**The discursive role of the label ‘PC’: Analyzing changes in discriminatory language 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’ campaigns 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 malicious intentions 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 in favor of using ‘Autist’ as an insult labeled those condemning it as ‘PC,’ while those labeled ‘PC’ resisted the label. Eventually, after the conflict between them was exhausted, and media interest in the subject subsided, the convention of using ‘Autist’ as an insult (which was present in Israeli public discourse since the 1980s) disappeared. ‘PC,’ evidently, won.

This incident exemplifies a key function of the 'PC' label that is rarely examined – serving as a precursor stage to the potential acceptance of non-discriminatory language norms, rather than merely a dismissive tactic of opposition. In this article, I argue that the emergence of the 'PC' label represents a pivotal moment where a linguistic suggestion enters the public sphere – not as an immediate change, but as a pending request that must still be accepted or rejected by broader society. This catalyzing role is often overlooked, partly because the very notion of 'political correctness' is so fraught with complexities itself.

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). Johnson, Culpeper, and 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, 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 historical model that describes the linguistic dynamics surrounding a potentially offensive expression and the role of the ‘PC’ label in that context.

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 characterization can be suggested based on what is common to most definitions and uses of the term. In particular, 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. Not only could linguistic suggestions get approved in public discourse *in spite of* being labeled ‘PC,’ both the labeling itself and resistance to it play a central role in spurring public debate that may bring about acceptance of the 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,[[1]](#endnote-1) 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 acceptance of the suggestion to stop using ‘Autist’ as an insult. By looking at the label 'PC' as part of a dynamic process and not merely as a tactic, the article suggests that its appearance plays a significant role as a pending request for change that is followed by public acceptance or disapproval. When a linguistic suggestion is labeled ‘PC,’ those in favor of the suggestion perceive the label as an attack on their identity and values, which often leads to counterattacks directed at the labelers for their resistance to the linguistic suggestion. This conflict is resolved in the next stage, when the broader public gets involved, not by providing a clear official verdict, but by either changing its use of language or rejecting the change.

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

The term 'politically correct' has its roots in the 1960s and 1970s American countercultural movements, particularly associated with the New Left. Deborah Cameron (1994) notes that while the term was used straightforwardly at times, its most common usage was ironic. Being politically correct in a straightforward sense meant opposing things like chauvinism and racism. However, being politically correct ironically was often a way of humorously poking fun at the idea of absolute correctness (Cameron, 1994: 19). Yet, as Stuart Hall (1994: 165) observed, the joke backfired on those who used it.

During the 1980s, 'politically correct' ceased to be an exclusive in-group term and was adopted by conservatives who began to use this phrase and abuse it for political gain (Wilson, 1995: 4). This appropriation of 'politically correct' also led to its transformation into a new phrase – 'political correctness'. By the early 1990s, 'PC' had become a popular abbreviation, alongside others that did not survive the test of time, such as the initials 'PCP,' which, according to journalist Richard Bernstein, designated "politically correct person" (The New York Times, 28 October 1990).

There is not a unanimous agreement in research literature regarding political correctness being exclusively an 'American' phenomenon. "As a strategy – and even more, as a political *style*," Hall (1994:166) argued, "PC was an active presence in British politics in the early 1980s, even though at the time it was known by a different name." However, the signifier 'political correctness' has travelled, as Chris Brickell (2004) described it, from the US to other cultures, gaining different meanings and associations. In New Zealand, for instance, 'PC' appeared during the 1990s with allusions to communism, fascism, and even Nazism (Brickell, 2004: 107).

In Israel, the 'new' phenomenon started gaining attention in the late 1980s. In 1987, journalist Gabi Nitzan reported that a friend told him that "in the United States there is a concept called 'PC'" (*Koteret Rashit*, 14 October 1987). Nitzan and other writers perceived 'PC' as a foreign 'American' phenomenon marked by indirectness and softness, contrasting with the directness of Israeli '*Dugri*' culture (Katriel, 1986).

In the second decade of the 21st century, a shift in this perception became evident. A string of media scandals ignited vigorous public discourse following remarks made by speakers perceived as offensive to certain social groups (Arabs, *Mizrahim*, African asylum seekers). Of course, scandals of this type have existed before, but unlike in previous periods, they were now framed in public discourse using the term 'politically correct.'

Gradually, 'politically correct' in Israel has shifted from being a denied phenomenon to a discourse that is, so to speak, recognized by 'everyone.' Yet, as a label, 'PC' in Israel still carries the association of a foreign American form of indirectness. Thus, in the Israeli context, calling someone 'PC' does not only mean someone who is a conformist but also someone who conforms to American culture.

