

From explicit prohibition to ambiguity in prohibiting¹

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And as Plain Man he continued to splash solemnly about in the Vocabulary of Ambiguity.

(C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards)

In the present day mistiness is the mother of wisdom.

(Cardinal Newman)

Abstract

This contribution will deal with two topics closely related and intermingled. I firstly will try to show how one of the salient features of euphemisms is their ambiguity and/or vagueness (Grondelaers and Geeraerts, 1998) to the extent that even sentences in which lexicalised euphemisms are used can become dysphemistic if they are not ambiguous. This means that ambiguous and/or vague sentences play a fundamental, cognitive role (Tuggy, 2006). This is the case of a well-known excerpt from Somerset Maugham in which, in spite of the fact that all the nouns used are euphemisms, the excerpt itself can be considered dysphemistic. Conversely, I will show two instances from two songs in which female pudenda are euphemistically and ambiguously alluded to. Secondly, I will try to apply my previous reflections to politically correct language. In order to do so I will take as a starting point the fact that political correctness spread across the western countries in the same decade (1960-1970) in which the motto “Il est interdit d’interdire” got also trendy (Hughes, 2006 and 2010). As a result of the fact that the noun ‘prohibition’ (and its cognates, derivatives and synonyms) became “prohibited” as a politically incorrect word, prohibition itself has to be phrased in ambiguous sentences. For instance, instead of the (currently) politically incorrect notice “No Smoking” or “Smoking is prohibited”, we frequently find the politically correct one “Thank you for not smoking”, where the sentence meaning is pretty different from what the author of the notice tries to mean; since the sentence meaning is that someone thanks you for not smoking, while what the author of the notice intends to mean that smoking is prohibited.

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Key words

Political (in)correctness, euphemism, dysphemism, ambiguity, vagueness, censorship/prohibition.

1. Introduction: Key concepts

Speakers can get euphemistic effects by means of several linguistic mechanisms such as metaphors, diminutives, learned words, allusions, and many others (Burridge, 2012: 72-78). For their part, euphemisms themselves fulfil several relevant social functions (Chamizo Domínguez, 2004 and 2005) such as conveying dignity to a (menial) profession, being polite or respectful, or attenuating a painful topic, typically death (Bultnick, 1998; Crespo Fernández, 2011 and 2013). Vagueness and ambiguity are two paradigmatic mechanisms that, when they are consciously used, allow the speakers to be euphemistic as well as achieve other cognitive effects such as being witty (Nerlich and Clarke, 2001). Among the social functions of euphemisms political correctness nowadays stands out. I will argue in this contribution that most of the political correct expressions or terms become so because they are euphemistic and they are euphemistic just because they are ambiguous or vague. If so, the identification of euphemisms, as well as what political correct language might be, will depend on an adequate contextual interpretation of texts or utterances (Casas Gómez, 2009).

Although the borderline between ambiguity and vagueness is not always clear (Tuggy, 2006: 168-172), (lexical) ambiguity generates in the fact that a given word (or syntagm) is polysemous (e.g. *lesbian* works as a euphemism because this noun may mean either ‘from Lesbos’ or ‘dyke’). Syntactic ambiguity originates in the fact that a sentence can have several different meanings because of the structure of the sentence (e.g. a former President of the Spanish Government, the socialist Felipe González, referred to the two chiefs of the parliamentary opposition as “Anguita y Aznar son la misma mierda”, which, in Spanish, can mean either “Anguita and Aznar are the same shit” or “Anguita and Aznar are the shit itself”). For its part, vagueness originates in the fact that the meaning of a given word (hyponym) is included in the meaning of another word (superordinate term) and people may use a superordinate term for avoiding (inconvenient) hyponyms (e.g. *restroom* works as a euphemism for *loo* because the first word can mean any room for resting as well as ‘toilet’ or ‘bathroom’).

The concept of political correctness has been used according to many senses (Reutner, 2013). Consequently, the nominal syntagms *politically correct language* and *politically incorrect language* cover not only topics related to ethnic groups or sexual options but also

many other topics such as toponymy (Wochele, 2013) or diseases (Drescher, 2013). In fact, political correctness may be considered “as a brainwashing programme and as simple good manners” (Allan and Burrige, 2006: 90).² In any case, the core of my argument in the following pages will be that politically correct language has to be euphemistic and, as a euphemistic language, has to be ambiguous or vague as well.

