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Language and social issues: from *Dutch comfort* to *ginger*

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Abstract. The language changes in history reflect our evolutionary attitudes to complex of social issues. The interaction between language and culture may be both overt and covert and manifests itself in showing-up national, religious, gender, and other differences. The English language historically reveals strong bias against women, people of other nations, and non-Christian religions. Nowadays, there is a clash involved between the drive for political correctness and that for clarity of expression.

Keywords: changes, gender bias, language, political correctness, social issues

The relations between language and social life have always been both the cornerstone and stumbling block of interdisciplinary studies. It is known that language is never about the language per se, but about political and cultural influence, immigration, economy, etc. As W. Wolfgram puts it “*We make judgments about regional backgrounds, social status, ethnicity, and a host of other social characteristics based simply on the kind of language people are using*” [7, p. 1]. If the ‘strong version’ of the E. Sapir and B. Whorf’s theory, that language determines the way people think, may sound controversial, the ‘weaker version’, that language differences affect our perception, is quite acceptable [2, p. 15].

The present paper brings to light the dynamics of the language changes in history which reflect our shifting attitudes to racial, religious, gender, and other social issues. The corresponding lexical items and textual sources, both historical and contemporary, serve as material for the paper. The methodology includes method of descriptive analysis, and that of discourse analysis.

The interaction between language and environment may be both overt and covert manifesting itself not only in lexis but on the other language levels. The drawl in the South of the USA, breaking, lengthening, and diphthongization of vowels, might be preconditioned by hot climate and slow pace of life in the region. The signatures of the Scouse accent, the dialect of Liverpool, might be muffled within the sinuses, a feature some linguists attribute to the effect that coal burning had on the nasal passages during the city's industrial period.

The culture of Old Germans in some way ‘promoted’ The First Consonant Shift (Grimm’s Law), interrelated changes in the series of stops and fricatives from Proto-Indo-European to Proto-Germanic languages. What’s the correspondence, if any, between the Kurgan burial of Proto-Indo-European along with the domestic horse and the chariot, ethnic markers of those, on the one hand, and the system of ablaut, a characteristic feature of Indo-European – vocalic alternations accompanied by morphological changes, on the other?

In modern German the process of ‘accusativation’, the substitution of dative case as the one of direct object for accusative with near passive meaning is in full swing, e.g. instead of *einem Waren liefern* it is said *einen mit Waren beliefern* “to supply someone with goods”. The resulting constructions, those with Direct Object, can easily be transformed into Passive Voice making the statements more impersonal. This trend has close connection to circumstances of modern society, where the advance of passive constructions is seen as steady loss of personal ‘free space’, and human beings are regarded as ‘cogs’ of the

system, just ‘tools’ to maintain the ‘machinery’ going [3, p. 119].

Stereotypes of thinking, especially the bias against people of nations other than one’s own, have always been present in any language. Thus the word *barbarian* with an etymological meaning “a foreigner, whose language and customs differ from the native inhabitants” has multiple applications revolving around the basic concept. In Old Greece, it was used for “one who is non-Hellenic”, in the Roman Empire, it referred to one “who lives outside its borders and civilization”, especially to the northern neighbors, Germans. Then, as Christian civilization had taken over, it was applied to an alien outside its domain. In the Italy of the Renaissance, it meant “one of a nation outside Italy”. Chinese used to employ the word to foreigners, as well. In Hebrew the word *goy* with original sense “nation, people (other than Jewish)” now “Gentile”, “not-religious Jew”, has heavy connotative opprobrium. The presumable history of the word *bizarre* may be connected with the Basque word *bizarra* “beard” which gave the sense in Spanish “a man of spirit, choleric” with the negative connotation referring to the Basque people as to their character and appearance.

The English language is no exception and bears the same ugly marks of cultural intolerance and negative connotation towards people of other nations. Thus the expressions with the first item *Dutch* reflect bitter, long-standing struggle and rivalry between two nations for the dominion both in the Old and New Worlds, especially in the 17th century. Apparently, since that time the Dutch acquired, according to OED, “*opprobrious or derisive application... often with allusion to drinking habits ascribed to ‘the Dutch’...to their broad heavy figure*” [6, p. 487]. ‘Dutch’ had become in English a synonym for “foreigner”, “non-English”, “something untrue, ridiculous, weird” as in *Dutch auction, bargain, comfort, lunch, party, treat, feast, treat, act, uncle, to go Dutch, I am a Dutchman*, etc. Through all political correctness, connotation of *Dutch* has little but changed in modern English, as in *Dutch cap* “contraceptive diaphragm”, *Dutch bath* “a sponge bath, one requiring a minimum of water”, *Dutch nickel* “a stolen kiss”, etc.

