



# Excessive Language on Twitter: Arguing about Political Correctness

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**Abstract** Political correctness, seen as a form of linguistic interventionism, and its derivate, political incorrectness, are frequently invoked to take a stand on language. These two formulas are considered as notions whose use is increasing in the media and whose semantic content remains vague. This study focuses on French and German metalanguage polemics on Twitter: these are positions on language in the name of political (in)correctness taken by a speaker who uses metalanguage and/or metalinguistic markers. Political correctness is considered here as a formula in order to show how its use in online exchanges makes it possible to organize the relationships between participants and to shape linguistic norms. The analysis distinguishes, in a polemical and argumentative context, between the use of the formula to disqualify the other and as a decommitment marker that uses humor to defuse the aggressive character of utterances.

**Keywords** political correctness, polemics, Twitter, social media, stances, metapragmatics

## 1. Introduction

Social media is well known as a space where language use can be felt as excessive. Hate speech, trolling or cyberstalking are all phenomena showing how online communities have to deal with verbal violence and excess in their communicative practices. There is a lot of research on online verbal violence in psychology, sociology and media studies trying to define and understand these phenomena (Dawson 2018; Leroux 2020; Malecki *et al.* 2021). The present study takes a linguistic perspective on a particular form of excess on social media—the so-called metalanguage polemics arguing about political correctness. Metalanguage polemics refer to any conflicting position on language taken by a speaker (on a word, a statement, a discourse, a style...) that uses metalanguage and/or markers that draws one's attention to the linguistic material (e.g. quotation marks, bold or italic fonts, hashtags), as illustrated by example (1) in which a speaker questions the relevance of an expression:

(1) @OliveLaMoole : La « neutralité suisse », jusque là il faut bien le reconnaître, c'était quand même un politiquement correct pour dire « manger à tous les râteliers y compris les moins recommandables » (28/02/22).

[“Swiss neutrality”, until today, one has to admit, has been after all a politically correct way of saying “to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, including the least commendable”]<sup>1</sup>

The expression *swiss neutrality* is questioned here: the quotation marks and the verb *dire* [say] are a sign of this metalinguistic activity. The speaker is referring to political correctness to define his conflicting position.

So, this study is about cases where speakers on Twitter argue about language in the name of political (in)correctness. The argument can take place during an interaction between Twitter users or in the absence of an opposing party (like in example 1), whether the latter is clearly identified or not. To use political correctness and its counterpart political incorrectness as a norm and point of reference shows how speakers tend to act as folk linguists defining what can be said or not, what is excessive or not. Excess can only be defined regarding a norm or an expectation. And political correctness constitutes a very interesting norm to observe for several reasons. In this sense, metalanguage polemics are a form of stance taking (Du Bois 2007) with political correctness as an imposed or claimed norm. Political correctness can be found everywhere in public debates (media, political, academic discourses, see Saltykov 2021) and even though this notion originally appeared as a desire to protect others, the phenomenon has become a sign of a tightening public debate about language and social issues; it has also become a manifestation of new forms of verbal violence.<sup>2</sup> The aim of this study is to show how political correctness and its use in argumentation contributes to generating excessive speech in social media

1 All translations are mine.

2 On the relation between political correctness and hate see Määttä, Romain & Sini (2021: 101): « L'usage d'expressions dites politiquement correctes est l'une de ces stratégies linguistiques pour neutraliser la haine, même si les réactions qu'elles suscitent dévoilent souvent cette même haine qu'on essaie de masquer, et génèrent du rejet » [The use of so-called politically correct expressions is one of the linguistic

by showing the speaker's own relationship to language. It explores the way speakers, by arguing about political correctness, refer to a norm and tend to shape it at the same time. The data collected and analyzed for this study is in German and in French: this cross-language approach should enable us to observe possible cultural specifics in the realization of this phenomenon in the digital space that embodies communicational globalization. The study is organized as follows: in section 2, we review the definition of political correctness and its status as a formula in public debates. Then, in section 3, we explain the method used to collect and constitute the corpus of tweets and we comment on the particularities of this new form of communication. Finally, the analysis of the data in section 4 will bring to light discursive processes of this phenomenon such as polemical reformulation and speakers' decommitment that oscillate between escalating and defusing polemics.