These associations are reinforced by the fact that although there is an accepted Hebrew translation of 'politically correct' ('*takin politit*'), and there were attempts to refer to the translated term 'PC' in Hebrew letters ('*TP*'), the common uses in Israeli public discourse are the English terms 'PC' and 'politically correct'. Even in writing, people transcribe these terms in Hebrew letters, which also underscore their non-local association.

Previous literature on PC emphasized the effectiveness of the label ‘PC’ in sabotaging linguistic suggestions. 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). This way, in debates about racist language, researchers have pointed out that when majority group members are accused of racism, a common response is to represents themselves as victims of 'PC' (Augoustinos and Every, 2007: 138). Additionally, labeling minority groups' demands for equality as 'PC' has been viewed as a tactic to maintain privilege among the labelers (Brickell, 2004). Some scholars even reject a descriptive use of the term ‘PC’ because of its popular abusive uses. For example, 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 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. 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 of the legitimization or de-legitimization of a certain expression has begun. 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 refer to instances of human interaction that are characterized by 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 and therefore involves an implicit condemnation of the latter. In Grice's (1975) terms, the implicit process of condemnation is non-conventional. When speakers imply condemnation toward a non-PC term, the receivers of the implicature may or may not interpret it as condemnation. In contrast, when speakers explicitly condemn the use of a term, for example by saying "calling grown women 'girls' is misogynistic," they are uttering a conventional PC condemnation. The degree to which a speaker is politically correct or incorrect (non-PC) depends on the potential of condemnation to appear in a given social environment. In other words, PC and non-PC cannot exist without condemnation.

Although definitions of PC often lack direct reference to condemnation, in most definitions it appears in some indirect way. Loury (1994), for example, defined PC “as an implicit social convention of restraint on public expression, operating within a given community” (p. 430). The "restraint" here is achieved by the power (or fear) of condemnation, and the public expressions that interest Loury all refer to social groups (Blacks, Jews, women), so what is being restrained is content that is offensive toward those social groups. Another example is 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.

I chose the term 'condemnation' over 'criticism,' as it more accurately captures the speech act performed by speakers when attacking transgressors. Unlike the broad notion of criticism, condemnations entail elements such as a call to action, the marking of the transgressor as deviant, and the assertion of the condemner's authority (Zohar and Katriel, 2017). Additionally, I employ the term 'expressions' rather than 'words' (or other linguistically exclusive terms) since non-PC objects can manifest in forms beyond spoken or written language. Actions such as mocking a disabled person by imitating certain body gestures, engaging in 'blackface,' or even wearing a leather jacket (in specific social contexts) can be perceived as offensive toward certain social groups (e.g., disabled individuals, Black people, animal rights activists), thus constituting non-PC expressions. Similarly, certain opinions, clothing choices, and even one's taste in music, when considered within a specific social context, can also be seen as non-PC 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’ 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.

The discursive negotiation of discrimination underscores the necessity for new labels to critique linguistic suggestions and other initiatives for social change, as well as tools to deal with such critiques. Although these labels refer to different meanings, they share a common function: characterizing suggestions and initiatives as new and fashionable in a negative light, and thus inauthentic, often portraying them as threats to 'our values.' Previous researchers have noted that what is labeled PC typically involves suggestions that challenge the status quo (Lea, 2009: 30), such as calls for innovative change regarding social inclusivity (for example, including works of women and non-whites in the undergraduate curriculum [O'Keefe, 1992: 125-126]).

As time passes and certain labels lose their sense of novelty, new ones inevitably emerge to fill the void. For instance, 'PC' as a dismissal label is being replaced in today's discourse with 'cancel culture' and 'wokeness.' On a discursive level, this type of label functions as an indicator of an examination protocol in place. The emergence of labels like 'PC' suggests an ongoing public debate, while their disappearance signifies its (sometimes temporary) conclusion.

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

What is considered a suitable target for PC condemnation is subjected to history. As Mateo and 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).

Conceptual history is a field of research that studies how expressions change their meanings over time and the relations between these changes and social transformations. Conceptual historians traditionally deal with ‘big’ concepts, or ‘basic concepts’ (*Grundbegriffe*), like ‘democracy,’ ‘revolution,’ and ‘republic.’ Reinhart Koselleck 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” (Koselleck and Richter, 2011: 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).

