**The conceptual meaning of the label ‘PC’: Analyzing language change with the condemnation model**

**ABSTRACT**

Labeling suggestions for language change as ‘PC’ (‘political correctness’) has been regarded by several prominent scholars as an effective tactic to oppose anti-discriminatory language campaigns. Expanding on that, I argue that by historicizing the label ‘PC’ a public debate is revealed, whose results may not only harm so-called ‘PC’ suggestions but also promote them. By combining tools from the fields of conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) and critical discourse analysis (CDA), the article offers a five-stage model for analyzing language change in the PC discourse, in which the label ‘PC’ characterizes a typical stage in the conceptual development of controversial expressions. The article demonstrates the model with the expression ‘Autist’ in Israeli public discourse and uncovers a broader meaning of the label ‘PC’ – namely, a pending request for a change that has yet to be accepted or rejected.

**KEYWORDS: language policing, cancel culture, minorities, disabilities, inclusion, profanity, symbolic capital**

1. **Introduction**

Ahead of the 2019 Israeli elections, Likud MK David (Dudi) Amsalem was accused of calling Benny Gantz, the former IDF Chief of Staff and, at the time, a new political rival, ‘Autist’ in a derogatory manner. Numerous condemnations expressing harsh criticism of Amsalem’s use of the word ‘Autist’ appeared in the media on the grounds that using ‘Autist’ as an insult is offensive toward autists. In response to these condemnations, counter-condemnations appeared as well. These suggested that using ‘Autist’ as an insult is conventional and lacks any harmful intention toward autists and, therefore, attacks against Amsalem are elitist, inauthentic, and reflect cynical political interests that are pursued at the expense of autists. Throughout this exchange, those who were in favor of using ‘Autist’ as an insult labeled those who condemned it as ‘PC,’ while those who were labeled ‘PC’ resisted the label. Eventually, after the conflict between them was exhausted, and media interest in the subject dropped, the convention of using ‘Autist’ as an insult (which was indeed present in Israeli public discourse since the 1980s) disappeared. ‘PC,’ evidently, won.

Defining PC has been described as “remarkably elusive” (Lakoff, 2000: 94), “difficult” (Harris, 2015: 474), and the term itself is commonly regarded as “ambiguous” (Roberts, 1997: 83). Sally Johnson, Jonathan Culpeper, and Stephanie Suhr (2003), who compared different uses of the term in newspapers in the UK between 1994-1999, concluded that ‘PC’ has the “uncanny ability” to mean “all things to all people” (p. 44). Similarly, in 1995, Harold K. Bush claimed that “PC has become largely an empty container of meaning […] its highly abstract meaning is impossible to pin down, but whatever it is, nobody wants to be it” (p. 45). In this article, I wish to clarify the meaning of PC and the meaning of the label ‘PC,’ by proposing a precise historical model for how, when, and which specific expressions are labeled or de-labeled ‘PC.’

I argue that defining PC is indeed extremely difficult, but only if we lack historical perspective. Accordingly, by observing the dynamics of PC discourse over time, a general formula can be suggested based on the action that is common to most definitions and uses of the term. That is, PC is an act of condemnation directed toward an expression (including, often, the speaker) that is offensive to a social group. However, and this is where a lot of confusion arises, not all PC condemnations receive the label ‘PC.’

This research expands on widely accepted perceptions in PC research regarding the effectiveness of the label ‘PC’ in sabotaging linguistic suggestions (for example, Fairclough, 2003: 24; Meynell, 2017: 803; Stark, 1997: 233). I argue that sabotage is one possible outcome and that a second, overlooked, possibility is acceptance of the linguistic suggestion. The article presents a five-stage model of the process by which innocuous expressions become taboo. Combining tools from the fields of conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) and critical discourse analysis (CDA), the model is grounded on the claim that an analysis of PC discourse should consider how expressions are conceptualized at different stages of their ‘careers.’

To demonstrate the suggested model, the article follows the uses of ‘Autist’ in Israeli newspaper articles, TV and radio shows, and social media posts, from the 1960s to the present day, and shows how this expression developed from a clinical term into a metaphor and an insult, and eventually (and perhaps temporarily) became a prohibited taboo. As we shall see, the appearance of the label ‘PC’ in that process preceded the acceptance of the suggestion to stop using ‘Autist’ as an insult.

