No one is "pro-politically correct": Positive construals of *political correctness* in Twitter conversations

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Abstract

This study investigates use of the contested term *politically correct* (PC) in written conversational exchanges on Twitter. PC is sometimes assumed to be entirely a fabrication by conservatives or the far right, not a label that anyone would voluntarily attach to themselves. This study focuses on discursive instantiations of PC that challenge this assumption by construing PC favorably. To this end, a small set of conversations featuring more-or-less clearly positive construals of PC, selected from an initial material of 184 Twitter conversations containing the target phrase "politically correct," are analyzed in detail. The aim is to see how such construals appear and function in everyday discourse.

Keywords: political correctness, PC, social media, discourse, Twitter

1. Introduction

Certain contested terms seem to function primarily as labels to stick to one's ideological others, and rarely, if ever, as labels to stick to oneself. Few people, for instance, would be happy to self-identify as *racist*. It is not uncommon to view *political correctness* (PC) in such a manner. To label someone else *politically correct* is to question the legitimacy of their values, to dispute their integrity, or to accuse them of intellectual dishonesty. Or so we may assume. For this reason, PC has been described as a kind of myth (Wilson, 1995) or "spurious construct" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 25). Granath and Ullén (2016) have identified this as the "denier" position in popular and academic accountings of PC. An instance from the material used in the present study, Example (1), shows a conversational exchange of messages between two users of the microblogging service and social networking service Twitter, jointly adopting such a denier position:[1]

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[1] Usernames have been replaced with alphabetical labels. See Section 2 for further notes on how examples from the material are represented in this article.

(1)

A	every time I rise above and don't engage in an argument abt political correctness on a comedian's IG photo an angel gets it's wings
B	@userA are you pro-political correctness?
A	@userB no one is "pro-*politically correct*" because it's a stupid buzzword conservatives propagated that doesn't even mean anything
B	@userA that's my girl

In this exchange, the initial tweet by user A seems to be a complaint about attitudes concerning PC in the Instagram ("IG") posts of comedians. User B replies to A's tweet asking whether A is "pro" PC. User A expresses the view that no one is for PC, as the very notion is a conservative fabrication. User B affiliates with this view. But is it really the case that no one is pro-politically correct?

The notion of PC has emerged as a contentious emblem of polarized political discourse in the Left–Right and progressive–conservative interfaces. In the era of social networking, the contested status of PC is perhaps especially evident in the light of the discourses of and the discourses surrounding social media movements for social justice such as the #BlackLivesMatter campaign. As the OED notes, PC may in contemporary, typically depreciative, usage be taken to mean "conforming to a body of liberal or radical opinion, esp. on social matters, usually characterized by the advocacy of approved causes or views, and often by the rejection of language, behaviour, etc., considered discriminatory or offensive" ("Politically, adv. [def. C2]," n.d.). Commentators, critics, and scholars exhibit a range of perspectives on the meanings and functions of PC (see, e.g., D'Souza, 1991; Fairclough, 2003; Lakoff, 2000; Wilson, 1995), but naturalistic empirical work on PC as a discursive entity in everyday language use is largely lacking (Granath & Ullén, 2016).

The present study aims to contribute to an empirically grounded understanding of PC via analysis of the meanings and functions of labeling something or someone as politically correct in everyday written interaction on Twitter, with a special focus on instances where Twitter users seem to be affiliating with PC or associating PC with positive qualities. A dataset of Twitter conversations featuring the exact phrase "politically correct" was collected and analyzed in terms of the situated meaning and function of the phrase on a case-by-case basis. The discourse-analytical approach taken in this study skirts the emic–etic

boundary: while the analyses are primarily directed at understanding the perspectives of discourse participants, the research project is ultimately motivated by a critical political engagement (Bucholtz & Hall, 2008). It may be argued that empirical attention paid to the functional flexibility of the PC label in a social media context may help elucidate, if not resolve, the apparent intractability of both public and private ideological disputes which are variously viewed as stifled by political correctness or stifled by accusations of political correctness.

