

**The Linguistic Trap – Experimental Study of Political (In)correctness as
Motivated Social Cognition**

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Abstract

Although the concept and message of political correctness (PC) spread all around the world and influenced the everyday language use and terminology, a cross-cultural methodology of how to reach the impact of the effect of political correct and incorrect terms hasn't been developed. In our paper we unfold a cross-culturally applicable "golden" path how to conduct a research upon political correctness. Through our own experiences and made mistakes introducing five different sampling and/or experimental method we'd like to show the correct model of studying (a)different samples (university vs. random), (b)different media effects (newspaper vs. television news), (c)different messages (harshness and directness) and (d)show, how to collect relevant keywords fitting your cultural character and historical background. Beyond that, the methodological difficulties of the research of political correctness and our model could open a door to a broader perspective of catching out the effect of media.

I. The linguistic basis of PC

The theory of political correctness (PC) can be originated to the debate about whether and how language can influence thinking. Whorf (1997/1956) in his famous book claimed that we can find a direct relationship between specific language production and the way of thinking through cultures. In his well-known example he compares the concept of time in the Hopi Indian and American culture. While – he argues – the Hopi Indians mark the time just in relative, not in absolute terms like the American English, therefore they will experience another sense of time as well. In his theory which is usually referred as *linguistic determination*, Whorf presumed a direct influence of language on the people's cognitive processes. Although Whorf's theory was challenged several times (e.g. Rosch, 1973) the idea that language can influence the way of thinking remained and had a great influence on the PC movement. Recent cognitive psychological research (e.g. Boroditsky, 2001) showed that although looking back, Whorf hypothesis seems to be too radical, the language can and does shape the way of thinking, therefore we can accept the concept of *linguistic relativism*.

Nevertheless PC thinking doesn't rely solely on linguistic bases but it emphasizes the language's social function alike. For instance studies (Penn and Nowlin-Drummond, 2001)

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showed that while people tend to have less empathy and more negative emotions for the people with linguistic labels such as “schizophrenic”, “suffers from schizophrenia” or “suffers from serious mental illness”, they are more opened to the PC form of “consumer of mental health system”.

II. PC in news and media

However the media and the news are trying to use PC phrases several studies suggested that considerable differences can be found in the word usage of news. A study (Máté-Tóth and Juhász, 2007) found that the press contents and naming of new religious movements (NRMs) highly depend on the context which they are discussed in. When the context is negative they rather called “cults” or “sects” for NRMs, while if the context is positive they are referred “small churches” or “new religious movements” instead. Another paper (Halmari, 2010) provided similar findings: in Houston Chronicle’s articles about the mentally challenged people incorrect labels emerged when they introduce stories about deviance, defencelessness related to them, or it was imaginary (e.g. movie or novel characters).

Not just the words, but even the visual contents can affect the people’s memory about news. Strange, Garry, Bernstein and Lindsay (2010) pointed out that pictures about never happened news events can induce false memories of the event. These results, in line with other previous articles (e.g. Braun, Ellis and Loftus, 2002) emphasize the importance of visual presentations in the media.

III. The goals of our paper

Although, the results of the PC movement seems promising we missed the systematic, cross-cultural studies behind the concept. Our goal was to develop a “correct” cross-culturally applicable methodology to study PC concepts across cultures. We wanted to include a strong applied basis in our inquiry therefore we built in the News genre in our study. We were also interested in the different media modalities, different messages and their specific effect on the people.

Our research has four main parts. First, we tried to unfold what kind of linguistic association do people draw about one of the most stereotyped groups in Hungary, the “gipsy” community. Second, we checked whether the words used in the television news have a special effect on individuals’ evaluation of a criminal event. And finally, we tested the effect of written news media’s impact on the people’s evaluation of a crimes.

IV. First, preliminary study

In our first study we gathered a community sample of 128 people. We use free-association method to indicate their opinion about specific minorities (Gypsies/Romas, Jews, Chinese, Svábs [minority with German origins], Turks). We chose to concentrate on the Hungarian Gypsy minority, which was the victim of many political and physical attacks from right-wing radicals in the previous years. According to the report of the international think tank Political Capital: *“The Hungarian domestic common talk has become the prisoner of the far-right explanation.”* (Political Capital, 2008). The politically incorrect manifestations against many minorities (especially the Hungarian Gypsies) became a commonplace. Therefore it wasn't surprising that most of the people associated the Gypsies/Romas with criminality (e.g. theft, burglary), immorality (e.g. laziness, strong uncontrolled sexual activity) and social marginalization (e.g. poorness, low-education). After these results we wanted to concentrate on how likely individuals associate specific types of crimes with the Gypsies. We asked them (108 people) to evaluate on a 1-10 Likert-scale whether or not a crime can be typically associated with the Gypsy minority. We picked two of the least likely solutions (“attacking a money delivery car” and “uprooting and stealing an ATM”) and built into our studies.

V. Second study

In our second study we prepared a typical television news which had five parts: in the first part they heard a story about a newly built barrage, which was followed by the manipulated news about the robbery of a money delivery car. The third evoked an international event of clearing out the Eiffel-tower due terrorist threat. The fourth was news about the new list members of Hungarian intellectual heritage, finally, a funny story about the Swiss economic minister' unbearable laugh during his speech at the parliament. None of the news contained any political or otherwise sensitive parts even the story about the terror threat in Paris was rather cheerful, with interviewed tourists. In the second news we built in six different conditions and used a 3x2 experimental design. We varied the applied linguistic label, which could be Gypsy (used as politically incorrect), Roma (used as politically correct) and no label. We also varied whether they saw Roma people on the screen while talking about the crime or not. According to the study of Das et al. (2009) in a racially tense society even the appearance of a threatening minority member (in their case Muslims) can strengthen the stereotypes against them.

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