

Does political correctness make (social) sense?

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Abstract

Political correctness (PC) norms are highly controversial and have been subject to political and philosophical debate for decades. Yet, surprisingly little empirical research has been conducted to understand if they have any impact at all and, in particular, if and how they affect the perception of and interaction between social groups. In this chapter, we will argue that PC language has tangible consequences for social cognition and, more generally, for human interaction. After presenting the main arguments in favor and against PC norms, we will review and discuss the literature regarding PC principles promoted by APA intended to counter (a) exclusive language, (b) essentialising labels, (c) asymmetrical comparisons and (d) offensive language.

[112 words]

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Most countries in Northern America and Europe have laws and regulations that define what is appropriate or inappropriate language. PC embraces many different speech codes and refers to a wide variety of speech acts, ranging from blatantly offensive speech or “hate speech” to more subtle forms of discrimination such as the generic use of the masculine forms (e.g., *fireman*) or of nouns rather than adjectives to describe social groups¹. In many countries, blatantly abusive language or hate speech is regulated by national laws, whereas the softer forms of discriminatory speech are generally subject to rules and regulations of organizations, such as political institutions (parliament, city governments), educational institutions (schools and universities), industry, media organizations and professional organizations (such as the American Psychological Association, APA). PC norms primarily aim at preventing abusive or discriminatory language, but in case of severe violations, individuals may face lawsuits and/or disciplinary actions.

An example of PC rules of a professional organization is the APA Publication Manual (2009) that most readers are likely to be familiar with. APA provides precise guidelines for authors, including the avoidance of pejorative and biased language. As a general rule, APA suggests to avoid language that could cause offense and to use designations that the target group would prefer to be called by. Also, APA suggests that authors use inclusive language. Although this rule applies, in principle, to any social group it has mainly been discussed with respect to gender-inclusive language (e.g., *native language* rather than *mother tongue*, *police officers* rather than *policemen*, *humans* rather than *men* to refer to human beings). Another rule is to avoid asymmetrical language that implies different status (such as *man and wife* or *Mr.* and *Miss*) or in which one group becomes the standard against which other groups are compared. Finally, APA suggests to avoid essentializing language that equates persons with their condition (*the depressive*, *the schizophrenic*, *the epileptic*) and that implies that the physical or

psychological condition is the very essence of the person. The recommendation is to use alternative language forms that put the individual at the center and treat the disease as one out of many attributes. One possible way to avoid essentializing implications is to use adjectives rather than nouns (*depressive individuals*), the other is to follow the *person-first* principle (*patients diagnosed with depression*). Thus, APA rules include at least four important principles, namely the avoidance of offensive, exclusive, asymmetrical and essentializing language.

The PC controversy

Although common in many organizations, PC norms are highly controversial and have been subject to political and philosophical debate for decades (see Wilson, 1995, and Hughes, 2010, for overviews). The main argument in favor of politically correct speech is that language not only reflects, but also channels thought. How messages are framed significantly affects how they are interpreted, processed and remembered. Thus, if democratic societies prohibit discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, gender, age, disability, religion, beliefs etc., then this same principle should not only hold for behaviors, but also for speech acts, assuming that speech acts are one type of behavior.

However, critics have been very vocal by raising a number of arguments against PC rules. First, PC is seen as violating the principle of free speech. In fact, many opponents of PC have argued that speech should not be censored or suppressed on any grounds, at times equating PC with “*thought police*”, “*totalitarianism*” or “*McCarthyism of the left*”. Second, many critics claim that PC rules interfere with the natural flow of speech production as speakers have to monitor consciously what they are saying. This argument holds particular in earlier stages of a language reform, whereas most PC expressions are likely to become automatic over time, much like seat-belt use initially required conscious monitoring but became automatic shortly after the introduction of seat belt laws. Third, some PC rules (such as gender-fair language) are seen as complicated and as destroying the natural beauty of language. As a case in point, in the 1990ies the feminization of occupational nouns in French language

was strongly supported by the Quebec government, whereas the *Académie Française* in Paris thought that this constituted an affront to the logic and beauty of the French language. Although the judgment of what constitutes *beauty* in language is largely subjective, it has been used as an argument against PC rules.