2. Material and method

A material of 184 conversational exchanges was collected from Twitter for the purposes of this study. The material was gathered using the advanced search interface provided on Twitter's website (www.twitter.com/search-advanced). All instances of the exact phrase "politically correct" from one particular date were retrieved (October 20, 2015; N = 628).[2] The particular date was chosen not to coincide too closely with any particular major holiday or news event, but was otherwise arbitrary.[3] Out of the total number of tweets featuring the target phrase, 184 were automatically labeled by Twitter as "conversations." This means that the tweet is part of a reply-chain (typically, a conversational-style interaction formed by users replying to one another's tweets), which can be expanded and viewed within the list of search results. After collection, some of the conversations were filtered out due to irrelevance or unanalyzability. Ten conversations were discarded because the conversations were mainly or entirely conducted in some language other than English (apart from code-switching on the item "politically correct"). A further nine conversations were discarded because one or more interlocutors were evidently missing from the retrievals (likely due to them having subsequently deleted their accounts

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[2] No other variants of phrases referring to PC, e.g. "political correctness" or "PC," were included.
[3] The most major events reflected in the material are the incipient primary season in advance of the 2016 US presidential election, the incumbency of Candian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (who assumed office on November 4), Halloween (which was celebrated on October 31), and the rapper Jeezy's EP titled "Politically Correct" (which was released online in mid-October to promote a later full album release). None of these events occupy more than a handful of tweets each out of the material.

or made them private). Finally, three conversations were discarded because the target phrase occurred only within a linked URL, not within the actual body text of the retrieved tweets. Thus, the final conversational dataset comprises 162 conversations.

These 162 conversations feature a broad range of construals of PC, ranging from non-contentious to highly contentious, from sincere to ironic, and from playful to aggressive. To a cursory, rough analysis, the stereotypical function of the PC label – to dismiss a person or perspective that you disagree with – seems in fact to be the most frequent function in the material. However, for the purposes of this study, there was no systematic attempt to identify and quantify the functions of PC in a manner that would permit such characterizations of the material to be made with any rigor. The analyses below present a set of instances some of which were selected based on featuring relatively clear positive construals of PC, and some of which were selected to illustrate ambiguous or borderline cases.

In the presentation of examples, participants' usernames are replaced with alphabetical labels. Each line prefaced by such a label represents one tweet. A tweet that begins with "@username" is addressed at or posted as a reply to the user with that username. Note that in some instances, participants reply themselves to extend an utterance beyond the 140-character limit of a single tweet. Emoji smiley faces and other symbols are reproduced as pictures of Twitter's own Twemoji 2.0 versions, which is how they will commonly appear to users viewing tweets on Twitter's website. Further, the target phrase has been italicized to highlight where in the conversations it appears. Beyond this, the tweets are presented as they were retrieved (with one exception noted below).

3. Analysis

Example (2) shows an exchange of 6 tweets between two users, A and B. The first two tweets are both from A, who without addressing anyone in particular asks whether people as born gay, and then replies to himself to qualify and contextualize the question . After this, B replies with her opinion, and A and B briefly discuss the issue.

(2)
    A   Are people born gay????

> A   @userA sorry if I did not word this politically correct but I want to hear what people think (-:
>
> B   @userA i definitely believe they are, just might take a while to find themselves is all
>
> A   @userB okay so you believe it is hereditary?
>
> B   @userA not necessarily im not fully informed in the biology about to say anything, but i definitely don't think people choose to be
>
> A   @userB not so much as coming from parents but genetics... If that makes sense 😂

In this conversation, there is no sign that the label PC disrupts the exchange of ideas, nor that it is used to attack anyone. To the contrary, the apparent function of A's use of the phrase is to preempt negative responses or to prevent anyone from taking offense. While A is not exactly ascribing PC to himself, he is construing PC as a desirable quality – something to apologize for not accomplishing. While the popular debate about whether homosexuality is hereditary or a "choice" is often seen as a sensitive of hot button topic, this exchange between A and B seems measured and non-contentious, partly due to hedging features ("just might," "not necessarily," "If that makes sense") and the smiley faces.

Example (3), below, is comparable to (2) in that PC is construed as a desirable quality. In the first tweet of this exchange, A is complimenting B for an online article that B wrote, documenting his experience of running a Kickstarter crowd-funding campaign. The quote comes from a section of the article that rather harshly expresses dissatisfaction with a courier service contracted for the campaign.

