



SHIFTS IN THE CONCEPTS OF "CIVILITY" AND "IMPOLITENESS" IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA DISCOURSE

Petrosyans Ernst Ashotovich

Uzbekistan State of World Language's PhD student

ernstpetrosyans@gmail.com

Abstract: *This article explores the evolving concepts of "civilization" and "impoliteness" within contemporary media discourse. Traditionally, "civilization" was associated with politeness, respect, and adherence to social norms, while "impoliteness" was viewed as a violation of these norms. However, with the rise of digital platforms and the changing landscape of public communication, these definitions have become increasingly fluid. Social media, in particular, has blurred the boundaries between civil discourse and rude expression, with unfiltered language often serving as a tool for attention, power, and social change. Public figures, including politicians and media personalities, have played a pivotal role in this shift, using provocative rhetoric that challenges traditional notions of civility. The article also examines the role of mass media in normalizing rudeness and how this has reshaped public perception of acceptable speech. Ultimately, the article argues that the shifting boundaries between civility and impoliteness have profound implications for social dialogue, highlighting the need for further examination of how these changes impact communication in the digital age. The evolving dynamic between these concepts calls for an ongoing investigation into the influence of media in shaping both public opinion and social norms.*

Key words: concepts, civility, impoliteness, rudeness, media discourse, digital platforms, rhetoric, public communication, social norms

Аннотация: *Эта статья исследует изменения в понятиях «цивилизованность» и «грубость» в современном медиадискурсе. Традиционно «цивилизованность» ассоциировалась с вежливостью, уважением и соблюдением социальных норм, в то время как «грубость»*

рассматривалась как нарушение этих норм. Однако с развитием цифровых платформ и изменением ландшафта публичной коммуникации эти определения становятся все более гибкими. Социальные медиа, в частности, размывают границы между цивилизованным дискурсом и грубыми высказываниями, где провокационная речь часто становится инструментом привлечения внимания, власти и социального изменения. Публичные фигуры, включая политиков и медийных личностей, сыграли ключевую роль в этом сдвиге, используя провокационную риторику, бросающую вызов традиционным представлениям о вежливости. В статье также рассматривается роль массовых медиа в нормализации грубости и то, как это изменяет общественное восприятие приемлемой речи. В конечном итоге статья утверждает, что сдвиг границ между цивилизацией и грубостью имеет глубокие последствия для социального диалога, подчеркивая необходимость дальнейшего изучения того, как эти изменения влияют на коммуникацию в цифровую эпоху. Эволюция динамики этих понятий требует постоянного исследования влияния медиа на формирование общественного мнения и социальных норм.

Ключевые слова: *понятия, цивилизованность, грубость, медиадискурс, цифровые платформы, риторика, публичная коммуникация, социальные нормы*

Introduction

In contemporary media discourse, heightened attention is devoted to two interrelated concepts: politeness and civility. The notion of politeness is the subject of active discussion within journalism, linguistics, and other branches of the social sciences. In academic literature, it is typically defined as a mode of behavior that allows interlocutors to avoid open conflict, or, following the terminology of Brown and Levinson, to mitigate so-called "face-threatening acts" (FTAs) [Bayer 1990]. Accordingly, politeness encompasses not only its conventional interpretation, closely linked to norms of etiquette, but also broader patterns of conduct that, within

a given cultural context, are perceived as manifestations of goodwill or an aspiration toward inclusivity[Aitchison 2004: 27-31].

In contrast to the notion of politeness, the concept of civility is scarcely institutionalized as a disciplinary term within scholarly discourse. Although these two constructs are often conflated in everyday parlance, critical inquiry reveals subtle yet consequential distinctions. The American Heritage Dictionary characterizes polite as denoting a mode of comportment marked by other-regarding attentiveness and conformity to the sociocultural norms of the culturally literate individual, whereas civil is defined solely as meeting the minimal threshold of accepted social standards. In practice, civil behavior is invoked to describe interaction that is “neither rude nor polite”—that is, a neutral, reserved stance devoid of the elevated tact or solicitude typically associated with genuine courtesy[American Haritage Dictionary 1992].