Conceptual history and critical discourse studies (CDS) share many theoretical ideas about the relations between language, society, and history. As Michał Krzyżanowski (2016) points out: "both approaches share the idea that forms of language (discourses/concepts) reappear […] across different fields, spaces and genres" (p. 313). However, while frameworks such as the discourse-historical approach (DHA) tend to focus on categories of expressions (like 'race,' in Reisigl and Wodak [2001]) and the ways they are manifested discursively as a social practice, conceptual history sees each of the expressions that make up that category (including the category name itself) as the focus of analysis to provide a better understanding of the category. In historical-pragmatics, to give an example from another relevant field, the focus is on language behaviors such as (im)politeness (see Jucker and Kopaczyk, 2017; Culpeper and Kádár, 2010), rather than on the specific expressions that make up the category of (im)politeness. What is lacking in research on PC is not the exploration of the PC category itself, but rather an emphasis on investigating the conceptualization of the expressions constituting this category.

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.’ Research on the dynamics of scandals, particularly talk scandals as described by Ekström and Johansson (2008), focused on their immediate and sensational impact on public discourse. These studies address expressions that have caused scandals but do not treat them historically. Transgressive expressions are typically analyzed in the context of the time their speakers used them, without considering their previous uses in different historical periods and changes in meaning that make them offensive. Horovitz (1997) explained that a scandal results from a social event that indicates a break in social and linguistic conventions. Nevertheless, these conventions are not static; they are shaped through discourse over time. Horovitz provides many examples of transgressive expressions from the mid-1990s, making a phenomenal case study for that period (in the Israeli context), but not for understanding how each of these expressions developed over time. Although scandal theory sometimes mentions the importance of socio-historical changes in norms (e.g., Thompson, 1997: 39-40), its investigation of the past is usually limited.

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 linguistic suggestions and political opponents who express them as ‘PC’ is indeed a powerful discursive tactic for preventing social change, by depicting the opponents and their suggestions as inauthentic, conformist, and often hypocritical and cynical. 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. Here, 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. Some condemners may attempt to reclaim the expression, while others may suggest alternative terms. 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.
4. 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.
5. If prohibition is accepted, the expression becomes a taken-for-granted taboo. If prohibition is denied, a return to stage 3 occurs.

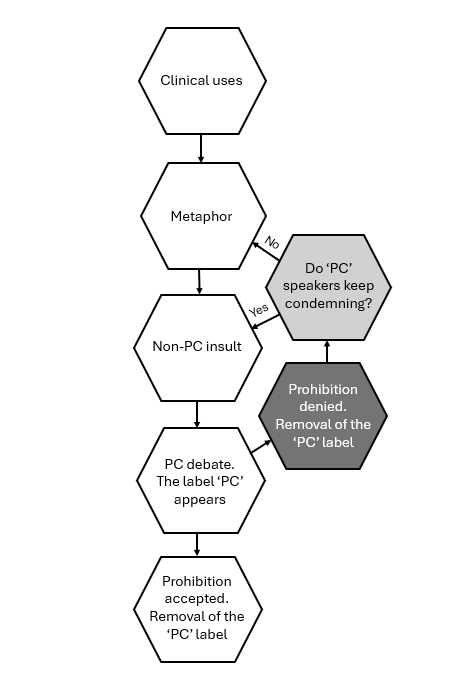


Figure 1: Condemnation model

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’ during the years 1964-2022 in newspapers, and numerous other cultural representations of autists in TV, film, and social media. While popular culture affects public discourse, it is important to note that the analysis and claims of this research are limited to the realm of popular culture. Some changes in language occur first in daily public discourse and only after a while, sometimes years, may appear in popular media, and vice versa. However, broadly speaking, the process outlined here reflects changes in both discourses, although the specific timeline indicates changes in popular media and may differ from those in daily public discourse.

The analysis reveals a process: ‘Autist’ was introduced into popular media in its clinical sense 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’ seems to be 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. I maintain that 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, though further research is required to substantiate this stronger suggestion. An interesting example for this kind of further research may include the changes the expression 'chairman' has undergone (a comparison between Fairclough's [2003: 25] account to Mills's [2008: 104] condemnation half a decade later is a good starting point). Another relevant case study would be the narratives toward homosexuality in New Zealand that in the 1990s were labeled 'PC', as Brickell (2004) described, to construct "the illusion of a new orthodoxy" (p. 117); and consequently, after the turn of the millennium "gave way to newer discourse of love" (Brickell, 2022: 351).

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 as also 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, its metaphoric use also opened the door to using the term 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 process, and these days are referred to (here, as well) as ‘neurotypical.’

Until the 2000s 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 without causing much harm or social turbulence.