## 2. Political correctness: from a formula to a hashtag

*Political correctness* is an expression that appeared in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s in the context of the civil rights movement. The French and German equivalent only appeared in the 1990s where, in accordance with the social-historical context in which it was born, it initially designated discourses and behaviors that excluded anything that was contrary to the respect of groups considered to be of a social minority (on the definition and historical evolution of the expression see Erdl 2004; Prak-Derrington, Dias & Durand 2021; Krieg-Planque 2021). Political correctness was originally a matter of promoting respect and equality between individuals. It is only later that the expression evolves to be denounced as a form of social censorship of language. Political correctness is therefore an expression that appeared in a specific cultural and historical context before spreading to other contexts, including social media, and becoming increasingly difficult to define.

Previous research on political correctness have been mainly concerned with the lexical and political dimensions of the phenomenon. Lexical studies have focused on the debate about whether or why certain expressions or words

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strategies to neutralize hate, even if the reactions they provoke often reveal the same hate they are trying to hide, and generate rejection].

can discriminate or stigmatize social groups (Hoffmann 1996; Mayer 2002; Germann 2007; Kilian 2007). Political studies have been more interested in the populist nature of anti-political-correctness-discourses and try to show how political parties use them for ideological purposes (Schröter 2019a, 2019b).

In this paper, we adopt a perspective that goes beyond the lexical approach, but focuses on uses and users. Political correctness is considered here in light of the norm and as producing excessive language. In this, we follow the tradition initiated by Cameron (1995) of observing popular attitudes towards language and the practices by which people attempt to regulate its use. Recent work has attempted to combine Cameron's notion of verbal hygiene with ethnographic methods (Årman 2021) focusing on affects in language activism. The present paper explores the uses of the expression *political correctness*, assuming that it evolved to become a formula in the sense of Krieg-Planque (2009: 7): "a set of expressions which, because of their use at a given time and in a given space, crystallize the political and social issues that these expressions contribute towards building at the same time"<sup>3</sup>. According to this definition, expressions in German like *politisch korrekt*, *Politische Korrektheit*, *PC*, *Political correctness* and in French *politiquement correct* or *PC* can be considered variations of the same formula "political correctness". For the present study we understand the term *political correctness* in French and German as a formula following Krieg-Planque's (2009: 63) definition. This definition includes four properties:

- a) A formula has a fixed character: this is shown by the substantivization of the adjectival phrase in French (*politiquement correct* (adjective) > *le politiquement correct* (noun)) even if the noun *correction* also exists in French. The reluctance of speakers to use the plural form<sup>4</sup> when it is an adjective also shows the fixed character of the

3 « ensemble de formulations qui, du fait de leurs emplois à un moment donné et dans un espace public donné, cristallisent des enjeux politiques et sociaux que ces expressions contribuent dans le même temps à construire » (Krieg-Planque 2009: 7).

4 Several examples in the corpus show an invariant form of the adjective even when the plural form *-s* is expected: @Ephrata\_Levi : les termes politiquement correct (04.03.22) [politically correct terms]; @yannkees14 : Ses discours sont toujours très « politiquement correct » (04.03.22) [His speeches are always very "politically

formula. In German, if the form *politische Korrektheit* exists, it is the frequent use of the English expression *political correctness* which shows the fixed character of the term.