Finally, many opponents believe that PC is an unlikely tool to create equality, as it introduces a superficial and hypocritical correction unable to hide the speaker's true attitude. In fact, at times, PC forms appear exaggerated and illogical such as when groups are described by what they are not or by what they are lacking. In Italian, blind people are often called *non vedenti* (non-seeing) and people in wheel chairs or on crutches are referred to a *non-deambulanti* (non-deambulating), whereas the organizations representing these groups often use the more common term, for instance defining themselves as *blind*. Moreover, when substituting offensive group labels (e.g., *Nigroe*) with new, politically correct labels (e.g., *Black*), any new term will soon take on the negative connotation of former expressions (Pinker, 2007). This argument, known as “euphemism treadmill”, refers to the fact that politically correct substitutes for offensive terms may quickly lose their positive connotation, creating the need for repeated replacements. Examples for this process are terms describing mental disability (*moron, mentally retarded, mentally challenged, with an intellectual disability, learning difficulties* and *special needs*) or race (*Nigger, Nigroe, Black, Afro-American, African-American*). An interesting exception to this process of repeated replacement is the term *gay* that has maintained its positive or neutral valence since the 1920ies, when it was coined by the gay community.

The above list of arguments illustrates that PC has been criticized on very different grounds and for very different reasons, some of which are best addressed by other sciences. For instance, the subordination of free speech vs. politically correct speech (or vice versa) is mainly a philosophical and legal matter, whereas the “beauty-of-language” argument is best judged by linguists. However, the question of the effectiveness of PC is an empirical question that falls into the realm of competence of

psychological research. But what evidence is there that speaks to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of PC norms? In the subsequent sections we will review the existing literature, together with some unpublished studies, addressing the main PC strategies. We will report evidence that PC language affects cognition and behavior and that it does mostly (but not exclusively) in the intended direction. Following the main suggestions included in the APA manual on how to avoid linguistic biases, we will briefly review the literature on the four main principles, namely the avoidance of (a) exclusive language, (b) essentialising labels (c) asymmetrical and (d) offensive language.

Exclusive language

As far as exclusive language is concerned, professional organizations such as APA are encouraging writers and speakers to pay attention to expressions that make some social categories salient, others invisible, or that exclude individuals or entire categories. An example are the terms referring to people's first language which, in the past, were described as *mother tongue (in English)*, *Muttersprache (in German)* or *lingua madre (in Italian)*, as if children were to learn language exclusively from mothers while their fathers apparently kept silent for about 3 years. In most languages in North America and Europe, these terms have now been replaced by more inclusive ones, such as *native language (in English)*, *Erstsprache (in German)*, and *lingua nativa o prima lingua (in Italian)*. Also, questions or response alternatives (e.g., *single, married, divorced*) are often framed so as to exclude unmarried heterosexual partners or same-sex couples (especially in countries or states in which homosexual marriage is still prohibited). Unless researchers are specifically interested in the legal status of their participants, more inclusive questions about "partnership" or "cohabitation" are better able to capture different forms of partnership.

Undoubtedly the most extensive line of research on inclusive language refers to gender-fair language, especially in grammatical gender languages where the explication of gender is mandatory. This research has shown that women tend to be overlooked when masculine forms are used, whereas

politically correct neutralizations and splitting-forms, naming both women and men, increase the social visibility of women. Stahlberg, Sczesny, and Braun (2001) conducted a survey-type research in which German participants were asked to indicate their favorite writer, actor, musician or athlete. The linguistic form was varied so that the question was either framed in the masculine form (e.g., *Athlet* [m]) or in one of two inclusive PC forms (neutralization or splitting-form, e.g., *Athlet* [m] *oder Athletin* [f]). As expected, participants named more women when inclusive language was used, suggesting that the masculine form inhibits access to female exemplars stored in memory (see Stahlberg, Braun, Irmen, & Sczesny, 2007, for an overview of the literature on gender-fair language). Also reading time experiments conducted in German confirmed this bias (Irmen & Roßberg, 2004). When perceiving incongruence between a person's sex and the language form they are described with, participants' reading times slowed down (e.g., congruent phrase: *Artists* [m] *can be very moody. This is sometimes difficult for their wives*; incongruent phrase: *Artists* [m] *can be very moody. This is sometimes difficult for their husbands*). This indicates that women were not mentally included when the masculine form was used. Irmen and Roßberg (2004) moreover found evidence that gender-stereotypicality of professions influences mental representations. Stereotypically masculine professions (e.g., *Astronaut*) resulted in longer reading times in the incongruent condition than stereotypically feminine professions (e.g., *Kindergarten teacher*). That gender-stereotypicality is inherent in role nouns, was also found in other languages, such as Italian, Spanish, English and French (Cacciari & Padovani, 2007; Carreiras, Garnham, Oakhill, & Cain, 1996; Gabriel, Gygax, Sarrasin, Garnham, & Oakhill, 2008).