1. **Theoretical framework: PC discourse, conceptual history, and the condemnation model**
	1. **The discourse about PC and the PC discourse**

Previous literature on PC emphasized the effectiveness of the label ‘PC.’ The act of labeling someone as ‘PC’ has been regarded as “a durable tactic” (Fairclough, 2003: 24), as well as a “nasty” dismissal that “amounts to a self-righteous choice not only to insult others but to protect one’s ignorance and tacitly support discrimination” (Meynell, 2017: 803). Some scholars even reject a descriptive use of the term ‘PC’ because of its popular abusive uses. For example, Sarah Mills (2003) refers to PC only with inverted commas (‘political correctness’), claiming that the term “constitutes less a set of linguistic practices, than an attempt to undermine and ridicule anti-discriminatory language campaigns” (p. 104). The use of the label ‘PC’ to ridicule language campaigns is one practice, among others, that Norman Fairclough (2003) described as “the critique of ‘PC’,” which he concluded, “remains an effective and damaging strategy” (Fairclough, 2003: 27). In this article I argue that while the PC critique can be effective and damaging in preventing language change, it should also be viewed as part of a historical process that can lead to acceptance of language change.

To present my argument, I first wish to differentiate between two types of discourse that I shall designate as the discourse about PC and the PC discourse. Discourse about PC consists of statements that directly mention the term ‘PC,’ for example, saying that someone or something is PC or non-PC, in declarations such as “I shouldn’t say that, it’s not PC” or “academia today has become too PC.” Another example is in periodizations, such as referring to the early-mid 1990s in the US as “the ‘zenith’ of ‘political correctness’” (Suhr and Johnson, 2003: 6), or describing the Trump-era as “a time that is anti-political correctness” (Meynell, 2017: 799).

PC discourse, however, consists of condemnations and counter-condemnations of expressions that risk offending some social group or other. Both discourses overlap frequently, and not by chance: they reflect different stages of development in the conceptual history of the expressions around which the discourses are built. When a PC discourse becomes (or overlaps with) a discourse about PC it means that public examination has started to take place regarding the legitimization or de-legitimization of a certain expression. As I show in the article, when a suggestion for language change is labeled ‘PC’ (or other synonyms, like the now popular ‘woke’) such labeling remains only as long as the public refuses to accept the suggestion. Accordingly, when the suggestion is accepted, the label ‘PC’ is removed. The underlying premise here is that culture does not change instantly when faced with a suggestion for change, rather there is a process of inquiry that involves labels (‘PC’ is just one example) and may lead to a change. I shall, shortly, provide a more detailed explanation of this dynamic, as part of a model for analyzing PC discourse.

Most uses of the term PC involve the following three features: a condemnation, an offensive expression, and a social group (to which the expression is offensive). When someone is being politically correct, even if no explicit condemnation is performed, there is an underlying condemnation to the performance. Saying ‘women’ instead of ‘girls,’ for example, implies a condemnation toward the expression ‘girls.’ Saying ‘chairperson’ instead of ‘chairman,’ similarly, implies that ‘chairman’ is offensive toward women. The degree to which a speaker is being politically correct or incorrect (non-PC) depends on the potential of condemnation to appear in a given social environment. In other words, PC and no-PC cannot exist without condemnation.

Although definitions of PC often lack direct reference to condemnation, in most definitions it appears in some indirect way. Glenn C. Loury (1994), for example, defined PC “as an implicit social convention of restraint on public expression, operating within a given community” (p. 430). A close look reveals the three components: “restraint” by the power (or by fear) of condemnation; “public expression” is vaguer, however, since the examples Loury brings in his article all refer to social groups (Blacks, Jews, women) we can extrapolate that the public expression that is being restrained is content that is offensive toward those social groups. Another example is Geoffrey Hughes’s (2011) definition: “in broad terms, political correctness seeks […] to stress human communality and correspondingly to downplay engrained differences and exclusivity, discouraging judgmental attitudes and outlawing demeaning language” (pp. 58-59). Here too we can see that our definition fits: “downplay,” “discourage,” “outlaw” – by what? Condemnation. “Engrained differences and exclusivity” – of whom? Social groups. “Demeaning language”? Offensive expressions.

Contemporary culture has been more alert than academics to the element of condemnation as the driving force of PC discourse. The rise in popularity of the term ‘cancel culture’ in recent years suggests that the act of ‘canceling,’ which is a harsh form of condemnation, is the most important practice of this ‘culture.’ Interestingly, both ‘cancel culture’ and ‘wokeness’ are used as labels to critique PC without calling it PC.