- b) A formula functions as a social referent: the phenomenon is identified by everyone, even if its definition and the values attributed to it are very variable<sup>5</sup>.
- c) A formula has a polemical aspect, since political correctness constitutes an injunction to the other (one must be politically correct!), or is the object of a transgression (I am not politically correct!).
- d) A formula is an “index of recognition that allows us to ‘stigmatize’—positively or negatively—its users”<sup>6</sup> (Krieg-Planque 2009: 76): the use of the formula in an argumentative context tends to polarize positions in order for the user to construct a self-image, or in most cases in the Twitter corpus, it is the politically incorrect, the transgressive attitude, that is claimed and becomes the new norm.

Moreover, the very meaning attributed to the formula *political correctness* seems to fluctuate. This is particularly obvious on social media where the formula is also used as a hashtag. A previous study with a discursive semantics approach (Dias 2022) focusing exclusively on German data revealed six different meanings used by speakers on Twitter. These meanings do not necessarily correspond to the definition of political correctness, as encoded in dictionaries, which corresponds to the historical meaning of the phenomenon in both French and German:

Politische Korrektheit: Einstellung, die alle Ausdrucksweisen und Handlungen ablehnt, durch die jemand aufgrund seiner ethnischen

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correct”]; @BRICEKE39026084 (restons politiquement correct 😊) (03.03.22) [Let us stay politically correct].

- 5 Previous research has already pointed out the difference between political correctness seen as a choice of words and political correctness as an ideological position (Schröter 2019a) but we can distinguish up to six different meanings (see Table 1 below).
- 6 « indice de reconnaissance permettant de ‘stigmatiser’—positivement ou négativement—ses utilisateurs » (Krieg-Planque 2009: 76).

Herkunft, seines Geschlechts, seiner Zugehörigkeit zu einer bestimmten sozialen Schicht, seiner körperlichen oder geistigen Behinderung oder sexuellen Neigung diskriminiert wird (*duden.de*, s.v.).

[Attitude that rejects all expressions and actions that discriminate against someone on the basis of ethnic origin, gender, membership in a particular social class, physical or mental disability, or sexual orientation.]

Politiquement correct (Calque de l'Américain *politically correct*.), se dit d'un discours, d'un comportement visant à bannir tout ce qui pourrait blesser les membres de catégories ou de groupes minoritaires en leur faisant sentir leur différence comme une infériorité ou un motif d'exclusion (*Larousse online*, s.v.).

[Relating to a speech or a behavior aiming at banishing anything that could hurt the members of categories or minority groups by making them feel their difference as an inferiority or a reason for exclusion.]

Table 1 summarizes the different meanings observed in discourse on Twitter as well as the corresponding antonyms, insofar as political correctness often appears negated (something is not politically correct) or in its prefixed variant (something is politically incorrect or anti-politically correct).

**Table 1. Meanings of political correctness and incorrectness in online speech (Dias 2022: 30)**

Political correctness	Political incorrectness
normative	transgressive
soft	brutal
censorship	freedom of speech
lie	truth
left-wing or neoliberal ideology	freedom of thought
protective	offensive

Thus, the opposition between political correctness and incorrectness can—more or less explicitly and depending on the speaker—cover the oppositions normative/transgressive, soft/brutal, censorship/freedom, lie/truth, protective/offensive. The meaning “normative” is inherent to each occurrence of the term *politically correct* and is associated with other meanings depending on speakers and contexts. Political correctness is said to be based on an ideology, which motivates the rejection of this ideology by some people: in the corpus considered, the ideology in question is mostly associated with left-wing political parties which, allegedly for the sake of equality, would willingly endanger freedom. On the other hand, there is also a use of *political correctness* that denotes neoliberal ideology: certain terms would be politically correct in that they mask socio-economic realities (see Benedetto 2021 on terms and expressions that refer to the collaborative economy in English). Thus, the use of one of the many meanings summarized in table 1 contributes to situating speakers and discourses in polarized argumentative configurations. Therefore, the semantic study on German presented in Dias (2022) is now complemented by a contrastive approach and is oriented towards an argumentative analysis in order to reveal discursive processes at work in polemics.