2. Instances of dysphemisms and euphemisms

To start with, let us consider three excerpts, one quote from a 20th century British writer and two quotes from two contemporary Spanish singers:

(1) “The Professor of Gynaecology. He began his course of lectures as follows: Gentlemen, woman is an animal that **micturates** once a day, **defecates** once a week, **menstruates** once a month, **parturates** once a year and **copulates** whenever she has the opportunity. –I thought it a prettily-balanced sentence” (Maugham, 1949: 15. My bold type).

(2) “Me gusta todo de ti: /tus pezones como lilas, / tu **alcancía** carmesí, / tus ingles y tus axilas” [I love everything about you: / Your nipples like lilacs, / Your crimson **moneybox**, / Your groin and your underarms] (Serrat Teresa, 1998. My bold type).

(3) “Nada sabe tan dulce como su boca, / tan sólo **alguna cosa que no se nombra**” [Nothing tastes as sweet as her mouth, / Just **something which cannot be named/is not named**] (San José Sánchez, 1986. My bold type).

All the three texts share the following features:

1. They have been written by males and refer to women; (1) refers to woman in general while (2) and (3) refer to two specific women.
2. They deal with topics traditionally included under the label of taboo, topics such as bodily effluvia and pudenda (Allan and Burrige, 2006: 144-174).
3. Taboo or inconvenient terms have been substituted by their respective, convenient terms which work as euphemisms.

² Paradoxically, the syntagm *politically correct* is “politically correct” used to refer to what is “conforming in behaviour or language to dogmatic opinions” (Holder, 2003: 306).

In spite of these shared features, (1) can be (nowadays) considered as derogatory with regard to women and even an instance of a macho chauvinist text, as well as factually false, while (2) and (3) probably do not. If so, one can ask about what makes (1) derogatory while (2) and (3) can be considered commendatory, complimentary or axiologically neuter at least.

All the verbs used to refer to bodily effluvia or sex in (1) are paradigmatic examples of euphemisms to the extent that *defecate* and *copulate* are verbs typically used in (euphemistic) medicalese instead of vulgar *shit* and *fuck*, respectively (Allan, 2001: 165); whose “dignity comes from the Greek or Latin roots of the words used” (Allan and Burridge, 2006: 62).³ This means that the derogatory flavour of (1) cannot be attributed to the use of any dysphemism.

Perhaps the aforementioned derogatory flavour of (1) could be explained by hyperboles such as “defecates once a week”, but hyperboles are neither dysphemistic nor euphemistic by themselves; in fact they can be both (Burridge, 2012: 75 and 78). Moreover, the professor’s humorous tenor can be explained by arguing that, given he was teaching his first lesson, he was trying to achieve the *captatio benevolentiae* on the part of his students.

The use of the noun ‘animal’ for referring to women is another plausible candidate in order to explain why (1) has its derogatory flavour. But the professor could argue in his own defence he was speaking as a “scientist” and, as such and from a medical/biological point of view, human beings, whether they are male or female, can be considered as animals. Not even the use of the noun ‘animal’, if one disregards any other consideration, can be regarded as derogatory by itself, even if it is used for naming a woman.⁴ In fact, it can be even a eulogy,

³ What is said about the English language can be said about almost any other modern European language. In the case of Romance languages, and given that most of their vocabulary derives from Latin, learned words or expressions work as euphemisms in spite of the fact that both a given learned word and a given common word can derive from the same Latin word. Consequently, one can translate into Spanish Maugham’s quote and maintain all the learned words used in the original English text: “El catedrático de ginecología. Comenzó sus clases de la siguiente manera: Caballeros, la mujer es un animal que **micciona** una vez al día, **defeca** una vez a la semana, **menstrúa** una vez al mes, **partea** una vez al año y **copula** cada vez que tiene la oportunidad. –Pensé que se trataba de una frase muy bien equilibrada” (My translation).

⁴ Since the noun *animal* is used by our Professor together with the technical verbs *micturate*, *defecate*, *menstruate*, *parturate*, and *copulate*, he also could argue he only was aiming “to communicate the vocabulary and syntax of a contemporary scientific language” (Kuhn, 1996: 136) as it is used in lectures and textbooks.

as shown in the fact that Ava Garner was defined as “The World’s Most Beautiful Animal” in the advertising campaign of the movie *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954).