(3)
> A   @userB Brilliant #kickstarter debrief article "I know not to give any tasks to couriers that I wouldn't trust an ape to do" Thank you!
>
> B   @userA I should probably change that to something more politically correct. Was so angry at time I wrote this.

In his reply to A, B does not address the positive review of the article as a whole, but rather focuses on the quote. B characterizes the quote's implicit comparison of couriers to apes as the regrettable result of being angry, and thus associates non-PC with irrational temperament. By suggesting that he "should" change the quoted sentence into something

"more politically correct," B positions PC as a local improvement of discourse. Arguably, this conceptualization of PC falls in line with the understanding of PC as a form of "decorum" (see Granath & Ullén, forthcoming).

Example (4) shows an extended conversation between two users about what to call American Indians (*Native Americans* or *Indians*).[4] User A is initially bothered by how characters on the crime drama series *Longmire* repeatedly say "Indian." User B, who is taking a class in Native American literature, informs A that "Indian" is okay according to her professors, and, later in the conversation, that the notion of "Indian culture" is problematic, since the various Native American groups have quite distinct cultures.

(4)

A	Native American culture is so interesting
A	I'm watching this Netflix show called Longmire and it bothers me they always say "Indian" but they go into the Native American reservations
B	@userA most Native American groups identify by the word "Indian"
A	@userB really? I thought it wasn't politically correct to call them Indian since that's what the settlers called them and that
B	@userA idk I'm currently taking my 2nd class about native American literature & both professors have told us that most say Indian
A	@userB if that's the case, then the show is doing it right. Every time a white guy say Indian I cringed but I noticed the native
A	@userB American characters were calling themselves Indian too. It's actually really interesting how much they go into Indian
A	@userB culture but it's also like a crime drama at the same time
B	@userA well I really hope the show isn't calling it "Indian culture" because there's many diff cultures within the Indian peoples
B	@userA that's like saying "African culture". There is no single Indian culture that's, like, shared btwn all Indian groups
B	@userA cultural practices and traditions differ a lot from group to group so I really hope they're not saying "Indian culture"

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[4] In the presentation of this example, the ordering of the tweets has been changed from how it appears in the search results. The tweets appeared out of chronological order in the reply chain because the two users apparently replied to the same tweet several times on some occasions, and thus did not always reply to the last tweet in the chain. The order of the tweets here presumably better represents the chronological sequential flow of the conversation as it was happening, but does not corresponding exactly to the reply-chain as archived on Twitter.

> A @userB no, that was me generalizing. They usually refer to the Cheyenne culture (idk if I spelled that right)
>
> B @userA oh awesome, that's exactly what we're told to do in class lol always refer to them by their tribe name when possible

In this exchange, it is plain to see that both interactants are repeatedly displaying a concern for taking an interest in minority cultures, respecting the self-understandings of other cultures, and wanting to use social or cultural labels in a respectful way. That is, these two Twitter users are aligning positively with values of diversity, tolerance, and multiculturalism – values stereotypically associated with PC. The fourth tweet of the exchange reproduces this association: A's account of why it bothers her when characters on the show use the term *Indian* is because she believes it not to be the politically correct nomenclature. Once more, there is no indication that the use of the PC phrase functions to denigrate the values that it is associated with. To the contrary, the orientations of the participants in this exchange jointly construe PC as a desirable quality. The further association between PC as a positive trait and higher education resonates with a history of American campus activism being "P.C. and Proud" (Gibson, 2016).

Example (5) shows user A, a contributing author to the *Washington Post*'s "PostPartisan" blog, tweeting a quote from and link to his own article. The article criticizes some recent (at the time) comments by Republican Party presidential hopeful Ben Carson regarding race and PC (Capeheart, 2015). The tweet reproduces a quote from Ben Carson.

(5)

> A "I will speak the truth regardless of what media and the PC police say is 'controversial.' It's time for honesty" http://wapo.st/1RUm7S1
>
> B @userA:Beaause there is no politically correct manner in which wapo knows how to present truth? What a waste that guy is w-o a scalpel.