### 3. The corpus

#### 3.1. Method and data

This study focusses on metalanguage polemics referring to political correctness on Twitter. As public reactions to language use, the analyzed tweets can be considered as metapragmatic comments and as stances. Since they refer to political correctness, they have a metapragmatic dimension:

Signs functioning metapragmatically have pragmatic phenomena—indexical sign phenomena—as their semiotic objects; they thus have an inherently ‘framing’, or ‘regimenting’, or ‘stipulative’ character with respect to indexical phenomena (Silverstein 1993: 33).



Indexicality is here the ability of linguistic signs to evoke or contextualize social values or types of participants: linguistic signs not only refer to certain objects, but also indicate values (see Spitzmüller 2013: 265). And by evoking a positive or a negative evaluation toward some act of language use, the tweets of the corpus correspond to stance taking, according to the well-established definition of Du Bois:

Stance is a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field (Du Bois 2007: 163).

In the “stance triangle” model of Du Bois, subjects evaluate some stance object (here a word or an utterance). While doing so, speakers position themselves and thereby align with co-participants in interaction. Analyzing the tweets of the corpus as stances implies considering the stance objects as well as the role and positions of participants. In that regard, stance is seen as contributing to social action. In order to define the position of participants, we can refer to the three pairs of tactics defined by Bucholtz and Hall (2004: 383): adequation and distinction, authentication and denaturalization, authorization and illegitimation. Adequation aims at or pursues socially recognized sameness whereas distinction represents an attempt to differentiate from others. Authentication and denaturalization involve the production of a credible or genuine identity or the production of an identity that is incredible, non-genuine. The last pair, authorization and illegitimation, concerns the attempt to legitimate an identity through an institutional authority or to withdraw such authority. Social positioning through language is thus a complex process including different objects and participants.

The analyses and results presented in this study are based on a corpus of 1332 French and 1504 German tweets compiled using the Twitter archiver tool<sup>7</sup> over a period of 40 days (late summer 2019 for German; early 2022 for

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7 [https://workspace.google.com/marketplace/app/tweet\\_archiver/976886281542](https://workspace.google.com/marketplace/app/tweet_archiver/976886281542).

French; see the general data in table 2). All tweets contain the words *politiquement correct* or *politisch korrekt* in the body text or used as a hashtag. When retrieved by the Twitter archiver tool, certain metadata can be accessed: date of posting, user name, number of followers and, if available, a mini-biography written by the users themselves. As political correctness can be about language and behavior, not all tweets containing the phrase *political correctness* necessarily constitute a metalanguage polemic. This is the reason why, in a second step, only the tweets involving the questioning of a word or expression have been selected (286 Tweets in German, 145 Tweets in French).

**Table 2. General data**

	<b>German data</b>	<b>French data</b>
Keywords	#politischkorrekt; politisch korrekt	#politiquementcorrect; politiquement correct
Number of tweets	1504	1332
Number of tokens	53,827	42,419
Number of metalanguage polemics	286	145
Period	late summer 2019 (40 days)	early 2022 (40 days)

The choice of establishing the corpus on the basis of the formula *politically correct* avoids limiting the analysis to a particular polemic and thus avoids a bias imposed by a particular theme. This perspective also enables us to appreciate certain cultural differences, even if it should be pointed out that the two sub-corpus do not correspond exactly to the same period.

The use of the formula *politically correct* can therefore index similar themes in both countries, such as gender-neutral language or the designation of so-called minority groups. But the formula also appears in specific cultural contexts: in the French sub-corpus the formula is very much used in the context of the presidential campaign of 2022, and in particular, by the supporters of the French far-right politician Eric Zemmour who see in their candidate the only bulwark against political correctness. In the German

sub-corpus, on the other hand, the controversy around the racist remarks made by Clemens Tönnies<sup>8</sup>, German businessman and then-president of the soccer club FC Schalke 04, gave rise to numerous tweets claiming or rejecting political correctness. The analyses in section 4 show that beyond the thematic and cultural differences, similar processes are at work.

