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Political Correctness and Wooden Language

La laïcité "est porteuse d'un idéal, celui de l'individu - citoyen qui sait qu'il n'y a de savoir-vivre collectif que dans la confrontation librement débattue de convictions individuelles. Celui, également, de la durée assumée au travers de l'affirmation d'une aptitude permanente à tirer des leçons de l'histoire les éléments de construction d'un présent acceptable et d'un futur qui conserve sa place au rêve."
(Jean-Michel Ducomte / La laïcité)

Preamble

I'll stop for a moment, right before starting, to plead in favour of my position, as a speaker at this exclusive gathering of professionals. On this occasion, I would like to greet the great experts who were invited to speak here and give their competent opinions on the proposed theme; and I accept my position of an intruder, although the theme of the meeting may well allow for an approach similar to the one I have proposed.

However, I would like to start by making a few considerations on style. I wouldn't have tackled this problem so attentively, if it hadn't been for the reticence of the scientific committee towards the subject of my presentation, and, consequently, for my need to sharpen all my argumentative talents in order to be admitted to this exclusive gathering. I was just reading a book – which I have chosen to mention on top of my *Bibliographical list* (see infra) – on how to deal with a

topic in such a way as to let pass even the most shocking things. The book presents the case of a famous paper published in 1953 in the *Nature* magazine, where Crick and Watson provide, in about 1200 words, the hypothesis of DNA existence. The paper – which was to open a whole new era in science – ends with a paragraph... of exceptional modesty. “It has not escaped our notice that the specific pairing we have postulated immediately suggests a possible copying mechanism for the genetic world”. The comment made by Ian McEwan in the book I am referring to is, in fact, a kind of pragmatic analysis of the two authors’ text. The double negation – McEwan says – made by adding the negation *no* to the verb *to escape* (semantically negative in this case) is a manifestation of politeness that remains impressively transparent. Instead of saying something like: “Look at us everybody! We’ve found the mechanism by which life on Earth replicates, we’re excited as hell and can’t sleep a wink”, they (merely) say “It has not escaped our notice...”, a turn of phrase which is meant to achieve a better contact with the audience.

Let me also make an attempt to work along similar stylistic premises...

The working hypothesis: where it may be found

After finding out that every moment, in the whole world approximately 30.000 PowerPoint presentations are done (which made me feel avenged for all the time I had been outside fashion, because I hated this type of presentations), there came another satisfaction: the language of *trainers* and corporations was proved to be a wooden language. I found the proof on a site someone recommended to me, and since then I have tirelessly kept recommending it to other people, www.bullshitbingo.com. Here’s what we can find when reaching this blessed site, which is teeming with humour, and which I first visited on September 30 / 2008:

“Do you keep falling asleep in staff meetings? What about those long and boring conference calls? Here's a way to change all of that:

1. Before (or during) your next meeting, seminar, or conference call, prepare your "Bullshit Bingo" card by drawing a square – I find that 5" x 5" is a good size – and dividing it into columns - five across and five down. That will give you 25 1-inch blocks.

2. Write one of the following words/phrases in each block: Synergy, Strategic fit, Core competencies, Gap analysis, Bottom line, Revisit, Take that off-line, 24/7, Out of the loop, Benchmark, Value-added, Proactive, Win-win, Think outside the box, Fast track, Result-driven, Empower (or empowerment), Knowledge base, At the end of the day, Touch base, Mindset, Client focus(ed), Ballpark, Game plan, Leverage, Cascade, Sequential or sequentially

3. Check off the appropriate block when you hear one of those words/phrases.

4. When you get five blocks horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, stand up and shout "BULLSHIT!". It is just like in Bingo games, when you score a line.

I have written here some of the testimonials of those who put in practice the advices found on this webpage. I did it to convince you that it is worth finding the adequate means to fight against any attempt of wooden language.

"Real Testimonials" from satisfied players, after the jump...

"I had been in the meeting for only five minutes when I won." - Adam W., Atlanta

"My attention span at meetings has improved dramatically." - David T., Orlando

"What a gas! Meetings will never be the same for me after my first win." - Dan J., New York City

"The atmosphere was tense in the last process meeting as 14 of us waited for the fifth box." - Ben G., Denver

"The speaker was stunned as eight of us screamed 'BULLSHIT!' for the third time in two hours. The Bullshit Bingo Championship will be played at the next meeting." - Rod H

And now, the exercise in style!