User B replies to A with a supposedly sarcastic question, implying that the conflict between PC and honesty proposed by Carson in the quote is false. The understanding of B's question as sarcastic is most plainly justified by B's criticism of Carson as a "waste" without his scalpel (referring to Carson's background as a surgeon), which clearly positions B as critical of Carson's political perspective. User B thus comes across

as a defender of PC, suggesting via sarcasm that one can in fact present truth in a PC manner.[5]

Example (6) illustrates an analytical complication when it comes to evaluating ambiguity. In the initial tweet, A reminisces fondly about the summer of 2014, which was spent "stream sniping" a player called "marine" in the video game *Day-Z*.[6]

(6)

A	summer of 2014 none of us did anything except stream snipe marine in dayz
	good fuckin times
B	@userA glory days of the squad
	We pretended to be politically correct but absolutely shit on other people most of the time

User B replies to A by calling these the "glory days" of the group of their group of friends, recalling that they "pretended" to be PC while actually behaving horribly. The problem that this instance poses for the purposes of this study is that on the one hand, being PC is contrasted with behaving in a mean-spirited way, but on the other hand, the mean-spirited behavior is remembered fondly. Thus, PC is positioned as "good" in a conventional moral sense, but it is nevertheless the contrary to PC behavior that is being explicitly positively evaluated. Thus, (6) presents a positive construal of PC in one regard, but without framing PC behavior as necessarily being preferable or desirable. Given the

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[5] There is a minor ambiguity in B's reply: While the second sentence of B's tweet is clearly condemning Carson, the first sentence refers to *wapo*'s (that is, the *Washington Post*'s), rather than Carson's, supposed inability to combine political correctness and truthfulness. It is unclear whether B is understanding *wapo* as endorsing Carson's view by quoting it, and thus condemning both *wapo* and Carson, or whether B is suggesting that Carson was complaining about the political correctness of *wapo*. Arguably, however, this ambiguity does not pose an analytical problem for the sake of understanding the evaluative construal of PC here.

[6] "Stream sniping" is jargon from the video game livestreaming community of *Twitch.tv*. When someone is broadcasting themselves in real time over the internet, playing an online multiplayer game, to "stream snipe" them typically means to try to get into their gameworld to disrupt whatever they are trying to accomplish in the game. It is often considered to be a form of 'trolling'. *Day-Z* is a massively multiplayer online game taking place in a zombie-ridden post-apocalypse, and the players can either help or prey on one another to survive.

conversational topic of "stream sniping," typically a 'trolling' behavior, User B may be characterized as employing a positive construal of PC, by distancing himself from it, as a way of performing a troll persona.

Example (7) features a similar type of ambiguity. This conversation begins with a playful exchange between A and B about being up too early in the morning (note, for instance, the playful hashtag #AintNotSleepBih, where *bih* is likely the conventional shortening of *bitch*, and abbreviations such as *lmbo* 'laughing my butt off,' and *smh* 'shaking my head'). After the first seven tweets, the topic turns metapragmatic, with B evaluating A's tweets as "hilarious." User A suggests the she would probably come across as even more funny "in person," as she only expresses a small portion of her "real thoughts" online.

(7)

A	I'm such an old lady. Why am I up thinking about food? And mimosas? And shopping? #AintNoSleepBih #AlwaysHungry
B	@userA lmbo
A	@userB just grown. Smh. Woke up at 445. Smh.
B	@userA Day's half done already. Lmbo
A	@userB lol! No it hasn't even started. It's jammed packed today.
B	@userA lol
A	@userB I'm just wondering.
B	@userA you're hilarious
A	@userB you should hear me in person. I don't post 1/3 of my real thoughts. 😫😂
B	@userA Likewise, this place isn't always the best venue for certain schools of thought.
A	@userB not mine at all. I have NO filter. On here I'm politically correct. And sweet. ☺️
B	@userA Yeah, this I will have to see.

User B also claims to filter himself on Twitter, because "this place isn't always the best venue for certain schools of thought." User A in turn associates this kind of selective self-presentation with being PC. The ambiguity of this construal of PC resides in how User A seems to be reproducing a commonly disparaging notion of PC as a kind of filter or (self-)censorship – thus contrasting PC discourse with expression of

one's "real thoughts." However, A is apparently not framing this notion of PC in a disparaging way, but rather associating it with being "sweet" and with the expression of the cheery, rosy-cheeked emoji. This construal can perhaps also be related to the notion of PC as a form of 'decorum,' mentioned in relation to Example (3) above.

