoting new ones, it is optimally innovative and pleasurable” (Giora 2004). This particular non-propositional effect of pleasurability, often makes the “anomalous” interpretation of PC optimally relevant. We assume that the OI interpretation is subconsciously selected as the optimally relevant one, due to the automatic engagement of a sort of protective reflex with the purpose of mitigating potential face-threats and conforming to norms of politeness and social adequacy, as this hedges the negativity associated with the evocation of the undesirable previously used biased expressions.

Having been recognized as interpretively used overtly echoic and the speaker's attitude towards their propositional content as dissociative, politically correct utterances obtain ironic interpretation. We suggest that such an interpretation may also arise as a result of metalinguistic negation, often employed by PC advocates/enforcers in order to correct (metarepresent) either the semantic content of politically incorrect utterances, e.g.: *He's not "dead", he is metabolically challenged* or their linguistic form: *She's not a "chairman", she's a chairwoman*.

In classifying an utterance as "politically correct" or "politically incorrect" hearers use the assumptions conveyed by the utterance to construct higher-level explicatures, under which they may also embed other levels of metarepresentations (i.e. recognition of the lower-order communicative intention discussed above). This can be illustrated by an example involving the echoic use of the generic anaphoric he/she pronoun form:

1. *After the voter makes his or, from what I understand, in some states, her onscreen selection...*

(from "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart", November 3, 2004)

This ironic example is overtly impolite and parasitic on the PC version of this utterance, to which a news anchor is supposed to adhere in covering presidential elections in order to follow the new communication standard: "After the voter maker his/her onscreen selection". The speaker directs the audience to the optimally relevant interpretation, by assuming a dissociative attitude towards the echoic interpretive *his/her* and by producing an Optimally Innovative utterance. The utterance is metarepresented as several higher-level explicatures:

- a) *the speaker is being ironic in saying that P*
- b) *the speaker is being politically correct in saying that P*
- c) *the speaker is pretending to be politically correct in saying that P*
- d) *in saying that P, the speaker is informing us that he assumes **he** to be the standard pronoun form to be used in such contexts*

It evokes the previously used biased *his*, which is, presumably, still perceived as a standard and conventional linguistic form by hearers. At the same time (1) communicates a large amount of such weakly communicated implicatures as:

- e) *In some states, decisions male voters make are significantly influenced by the opinion of their spouses*
- f) *In some states male voters make onscreen decision for themselves and their wives;*
- g) *The speaker does not like the new onscreen voting system, etc.*

As we can see, there are many reasons why a speaker aiming at optimal relevance might decide to use a concept echoically (see Sperber & Wilson 1983:68) - it may provide access to a wide range of contextual implications, it may enable the speaker to express a variety of attitudes, ranging from complete approval to complete rejection, towards the descriptive content of the concept. In RT, irony is viewed as a case of echoic use which has to remain implicit and communicates an attitude of dissociation from the echoed content (Sperber & Wilson 1989).

Unlike the ironic example (1), the cognitive effects resulting from uttering *Could you please tell me what time it is?* are not relevant enough to be noticed by hearers, as politeness has become a default and anticipated type of linguistic behavior or as V. Zegarac puts it: "When I say to you: *Do you mind if I open the window?* I am certainly using a polite form. But am I communicating some polite assumptions? Hardly, provided you assume that I am generally a polite person. True, my utterance does provide evidence of my being polite, but you would not be justified in assuming that I intended it to be relevant in this way. An utterance can hardly be expected to be relevant to the hearer merely by virtue of confirming belief assumptions which are already held at maximal strength (Zegarac 1998: 353). Thus, our conclusion is that political correctness must be explained independently of politeness, as polite communicative behavior is not a necessary feature of political correctness: utterances may be interpreted as politically correct or incorrect irrespective of being polite or impolite.