The practical implications of these linguistic biases have been shown in various fields of applications. For instance, Hamilton, Hunter and Stuart-Smith (1992) found that the masculine form penalizes women in court decisions and Stahlberg and Sczesny (2001) reported similar results for public opinion polls. Also workplace decisions are highly influenced by language. Bem and Bem (1973) demonstrated that women perceived a lack of fit, when reading job ads in the masculine form

and subsequently were less willing to apply for the offered position. Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell and Laasko (2011) argued that language is closely associated to economic and social gender equality. Their findings suggest a greater gender gap in countries with grammatical gender languages than in those with other language systems, and this remained consistent even after controlling for other relevant factors such as religion and type of political system. Despite the overwhelming empirical evidence, there are still many voices arguing against gender-fair, inclusive language. Slovenko (2007) calls gender-fair language “an absurdity and a distraction from serious social issues” and refers to it as a “loony idea promoted by ideologically deranged feminists” (p. 96). Along the same lines Kreeft (2005) states that turning to gender-fair forms would mean to give up one’s “linguistic sanity” (p. 36).

Given that empirical results convincingly demonstrate the importance of gender-fair language, public policy seems nevertheless moving towards PC gender-fair language use. For example derogatory feminine suffices such as *-ess* in *Quakeress*, *Actress* or *Jewess* have almost been abolished from today’s English (Miller & Swift, 2001) and many associations have adopted gender-inclusive language rules (e.g., American Medical Association, National Council of Teachers of English). Language guidelines released by political institutions (such as the European Parliament) are generally in favor of gender-fair language use. For instance, the UNESCO Guidelines for Gender-Neutral Language (UNESCO, 1999), which were approved by its 193 member states, have become one of the most established commonly cited guidelines with regard to gender-fair language for the English language. The UNESCO aimed at establishing guidelines in order “...to transform behavior and attitudes that legitimize and perpetuate the moral and social exclusion of women” (p. 3) under the premise that current language usage was “exclusionist to women and girls” (see Moser, Sato, Chiarini, Dmitrow-Devold, & Kuhn, 2011, for an overview of the gender-fair language guidelines).

Essentialising labels

The second rule imposed by APA regards the politically correct labeling of people. The linguistic guidelines suggest avoiding categorizations whose framing essentializes people's membership and reduces their individuality and personhood. In particular, individuals should not be equated with their conditions. There are different linguistic strategies to put the individual person at the center, namely (a) to add report on the condition after having provided individualizing information (*individuals with depression, a person with hearing impairment*), and (b) to use adjectives (*depressive individuals, older people*) rather than nouns (*the depressives, the elderly*).

By the age of two, children are able to distinguish between different word classes, recognizing that nouns refer to objects, adjectives to properties and verbs to actions. As investigated from several theoretical perspectives, the use of these linguistic elements in describing a person strongly affects the information conveyed about the person. Nouns are the primary linguistic instrument used to describe a person's social membership and, compared to other forms, nouns tend to enhance the essentialism and the permanence of this membership (Markman, 1989). Nouns are the grammatical form used to indicate objects and hence their application to human beings may promote an object-like perception. For instance, referring to somebody as "the depressive" may prevent listeners from noting other characteristics of the person. A chair is defined by specific properties and functions (e.g., *it is used to sit on and is part of the furniture*) and any irrelevant information (e.g., *whether it can also be used for cooking or be part of sport gear*) is prevented by that definition. As we do for objects, when we label a person using a noun, we de-personalize her/him, thus equating the person with his/her conditions or group membership. In order to avoid these implications, APA suggests two alternatives to nouns, namely adjectives (*depressive individuals*) or the "person-first" strategy (*individual diagnosed with depression*), in which the condition or membership is defined as a characteristic owned by the target rather than being equated with her/his identity.