* 1. **The need for conceptual history in PC research**

What is considered a suitable target for PC condemnation is subjected to history. As José Mateo and Francisco Yus (2013) explain in discussing insults: “languages evolve constantly and insults appear and disappear along with cultural changes: words without offending meanings acquire an insulting load, while others that were considered highly derogative in the past become innocuous” (p. 88). An “insulting load,” I would like to add, is a quality that is always related to condemnation: the more condemned an insult is, the more insulting load it acquires, and vice versa. This is relevant not only regarding insults, or even words or combinations of words, but to various forms of expressions as well such as ideas, narratives, and behaviors.

 Conceptual history is a field of research that studies how expressions change their meanings over time and the relations between these changes to social transformations. Conceptual historians traditionally deal with ‘big’ concepts, or ‘basic concepts’ (*Grundbegriffe*), like ‘democracy,’ ‘revolution,’ and ‘republic.’ Reinhart Koselleck (2011) introduced it as a method that “uncovers those concepts which can serve as the basis for theories, and then examines thematically how such concepts change over time” (p. 21). The theories Koselleck and his colleagues offered, as a result of their investigations, were also ‘big’: they were concerned, for example, with the democratization process of European society. But this method can also serve ‘smaller’ inquiries, as several scholars suggested by studying expressions like names of continents (Ifversen, 2002) or coming-of-age ceremonies (Shoham, 2018).

 Less attention has been given to the conceptual history of popular expressions and media scandals, including PC and non-PC expressions, and their dynamic discursive mechanisms, such as the label ‘PC.’ For a phenomenon such as PC, which is heavily characterized by language change, an investigation of this sort is needed. By studying expressions that have become subjects of PC discourse, their change in meanings, the condemnations and counter-condemnations of their uses, the appearance and disappearance of the label ‘PC’ with regard to their uses, and their eventual legitimization or delegitimization, a process of conceptualization is revealed – a model (or a theory, as Koselleck would have it). Through this model, as I wish to show, the act of labeling political opponents as ‘PC’ is indeed a powerful discursive tactic. Yet it is also a symptom of a typical stage of conceptualization of expressions that are the subjects of the PC discourse; a stage that is not final and, thus, should not discourage those to whom the ‘PC’ label is attached‘’.

* 1. **The condemnation model**

Non-PC insults consist of expressions that have the power to offend both their targets and groups of people to which the expressions refer. Their offensiveness is the result of a special relationship between conventional use and condemnations. This relationship, as this article aims to show, can lead to different outcomes. When condemnations are effective, they can bring about the prohibition of an offensive expression. But when condemnations are not effective and the audience rejects them, they can lead, ironically, to further legitimization of the same expression.

I explain this process with what I call ‘the condemnation model.’ The condemnation model is a descriptive pattern for analyzing forms of social policing. This model can be applied, with the appropriate adjustments, to different kinds of expressions, but also to behaviors, norms, manners, narratives, insults, etc. In this article, I will apply the model to one type of expression, non-PC insults. The condemnation model refers to a cultural pattern described as follows:

1. People use an expression in a neutral manner.
2. The expression acquires negative meanings, all of which are considered legitimate (or at least no one treats them as harmful).
3. A specific negative meaning of the expression becomes dominant, making it provocative and a target for condemnation. A conflict between condemners and the condemned takes place. If condemnations are successful and accumulate sufficient force, the next stage follows. If condemnations fail, a regress to stage 2 occurs.

[insert Figure 1]

1. The condemned speakers attempt to dismiss the condemners as inauthentic (for example, by labeling them as ‘PC’). A public debate is formed to decipher whether the expression should be prohibited or remain legitimate.
2. If prohibition is accepted, the expression becomes a taken-for-granted taboo. If prohibition is denied, a return to stage 3 occurs.

Based on materials from popular culture in Israel, I will demonstrate the model via the expression ‘Autist.’ The materials gathered for this research consist of 416 appearances of the word ‘Autist’ in newspapers, and numerous other cultural representations of autists in TV, film, and social media. The analysis reveals a process: ‘Autist’ began as a clinical term in the 1960s (stage I), acquired negative metaphorical meanings between 1970s-2000 (stage II), became an ambivalent insult during the years 2000-2019 (stage III), entered the PC debate in 2019 when condemnations of its use as an insult ‘’were labeled dismissively as ‘PC’ (stage IV), and was eventually unlabeled and considered taboo from 2019 onwards (stage V).

The case of ‘Autist’ is unique to Israeli culture. While in other cultures ‘Autist’ is (or was) used ‘’ as an insult, only in Israel was its use legitimate (for example, in journalistic jargon) and conventional in the language of public figures, especially politicians. The same stages of conceptualization that the case of ‘Autist’ embodies exist also in most expressions from the Anglosphere that have entered, or will enter, a PC discourse.