The constructs of civility and impoliteness (or rudeness) are interrogated in media discourse from a variety of analytical vantage points. Below, we delineate the principal dimensions of this phenomenon:

Terminological Shifts in Public Discourse

Marginalized groups have long advocated for the replacement of terms imbued with pejorative connotations. In the Anglophone context, for example, the designation *Negro* was supplanted by *African American*, and nomenclature pertaining to gender and ethnic identity has been progressively refined. A parallel dynamic is observable in the Russian sphere, where representatives of various social constituencies campaign to retire archaic or stigmatizing labels, thereby fostering a more neutral and respectful public lexicon [Aitchison, Lewis 2004: 37-44].

In the past, the Russian word *kaleka* (“*cripple*”) was often used as a label for people with disabilities, carrying a clearly derogatory connotation. The contemporary tendency, by contrast, is to employ the term invalid, thereby placing the emphasis on the person rather than on their limitations.

At present, *kaleka* has virtually disappeared from use in modern mass-media, supplanted by *invalid*, which is formally regarded as a neutral descriptor. Consider, for example, the following headline from an online newspaper:

«Ирина Иванова родом из Беларуси, инвалид-колясочник. Она не побоялась родить, организовать свой бизнес и приехать в чужую страну, чтобы начать здесь все заново [ПензаИнформ].»

The translation of the heading from online Russian newspaper into English language:

“Irina Ivanova, originally from Belarus, is an invalid in a wheelchair. She did not hesitate to give birth, establish her own business, and relocate to a foreign country in order to start anew here.”

This example illustrates how contemporary media construct the public image of *individuals with disabilities* through the use of the term *invalid*, which, although regarded as neutral, nonetheless functions as a marker of a particular social identity. The narrative emphasis on her achievements—specifically, the capacity to give birth, to found a business, and to restart life in a foreign country—serves both to normalize certain terminologies and to provoke a reappraisal of the roles occupied by people with disabilities in modern society, where personal resilience and determination are valorized.

However, a substantial body of researchers and public commentators argues that the term *invalid* no longer satisfies the exigencies of respectful and inclusive communication, highlighting the imperative for ongoing refinement of the lexicon used to designate *people with disabilities*.

In 2018, the online newspaper Kun.uz published a headline entitled in Russian *«Инвалиды» - правильное слово?* and the English version is *“Invalids – Is This the Right Word? How to Speak Without Causing Offense”* and unpacked the essence of the problem. We quote the article:

«В Организации Объединённых Наций уже отмечали, что официальный перевод термина как «инвалиды» не соответствует принципам прав человека.

При этом люди с ограниченными возможностями сами высказывают недовольство данным термином. *«В конвенции ООН употребляется термин «person with disability», - объясняет сотрудник региональной общественной организации инвалидов «Перспектива» Ольга Котова. - Поэтому мы по-русски говорим «человек с инвалидностью». Мне хотелось бы, чтобы меня так называли. В первую очередь - человек, а потом моя особенность [Kun.uz].»*

The translation of this piece of article into English: *“The United Nations has already observed that the official translation of the term as ‘invalids’ does not conform to human-rights principles. Moreover, persons with disabilities themselves express dissatisfaction with this designation. ‘In the UN Convention, the term “person with disability” is employed,’ explains Olga Kotova, an employee of the regional public organization for persons with disabilities, Perspective. ‘Therefore, in Russian we say “chelovek s invalidnost’yu” [person with a disability]. I would prefer to be addressed in that way—first and foremost as a person, and only then by my condition.’”*

The word *“invalid”* derives from the English adjective *invalid*, which originally meant *“weak” or “ailing”* and is no longer used to refer to persons with special needs. For contemporary native English speakers, *invalid* carries a harsh and archaic connotation. Instead, neutral expressions such as *“disabled people”* or *“people with special needs”* are employed. The global standard in this domain is embodied by the people-first language principle, which places the emphasis on the individual before any condition or impairment. For example, English usage prefers *“person with a stutter” over “stutterer”*, thereby reinforcing that a disorder or disability does not define one’s identity [Kun.uz].»