A long-lasting face-off between the English and Native Americans in the New World brought about negative connotation associated with the latter, as in the following lexical items: *Indian hay* “marijuana”, *Indian giver* “one who gives something to another and then takes it back”, *Indian gift* “such gift”, *Indian wrestling*, *Indian* “temper, dander”.

The list of English disparaging designation for people of nations and races other than Anglo-American along

with association of those is black enough to be thoroughly read through: *Chink* “a person of Chinese descent”, *Chinaman’s chance* “an extremely poor chance”, *frog* “a French person”, *wop* “Italian”, *Dago* “a person of Latino origin”, *Kraut*, *Heinie*, *Fritz* “a German”, *square-head* “a German, Dutchman, or Scandinavian”, *greaser* “a Mexican”, *kike* “Jewish”, *to scotch* “to put an abrupt end to”, *to welsh* “to cheat a person out of money, fail to fulfill one promise”, *bohunk* “a person from east-central Europe”, etc.

The works of W. Shakespeare reflect the strong racial bias: *Hungarian* is ‘base’ [The Merry Wives of Windsor. I.ii. 21-27], as well as Phrygian Turks [ibid. I.ii.94-95], Chinese are ‘sharper, con-men’ from the supposed skillful thieving of those people and ‘scoundrel’ [ibid. II.i.147-149]. Among other examples are: “*I will rather trust a Fleming with my butter, Parson Hugh the Welshman with my cheese, an Irishman with my aqua-vitae bottle, or a thief to walk my ambling gelding than my wife with herself.*” [ibid. II.ii.320-324]; “*liver of blaspheming Jew, ...Nose of Turk, and Tartar’s lips*” make the potion of witches in *Macbeth* [Macbeth. IV.i. 26.29.32].

The famous dialog in The Comedy of Errors [III.ii.117-144] where Dromio of Syracuse speaks of his fat mistress by comparing her body to the globe contains a lot of derogatory remarks of different countries: “...*she is spherical like a globe; I could find out countries in her.*” – Ant. S. “*In what part of her body stands Ireland?*” – Dro. S. “*Mary, sir, in her buttocks: I found it out by the bogs.*” – Ant. S. “*Where Scotland?*” – Dro. S. “*I found it by the barrenness; hard in the palm of the hand.*” – Ant. S. “*Where France?*” – Dro. S. “*In her forehead; armed and reverted, making war against her heir.*” ... Ant. S. “*Where stood Belgia, the Netherlands?*” – Dro. S. “*O, sir! I did not look so low.*”

Religious intolerance was also clearly expressed in the language. Thus in the Middle Ages *maumetry* meant “false religion, heathenism, idolatry” (*maumet* “false god, idol”) from erroneous notion that Prophet Muhammad was worshiped as god and negative connotation with Islam. The word *macabre* with positive evaluation in the Jewish culture and Hebrew language (*Maccabee* “epithet for Jewish patriot Judas Maccabæus”, generally “his supporter, followers, martyrs, fighters for peace” after recorded Jewish revolt against Antiochus IV) was shifted in French, English, and other European languages, as in *danse Macabre* “dance of death” and then to *macabre* with hostile connotation “suggesting the horror of death, gruesome” along with the blunt meaning “referring to a corpse, human remnants”. Another example of that kind is *Sabbath*. Originally, a Jewish holy day of rest, Saturday, has shifted its application to “a night meeting demons, witches and other evil forces presided over by the Devil” in most of European languages mainly because of prejudice against the Jewish culture.

In its turn, the word *assassin* established in many European languages and containing negative evaluation came from Arab *hashīshīyyin* plural of “hashish-eater” with matter-of-fact designation which was used about some Muslim fanatics who in the time of the Crusades intoxicated themselves with drugs to murder Christian invaders.