To our knowledge, the first evidence regarding the impact of nouns and adjectives in people's descriptions was provided by Markman and Smith (as cited in Markman, 1989). In one study the authors presented two descriptions of targets to undergraduate students. One of the descriptions used a noun (e.g., "*John is a sexist*") and the other an adjective (e.g., "*John is sexist*"). The two descriptions were pretested to check their semantic similarity and to assure that they referred to the same class of people. The presentation order of the two descriptions was counterbalanced. Participants were asked to choose which description was in their opinion the more powerful statement about the target and to justify their choice. Noun descriptions were selected more frequently (68%) as the most powerful statement because participants thought that nouns were more informative about the target and referred to more central and stable features of the person. In another study, participants were either presented with statements presenting several targets using nouns (e.g., "*Suppose the person is an intellectual*") or adjectives (e.g., "*Suppose the person is intellectual*") and then asked to list other properties of the targets. When the target was presented with a noun it triggered more additional attributes than when it was presented with an adjectives. Therefore nouns are more powerful and trigger more inferences than adjectives.

Similar findings have also been reported by Carnaghi, Maass, Gresta, Bianchi, Cadinu, and Arcuri (2008) who had participants draw inferences from simple statements such as *Mark is homosexual* vs. *Mark is a homosexual*. In line with hypotheses, Carnaghi et al. found that nouns (vs. adjectives) facilitate stereotype-congruent inferences, but inhibit incongruent ones. Also, in the case of nouns, the relevant characteristic (e.g., *being intelligent or athletic*) is perceived as more essentialistic and, indeed, takes on a quasi-genetic quality, whereas the same property described by adjectives is perceived as a less stable and less enduring feature of the individual. Finally, and most importantly, this research shows that alternative classifications are inhibited when nouns rather than adjectives are used.

Thus, once a person has been labeled by a noun, it becomes difficult to imagine the same person along different social dimensions.

An unpublished study by Maass, Lindenthal and Carnaghi has extended this reasoning to the clinical realm, presenting psychiatric patients either under a noun (*a schizophrenic*) or an adjective label (*schizophrenic*). After reading the case descriptions, clinical students in their last year of training attributed the causes of the disorder more to genetic and less to environmental reasons and were less optimistic about the prognosis when noun labels were used. Importantly, however, this was true only in German where differences between nouns and adjectives are very marked (adjective *schizophren* vs. noun *ein Schizophrener*), but not in Italian where the difference lies only in the absence or presence of the article (adjective *schizofrenico* vs. noun *uno schizofrenico*). On one side, this study confirms that nouns are more essentializing than adjectives, on the other side it also suggests that the magnitude of the difference between nouns and adjectives depends on the grammatical features of a given language. Together, the above studies allow us to conclude that adjectives are indeed the more politically correct form compared to nouns, since adjectives safeguard the personhood of the target individual by reducing the strength, essentialism and stability of the ascribed membership.

The second strategy proposed by APA is to the person-first strategy, namely to first introduce the person and then use a descriptive clause indicating the relevant characteristic. The additional description usually requires the use of a verb, which makes the information more context-dependent and less permanent and pervasive (e.g., *individuals diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder*). The role of verbs in social cognition has been introduced by the Linguistic Category Model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988) according to which verbs define a situation in a more concrete way, whereas adjectives are more abstract. In comparison to adjectives (e.g., *being aggressive*), verbs (e.g., *acting aggressively*) imply greater context-dependence and lesser stability over time. This characteristic of linguistic abstraction has been applied to the context of intergroup relations and several studies have

shown that linguistic abstraction can be strategically used to affirm positive characteristics of the ingroup (“*we are friendly*”) and negative characteristics of the outgroup (“*they are aggressive*”). At the same time, the stability of negative information about the ingroup (“*we have insulted that person*”) and positive information about the outgroup (“*they have helped that person*”) is reduced by using a concrete language (see Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989).