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 and gradually transformed 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 (e.g., as ‘people with autism’ instead of the now reclaimed ‘autists’) were translated and published in Israeli media, and later adopted by the public more broadly. 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 contrastive "but" in this statement implies that autism is a negative trait that detracts from Beilin's giftedness, suggesting he lacks the social communication capabilities that a high-level politician needs. The statement was not condemned when it was expressed, but two decades later it became an oft-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 Lieberman to apologize. 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, where 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 the status of a legitimate metaphor. Seinfeld’s remark and its condemnations were covered in all major Israeli newspapers and news broadcasts. Even though sensitivity to autists in the US was not centered around the use of ‘Autist’ as an insult, in Israel it was perceived as part of the same struggle for better cultural representation.

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 was 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 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” appeared in the media. For example, the Ruderman Foundation stated: “it is disappointing to discover that the son of the Prime Minister, Yair Netanyahu, chooses to offend with an appeal to a disability that is nothing more than prejudice 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…” (@YinonMagal on 3 December 2018).

1. **Enter the 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 arise 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, 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.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

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.[[3]](#endnote-3) In addition, he compared ‘Autist’ to other non-PC insults – one common metaphorical insult (‘blind’), and another mildly condemned insult (‘disabled’). Comparing expressions is a common counter-condemnation tactic, aiming to use recontextualization as mitigation (Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022: 842-843). Thus, the comparison between 'Autist' and expressions that have not yet reached the status of taboo serves as an attempt by Amsalem to repair his image (Benoit, 2015) by convincing his audience of his 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 opposite 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 by attempting to reverse roles. Following a tactic akin to what Van Dijk (1992: 114) terms "reversal" concerning denial of racism, Amsalem "attacked the accuser" (Benoit, 2015: 128) by depicting Lapid (and others who condemned him for his expression) as offensive towards 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. At 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 your fake and pesty political correctness, we are exhausted by your language policing, let us go, OK?” (@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 along with the comment that “just [saying] moron [*‘Debil’*] is allowed. You are [one].”

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. For this purpose, we can anecdotally compare 'Autist' to *'Debil'*. 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. Although further investigation is necessary to pinpoint and analyze the specific stages *'Debil'* went through, the notable difference observed is that *'Debil'* stopped being used as a clinical term (while 'Autist' remained a clinical term). This contributed to the symbolic separation between the term and the social group it was previously associated with, thus allowing it to be used once again 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 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. While it is hard to find examples for this exact tactic in previous research, it aligns with other rejection strategies suggested by scholars to avoid the traps of the PC label. For example, Mills (2003) insists on referring to the term only with inverted commas (‘political correctness’), and Feldstein (1997: 183) urges those labeled to "not accept the ‘politically correct’ label that neoconservatives have fabricated to stigmatize them."

Nonetheless, it is evident that while the label ‘PC’ was indeed used as an attempt to hinder the language suggestion, 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 expressions 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 ‘determined people.’ 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.

However, this current stage is not necessarily permanent, hence the caveat "for now." Taboos can be challenged, and expressions that have undergone condemnation and become taboo may resurface in the future among speakers who seek to revive their previous usage. It is essential to differentiate between a taboo and a non-PC expression. The latter is subject to debate, and its use, when condemned, can be defended through counter-condemnations that accuse the condemners of inauthenticity, often by labeling them as 'PC' or 'woke.' In contrast, a taboo is an expression whose prohibition has become an unquestioned norm in a culture. When a taboo is violated, the response is typically not a PC condemnation but rather a rebuke based on social norms ("it isn't done," "we don’t say things like this," "this is not acceptable," etc.). Taboo breakers may respond to such rebukes by using labels like 'PC,' but unlike in previous stages, this tactic will not convey the meaning of inauthenticity since a taboo, by its nature, is recognized as authentic, and thus the chances of this tactic succeeding are relatively very low.

Over time, however, a taboo can lose its status if the social forces underpinning its prohibition change. In the case of 'Autist' in Israel, if in the future the social status of autists reaches a consensus of equal membership in society, and complaints of discrimination are no longer heard, the taboo against using 'Autist' as an insult may weaken. Other hypothetical scenarios may include existential threats to society itself, such as times of war. These situations can impact values like solidarity with minority groups, making taboos related to them easier to violate without repercussions.

1. **Conclusion: 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 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 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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1. All translations from Hebrew sources are mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The original post: <https://www.facebook.com/YairLapid/posts/pfbid056CNK1MyqcB5BViem3GPR1XcQ42Yr2dV96kbAG4weDNbR9tvFUd12pkMmc1rB4qGl> (accessed 28 August 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The original post: <https://www.facebook.com/mkdavidamsalem/photos/a.667601483340086/1733678410065716/?type=3> (accessed 28 August 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)