Even within Christian religion non-orthodox sects were branded as mavericks and the stigma attached to them is reflected in language. Thus *libertines* originally were antinomian sects that arose in the early 16th c. in Europe and their followers confessed the priority of the “law of grace” over binding Christian moral [6, p. 967]. Later, the word *libertine* developed negative connotation as “one of loose moral and irresponsible behavior”, e.g.: “*Why, he is a prince’s jester: a very dull fool; Only his gift is in devising impossible slanders: None but libertines delight in him.*” [Much Ado About Nothing II. i. 144-146]. “*Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven, Whiles, like a puff’d and reckless libertine, Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads.*” [Hamlet. I. iii. 48-50].

Another case in point is gender bias in language in the male-dominated world, so far. A lot of derogatory lexemes originally applied to men gradually crept over the line to be referred exclusively to women, e.g. *Blue Stocking*; *coquette*, diminutive of *coq* “cock”, originally referred to male lover as “beau, womanizer, swank fellow”, then used of both sexes, now spares men from this sense of vanity and its strings attached. *Harlot*, as well, used to designate a worthless male, good-for-nothing, base fellow, villain as early as in the 13th c. Then the connotation was softened as “a man of loose moral”, “juggler, trickster” giving way to positive sense “good man, charming rascal”. G. Chaucer uses the word mostly referring to males: “*He was a gentil harlot and a kind; A better felawe sholde men noght fynde.*” [Prologue, 647-648]. – “*He was a gentle and kind fellow; You would not find a better one.*” Later, from the 15th c. on, the opprobrious sense was finally passed to females only, although W. Shakespeare still uses it frequently in the old sense: “*This day, great duke, she shut the doors upon me, While she with harlots feasted in my house.*” [The Comedy of Errors. V.i. 204-205].

A similar development is observed in the words *bawd* and *brothel*. The former as “pander, go-between, procurer in sexual debauchery”, according to OED [6, p. 113], in most cases originally had been masculine, but since 1700 is used about women-keeper of a brothel. Both G. Chaucer and W. Shakespeare use it in an old sense: “*Thus false thief, the somonour, quod the Frere, Hadde alwey bawdes redy hond, As any hawk to lure in Engelond...*” [The Friar’s Tale, 1338-1340] – “*Thus this false thief, the summoner, the Friar said, Had always a lot of panders, Whom he could easily lure to his hand, as any hawk in England.*” “*He, sir! a tapster, sir; parcel-bawd; one that serves a bad woman.*” [Measure for Measure. II. i. 64-65]. Another word *whore*, with the kindred *Hure* in German refers to women, but its etymology and kindred words clearly show its original male application: Gothic *hors* “adulterer, marriage-breaker”, Latin *cārus* “dear”, Old Irish *cara* “friend”, Lettish *kārs* “lascivious” (all masculine gender). One more set of examples of similar language discrimination against women that reflects social inequality is given by R. Lakoff [4, pp. 19-41]. Through apparent parallelism in terms of relationship the author shows “the linguistic double standard” that holds in applying to men and women. Thus in the pair *master* : *mistress* the former has positive evaluation referring to man’s distinguishing features, accomplishments in some field or power to exercise over others, while its feminine counter-

part mainly implies “a sweetheart, lady-love”. “A man is defined by what he does, a woman by her sexuality...in terms of...her relationship to men” [ibid]. We can add to this the pair *dominus* “lord, master” versus *dame*. The former kept its high status, as in obsolete *domine* of the same sense along with the derivatives *dominion*, *dominium*, while the latter originally meant “female ruler, superior or head, lady” along with a form of address to a woman of rank or woman of position gradually descended to “mistress of the house, housewife”, “old housewife”, “a mother of human beings and animals” and just “woman, girl” used disparagingly in American slang. That change is already reflected in G. Chaucer’s works: “*That Jankyn clerk, and my gossyb dame Alys, And I myself, into the feeldes wente.*” [The Wife of Bath’s Prologue. 548]. – “*That scholar Jankin and my friend housewife Alis And I went in the fields.*”