Gelman and Heyman (1999) compared nouns or verbs in relation to attitude inferences. They asked 5 and 7-years old children to rate the strength of the characteristic of a person described using a noun (e.g., Marc is a carrot eater) or a verb (e.g., Marc eats carrots whenever he can) and showed that the attitude inferred by a noun-description was perceived as stronger compared to the attitude inferred by a description using a verb. Walton and Banaji (2004) replicated these findings with adults, and confirmed that the perception of the strength of the attitude was based on the grammatical form rather than on the content. In two additional studies, the authors showed that also own attitudes were affected by the linguistic structure of the sentence in which an attitude were described. When the description involved a noun as the keyword for communicating the attitude (e.g., *I am a Shakespeare reader*) the attitude was subsequently rated as more essential compared to when the attitude was described using a verb as keyword (e.g., *I read Shakespeare a lot*) (Walton & Banaji, 2004, Study 2 and 3). It is therefore clear that the strength, stability and resilience of the information communicated by nouns is stronger than the semantically corresponding information communicated by verbs.

Whether verbs are also better suited than adjectives is an issue that needs to be further examined. According the previously described Linguistic Category Model, verbs represent the most concrete level of an ideal linguistic abstraction line, and therefore verbal descriptions should be the least essentialing structure to describe a person. In line with this idea, Wigboldus, Semin and Spears (2000) showed that when a target person is defined with an adjective (e.g., *Sandra is emotional*) the dispositional

inferences are stronger compared to those triggered by a corresponding verb description (e.g., *Sandra brushes away a tear from her eyes*).

The most direct test of APA's rule to avoid essentializing expressions come from a set of studies of Reynaert and Gelman (2007) who compared the implication of three wording strategies (i.e., noun labels, adjectives and verbs) on the perception of illness. The authors presented participants with three wordings of imaginary illnesses (e.g., "*he has baxtermia*", "*he is baxtermic*", "*he is a baxtermic*") and asked which wording made the illness seem to be more permanent over time and showed that the noun form conveys the higher level of permanence, the verb form the lowest with the adjective form occupying an intermediate position.

Together the studies reported here confirm that noun labels (e.g., *Mark is a paralytic*) equate the condition with the person's identity, leaving little space to other possible identities or to changes over time. Adjectives (e.g., *Mark is paralytic*) improve the situation, but still the ascribed characteristics are thought to be relatively context-independent and relatively enduring. The most correct wording to define a person is by using a sentence that puts the person first and then describes the possession of a characteristic (e.g., *Mark has been diagnosed with paralysis* or *Mark has a paralysis*).

Asymmetrical comparisons. A third important suggestion advanced by the APA Manual to reduce linguistic biases is to pay attention to social comparisons. When two (or more) social groups or individuals are compared, it is desirable to avoid the use of one group or person as the normal or standard, especially if that group or person is the higher status representative. Biased comparisons can take many different forms, some of which are rather transparent (e.g., *men and girls, borderline vs. normal, lesbians vs. normal women*), others are very subtle such as when the order of mentioning favors one group over the other, implicitly making the first mentioned group the standard against which the other is compared. Hegarty, Watson, Fletcher and McQueen (2001) investigated the order of romantic partners' names and showed that speakers spontaneously tend to mention first the partner

possessing more stereotypically masculine traits. The same bias is found in graphs, given that both scientists and lay people place the bar representing men or powerful group members to the left (i.e., before, in a left-to-right writing system) of women or of powerless group members (Hegarty, Lemieux, McQueen, 2010; Hegarty and Buechel, 2006). In this way we subtly confirm the social bias that maleness comes before femaleness.

Choosing one group as the norm to which others are compared has deep social roots and important consequences. Pratto, Korchmaros and Hegarty (2007) showed that powerful groups are typically used as the standard against which powerless groups are compared. Similarly, Bruckmüller and Abele (2010) found that the group that was used as the norm of a comparison was perceived as higher in status and more powerful, despite the fact that a previous pretest had attested to the similarity of the groups. Finally, Bruckmüller, Hegarty and Abele (2012) showed that when gender differences in status were linguistically framed proposing men as referent group (e.g., *Compared to males, females are ...*), these differences were perceived as larger and more legitimate. How we frame social comparisons has important consequences for how we perceive social groups and for how legitimate we believe the social difference is. Thus, language and cognition are part of a self-perpetuating cycle in which linguistic bias derives from the stereotypical status ascribed to groups and reinforces and legitimates it, contributing to the maintenance of the status quo.