I am wondering, just like you, if there is any connection between “the wooden language in the newspapers” and the concept of “political correctness”.

I will resort to instruments that are more difficult to examine for the people who are not in the communication / information-related professions, only to signal the following fact: acknowledged thesauri (organized by the Internet research engines) regard the two terms (*wooden language* and *political correctness*) as related. This situation can also be easily found in the world of linguists, on the basis of the analyses carried out with the tools of intertextual coherence, such as, for example, thematic isotopies. As far as the use of wooden language in press is concerned, I found it way too easy to extract examples of wooden language usage in the writings of our past or present-day journalists; so I thought of another, much more appealing perspective: that of seeing how the wooden language structures become instruments for the practice of irony in the journalistic discourse. Thus, I will support the journalists who use the wooden language, but only those – in good command of language, and “more intelligent than ‘theirs’ ” – who make use of elements of the wooden language in order to rally, and even to mock their fellow creatures. It is enough to read the term *Rom* spelt with three r’s, in the *Academia Cațavencu* (“The Cațavencu Academy”) Romanian newspaper to understand that it is not political correctness (taken beyond the limits) that leads the respective journalist to fight, but his/her wish to present the suffocation of the public space with imposed terms, instead of a rational approach to the ethnicity problem. It is also enough to find structures of the wooden language from the communist period in the caricatured discourse of a present-day politician (most often belonging to a particular political party!), to understand that we are confronted with the ironic usage of a language that was meaningless to us for almost 50 years.

Looking at this problem from a historical point of view, without attempting to rigorously reconstitute the history of the concept itself, we find that political correctness is imposed and demanded in all seriousness, in any situation when a dogmatic approach to a belief or a doctrine is provided. Thus, a belief or a doctrine, among those officially instituted within a social framework (by a religion, an ideology, or any other type of organization or institution, seen as an undeniable and irrefutable authority), no longer stands the chance of being questioned. It becomes a dogma, and nobody wonders anymore how its principles could be interpreted or expressed otherwise. All is reduced to a ritual governed by rules, which is no longer understood,

not even by the persons who use it in order to dominate the others. It is almost the situation in Orwell's *1984*; here, *newspeak* tended to become the only language spoken in the whole world, its vocabulary was getting increasingly smaller, since it was no longer allowed – and, consequently, no longer necessary – to communicate on whatever topic would have crossed one's mind. During the Cold War, the Western World would make fun of two Soviet periodicals, *Izvestija* and *Novosti*, and jokes like “*Izvestija*¹ –heralds no news” or “Nothing new in *Novosti*²” were highly popular. The social antibodies functioned, nevertheless, even within the societies oppressed by the stupidest impositions, such as the obligation to use the wooden language in social life, as an expression of political correctness. For example, during the communist period, the wooden language was already used within small circles to criticize the regime, and the humour thus created was high quality one. The short period in which the wooden language of the communist regimes was taken seriously, in the true spirit of political correctness, was avenged by a long period in which the same wooden language was ironically used, in order to satirize the *politricks*, and in particular, the *culturniks*. It was a deviation from political correctness, from the line of the unique party, but a deviation extremely difficult to sanction, since it was achieved with the very methods of political correctness. The term *political correctness* together with its correlative, *wooden language* were to reappear in the changing America of the 1950s and 1960s. Just as in the case of the totalitarian regimes, here too the two concepts were differently treated: at first, they were considered in all seriousness, and the respective terms were used with the utmost sobriety; then they became the target of ironies as well as means to rally dogmatists, those people who did not understand that the freedom of the individual cannot be separated from his/her freedom of expression. From the mid-20th century feminists and the anti-segregationists of the 1960s, we got to joke about some exaggerations deriving from the very stiffness of the proposed measures. A whole debate concerning the replacement of “Baa Baa Black Sheep” by “Baa Baa Rainbow Sheep” degenerated into jokes, some of which were really good (people required that the term *black* be forbidden in words such as “black coffee” or “blackboard”). I remember another story that circulated at the time, during the 1971 *coup d'etat* in Chile: it was about a descent of Pinochet's forces at a scholar's house, which ended in emptying his library shelves; among the prohibited books on their list, there was also ... *Little Red Riding Hood*.

¹ The name should translate in English as “bulletin”

² This name should translate as “news”

During the same period, an intellectual from Iași was protecting a photography album, representing the newly launched *Emmanuelle*, by adding “Kant” on the book cover; the person was also “visited” by the agents of the Secret Services of communist Romania, who wanted to see what he had been reading lately. But, as it was not prohibited to read Immanuel Kant, the visit went well. The slight “deviation” from the correct spelling of Kant’s first name had passed unobserved.