1. **Uses of ‘Autist’ in Israeli media: Five stages**
2. **Clinical uses**

The term “Autism” was coined in 1911 by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler as one of the four basic symptoms of schizophrenia (Hoff, 2012: 10). This preliminary use differed from its later use to mark a unique disorder. In 1943, Austrian-American psychiatrist Leo Kanner (1943) published an article titled “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact,” where he described a group of children that he treated and observed, who were unable “to relate themselves in an ordinary way to people and situations” and had an innate “extreme autistic aloneness that comes to the child from the outside” (p. 242).

During the 1960s the term “Autism” appeared in Israeli printed newspapers in the same clinical sense that was used by Kanner to refer to “children who are closed within themselves” (*LaMerhav*, 4 June 1964). During this period, autism was characterized along a normal-abnormal dichotomy, and autism was considered on the abnormal side of this dichotomy. Descriptions of autistic children as “disturbed ” (*Davar*, 12 July 1968), “the underprivileged, the disabled, the abused” (*Al HaMishmar*, 14 January 1969), prevailed, and positioned their cultural status as a weak group of sick children who must be cured, rehabilitated, and integrated into ‘normal’ society.

Despite several attempts to suggest Hebrew alternatives, such as ‘Bidalon’ (separateness) (*Maariv*, 17 December 1982) and ‘Atzmanut’ (selfness) (*Davar*, 12 July 1968), the term ‘Autism’ became established in its English form (itself a translation from the German ‘Autismus’‘’). The global origin of the term did not prevent it, in the following decades, from acquiring local cultural uniqueness.

1. **Metaphorical developments (1970-2000)**

Up until the mid-1970s, the term ‘Autism’ was used almost exclusively in the context of children. Surprisingly, the change did not occur by broadening its meaning so it could also be used to refer to adults. Rather, a new poetic technique gained popularity in Israeli culture – ‘Autist’ was used as a metaphor. Speakers used it to describe phenomena, ideologies, works of art, and people, who were characterized by emotional detachment (from the environment, reality, social norms, and morality). Expressions like “violence is a closed autistic circle” (*Maariv*, 9 July 1976), and “we live in closed societies, within ‘autistic’ tribes” (*Davar*, 15 December 1975), enriched the journalistic vocabulary and opened the door to using the term ‘autistic’ regardless of age. As we shall see, the metaphoric use also opened the door to using the term ‘Autist’ as an insult.

The ‘autistic’ metaphor continued to develop additional innovative uses during the last quarter of the twentieth century. ‘’It became common to use it to describe people, who were not autistic in the clinical sense. Prior to the 2000s, those people were described as ‘normal people,’ an expression that also went through the PC discourse, and these days are referred to (here, as well) as ‘neurotypical’.

Until the 2000’s uses of ‘Autist’ as a distinct insult were rare. Journalists described neurotypical people, usually politicians, as ‘autistic’ to emphasize their detachment from certain political areas of concern. Likud MK Menachem Begin was described as someone who treats US officials like “‘autists,’ who do not understand what is happening in the world” (*Davar*, 2 July 1977). Begin and his government were compared to “autistic children who are detached from the world around them” (*Davar*, 9 August 1980). Former minister of finance, Yoram Aridor, was depicted as “a well-known autist, [who] stands aside and does not make contact” (*Maariv*, 26 September 1984).

During the 1990s even Saddam Hussein was described as autistic (*Maariv*, 10 January 1991). Next to presidents, ministers, and other politicians, one can find uses of ‘Autist’ to describe literary critics and even musicians. Not all uses of the metaphor were negative. In rare cases, being ‘autistic’ was a description some people voluntarily used to describe themselves positively. “When I write songs, I’m like an autist,” said singer Hemi Rudner in an interview, to express his artistic attitude (*Maariv*, 19 March 1990). However, most uses of the ‘autistic’ metaphor that spread in the media signified negativity – bad behavior and unwanted personal characteristics.

And still, this metaphor did not yet reach the level of a clear insult. It was not scandalous, and its use did not attract condemnation. The ‘autistic’ metaphor stood on a middle ground between the clinical and the insulting. It was a quasi-insult: a way to criticize a person, but the metaphor itself was rather harmless and did not cause any social turbulence. When a politician was described as autistic, the description did not imply that a social group might be offended by this use. This PC awareness emerged only when the use of ‘Autist’ to describe a neurotypical person became a distinct insult.