Offensive language. The fourth and most obvious violation of PC is the use of offensive language. In extreme cases, the offense is so blatant that there is little doubt about the derogatory intent of the speaker such as when racial or ethnic slurs are used. Even overhearing such terms or being subliminally exposed to them induces a shift in evaluations of the target group. For instance, studies comparing exposure to offensive (e.g., *fag*) vs. politically correct language (e.g., *gay* or *homosexual*) have consistently shown that offensive language induces more negative attitudes and more

discriminatory behaviors toward the targeted minority group than politically correct language (see Carnaghi & Maass, 2007, for an overview).

However, often labels are not clearly derogatory, but have a vaguely negative connotation. For instance, the suffix *-ess* in English (*actress*) or *-essa* in Italian (*professoressa, avvocatessa*) often conveys lesser status than alternative forms (e.g., *professora, avvocata* see Merkel, Maass, & Frommelt, in press). These subtle forms make it more difficult for listeners to discover the discriminatory nature of discourse and are therefore an important target of language reforms and speech codes. For instance, in many languages the professional noun for *garbage collector* has been substituted by new terms that give greater dignity to the professional collecting waste. The English *garbage collector* turned into a *sanitation worker* and the Italian *spazzino* became an *operatore ecologico*. Such transformations are generally ridiculed by opponents of PC-language rules. But are these new PC labels able to change the image of those performing the profession? Many professional labels, especially those of low-status professions (*janitor, garbage collector*) have undergone changes in labeling, yet it remains unclear whether such changes also led to shifts in the public image of the professions and in the perceived hierarchy within organizations. For instance, if *School Principal* and *Janitor* are now called *Head Teacher* and *School Custodian* will this change the perceived distance between the two professional roles? Will it ultimately affect the interaction between school principals and janitors?

To investigate this question, we have recently conducted a set of studies in which dated professional labels were compared to novel, politically correct labels (Maass, Barbiero, & Suitner, unpublished). As a first step (pilot study), we identified work settings in which linguistic labels for specific pairs of high vs. low status jobs had undergone a clear change over the past 30 years. This was done on the basis of legal documents and on interviews, which led to the selection of 4 professional role pairs, referring respectively to School, Hospital, Factory, and Company settings. For each pair, one

role was subordinate to the other in the organizational hierarchy and both roles had undergone a change in language over the past decades. For instance, in the case of the school setting, the roles can roughly be translated into “Principal” vs. “Janitor” in the case of the dated labels and as “Head of School” vs. “School Attendant” or “School Custodian” in the case of current labels. The current labels correspond to those now used in job advertisements and in legal documents. Some of the new labels have already entered the popular vocabulary, whereas in other cases the old labels are still used in informal discourse, as in the case of the “school attendant” who is still referred to as “janitor” or of the “health operator” who is still referred to as “nurse” in everyday speech.

The aim of the first study was to test whether different professional role labels would suggest different degrees of interpersonal and institutional distance. Participants were exposed either to dated or to current (PC) labels and asked to indicate the perceived interpersonal and institutional distance between the professional roles of each pair as well as the degree of overlap between the roles. They also were asked to provide estimates of the likely income and of the relative prestige and autonomy. Findings were consistent across variables. Current politically correct labels made observers believe that the interpersonal and institutional distance was significantly smaller than when dated labels were used. Similarly, the professional overlap between the two roles was judged greater and the perceived difference in prestige and autonomy smaller when professions were described by politically correct labels. Also, differences in salary were judged somewhat greater for the dated (2290.70 Euro) than for the current label (2041.57 Euro) labels, although this difference was non-significant, probably due to the fact that participants found it difficult to estimate the salaries, resulting in considerable variance in estimates. Together, these findings illustrate a strong effect of linguistic label on how distant professional roles are perceived, with modern labels implying a much smaller distance between superior and subordinate roles. Although confirming our expectations, the findings of Study 1 only refer to perceptions of external observers, but provide little insight into the way in which linguistic

labels channel the actual behavior of those to whom the labels refer. If professional role labels are as powerful as Study 1 suggests, then they may also affect the way in which people enact their respective roles.