In my opinion, what makes (1) derogatory, inconvenient or politically incorrect are three things: 1) its explicitness, since it plainly refers to bodily effluvia and sexual functions; 2) the text itself as a whole and not because any of its parts separately considered; and 3) the intentions the reader attributes to the professor and/or to S. Maugham.

By contrast, (2) and (3) can be considered as eulogistic. And what makes eulogistic both cases is that female pudenda are ambiguously and vaguely referred to. Indeed, in (2) female pudenda are referred to by means of a metaphor, which is not usual. In fact, as far as I know, this metaphoric/euphemistic use of the noun *alcancía*⁵ can be considered as a hapax legomenon; so, what allows us to state that it stands for *vagina* or *pussy* is the fact that it occurs together with other parts of the human body. In any case, *alcancía* works as a euphemism in this case because the author of the song converted this word in a polysemous one and, consequently, a sentence such as “Me gusta tu alcancía carmesí” is ambiguous since it can be understood either as “I love your crimson moneybox” or as “I love your crimson vagina/pussy”.

As far as (3) is concerned, its euphemistic flavour can be explained by the fact that the periphrasis “alguna cosa que no se nombra” stands for *vagina* or *pussy* as well. But now we are not dealing with an instance of ambiguity originated in the fact that a given word is polysemic, but with an instance of vagueness originated in the fact that “something which is not named” is vague enough as to have the possibility of meaning anything. Not to mention that the original Spanish sentence is ambiguous since it can mean both “something which is not named [because it is not necessary since it is well-known, implicit, or assumed]” and “something which cannot be named [because it is forbidden, taboo, or inconvenient]”.

3. Prohibiting is not politically correct

On the one hand, although the term *political correctness* probably originated in the English translation of Mao’s *The Little Red Book*, in its current conception, the phenomenon

⁵ In addition, the noun *alcancía* has some archaic and/or dialectal flavour in Spain, although this is not the case in many American Spanish speaking countries.

of political correctness, either as some kind of externally imposed censorship or as self-censorship about what is socially permissible or inconvenient to say by an individual, became to be widespread throughout western countries in the sixties of the 20th century, the same decade (1960-1970) in which the paradoxical motto “Il est interdit d’interdire (it is forbidden to forbid)” got also trendy (Hughes, 2006: 348 and 2010: 60). On the other hand, and as a consequence of my previous remark, politically correct language has to avoid terms such as *prohibit*, *forbid*, *ensor*, *prohibition*, or *ensorship*. In other words, in the same decade two phenomena, which seem to be opposed and very difficult to reconcile, emerged. This leads to the paradoxical Gordian knot that could be summarized as follows: “in the interests of political correctness it is politically incorrect to prohibit, but political correctness itself demands the prohibition or avoidance of some words or actions”. One of the ways to cut this Gordian knot is by means of some calculated ambiguity and or vagueness of the message, so as to get three 1) the expurgation of terms or passages; 2) the substitution of terms considered as dysphemistic and/or insulting by a given social group by other terms which the social group in question considers more “adequate”; and 3) the avoidance of terms which literally mean prohibition or censorship. The first method basically consists in banning what is considered inadequate. The second method basically consists in the substitution of politically incorrect terms by supposed synonyms which are considered euphemistic just because they are ambiguous or vague. The third method basically consists in using indirect speech acts instead of direct speech acts.

4. Expurgation of terms or passages

When the writings of the past are not in accordance with our current criteria of political correctness it is usual to re-write them and/or expurgate passages or words which run counter to the sensibility of a given epoch. This was the job of Thomas Bowdler (1754-1825) in his *The Family Shakespeare, in one volume: In which nothing is added to the original text, but those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family* (1818). Indeed, Thomas Bowdler intended to expurgate Shakespeare’s works in order to achieve they do not infringe upon Victorian criteria of political correctness. The result of this is no other than the fact that Bowdler reached the infrequent privilege of converting his family name in an eponym: the verb *bowdlerize*, which is synonymous with *ensor*, *expurgate* or *clean up* (Fergusson, 1986). So that *bowdlerize* can be found since 1836 with the meaning of “to expurgate (a book or writing), by omitting or modifying words or passages considered