In this context, we would also like to point out that certain conspicuously coherence disturbing linguistic units achieve relevance by standing out in discourse. Thus, in the English language “positive” attributes normally precede nouns they modify, e.g. *beautiful people*, *healthy people*, *normal people*. In our opinion, the artificially introduced PC alterations of the naturally-evolved grammatical norms to the so-called “people first” linguistic forms (e.g. *people of color*) require gratuitous processing effort without yielding any positive cognitive effects. Thus, the well-formed *normal people* is more relevant than the ill-formed *people of norm* on the processing-effort side, as *people of norm* yields no extra cognitive effects. In order to render this utterance relevant, hearers are forced to access those contextual assumptions, which would render it relevant, for example that the speaker is not being serious (literal) etc. In such cases, hearers start to generate numerous weak implicatures assuming that the speaker intended to communicate an array of non-propositional effects.

## 5. Conclusions/Relevance of anticipated outcomes

Contrary to the claim made in Giora (2003), that politically correct language has effect only when it is novel, in our thesis we will aim at proving that functional feasibility of political correctness as a policy of prescribing and proscribing certain types of linguistic behavior, will gradually increase as its novelty wanes.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, more research is needed to further clarify and exemplify the issues, discussed within the scope of this thesis project. We hope to have shown that lexical change does not solve the problem of discrimination or bias and sometimes even aggravates it. Using politically correct language, which does not reflect the real state of affairs in the social environment, appears to be similar to uttering "What a lovely day for a picnic!" on a stormy day, where hearers weigh propositions expressed by the utterances against a number of incompatibilities detected in simultaneously activated contextual sources in order to estimate whether the utterance is used descriptively or interpretively. According to Yus (2000a, 2000b), the most *salient contextual source*, activated during utterance processing, will be the *leading contextual source*, in determining the type of interpretation the utterance receive and the first (i.e. most salient or accessible) set of properties that yields enough implications to satisfy the expectation of relevance is the only one that satisfies the expectation of relevance, and is the one the audience should choose. According to R. Giora (personal communication), there is experimental evidence that, ironically, for novel language to succeed, in the sense that people will start using it and adhering to it, the novel language must exploit evocation of the (salient) representations it was coined to replace.

In addition to evoking the previously used biased terms, it can be shown that, in use new PC terms substituting the old ones, will acquire all the negative connotations of the terms they were coined to replace, despite being originally distinct on the lexico-semantic level, and will be substituted by still newer ones, until the actual social status of the referent of the term changes. Thus, the word *colored*, once discouraged as a racist term, was replaced by *Negro*; then *Negro* in turn was replaced by *black*; *black* was again replaced by *people of color* and, most recently in the US *African-American* has gained ground against other terms. Thus, it is probably safe to assume that all attempts of language purification will be shattered against the ability of words to acquire new pragmatic connotations in new contexts – a process, described as the “euphemism treadmill” by S. Pinker. As D. Wilson points out, “the repeated application of lexical-pragmatic processes may lead to semantic change: what starts as a spontaneous, one-off affair may become regular and frequent enough to stabilize in a community and give rise to an extra sense” (Wilson 2004).

Similarly to using biased language, the use of PC expressions “allows us to focus more specifically on certain aspects of what is being referred to” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:37). In such cases the speaker is not interested in the person as a person but only as a representative of a certain racial, ethnic, religious etc. group, or a customer, which is why the use of such expressions is dehumanizing (cf. the absence of such terms as *European Americans*, *people living without disabilities*).

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<sup>1</sup> An obvious straightforward way to falsify our analysis would be to find examples of utterances, interpreted as PC, whose use does not evoke previously used biased expressions, because the PC neologisms were not coined with the purpose of replacing them.

We hope that the cognitive pragmatic account outlined here will open up interesting questions for further investigation into the domains of the broader linguistic categories of euphemisms/neologisms and following E.-A. Gutt's unified RT account of translation (Gutt 2000), propose to consider understanding of "new language" in terms of *intralingual* interpretive use. We also hope and that the outcomes of our research will contribute to shedding light on the status of linguistic relativism in the inferential model of communication and on the future of linguistic prescriptivism in general, and will be useful for solving such problems as whether to incorporate PC terminology into TEFL curricula/translator-education programs (and to what extent), and in general result in further recognition of the fact that acquisition of pragmatic and socio-cultural aspects of a language is one of the most important components of second/foreign language education.

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