From the perspective of media discourse, this article serves as a striking example of how contemporary media actively engage in processes of linguistic reconfiguration and social reinterpretation. In the Kun.uz online newspaper text, particular emphasis is placed on the problem of using the term *“invalids”* and its

negative connotation, reflecting society's aspiration toward more respectful and inclusive forms of linguistic communication.

Firstly, the article illustrates a shift from outdated terminology to the principles of people-first language, whereby the person is foregrounded and their characteristics or limitations are rendered secondary. This discursive move not only aids in reshaping perceptions of individuals with disabilities but also fosters the development of new communicative norms in which negative stereotypes are supplanted by more neutral and humanistic categories.

Secondly, the invocation of authoritative sources—such as United Nations documents and the perspectives of representatives from public organizations—imbues the discourse with weight and underscores the imperative to revise prevailing terminology. This demonstrates that the media do not merely relay information but actively participate in establishing linguistic norms that reflect contemporary understandings of human rights.

Thirdly, the article exemplifies how discursive practice can shape public consciousness by proposing alternative linguistic solutions. The reappraisal of terminology in media texts reflects broader socio-cultural processes aimed at combating discrimination and stigmatization.

The Proliferation of Vulgarisms in the Public Sphere

In today's online environment, there is a marked increase in the use of language traditionally regarded as coarse or obscene. Blogs, comments on news platforms, and social networks increasingly feature slang and even vulgar expressions that were once impermissible in official media outlets. This phenomenon indicates a shift in the boundaries of acceptability within public discourse, as elements of informal register become central to discussions of current issues [Bayer 1990].

The expanded use of slang—particularly expressions designed for emotional impact and the strategic weakening of one's opponent—exerts a deleterious effect not only on the moral tenor of public debate over socially consequential issues, but

also contributes to the construction of a particular version of reality in which politico-economic circumstances and the images of leaders are subjected to harsh invectives aimed at undermining their opponents' authority.

«Navarro is truly a moron. What he says here is demonstrably false.»- Elon Musk on social media X [X.com].

In this context, Elon Musk branded Trump's advisor a "***moron***". The billionaire posted his angry remark on the social network X beneath clips from CNBC in which Peter Navarro asserts that Musk is merely a "***car assembler***." Such expressions not only convey a negative evaluation but also construct a particular perception of reality—one in which the opponent is portrayed as unqualified or untrustworthy. This phenomenon is likewise evident in other instances where public figures employ harsh language to undermine their rivals' authority.

Agonism as Strategic Rhetoric

The concept of agonism—understood as an automatic belligerent stance or programmed conflictuality—is employed not primarily to insult, but rather as a device for securing argumentative advantage in polemical exchanges [Aitchison, Lewis 2004: 37-44].

The deployment of agonism may be understood as a strategic maneuver in which adversarial statements serve as instruments for shaping and consolidating one's own stance in debate. This approach entails not so much the direct insult of an opponent as the use of narrative and rhetorical techniques that elicit an emotional response from the audience and exacerbate polarization. Such a phenomenon represents a vital component of contemporary media discourse, wherein each side endeavors to articulate its views as expansively as possible [Carbaugh 1988]. Moreover, agonistic rhetoric operates through a constellation of intertwined cognitive and communicative mechanisms that amplify conflict and erode deliberative norms. By deploying rhetorical devices such as hyperbole, sarcasm, and vivid imagery, speakers deliberately provoke strong emotional reactions—anger, fear, indignation—that tend to override sober, rational consideration of complex

issues. Once aroused, audiences seek out confirmatory information and dismiss counter-arguments, deepening polarization and transforming public discourse into segregated echo chambers. In the digital arena, these emotionally charged messages are further magnified by algorithmic recommendation systems, which privilege content that elicits outrage or high engagement, thus creating a feedback loop that incentivizes ever-more confrontational language. At the same time, agonists maintain strategic uncertainty by refusing nuance or partial concessions, forcing adversaries onto the defensive and recasting multifaceted debates as zero-sum moral struggles. Finally, every provocative attack doubles as a performative assertion of group identity and values, rallying supporters around a shared sense of righteous indignation [Bayer 1990]. In concert, these dynamics render agonism a potent instrument of modern media discourse: it both galvanizes in-group solidarity and perpetuates cycles of hostility, making genuine consensus ever more elusive.