1. **The creation of an insult (2000-2019)**

In the early 2000s, a significant trend can be identified in the poetic use of the expression ‘Autist’: condemnations that seek to delegitimize the use of this quasi-insult began to appear, gradually transforming it into a distinct insult. Up until 2019 ‘Autist’ was an ambivalent insult. Some speakers used it as a legitimate metaphor, while others interpreted it as offensive toward the autistic community.

During this period, another significant and relevant cultural change occurred – the rise of a narrative of pride in the discourse about autism. The term ‘Asperger’s syndrome’ appeared and referred to a condition characterized by social withdrawal with intact learning abilities. It was described as a form of high-functioning autism (another new concept) and was often considered a subgroup of genius autists. With the introduction of the concept of the ‘autistic spectrum,’ the distinction between low-functioning and high-functioning autism became blurred and controversial. Despite this, both groups were considered part of the same spectrum, making the term ‘Autist’ increasingly vague. Many high-functioning autists rejected the characterization of autism as a disease and expressed pride in their identity, while others (usually parents of low-functioning autists) resisted the pride narrative. This narrative was first imported from the US. News articles condemning perceptions of autism as an illness and condemning how autists were referred to (such as ‘people with autism’) were translated and published in Israeli media, and later adopted by the local discourse. Tensions grew between the ‘illness narrative’ and the ‘pride narrative’ in the Israeli discourse about autism. Nevertheless, proponents of both narratives were united against the use of ‘Autist’ as an insult. As we will see, both neurotypical people and autists who condemned the use of ‘Autist’ as an insult, a use that is offensive toward autists, would not be taken seriously up until the second half of the 2010s.

In 2000, Minister of Health Shlomo Benizri said the following about then Prime Minister Ehud Barak: “oh, my! We have never had a Prime Minister as confused and autistic as the current Prime Minister, and I tell you – this is a diagnosis by the Minister of Health, not just anybody” (*Ynet*, 31 December 2000). Unlike previous uses of the metaphor, which went under the ‘PC radar,’ Benizri’s metaphor was met with condemnations that sought to protect the autistic population. For example, an anonymous reader wrote in a talkback: “Mr. Benizri insults an entire community of autists whose only sin is being autistic.” The reader then added a comparison between ‘Autist’ and other metaphorical insults, “will Mr. Benizri’s next move be to call Barak a homosexual for bowing to Arafat? Arik Sharon will be retarded, due to his stupid facial expressions.”

Further comparisons between ‘Autist’ and other profanities, including presenting them side by side, reinforced the new status of this metaphor as an insult. An article reported that graffiti was discovered at the training facility of the soccer team Maccabi Tel Aviv with derogatory references to the team’s manager and two of its players: “Loni is an autist”, “Dego is a *Cushi*,” “Avi Nimni is an Arab” (*Haaretz*, 17 January 2002). Like ‘Autist,’ both ‘*Cushi*’ and ‘Arab’ are expressions of neutral origin that acquired an insulting load over time. Although *‘Cushi’* is a word of biblical origin referring to a person from Ethiopia or Africa, it is often associated with taboo insults for blacks in other cultures, particularly with the ‘N-word’ (Kaplan, 1999). ‘Arab’ is still used mostly as a neutral description, however, the word has developed an additional derogatory use as in the graffiti mentioned, especially as an insult for a Mizrahi/Sephardic Jew who ‘betrayed his roots.’

An interesting and unusual incident was how Shulamit Aloni, then an MK of the left-wing party Meretz, described the party’s leader Yossi Beilin in 2007: “Yossi Beilin is gifted, but he is autistic. […] Beilin is a stranger to Meretz’s voters” (*Walla!*, 21 November 2007). The statement was not condemned when it was expressed, but two decades later it became a referenced example for the selective enforcement of PC rules.

During an interview, MK Benny Begin reminisced: “I heard so many nicknames about me. Autist, astronaut, delirious” (*Haaretz*, 2 January 2009). Famous TV persona Rafi Reshef was described by a TV critic as “antipathetic,” while noting that “others” called him “autistic”: “he was called ‘antipathetic’ (by me) and an ‘Autist’ (by others)” (*Haaretz*, 4 August 2009). It is possible that the purpose of the distinction in the last quote between the critic and “others” is to clarify that the speaker renounces the use of ‘Autist’ as an insult.