indelicate or offensive; to castrate” (*OED*). An instance of this task of elimination of politically incorrect passages is the disappearance of a hilarious passage from *Henry V* (III, iv, 52-53), where the character of Alice teaches the character of Katharine the English names of the parts of the human body. And this passage was excised by Bowdler because Shakespearean text “was written in compliance with the bad taste of the age, for the express purpose of raising a laugh at the conclusion, by introducing, through the medium of imperfect pronunciation, the two most indecent words in the French language.” (Bowdler, 1847: vi). Consequently, the bad taste of the age in which Shakespeare wrote and the purpose of making readers laugh seemed to be two solid reasons for eliminating a passage in which, in addition, “the two most indecent words in the French language” are used. Needless to say Bowdler himself neither mentions nor uses these words which are obscene due to the pronunciation of the English nouns *foot* and *count* (for *gown*) according to the French accent. This makes that such English words sound for Katharine like *foutre* [fuck] and *conne* [cunt], respectively (Shewmaker, 1996). As a result of this, the hilarious climax – which, according to Bowdler himself, originated in the bad taste of the age – is just reached when Katharine repeats three times both indecent words: “De foot et de count! O Seigneur Dieu! ce sont mots de son mauvais, corruptible, gros, et impudique, et non pour les dames d’honneur d’user: je ne voudrais prononcer ces mots devant les seigneurs de France pour tout le monde. Foh! le foot et le count! Néanmoins, je réciterai une autre fois ma leçon ensemble: de hand, de fingres, de nails, de arm, de elbow, de nick, de sin, de foot, de count.” (*Henry V*, III, iv, 52-53).

And although from our contemporary point of view Bowdler’s qualms seem to be the product of some 19th century bigotry, Bowdler’s precedent had many followers in 19 and 20th centuries to the extent that “it is only fairly recently that school editions of Shakespeare have become unexpurgated” (Hughes, 2006: 45). In any case, the result of bowdlerizing any work – whatever is its author – is some vagueness in it, since the bowdlerized work in question will never say and reflect what its author tried to mean. And what is said about a book can be said about a movie or any other work.

5. Substitution

Vagueness in politically correct language is not only achieved by means of expurgating passages from literary or scientific works it is also achieved by means of suggesting the substitution of a given term by another which is considered a plausible

synonym of the term which has to be avoided. This leads us to the subject of synonymy. Let us consider two instances of this subject.

The English word *Negro*, both as a noun and as an adjective, were borrowed from Spanish or Portuguese *negro* in 16th century and originally had a strictly referential meaning as “A member of a dark-skinned group of peoples originally native to Africa south of the Sahara.” (*OED*). According to this referential meaning, the word *Negro/negro* was used by Charles Darwin, for instance, as shows this quote: “If it could be proved that the Hottentot had descended from the **Negro**, I think he would be classed under the **Negro** group, however much he might differ in colour and other important characters from **negroes**.” (Darwin, 1859: 242. My bold type). This word was used according to its referential meaning until the 1960s, when it started to be considered derogatory or taboo,⁶ and consequently and gradually, substituted by other euphemistic synonyms such as *Black* (Cf. Black Power), *Coloured*,⁷ *African*, or *African-American* (only in the United States, for obvious reasons).

Now, the nouns *Coloured*, *African*, or *African-American* can work as euphemisms for *Negro* or *Nigger* because they are basically vague. Indeed, given that the three first nouns are superordinate terms with regard to the second ones, which are their hyponyms. And so because the set of African people includes the set of Negro people, but not vice versa. This means that one can substitute, *salva veritate*, any hyponym by its superordinate term, but not vice versa. This is what, in spite of its vagueness, makes literally true “Charlize Theron is an African actress” (because she was born in Africa) or “Charlize Theron is an African-American actress” (because she was born in Africa and is living in America), while “Charlize Theron is a Negro actress” is false.