It seems that, in more recent years, there have been fewer and fewer cases in which political correctness (with its wooden language) has been accepted and taken seriously. More often than not, wooden language remains an instrument for ironists and is used for satirical purposes. Therefore, better knowledge of the possibilities of language and good knowledge of the audience are necessary. Only within a context of communication in which both journalists and their readers are smarter than ‘theirs’, can wooden language be used for rallying and laughing at dogmatists of any kind.

And here, I owe you and myself a parenthesis: in terms of possibilities, the language structures (even those considered to belong to wooden language) are part of our common thesaurus (the historical language that serves a linguistic community). The use of these structures within speech will be decided by the speaker and observed by the listener. What can be repeated is the linguistic segment and not the utterance, the speech. This is why we speak about *wooden language* and not about *wooden speech*. And we can also notice here that the same language segments can be used seriously or in a mocking manner, in different utterances. The discourse may carry the same linguistic meanings as other speeches before its production; but, since *discourse* implies contextualization and a communication contract, each time it will “say” something different, and will be a new unrepeatable act.

In social psychology there are also other reasons to consider the relation between political correctness and wooden language both interesting and important. Studies in this scientific field, carried out in America in the 1920s and 30s, promoted the idea of an almost infinite pliability of

human nature. The idea was quickly accepted by the wide public and even in the academic environments. There are voices saying that today's supporters of the movement promoting the spirit of political correctness are the descendants of Margaret Mead or John Watson³, since they support an idea closely related to those of the two scientists, namely: since human condition is a social construct which in turn is defined by language, it is possible and desirable to reform the condition by changing the language (cf. McEwan, 2006).

Therefore,

...it seems there is a connection (even though not an explicit one!) between the theme of the meeting I have been invited to, and the subject I have chosen to propose for debate. The fate of the wooden language within free democratic societies is to end up as a means of ironizing a person's incapacity to say something. In totalitarian societies – and we felt it for so many years – the wooden language (ironically) serves for stimulating communication, since those in power do not need to “really” communicate with people, and people are not willing to take any risks and “really” communicate with them. On the other hand, in the democratic societies, we are confronted with promotions to functions and positions that require the ability to utter political speeches by people that have nothing to say, and lack the necessary means to hide this fact. The users of the wooden language are recruited from among these politicians. Some of them “escape” the press. They have not been the object of my investigations. However, most of these public figures become press material, and, in order to speak about them, inspired journalists choose to use wooden language in an ironical manner. They either ascribe to them speeches that contain the famous patterns of the communist wooden language, or the “capacity” to make speeches in the new wooden language, the corporate one; other times, journalists notice and quote discursive fragments belonging to the persons involved. And in so doing, they produce positive effects by using irony. They are “positive effects” as in this way journalists expose the incompetents, reveal the intentions awkwardly hidden in the speech of some politicians, etc.

³ Both are quoted by McEwan as specialists in psychology, university professors and authors of outstanding works in the field of psychology and social psychology, in the first half of the previous century.

I would not like to leave the impression that I am referring to the journalists from *Academia Cațavencu* only. Fortunately, the ironic use of the wooden language from various dogmatic fields is an art practiced by the journalists in all types of media. Therefore, I find it unfair to approach only the negative aspects of the wooden language in the written press, when we can also relish in the delightful use of this objectionable form of (our) language in the media.

On the other hand, I would like you to see my presentation as an attempt to clarify a number of aspects (even to myself), with no intention of imposing as undeniable truths my various considerations throughout this paper. Reverting to the issue of style in revealing a number of scientific intuitions, I would like to close with the text of one of the two songs mentioned below, but I am not sure which one would be more suitable. As an *outsider*, I encounter difficulties in grasping the preferences and tastes of the select audience which is present here... Let me try, though. I have to choose between:

1. what Jean Gabin uttered, on music, in the *diseurs'* manner

„Je croyais tout savoir

La vie, l'amour, l'argent, les amis et les roses

Je croyais savoir le bruit et la couleur des choses

Et maintenant, je suis fixé : maintenant je le sais

Je sais qu'on sait jamais”.

or

2. the unpolished register of a contemporary American singer, who begins one of his songs with :

„F... what I said

It don't mean sh.. now”.

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3. Watson, John B., *Behaviorism*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1925.