Since the mid-2010s, additional aspects of delegitimization appeared regarding the use of ‘Autist’ as an insult. More and more small-scale media incidents focused on the use of this metaphor as a derogatory term, with greater attention given to its usage by politicians. For example, it was reported that Avigdor Lieberman, leader of the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu party, used “the word ‘Autist’ to describe those who think that a retreat to the pre-1967 border will bring peace” (*Maariv*, 21 May 2015). This statement was met with condemnations that interpreted Lieberman’s use of ‘Autist’ as offensive to the autistic population and eventually led to an apology by Lieberman. Following an article in *The Atlantic*, another incident suggested that Obama administration officials described Benjamin Netanyahu as ‘Aspergery’ (*Maariv*, 29 October 2014). Alongside other condemnations, an opinion column titled “In the name of the Autists” wrote: “we are witnessing a phenomenon lately, whereas political figures are using the concept ‘Autism’ (and Asperger’s syndrome) to attack others […] these expressions are the fruits of ignorance that should be condemned […]. Expressions that negatively represent autism should be condemned […]. I appeal to everyone to stop using the word ‘Autist’ or ‘Asperger’ as a derogatory term” (*Haaretz*, 30 May 2014).

Those incidents coincided with a growing global cultural sensitivity toward autists, which was also felt in Israel. A prominent example is the remark of comedian Jerry Seinfeld, from 2014, “I think I’m on the spectrum,” which lead to condemnations in the US and around the world. As we saw earlier, in the 1990’s singer Hemi Rudner described himself similarly (“When I write songs, I’m like an autist”), however, at the time, the expression enjoyed a status of a legitimate metaphor. Seinfeld’s remark and its condemnations, including Israeli ones, were covered in all major Israeli newspapers and news broadcasts. Even though the US’s sensitivity to autists was not centered around the use of ‘Autist’ as an insult, it was perceived in Israel as part of the same struggle for better representation in culture.

At the end of 2018, we can identify a shift in the media’s attitude. Condemnations that sought to prohibit the use of ‘Autist’ as an insult became more central and their attachment to politics became more obvious. It was no longer merely political figures who used ‘Autist’ to attack ‘others.’ It was right-wing speakers who used ‘Autist’ to attack left-wing speakers and left-wing speakers who condemned them for harming the autists community.

The first hint of this trend came in the form of a Facebook post by the Prime Minister’s son. On December 3, 2018, Yair Netanyahu published the following text: “Alsheikh is a special combination of Tony Soprano and ‘The Rain Man.’” Yair Netanyahu, the son of Benjamin Netanyahu, compared Police Commissioner Roni Alsheikh to two canonical characters from American cinema – a violent sociopathic mobster, and an autistic genius who lives in a closed institution. The statement was posted on the same day that the press reported on police recommendations to prosecute Yair Netanyahu’s parents.

In response to ’his Facebook post, condemnations of his comparison between Alsheikh and the “Rain Man,” which was seen as offensive to autistic people, appeared in the media. A condemnation published by the Ruderman Foundation stated: “it is disappointing to discover that the son of the Prime Minister, Yair Netanyahu, chooses to offend by using a disability, which is all prejudices and stereotypes against people with autism. The attempt to use any disability as an insult is archaic, disconnected from reality, and mainly insults the person who used it” (*Maariv*, 7 December 2018). “So now,” tweeted journalist Zion Nanous, “the representation of a person on the autistic spectrum is used to mock the commissioner?” (@zionnenko on 3 December 2018). In defense of Netanyahu, right-wing journalist Yinon Magal responded to Nanous by labeling him ‘PC’: “the guardian of the politically correct on Twitter woke up again chilling slash shaking“ (@YinonMagal on 3 December 2018).

1. **Enter PC debate (2019)**

As we have seen, up to this point, speakers used ‘Autist’ regularly to describe detached people without being condemned (1970-2000), and when condemnations did appear, they did not lead to serious debate or significant media attention (2000-2019). Only in 2019 did a major PC debate concerning the expression ‘Autist’ as a form of insult. The trigger for this debate was the remark, already mentioned at the beginning, by Likud MK David Amsalem.

“It’s as if the IDF chief is some autistic person,” Amsalem said of Benny Gantz, former IDF chief of staff (*Ynet*, 4 February 2019). At the time, Gantz entered politics and allied his new party with other center-left leaning parties (including Yesh Atid) to form the Blue and White party. The alliance positioned itself against the Likud party and especially against Likud’s leader, Benjamin Netanyahu. Amsalem’s remark about Gantz, it seems, was interpreted as a political jab.