Tide began to change in the beginning of the 19th c. in America. British travelers witnessed the nascent political correctness there. Thus J. Davis in 1803 wrote: “*Every public-house in the United States, however contemptible, is dignified by the name of Tavern*” [10, p. 32]. F. Cuming in 1807 recorded the abundance of the word *handsome*, as *handsome square roofed house, handsome appearance* (of the city) [9, p. 108]: “*Portsmouth is in a handsome and healthy situation*” [ibid, p. 161], “*handsome bird's eye view of that town*” [ibid, p. 234], *handsome grove* [ibid, p. 250], *handsome fortune* [ibid, p. 324]. *Grocery store* in early American English meant “a licensed one, selling alcoholic drinks”. F. Trollope (1832) noted “[men] of high standing” [22, p. 83], *lady of high standing* [ibid, p. 119], *young lady* (=chambermaid) [ibid, p. 161] and was amused by the word *help* “servant” [ibid, p. 61]. T. Hamilton (1833) mocked American phrases: “*in possession of the floor* (=to take the floor)” [14, p. 83], “*a great improvement*” [ibid, p. 249], as “*On the morning we came to Portland, a wretched settlement, consisting of a store and a few wretched houses. This is what is called, in American phrase, "a great improvement."*”, “*a considerable place*” [ibid, p. 252].

F. Marryat (1839) related the episode when he inquired about the young lady’s leg grazed by the fall. The lady was shocked and said that *limb* would have been a proper word [16, p. 18]. T. Grattan (1859) was scathing about political correctness in the USA: “*filagree phrase and silken term precise of attempted and affected fine speaking*”, he sees here “*underbred affectation... ordinary minds are always afraid of homely words*” [13, p. 55]. Among the author’s examples are *garments* for “clothes”, *mansion* for “house”, *vehicle* for “carriage”, *domestics* for “servants”, the *atmosphere* for “the air”, *where did you worship?* for “*what church were you at?*”, *I opine* for “*I think*”, *an incorrigible inebriate* for “*drunken fellow*”, *corsets* for “*stays*”, *elastics* for “*garters*”, *hose* for “*stockings*”, *limbs* for “*legs*”, *white meat* for “*chicken breast*”, *dark meat* for “*poultry legs*”, *rooster* for “*cock*”, *helps* for “*servants*” [ibid].

I. Bird (1858) also mentions PC. The author very seldom heard profanities which grated on her ear in England. Especially such language was banned before ladies. In general, what struck her the most was the extreme respect and deference of Americans in their manners to ladies. Once, she witnessed as a gentleman gave up his seat in a

stage coach to a young girl and had to stay at the roadside inn for a day and two nights, the episode taken for granted by the fellow-travelers. On another occasion, an author’s friend on leaving a hotel offered a tip of half a dollar to a servant, but “*she drew herself up and proudly replied, 'American ladies do not receive money from gentlemen'*” [8, p. 78]. In England, it would be difficult for the author to travel by railroad unattended, but in the USA, she went several thousand miles on her own.

Max O’Rell (1891) mocks some modes of speech: “*The employees (I must be careful not to say "servants") of the Pennsylvania Railroad.*” [18, p. 83], “*The cold, icy air fell on my legs, or (to use a more proper expression, as I am writing in Philadelphia) on my lower limbs.*” [ibid, p. 266], “*At eleven o'clock I went to bed, or, to use a more proper expression for my Philadelphia readers, I retired.*” [ibid, p. 300].

The criticisms of the officialese, weasel-words, goes back to 1914 when S. Graham gives an example of President Wilson’s speech: “*So far as the prognosticationary and symptomatic problem-aciousness of your inquiry is concerned it appears to me That while the trusts should be regulated with the most unrelentful and absquatulatory rigorosity, yet on the other hand their feelings should not be lacerated by rambunktions and obfusticationary harshness.*” [12, p. 250].

The 20th century witnesses both the growing awareness of society the way it talks about itself along with backlash against political correctness which became “*the most pernicious form of intolerance*”, “*a lethal weapon for silencing anyone whose ideas you don't like*” [2, p. 177]. G. Orwell writes about such manipulation in 1946: “*In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air...: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.*” [19].