Under the influence of English language the noun *Negro* (and its cognates in various languages) has become offensive as well and, consequently, substituted by terms such as *sub-*

⁶ The noun *Negro* or *nigger* (and its derivatives) have been in and out of fashion depending on the different countries and cultures. So, for instance, the noun *négritude* has been melioratively used by many black writers, politicians, and intellectuals. Nowadays, even in English speaking countries *Negro/nigger* is used both as derogation and according to its literal meaning (see, Allan, unpublished).

⁷ I disregard the fact that *Black* and *Coloured* can be considered nowadays offensive or derogatory and, consequently, taboo. And so, in spite of the fact that they were originally coined as euphemisms.

sahariano, in Spanish, or *di colore*, in Italian. Again, both terms can work as politically correct substitutes of *negro/negra* or *nero/nera*, in Spanish and Italian respectively, because their meanings are undetermined and vague; so that many times the speakers are obliged to elect between political correctness and accuracy. This is why Cécile Kyenge, Italian Minister for Integration in 2013, claimed: “Sono nera, non di colore e lo dico con fierezza... (bisogna cominciare a usare le parole giuste” [I am a Negro (woman), I am not a coloured (woman) and I proudly say it... (it is necessary) to begin to use the exact words] (Available at http://www.corriere.it/politica/13_maggio_03/kyenge-nera_5b24eea0-b3db-11e2-a510-97735eec3d7c.shtml Accessed 30 October 2014).

And what is said about ethnic terms can be said about terms related to sex. Let us see it by means of analysing another example. The website of *The British Sociological Association* (BSA, hereinafter), under the epigraph “Language and the BSA: Sex and Gender” and with the praiseworthy purpose of “assist[ing] BSA members in avoiding sexist language by showing people some of the forms it takes and by suggesting non-sexist alternatives” (Available at <http://www.britisoc.co.uk/about/equality.aspx> Accessed 30 October 2014), includes a list of terms considered sexist and offers an alternative list of non-sexist substitutes. In this list there is one term which fits into my argument. It is about the adjective *seminal*, which is considered sexist by the authors of the aforementioned website, and, consequently to be avoided. Since *seminal* is to be avoided, two alternative substitutes are suggested, namely *classical* and *formative*. In order to shorten my paper I will focus on the case of *classical*.

In view of the fact that the BSA does not provide any account for explaining or justifying the reason that makes sexist the adjective *seminal*, one can imagine that the *ultima ratio* for such interdiction could be explained by appealing to its etymology, since the English adjective derives from the Latin noun *semen*. And, in view of the fact that the semen is something which is produced by the males of the different animal species, its derivatives have to be “guilty” of machismo. But it is the case that, in Latin, *semen* means firstly and generally *seed*, so that the meaning of “the impregnating fluid of male animals; the seed or sperm” (*OED*), is only a metonymic specification of the general meaning of the Latin noun *semen*.⁸

⁸ Although not included either in the *OED* or in the *Merriam-Webster*, the noun *semen* is also used in English according to its Latin meaning by botanists in their sociolect. So, for instance, the official website of the *American Botanical Council* defines *semen* as “the seed of a plant, usually removed from the fruit, and may or may not contain the seed coat.”

Suggesting that *classical* can substitute *seminal* brings two matters up that are intermingled: 1) the matter of synonymy; and 2) the matter of vagueness.

The BSA can propose that *classical* substitutes *seminal* because it is tacitly assumed they are synonymous, i.e., they can be substituted one by another because both have the same (or similar, at least) meaning in whatever contexts, so that sentences in which the substitution is carried out do not change their truth values (Chamizo Domínguez, 2009). I will argue that, if this substitution is possible in order to get some euphemism or some political correctness, it is not due to the fact that both adjectives are synonymous, but just to the fact they are not. Really, the adjective *seminal* has two salient meanings: 1) a literal meaning as “of or pertaining to the seed; of the nature of seed”; and 2) a figurative meaning as “having the properties of seed; containing the possibility of future development. Also, freq[ue]ntly used of books, work, etc., which are highly original and influential; more loosely: important, central to the development or understanding of a subject” (both *OED*). Although it is not stated anywhere at the BSA website, I assume that *seminal* is to be avoided only if it is used according to its second sense, not according to its first sense. Prohibiting the use of *seminal* according to its first sense as well would be obviously foolish.⁹ Consequently, it is allowed to assume they refer to the figurative sense of the adjective in question. Consequently, the adjective *classical* has to be understood according to its meaning “of the first rank or authority; constituting a standard or model; especially in literature” (*OED*) and not according to any other meaning. If so, we can substitute, *salva veritate*, *seminal* for *classical*, since such substitution has to be symmetric so that the speaker says what s/he exactly wants to say. And so, because a literary or philosophical work can be classical but not necessarily seminal. For instance, Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* can be considered a classical work on the doctrine about the composition of sublunary world, i.e. that all sublunary matter is composed of earth, air, fire, and water. But Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* cannot be considered the seminal (i.e. original/ground-breaking) work on this topic, since Aristotle himself states very often that such doctrine was established earlier by Empedocles. So, for instance, in the following text: “Ἀναξιμένης δὲ