### 3.2. Specificities of social media

The contrastive approach targeting German and French also makes sense in relation to the nature of the corpus. Social media probably best embodies the new forms of communicational globalization by the apparent absence of boundaries. There are apparently no boundaries between countries: anyone can subscribe to an account among millions of users around the world. However, language can still be a barrier and the classification of trends is done by country, which limits the apparent globalization of debate. There are also no boundaries between private and public discussions: these forms of communication combine the characteristics of interpersonal exchanges and mass diffusion (e.g., interactions between two interlocutors, but visible to the whole community). Moreover, the technological properties of media have an influence on the behavior of users, who have in return an influence on the way media is used in a society. These are the so-called affordances, i.e., a reciprocal conditioning and enabling relationship of technical realities and usage practices (Zillien 2008). In the case of Twitter, the interface necessarily plays a role in the way speakers present themselves and interact with others. This micro-blogging service, where users post short messages that are visible to all their followers, imposes a format of “post-it visibility” (Cardon 2008: 118). This format, i.e., with a brief structure (280 characters on Twitter), tends to increase the potential of a sentence to become a quote or an aphorism (or in the case of Twitter a “retweet”), which is over-asserted,<sup>9</sup> taking a stand on

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<sup>8</sup> He suggests financing power plants in Africa so that Africans stop cutting down trees and having children at night because they cannot get light. Beyond the contexts of use specific to a given cultural space, certain discursive procedures remain quite comparable.

<sup>9</sup> In the sense of Maingueneau (2010), i.e., inducing a modulation that formats a fragment as quotable, as a candidate for de-textualization.

a controversial point and implying a sort of amplification of the enunciator. However, this is what the use of the formula *politically correct* induces, as it participates in the construction of speakers' self-image, because they only have a few characters to make themselves visible. Indeed, the emergence of verbal excesses linked to political correctness is not induced by the potential anonymity of the virtual space but can, on the contrary, contribute towards users' desire for visibility, even through this post-it format. Example (2) shows the case of a public figure who takes advantage of this virtual space to build his discursive image:

(2) @f\_philippot: J'ai beaucoup de compassion pour les populations. Mais je ne me sens aucune obligation à défendre Zelensky, les réseaux mafieux et même nazis d'Ukraine ! Pas politiquement correct ? Peu importe, la vérité fera son chemin !

→ Les protagonistes actuels ne cherchent pas la paix ! (05/03/22)

[I have a lot of compassion for the people. But I don't feel any obligation to defend Zelensky, the mafia and even the Nazi networks of Ukraine! This is not politically correct? No importance whatsoever, the truth will come out!

→ The current protagonists are not looking for peace!]

Florian Philippot plays with a form of dialogism (asking: Not politically correct?) to stage his transgressive character of not being afraid to "speak the truth". As Mercklé (2016: 96) points out, there is a risk of seeing social media invested by debates that proceed through successive assertions and not by interactions between users. There is then at best a juxtaposition of monologues and at worst an exchange of insulting comments.

## 4. Discursive processes at work

Let us now consider more specifically the cases of metalanguage polemics while taking into account the described particularities linked to communication on Twitter. Since political correctness implies a question of designation, the metalanguage polemics on Twitter oppose two designations, each one characteristic of a way of speaking about and naming the world. This confrontation is most often done by resorting to processes of reformulation.

### 4.1. Polemical reformulation

Insofar as political correctness is similar to a form of avoidance of a linguistic taboo by euphemization<sup>10</sup> or re-designation, its criticism in metalanguage polemics gives rise to reformulation. That is to say, these polemics take the form of an “enunciative act that equates a discursive sequence X with a discursive sequence Y”<sup>11</sup> (Steuckardt 2009: 159). And it is precisely in the nature of this equivalence that the polemical character of the statement lies. Thus, even when there is referential identity between segments X and Y, the equivalence between terms introduces a change of point of view that marks a different way to see and name things:

(3) @Europolitikus: Aktivisten ist von den Gutmenschen als positiver Schönsprech (politisch korrekt) für die bisherigen Begriffe wie Krawallmacher, Landfriedensstörer, Rabauken, Gesetz-Übertreter, Polizeigegner, Rechtsbrecher, Bandenkriminelle, Anarchisten, Links-Chaoten usw., usw. ersetzt worden (13/08/19).