In response to this use of ‘Autist,’ Yesh Atid’s party leader Yair Lapid condemned Amsalem on his Facebook page. Lapid, Gantz’s political partner, and a father to an autistic daughter, wrote: “Dudi Amsalem just said on the radio about Benny Gantz that he is autistic. Because being my daughter is a curse in his eyes. Because in Amsalem’s world, the heads of the weak are a target.”

Amsalem responded with direct reference to normative conventions of speech. “How many times in life have you said, are you disabled? Are you blind? Are you autistic?” Amsalem wrote on his Facebook page. In addition, he compared ‘Autist’ to other non-PC insults – one common metaphorical insult (‘blind’), and another mildly condemned insult (‘disabled’). Comparing between expressions is a common counter-condemnation tactic. We can see in the comparison, between ‘Autist’ to expressions that did not reach (yet, at least) the status of taboo, an attempt by Amsalem to convince his audience of his own innocence. Of course, this would be futile had he compared ‘Autist’ to expressions that did reach the status of taboo. As we will see, the tactic of comparing the language suggestion (stop saying ‘Autist’ as an insult) to taboo expressions is used by those who favor the suggestion.

Amsalem continued his counter-condemnation with an attempt to reverse roles and depict Lapid (and others who condemned him for his expression) as offensive toward autists: “Election period is a bad and ugly period that brings out enormous slime, but mainly a cynical exploitation from little people who see nothing but votes“.

Amsalem’s and Lapid’s Facebook posts on the subject were extremely popular in local terms, attracting thousands of comments and numerous quotations in mainstream newspaper articles, TV news, and radio shows. During the height of the controversy, the discussion involved increased use of the label ‘PC’ and its critique, thus making ‘Autist’ not only central to the PC discourse (stage III) but also to the discourse about PC (stage IV).

Though the label ‘PC’ appeared in comments of many who responded to condemnations of Amsalem, I would like to focus here on the comments made by right-wing journalist and former The Jewish Home party MK Yinon Magal, and the resistance he encountered. “You cannot say retarded (*‘Mefager’*),” Magal tweeted, “You cannot say autist, nor disabled (*‘Nehe’*). What about handicapped (*‘Mugbal’*)? What about just a moron (*‘Debil’*)? What about you bunch of annoying and tiring [people] with fake and pesty politically correct, we are exhausted by your language policing, let us go, can we?” (@YinonMagal on 4 February 2019)

A few speakers chose to reply to Magal’s anti-PC rant with irony, by comparing ‘Autist’ to different expressions than those referenced by Magal. Left-wing activist Ori Kol tweeted: “you cannot say […] autist. […] You cannot say *Cushi*. […] You cannot say death to the Arabs. What happened to the world??” (@orikol on 4 February 2019). The tactic of comparing the language suggestion to taboo expressions like *Cushi*, “death to the Arabs,” and even to sexually harassing women and slavery, has been accompanied by statements about PC. Thus, by complaining about taken-for-granted taboos and asking, “What happened to the world??” or ironically stating that “[we are] fed up with this liberal and politically correct policing!” (@Nifla\_Po on 4 February 2019) these speakers resisted the PC label, not by serious arguments, but by parody and humor.

Labor party MK Stav Shaffir responded to Magal’s tweet without irony. “I am reading this moronic (*‘debili*’) text,” she posted on both her Facebook and Twitter pages, “written by someone who was here for a short (and sad) moment, a member of the Knesset in Israel, and I think ‘how does this man educate his children?’” Shaffir was not the only one who used the expression *‘Debil’* to mock Magal. Activist Facebook page ‘Disabled, not a half-person’ shared Magal’s tweet with the remark: “just [saying] a moron [*‘Debil’*] is allowed. You are.”

Through the lens of the condemnation model, we can understand the major historical difference between ‘Autist’ and the expressions that were used both to reject the language suggestion and to support it. While ‘Autist’ was well recognized as a controversial insult in 2019, *‘Debil’* has long been a legitimate metaphor for a stupid person. Like ‘Autist,’ *‘Debil’* too went through a PC stage – it used to be a legitimate clinical term, became a metaphorical insult, was condemned as offensive toward the intellectually disabled, and years later came back to be used as a legitimate insult. The major difference is that ‘Autist’ did not come back to be used as an accepted insult.

Magal used the label ‘PC’ also on his radio show during a debate about ‘Amsalem’s controversy’ with co-host Anat Davidov (103fm, 5 February 2019). Davidov condemned the use of ‘Autist’ as an insult, while Magal accused her of waving the ‘flag of political correctness.’ “No, I don’t wave flags of political correctness,” she responded impatiently, “it really doesn’t interest me. [...] It’s not true today, we don’t use such expressions today, and we don’t insult people, neither blind nor deaf nor disabled” (03:42 -03:53).