(<http://abc.herbalgram.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Terminology> Accessed 30 October 2014).

⁹ Although it is at no time specified by BSA, it is reasonable to think that its zeal for political correctness goes not so far as to forbid the use of *seminal* in collocations as *seminal fluid*; since, in this case, we would not be speaking of a matter of synonymy. And so because, if one substitutes *seminal fluid* for *classical fluid*, we are not in the face of a matter of a euphemistic synonym but in the face of a jocular situation. In fact, *seminal fluid* is considered as an orthophemism with regard to spunk or spoof (Allan and Burridge, 2006: 151).

ἀέρα καὶ Διογένης πρότερον ὕδατος καὶ μάλιστα' ἀρχὴν τιθέασι τῶν ἀπλῶν σωμάτων, Ἴππασος δὲ πῦρ ὁ Μεταποντῖνος καὶ Ἡράκλειτος ὁ Ἐφέσιος, Ἐμπεδοκλῆς δὲ τὰ τέτταρα, πρὸς τοῖς εἰρημένοις γῆν προστιθεὶς τέταρτον” (*Metaphysics*, 984 a 8-9).¹⁰

Accordingly, one can say that while the sentence

(4) “Aristotle’s seminal four element theory was accepted until 17-18th centuries”

is false (or inaccurate at least),

(5) “Aristotle’s classical four element theory was accepted until 17-18th centuries”

is true. By contrast, if one replaces the name ‘Aristotle’ with the name ‘Empedocles’, both sentences are (or can be) true. And so because something, which is seminal, uses to be (or may be at least) classical, but something, which is classical, is not necessarily seminal.¹¹ Consequently, if someone is obliged to replace *seminal* with *classical* when s/he wants to mean that something is highly original, influential, important, and capable of later developments or something like this, s/he would probably be betraying his/her thought.

6. Indirect speech acts

Eventually, an accomplished example of being sat on the fence is the resort to indirect speech acts in order to prohibit and being politically correct at once. This is what typically

¹⁰ The authoritative English translation by Sir William David Ross reads as follows: “Anaximenes and Diogenes make air prior to water, and the most primary of the simple bodies, while Hippasus of Metapontium and Heraclitus of Ephesus say this of fire, and Empedocles says it of the four elements (adding a fourth – earth – to those which have been named)” (Aristotle. 2014. *Metaphysics*. Translated by W. D. Ross. Adelaide: The University of Adelaide Press [1924]. Available at: <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/metaphysics/index.html>

¹¹ Although not included in other dictionaries, the *Collins English Dictionary* (<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english> Accessed 2 October 2014) also lists the sense of “rudimentary or unformed”. This new sense also fits Empedocles in very well, since, as far as we know according to the texts that exist, he did not develop his four element theory. And, again, it would make false “Aristotle’s seminal four element theory was accepted until 17-18th centuries”, since Aristotle left us a very fastidious four element theory.

happens in signs in which something is “kindly” or “mildly” prohibited. Let us focus on the case of no smoking signs. Let us start by considering the following sign:

Figure 1



Figure 1 is a paradigmatic example of both political incorrectness and explicitness, or to put it the other way round, its explicitness is the reason of its political incorrectness, if we accept that prohibiting is prohibited and, consequently, politically incorrect since May 68. The Canadian City of Surrey (British Columbia) Government’s zeal for making explicit that smoking is not allowed in certain places brings them to minimise the possibilities of misunderstanding their message. Consequently, they make clear:

1. That smoking is prohibited in a given building.
2. The (minimum) distance from any opening of the building within smoking is prohibited.
3. Since the prohibition of smoking is general, it includes not only tobacco, but also other smokable products such as marijuana or herbal blends.
4. The maximum amount of the penalty with which violators will be punished.