This question was investigated in a subsequent study, which used a role-play methodology in which an interaction between high and low status professionals was simulated by pairs of participants. We selected two of the four work settings from Study 1, namely School and Company, in which pairs of participants either simulated an interaction between a school principal and a janitor at a school or between a manager and an employee at a company. Within pairs, participants were randomly assigned to either the high or the low status role and had to perform a number of tasks, some of which constituted individual, others collective dependent measures.

The most important individual measure was leadership style (corrected for pre-experimental leadership style assessed a few weeks before the study). Overall, people claimed more leadership abilities when politically correct rather than dated labels were used, but this was entirely due to those assigned to low status professions. Thus, lower (but not higher) status professionals claimed greater leadership capacities in the recent than in the dated label condition.

The remaining measures represent collective responses regarding funding allocation, a salary bonus, and the construction of a hypothetical organization chart. We had expected that, collectively, participants in the current (vs. dated) label condition would distribute funds and salary bonus in a more egalitarian way and that they would represent their roles as less distant on a hypothetical organization chart. With the exception of the salary bonus, these predictions were born out. When negotiating how to distribute funds that would mainly favor one or the other professional role, resources were indeed assigned more fairly when politically correct new labels were used. Interestingly, an exactly opposite trend emerged for the collective decision on how to distribute a salary bonus to be divided between the two roles. Here, a greater salary bonus was assigned to the low (rather

than high) status role in the dated label condition. Presumably, participants considered the low status person more needy of salary compensation when the dated (rather than current) labels were used.

The last collective task consisted of the construction of a hypothetical organizational chart. Participants were provided with a number of possible roles (e.g. teacher, lab technician, gardener), including their own roles, and asked to jointly develop an organizational chart of their organization as they envisaged it. This allowed us to calculate 2 measures, namely the relative distance between high vs. low status role and the number of intermediate positions. As predicted, the distance between the two professional roles in the organizational chart was greater when dated than when recent labels were used. A similar pattern emerged when looking at the number of intermediate ranks which was greater when a dated than when the recent label was used. Together, our research suggests that PC labels are by no means irrelevant in organizational settings and may effect both the perception of external observers and the individual and collective behaviors of actors within the organization.

Conclusion

Together, the small but growing psychological literature on PC language suggests that rules such as those of APA may have tangible effects on the listener, the reader, and sometimes even on the speaker. To a large degree, these effects are in line with the non-discrimination goals of PC policies, thus illustrating their effectiveness. Professional role labels may even affect those enacting these roles, although more research is needed to assure that this also holds for real work settings. Indeed, with the possible exception of research on gender-fair language, empirical research is not only sparse, but also mainly limited to controlled experiments, whereas only few attempts have been made to test the effects of PC rules in the field. The limited amount of empirical investigation is quite in contrast to the lively and often heated debate surrounding PC, where proponents and opponents take rigid positions on purely ideological grounds. In practice, PC rules are often grounded in idealistic and wishful intuition rather than being guided by solid empirical evidence.

The current overview shows that PC language rules do have concrete and multifaceted consequences that are likely to be driven by a multitude of processes. Language guides our attention, making groups salient or invisible, as in the case of the “generic” masculine forms. It also affects our inferences by creating links between people and the groups they belong to or by suggesting that a given feature is an essential, deeply rooted aspect of an individual, as in the case of essentializing language. Language also channels interpretation as in the case where one group – according to a simple criterion of temporal or spatial ordering - is taken as the standard with which the other is being compared. Such asymmetries are created not only through language but also through seemingly objective tools such as graphs. Finally, language affects our affective reactions towards individuals and groups, as in the case of offensive language, and it creates or reduces status hierarchies, as in the case of professional role labels. The functions reviewed here are by no means exhaustive, but illustrate the multitude of effects that language can have on our cognition. Most of these language tools are very subtle and, hence, difficult to control, although extensive experience with language reforms around the world suggests that people are able to learn new language rules that are likely to become automatic and to sound “natural” after short periods of practice. Our review suggests that such practice may be worth the effort if one wants to create more inclusive, symmetrical, and democratic organizations.

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Footnote

¹Although PC embraces many other aspects (behavior, economic and social policies etc.) aimed at reducing offense on the basis of gender, race, occupation, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, age, beliefs etc., in this chapter we will exclusively focus on language.