[The term ‘Activists’ has been replaced by so-called do-gooders as a positive nicety (politically correct) for previous terms like rioters, disturbers of the peace, bullies, violators of the laws, opponents of the

**10** This is the generic term used, among others, by Reutner and Schafroth (2012) to designate all forms of circumvention of a taboo expression for which another is substituted.

**11** « La reformulation peut se définir en première analyse comme un acte énonciatif qui met en équivalence une séquence discursive X avec une séquence discursive Y » (Steuckardt 2009: 159).

police, law-breakers, criminal gangs, anarchists, left-wing hoodlums, etc., etc.]

Thus, in (3), the pseudo equivalence between the X [*Aktivisten*] and the Y [*Krawallmacher, Landfriedensstörer, Rabauken, Gesetz-Übertreter, Polizeigegner, Rechtsbrecher, Bandenkriminelle, Anarchisten, Links-Chaoten*] segments denounces political correctness as a form of newspeak for which reformulation operations are necessary. The speaker develops the tactics of distinction and illegitimation (Bucholtz & Hall 2004: 387): he wants to differentiate from others and shows a form of resistance to a dominant authority. Polemics thus consist of a form of linguistic mediation for which the formula *political correctness* gives semantic instructions (here to be understood as a form of lying/softening of reality).

The argumentative use of the formula *political correctness* is based on the mechanism of reformulation which can also put segments that do not have the same denotative meaning into a relationship of equivalence. In other words, we are in the presence of a polemical argumentative process that takes on the appearance of a “supposedly reformulative discursive scheme”<sup>12</sup> (Steuckard 2009: 161). This was the case in example (1), which, under the guise of questioning a designation, gives a definition that is rather a form of accusation: for the Twitter user, Switzerland is a country with questionable political positions. Example (4) also presents a form of polemical reformulation which marks a) an escalation of the polemic (to speak of the Islamization of certain districts would be deemed politically correct); b) a semantic vagueness in the use of terms. According to the author of the tweet, Islamization would be a euphemism of Arabization and thus hide its reality: this reality refers probably to the theory of the “great replacement” (*Grand remplacement*), created by the French far-right political activist Renaud Camus. According to this controversial theory, the French population is going to be replaced by a population originating from the former French colonies in Africa:

(4) @\_Rowlf : L’islamisation de certains quartiers c’est le terme politiquement correct pour parler d’arabisation (05/02/2022).

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12 « un schéma discursif prétendument reformulatif » (Steuckardt 2009: 159).

[Islamization of certain neighborhoods is the politically correct term for Arabization]

While reformulation is a discursive activity aimed at ensuring the best possible reception of information (Vargas 2021: 51), in example (4) it has an argumentative function of denunciation. The reformulation is supposed to adjust what is said to reality. In this case, it is used to contest<sup>13</sup> an idea, a point of view, a form of presentation or expression. One thing is certain: these different examples show that the designation of socio-political realities is a crucial issue for speakers (and folk linguists) insofar as it conveys a certain viewpoint. The use of the formula *politically correct* in a supposedly reformulative scheme consists in making these two visions confront each other, denouncing one in order to impose the other. This is indeed a case of an overassertion with a polemical aim, which tends to escalate debates.