Having said that and according to the principle that what is not forbidden is allowed, the use of chewing tobacco or snuff would be allowed by the Government of the City of Surrey inside or within 7.5 meters of any opening of the building in question. In order to

avoid such kind of objections, other signs are more explicit with regard to the point about what actions are included under a no smoking prohibition.

Figure 2



Indeed, possible objections to Figure 1 are avoided in Figure 2, since it is explicitly prohibited both smoking, which includes marijuana or herbal blends, and the use of tobacco products, which includes chewing tobacco and snuff in addition to cigarettes, pipe tobacco, and cigars. Not to mention that the zeal of the Government of the State of Iowa for making explicit this prohibition goes so far as to substitute the mere and easy adverb *always* for the periphrasis “24 hours per day, 7 days per week”.¹²

In any case, the explicitness of figures 1 and 2 is just what makes them impolite or politically incorrect since both include direct speech acts of prohibitions. In order to be polite by honouring the motto “it is forbidden to forbid” and forbid in fact at once, speakers appeal to ambiguity. Let us consider some instances of this.

¹² In fact, this periphrasis seems to be more typical of a mall sign or a petrol station than of a sign published by the Government of a State.

(6) “Thank you for observing our no smoking policy”.

(7) “Benzene is found in gasoline and cigarettes”

Figure 3



Figure 4

**BENZENE
IS FOUND IN
GASOLINE
AND IN
CIGARETTES.**

You can quit. Call 1-800-QUIT-NOW. 
source: go.usa.gov/Yjgx

In (6) impolite and politically incorrect, but precise, “No smoking” or “Smoking is prohibited” have been substituted by a sentence in which both ambiguity and vagueness occur. Ambiguity originates in the fact that, instead of the noun *prohibition* or any of its synonyms, we find the noun *policy*.¹³ As a result of this, *policy* works as a euphemism because, in this case, this noun does not mean what usually means, i.e. a principle of action adopted or proposed by an organization, group, or individual, but *prohibition* or *banning*. As well as it probably works as a “purr word” (Leech, 1974: 50 and ff.) with regard to *regulation* or *rule*. Vagueness originates in the fact that someone thanks the reader for not smoking, instead of an explicit proscription of smoking; that is to say, while the implication of (6) is an act of gratitude, its implicature is the prohibition of smoking. But, since any implicature can be cancelled if the hearer/reader cannot be or wants not to be cooperative (Grice, 1989), the

¹³ If Yahweh were politically correct when gave Moses the Ten Commandments, he should have said, for instance, “Thank you for observing my no murdering policy” instead of the impolite “You shall not murder”.

reader of Figure 3 can interpret (6) according to what it literally means and the implicature will cease to have the desired effect. In this case the hearer/reader will understand that someone acknowledges or shows gratitude for the fact that people do not smoke, not that smoking itself is prohibited.

In (7) the ambiguity of the message in order to achieve a euphemistic effect is going beyond any previous examples, if we assume that, who wrote it, tried to politely mean “Smoking is discouraged” (Lee and Pinker, 2010). In (7) not even *no smoking* is written or alluded to, it only states that benzene can be found in both gasoline and cigarettes. But this assertion is, in fact, an ambiguous euphemistic substitute of an advice, recommendation, counsel, or suggestion. In fact, if someone argues that smoking is inadvisable on account of tobacco smoke contains benzene and this compound is a carcinogen, by using an *a pari* argument, one can argue that gasoline (or gasoline vapour) is carcinogen as well and, consequently, the use of gasoline should be also discouraged, since, when refuelling, gasoline vapour can be inhaled and it is in fact, even it is in small quantities. Needless to say one can counterargue that smoking is not necessary whereas the use of gasoline is not only necessary but also unavoidable nowadays. But, given I am not speaking about the virtues of tobacco smoke and the hazards of gasoline vapours or vice versa, what is clear is that (7) is an assertion that describes a truth of fact. And, from the truth of fact described in (7), its author pretends the reader understands that smoking is not recommended and not that the use of gasoline is not recommended. In other words, the ambiguity of the recommendation or prohibition under the shape of an assertion is what makes (7) politically correct as opposed to other less acceptable (from the political correctness point of view) or unacceptable signs such as “Smoking is not recommendable” or “Smoking is prohibited”.