Some spheres where the drive to purify language of loaded words in the 21st c. clashes with clarity and transparency may be illustrated, as follows. In the office jargon there are some ‘offenders’, as *synergy* (“*We must find the synergy between what they're offering and our position*”), *I'm thinking in real time, to execute* (“*It's time to execute this action before it's too late*”), *let's take this offline* (“*I'm just conscious of the time in this meeting. Let's take this offline, shall we?*”), *going forward* (“*Going forward, I'd like all of you to think about how to improve efficiency*”), *let's action that* (“*Make sure you action that*”), *to empower* (“*I trust you'll find this webinar really empowering*”), *take*

it to the next level ('Can you take it to the next level and report back?'), to circle-back ('I'm just heading to a really important meeting but we will circle-back later'), we're on a journey ('This organisation is on a journey to a new beginning'), root-and-branch review ('We are undertaking a root-and-branch review of our sales team to identify hits and misses'), staff engagement, to reach out ('I'd like you to reach out to her today and see what she thinks'), work flows ('You all need to improve your work flows'), entrepreneurs (an entrepreneur who works for a large corporate), to leverage ('Let's see if we can leverage these options and drill down to the next level'), inside the box ('I actually think we need to think inside the box on this one'), conscious uncoupling ('You're fired') [20].

In Great Britain, there is an attempt to scrap the traditional teachers' titles – 'Sir' and 'Miss' because they discriminate against women. The Maryland state motto "*Fatti maschii, parole femine*" translated from Italian as "manly deeds, womanly words" is misogynist and sexist, as many experts think [21]. Others insist that the correct idea is "strong deeds, gently words" or "action speak louder than words". Into the bargain, the state song of Maryland calls Abraham Lincoln a '*despot*' and '*tyrant*' ("*The despot's heel is on thy shore... Dear Mother, burst the tyrant's chain*"), and the Union forces '*Northern scum*' ("*Huzza! She spurns the Northern scum*").

On college campuses of the USA, the growing number of students and faculty are challenging the English gender-related names, as *agender*, *bigender*, or unfamiliar gender pronouns *ze*, *sie*, *e*, *ou*, and *ve*, as in the University of Vermont, the University of California. At Mills College students are now called 'first-years' instead of 'fresh women' [15].

British Royal Navy has dropped its traditional sailors' toast to '*our wives and sweethearts*', followed often by

'*May they never meet!*', now they drink to '*their families*'. About half of all U.S. states have moved toward such gender-neutral language at varying levels, from drafting bills to changing state constitutions, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Florida and Minnesota have already completely revised their laws, and Washington is following the lead. Although such words as *manhole* and *manlock* cannot be changed so easily [21].

Another problem is the prejudice against red-haired people. The New Statesman reports about a number of assaults and even murders of red-haired people. Only a ginger can call another ginger *ginger* [11]. Some experts go as far to explain the UK's uniquely aggressive gingerism as "*a form of racism, rooted in anti-Celtic, specifically anti-Irish, prejudice and therefore related to centuries-old matters of imperialism, religious bigotry and war*" [ibid].

Left-handed people are also stigmatized in language, as *southpaw*, *cack-handed*. In Britain, such derogatory names include *buck-fisted*, *cow-pawed*, *corky dobber*, *dolly-pawed*, *gibble-fisted*, *golly-handed*, *keggy*, *squiffy*, and *scoochy* [17]. Experts are at loss, as well, about the way of calling the people who have advanced beyond the middle of their lives: *senior*, *boomers*, *elderly*, *older people*, *older adults*. People can be called *terrorists* and *freedom fighters*, *rioters* and *protesters*, *desperate* and *open-minded*, *heavy-drinking* and *thirsty* depending on our attitude.

Summing up, one can say that language is marching in lockstep with social issues, being influenced by cultural development of society, and in its turn, helps change our stereotypes.

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Крицберг Р.Я. Язык и социальные проблемы: от *Dutch comfort* до *ginger*

Аннотация. Изменения в языке отражают эволюцию нашей оценки комплекса социальных проблем. Взаимодействие между языком и культурой имеет как явный, так и неявный характер и проявляется в выражении национальных, религиозных, гендерных и др. разногласий. Исторически в английском языке всегда существовали предубеждения в отношении женщин, людей других наций и нехристианских религий. Сейчас существует противоречие между стремлением к политической корректности и необходимостью точности выражения в языке.

Ключевые слова: изменения, гендерное предубеждение, язык, политическая корректность, социальные проблемы