#### 4.2. The speaker's decommitment

Even if polemical reformulation opposes two often irreconcilable points of view, some occurrences give rise to humorous sequences and humor is supposed to create an in-group of persons that share the joke.<sup>14</sup> Humor is indeed a form of social management: it can be seen both as creating a bonding experience for the in-group participants and as excluding an out-group, that is often the target of the humor (Attardo 2020: 273). An interesting point that also explains this combination of inclusion and exclusion, of aggression and mirth, is that humor activates a “decommitment” (as defined by Charaudeau 2006: 38). This is a particular enunciative category that consists of punctuating the remarks with a comment that removes their serious nature and tends to defuse their overly aggressive nature (Charaudeau 2006: 38). Humor can be seen as an aggressive or disparaging phenomenon, which affords “the opportunity of ‘taking back’ any of the implicatures and even inferences that would normally be carried by said utterance in context” (Attardo 2020: 273). Example (5) illustrates this specific form of decommitment:

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**13** On the functions of reformulation, see Vargas (2021: 247–248).

**14** Humor is here being used as an umbrella term to speak of various phenomena (joke, pun, irony, ridicule, sarcasm...). For a discussion of the terminological problem of humor and its categories, see Attardo (2020: 7–10).

(5) @warrior9813 #Delacre, n’avez pas honte de collaborer avec #Poutine ? Il serait temps de renommer vos biscuit (*sic*) en « Cigarettes de la Paix ». Ah non, cigarettes, ce n’est pas politiquement correct. Proposons « Tampons pour personnes menstruées de la Paix », là on est tranquille à (*sic*) priori (03/03/22).

[#Delacre, aren’t you ashamed to collaborate with #Putin? It’s time to rename your biscuits “Cigarettes of Peace”. Oh no, cigarettes, that’s not politically correct. Let’s propose “Tampons for menstruators of Peace”, in order to be safe in theory.]

This tweet is a comment of a photo showing a package of Delacre brand cookies called *cigarette russe* (Russian cigarettes). The message should not be taken at face value: contrary to what is said, it is not a question of accusing the Delacre company. As Bateson (1972: 321) has shown, utterances made in a playful mode carry—explicitly or implicitly—a metamessage meaning “this is a play”. The literal message suggests that because of the war in Ukraine, the word *Russian* is not politically correct anymore and should be banished. However, the word *cigarette* is equally problematic because it refers to a dangerous practice for health. Moreover, the use of the term *menstruator* refers to a controversy that took place at that time: the New York Times referred for the first time to women using the term *menstruator*. In this way, the North American newspaper tries to describe female-exclusive experiences with gender-neutral words. Here the parodic use of the mechanisms of political correctness and the sometimes ridiculous rephrasing allow the attack to be defused or rather redirected. The speaker uses a tactic of denaturalization (Bucholtz & Hall 2004: 386) by highlighting the non-serious character of his stance.

In another register, Tweet (6) comments on the photo of someone peeling a clementine with the cap of a Bic pen:

(6) @Hugo\_Baup: « Clémentines à jus » est le terme politiquement correct pour « Clémentines inépluchables ». Encore un des rares usages du stylo Bic : son capuchon auquel aucun agrume ne résiste. #Psychiatry #OrangeIsTheNewBic #strangefruits #BusyBrain (28/02/22).



[“Juicy clementines” is the politically correct term for “unpeelable clementines”. Another one of the few uses for the Bic pen: no citrus fruit can resist its cap. #Psychiatry #OrangeIsTheNewBic #strange-fruits #BusyBrain]

This occurrence also presents a case of polemical reformulation with several clues to the speaker’s decommitment such as:

- the exaggeration in the attribution of an extraordinary quality to the Bic pen cap (“no citrus fruit can resist its cap”, that sounds like an advertising slogan);
- the hashtags categorizing the slogan as a form of self-mockery (#psychiatry) and parody (#OrangeIsTheNewBic referring to the series *Orange is the new black*).

But what precisely is criticized remains unclear: is it the quality of the clementine or simply the principle of political correctness that seems so ridiculous applied to a harmless object of everyday life? It is also difficult to interpret clearly the position taken by the speaker.