Sometimes, resorting to polite politically correct signs such as (7) seems to be not enough in order to make clear that something is prohibited probably because of the ambiguity itself of (7). In such cases, messages which are polite and impolite at once can be found, as happens in this sign published by the Authorities of the State of Washington

(8) “Smoking is prohibited within 25 feet of all building entrances. Thank you for not smoking”.

Figure 5



This sign refers to the *Washington Clean Air Act*, which establishes that 1) “Smoking is prohibited within a presumptively reasonable minimum distance of twenty-five feet from entrances, exits, windows that open, and ventilation intakes that serve an enclosed area where smoking is prohibited so as to ensure that tobacco smoke does not enter the area through entrances, exits, open windows, or other means” (*RCW 70.160.075*) and 2) “Any person intentionally violating this chapter by smoking in a public place or place of employment, or any person removing, defacing, or destroying a sign required by this chapter, is subject to a civil fine of up to one hundred dollars” (*RCW 70.160.070*).¹⁴ Things being so, one can wonder why, if something is obliged by law, someone has to thank for it. And vice versa, one thanks for something that people are not obliged to do or refrain from doing, not for something that people are obliged to abstain from. Furthermore, given the fact that people will be fined if they violate the order in question. Unless the sentence “thank you for not smoking” has become an empty phrase or, at the most, fulfils a mere phatic function.

Finally, politeness and political correctness seem to be applicable to the speakers of some languages and not to the speakers of other languages. This is the case of Figure 6

¹⁴ *RCW* is the acronym of *Revised Code of Washington*. Available at: <http://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=70.94>.



In Figure 6,¹⁵ the ambiguous and polite English version (“This is a smoke-free facility. Thank you for not smoking”) becomes the explicit (and consequently “impolite”) explanation of a prohibition: “En este edificio es prohibido fumar” [literally, “It is forbidden to smoke in this building”]. Should one think that who wrote the Spanish version thought that politeness (or political correctness) had nothing to do with Spanish speakers?¹⁶ Is not this a case of an ethnic and/or linguistics insult? And to add insult to injury even the Spanish sentence is ungrammatical, since, in correct Spanish, it should be either “En este edificio está prohibido fumar” or “En este edificio se prohíbe fumar”. Not to mention that the addition “Gracias por no fumar” makes no sense when joined to an explicit prohibition, as it happens in Figure 5.

7. Conclusions

1. The rise of political correction in western societies has coincided in time (and in all probability conceptually as well) with some aversion to explicit prohibition.
2. As a consequence, explicitness in prohibiting has become out.

¹⁵ I do not know whether this sign has been factually used somewhere. In fact, I found it at the website of a sign company: <http://www.safetysign.com/products/p7270/bilingual-this-is-a-smoke-free-sign>

¹⁶ This recalls me the case of *Friedhof Große Hamburger Straße* (the oldest Jewish cemetery in Berlin), where, among other notorious members of the Jewish Community of Berlin, the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) was buried. All the historical, religious, or cultural, significant information for understanding what this historical site symbolises is written in Hebrew and German, except the list of prohibitions (e.g. “Men and married women have to cover their heads inside the burial ground” or “It is forbidden to eat, drink, or smoke inside the burial ground”), which is written in English as well.

3. It has obliged the speakers to resort to several linguistic means in order to reach both being politically correct and complying with the motto “It is forbidden to forbid”.
4. Among other means, the speakers use to resort to several mechanisms in order to flout the prohibition that forbids forbidding as well as they forbid in fact.
5. A salient feature of these mechanisms is to achieve some ambiguity or vagueness in a given text or utterance.
6. Ambiguity and/or vagueness are achieved by three different ways: 1) by rewriting or excising some texts, as shows the job of Th. Bowdler; 2) by substituting the words that have to be avoided by acceptable, euphemistic (factual or supposed) synonyms; and 3) by indirect speech acts, counting on the fact that the hearer will be cooperative and will interpret assertions as polite orders, rules, or prohibitions.

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