In addition, (7) also hints at a further complication for any attempt to straight-forwardly define what constitutes a positive construal, namely that many of the conversations in the material introduce the notion of PC in a context of playfulness and irony. Another playful interaction between two users is illustrated in (8), where, despite the apparently friendly and positively charged quality of the exchange as a whole, it is difficult to assign any clear-cut evaluative polarity to the PC phrase.

(8)

A	People always out to offend...
B	@userA 💅 that's what this emoji is for
A	@userB ily Dan
B	@userA 👨‍❤️‍💋‍👨 got this here politically correct ass emoji for you now too bro

User A initially tweets the observation that there are people who are always "out to offend." B replies to this by suggesting that one should respond to offensive people with the emoji of nails being painted with nail polish. Among other potential functions, the nail care emoji is frequently used to dismissive, superior attitude, or a playful devil-may-care attitude.[7] User A indicates appreciation by telling B that he loves him (*ily* 'I love you'). B requites A's appreciation, calling A *bro,* 'brother,' and using the emoji of two males figures kissing with a heart in between them. B himself refers to this as a "politically correct ass emoji." The emoji in question is one out of a line-up of new, more diverse and inclusive, emoji which were released in 2015. These emoji were met with mixed with reactions, and sometimes denigrated as overly PC (see, for instance, Maloney, 2015). However, in the context of this particular exchange, it seems that B is not so much dismissing the emoji by labeling it PC, but rather playing upon such views to make something

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[7] See, for instance, Jewell (2014), for an entertaining, if unsystematic, mapping of some common functions of the nail care emoji.

of a joke out of his brotherly affiliation with A, perhaps with the face-saving function of making the display of affection defeasible. Be that as it may, the analytical point to make here is that the situated function of the PC phrase in this conversational exchange may to be too particular or too ambiguous for a gross categorization of it as a 'positive' or 'negative' construal of PC to be possible. As noted, the material was not categorized so as to permit quantification for the purposes of this study, but it is safe to say that evaluatively ambiguous, playful or joking, uses of the target phrase were more frequent than positive construals.

4. Discussion and conclusion

What the material collected for this study shows above all else is that even in a relatively small corpus, a great conceptual complexity emerges, which the analyses presented above capture only some of. While there may be some truth to the perspective, cited in the introduction above (Example 089), that PC is a "stupid buzzword" propagated by conservatives to silence progressives and liberals, it is definitely not the case that it "doesn't even mean anything." As it turns out, PC tends to mean rather many things. The small selection of (more-or-less clearly) positively valenced instantiations of the phrase "politically correct" analyzed above shows PC being used to pre-empt potentially offensive understandings, to perform considerate and respectful personae, to project a more desirable state of discourse, to do playfully affiliative interpersonal bonding, and to serve as a vehicle for irony. These positive construals of PC occurred in contexts ranging from highly personal communication – e.g., friends sharing memories – to public commentary on current events – e.g., responding to a *Washington Post* bulletin. The ambiguous or borderline cases also show that while a particular situated construal of PC may be favorable in some respect, it may still retain depreciative connotations or functions in other respects. Further research with a larger material and wider selection parameters is certain to uncover even more complex situated functions of PC phrases. It may, for instance, be the case that the more frequently occurring derogatory uses of PC phrases have in their own right been underestimated in terms of the diverse functions they may be able to perform in actual interaction.

For those who support the liberal, inclusive, and progressive agendas typically associated with PC, the question is perhaps which project is

more politically productive – to reject the term together with the strawman it often denotes, or to appropriate the term and instill it with actual progressive values. While positive construals of PC still demonstrably happen, however, it has been suggested that maybe the connotations of derision and ridicule have become too entrenched for PC terms to be salvageable (Gibson, 2016). But even if PC is destined to some extent to remain, as one Twitter user, not cited above, puts it, "the go to complaint for the bigots to justify their weak shit," it is also, plainly, more than merely that.

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