It can be seen that the use of ‘politically correct’ as a derogatory term constitutes a stigma attributed to certain people, which positions them as unworthy. In the context of Magal’s critique, the stigma of being PC mainly means that one is a conformist. To deal with the stigma, Davidov denied the label by creating an aesthetic distinction between two phrases with similar meanings – ‘being politically correct’ and ‘avoiding expressions that we do not use today.’ This tactic can be viewed as part of a set of ‘stigma management’ struggles, in Erving Goffman’s (1963) words, applied by speakers who were labeled ‘PC.’ Instead of taking pride in being PC and thus contributing to its normalization, people usually reject the label by offering a different and less stigmatized wording.

Nonetheless, it is evident that while the label ‘PC’ was indeed used as an attempt to hinder the language suggestion of not using ‘Autist’ as an insult, people who were labeled ‘PC’ (or perceived themselves as such) had a variety of tools to deal with the label. Irony, mockery, favorable comparisons, and rephrasing ‘PC’ into less stigmatized descriptions – are all tactics that were implemented to resist the negative influence of the ‘PC’ label.

1. **Taboo (2019-onwards)**

After the chain of scandals and ongoing discussions surrounding the uses of ‘Autist,’ a sense of exhaustion of this subject prevailed in mainstream media. And yet, a clear win for PC can be announced. The use of ‘Autist’ as an insult has vanished from representations of Israeli culture following 2019.

Even though, every now and again, the phrase ‘Autist is not a curse’ appears in articles, especially around World Autism Awareness Day, its context has changed. It is no longer about condemning the use of ‘Autist’ as an insult, but mainly about a different meaning of the word ‘curse’ (*‘Klala’*) – a negative state of misfortune. Discussion of the offensive value of the use of ‘Autist’ as an insult disappeared, while a broader discussion of the meaning of ‘Autist’ emerged. An example of this pattern can be seen in the following quote from *Maariv* newspaper columnist Josh Aronson:

*I cannot remain silent, as long as there are still different types of discrimination and a lack of understanding toward autistic people in Israel. In Dubai, people with various disabilities are not called disabled, but ‘people with determination.’ I call on our government to try to change the attitude toward people with autism in Israel as well until people will realize that the word ‘autist’ is not a curse (3 April 2022).*

The slogan “‘Autist’ is not a curse” is now primarily a condemnation of the perception that being autistic is a negative thing. The use of ‘Autist’ as an insult has been established, almost completely, as a taboo. Politicians and journalists are more careful about using it, and it seems that – for now – the defenders of ‘non-PC’ have lost this battle.

1. **Conclusions: The condemnation model and the PC label**

The label ‘PC’ was attached to the prohibition of using ‘Autist’ as an insult only when a significant PC debate broke. The label ‘PC’ was used derogatorily by speakers from the right, just like Fairclough (2003) and others have suggested, to mock speakers from the left. However, the act of labeling something as ‘PC,’ as we saw, has an additional effect. It relegates the labeled expression to an examination protocol. Should we prohibit expression X (in our case, ‘Autist’ as an insult) from legitimate discourse? If the answer is yes, X becomes taboo; if the answer is no, X regresses back to a legitimate expression. In both scenarios, the label ‘PC’ evaporates. The only scenario where the label ‘PC’ remains intact is when there is no clear answer and public examination is still at work.

The process can be chronologically described as follows. Every insult that begins as an innocuous term and becomes the subject of a PC debate can be located somewhere in the aforementioned stages. If we were to compare the expressions ‘Autist’ and ‘Blind’ in Israel, we can easily identify their different stages of development. ‘Autist’ went through all the stages and the prohibition of using it as an insult has been accepted. On the other hand, though ‘Blind’ also began as a clinical term that evolved into a metaphor and an insult, it has yet to complete its PC debate stage. Some speakers do condemn the use of ‘Blind’ as an insult, however, this debate has (so far) not attracted enough public attention to proceed to the next stages. Therefore, in contemporary Israel, calling a detached person ‘Autist’ is much more offensive than calling someone ‘Blind’ for not seeing reality as it is.

PC is not ‘everywhere.’ What we can or cannot say depends on a certain process. When condemnations are labeled ‘PC’ it means that they are in a collective process of examination. Research on PC should not look for a ‘PC era’ in a culture, but rather a PC stage in the development of an expression within a culture. For critical discourse analysts, acquiring a historical perspective of labels and their broader meanings may bring about new questions about their role in social change.

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