The example (7) from German also corresponds to the principle of decommitment after a polemical reformulation. Under the guise of fighting against the anglicization of the German language, the speaker proposes a new name for the acronym SUV (Sport Utility Vehicle):

(7) @DirkSchumann77: SUVs ist übrigens nicht politisch korrekt, da dies ja als „Sports-Utility-Vehicle“ ausgeschrieben wird und wir in unserem schönen teutonischen Landen immer mehr unsere eigene Sprache dahinscheiden sehen. Korrekte Bezeichnung ab sofort: Hausfrauenpanzer (wer hat’s erfunden?) (14/08/22).

[SUV, by the way, is not politically correct, since it stands for “sports utility vehicle” and once again we are seeing our own language passing away progressively in our beautiful Teutonic land. Correct designation from now on: housewives panzer (who invented it?)]

As Charaudeau (2006: 38–39) reminds it, the speaker's decommitment is a way for the speaker to claim a right to joke in a free, noncommittal, and nonjudgmental way. But this is only an appearance, a game that consists of pretending that it is just a joke, whereas the criticism remains underneath. Thus, if in (5), it is indeed not a question of attacking the Delacre company, one can nevertheless read in it a criticism of the processes of euphemization linked to political correctness. In (6), and (7) it is also less the designations that are problematic than the quality of the orange purchased or the lifestyle of housewives who drive SUVs. The euphemistic mechanisms of political correctness are parodied in order to denounce its excessive character and the reformulation process contains a more indirect, implicit, and sometimes more diffuse criticism: it remains unclear if, in example (7), the use of acronyms is also criticized or if it is only the lifestyle of SUV drivers.

The fact that many examples of humor are used to target a societal issue or the very principle of political correctness confirms the validity of the so-called hostility theories (also known as disparagement, aggression, and superiority theories). They perceive humor as an act of aggression towards a target (Raskin 1984: 36–38). But on the other hand, it can also be seen as a form of relief as described by release theories (also known as sublimation or liberation theories). Those theories consider humor as an opportunity to relinquish negative energies (Raskin 1984: 38–40). The constraints and injunctions dictated by political (in)correctness would then find an outlet in the humorous character of the metalanguage polemics.

## 5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that the use of the formula *politically correct* in social media tends to polarize positions, and all the more so on Twitter, whose 280-character format leaves little space for the users to express themselves. Considering that the Twitter corpus analyzed in this paper consists of metapragmatic comments or stances has permitted us to examine popular attitudes toward language and how speakers position themselves. The metalanguage polemics thus often say more about the users (the image they give of themselves and their relationship to the world) than about the reformulated designations, as Siblot points out:

À défaut de pouvoir nommer l'objet « en lui-même et pour lui-même », je le nomme tel qu'il m'apparaît et me concerne, tel que je le perçois, que je l'utilise et qu'à partir de là je peux le concevoir. Aussi quand je crois nommer l'objet lui-même, c'est mon rapport à lui qu'en réalité je nomme (Siblot 2001 : 14).

[Failing to be able to name the object “in and of itself”, I name it as it appears to me and concerns me, as I perceive it, as I use it and as I can conceive it from thereon. So, when I think I am naming the object itself, it is my relationship to it that I am actually naming]

The use of the formula makes it possible to set up a polemical reformulation mechanism, that consists of bringing together two segments which most of the time do not present any referential identity but bring into collision two visions of the world and/or two ways of naming it. Conversely, this same mechanism can be implemented with a decommitment in humorous sequences that apparently suspends the aggressive character of the polemic, but still contains a form of criticism. In other words, aggression and mirth are not so far apart since they can share the same linguistic mechanism. The contrastive approach has shown that even if the expression political correctness appeared originally in the United States, metalanguage polemics about political correctness are not specific to one culture. The use of the formula indexes similar themes in France and Germany but can also appear in specific cultural contexts. In this regard, future research could shed further light on intercultural specifics. Twitter and social media in general can constitute a space where language norms and excessive language can be observed. **N**

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