An exemplar of this approach can be discerned in remarks that epitomize the polarization of contemporary politics. In a column for The New York Times, Elizabeth Spiers observed:

“Our understanding of Trump’s political orientation was forged in an era when America—crushed by the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, rampant crime, and the oil crisis—found itself alone with a **President clad in a cardigan.**”

“This column concerns Jimmy Carter, the unassuming and cultivated Democratic president who endured the ‘**killer-rabbit**’ attack and, seated by the fireplace, addressed the nation in a woolen cardigan while the country reeled from the energy crisis and the seizure of American hostages in Iran. This individual—so reminiscent of another erudite **intellectual amidst apocalyptic scenery**, Joe Biden—was in many respects instrumental to Ronald Reagan’s triumph in 1980. ‘Reagan exhorted us to turn the thermostat all the way up, live lavishly, and roam freely once more [NovayaGazeta].’”

This statement illustrates how vivid imagery and deliberately paradoxical comparisons are employed to reframe political realities. Such use of metaphor not

only highlights transformations within socio-political life but also contributes to the creation of a distinct emotional tone that fosters audience polarization.

The expression "**president clad in a cardigan**" is employed as a metaphor to describe a leader whose demeanor and appearance are marked by modesty, informality, and approachability. The phrase evokes the image of a statesman who eschews formal, official style in favor of simplicity and practicality—qualities that are intended to inspire trust and sympathy among citizens.

The "**killer rabbit**" represents a multifaceted discursive phenomenon that acquires various symbolic and cultural interpretations across different levels. This expression combines elements of absurdity, irony, and even menace, and its significance can be traced both historically and in contemporary contexts.

However, in the present context, it refers to the incident involving U.S. President Jimmy Carter and a swamp rabbit (an event later dubbed by the press as the "**killer rabbit attack**"), which occurred on April 20, 1979, while Carter was fishing from a boat (often mistakenly referred to as a canoe). The President was unharmed during the incident, and the fate of the rabbit remains unknown [Wikipedia]. Although seemingly trivial, the event quickly acquired disproportionate symbolic weight in the media. When photos and reports surfaced, the incident was widely ridiculed, reinforcing a narrative of Carter's perceived weakness and ineffectiveness as a leader. In a period marked by economic turmoil, energy crises, and international challenges such as the Iran hostage situation, the "killer rabbit" incident was seized upon by critics as an emblem of an administration struggling to project strength and authority.

The episode illustrates how media discourse can transform mundane or absurd events into powerful political symbols. The "**killer rabbit**" became part of a broader rhetorical strategy that framed Carter not as a resilient or commanding figure, but as vulnerable, passive, and almost comically besieged. In this sense, the incident reveals how political imagery operates within public discourse—not merely to report

facts, but to shape collective perceptions and reinforce underlying narratives about leadership, power, and national identity [Carbaugh 1988].

The figure of the "**intellectual amidst apocalyptic scenery**" can be interpreted as a symbol of an individual who, despite a high level of cultural refinement and sophistication, is compelled to exist in a world engulfed by crisis, destruction, and societal upheaval. This image underscores the idea that even educated and culturally advanced individuals are not immune to the effects of global catastrophes and radical transformations.

Such metaphors are employed to construct a distinctive portrayal of a leader or public figure. For instance, analytical articles often describe leaders whose decisions are so unexpected and extreme that they are perceived as "**apocalyptic**" in nature, eliciting shock within society. This rhetorical device serves to highlight the contradictions and dramatic nature of their actions.

In online discussions, agonism manifests through the deployment of oppositional statements, by which participants deliberately intensify the polarization of opinions. These rhetorical strategies are designed to "**split**" the discourse into two antagonistic camps, with each side reinforcing its stance through vivid metaphors and emotionally charged arguments [Aitchison, Lewis 2004; Brown 1987].

The Popularization of "Politically Incorrect" Discourse

In contemporary media discourse, there is a discernible trend toward the normalization and proliferation of politically incorrect rhetoric. Public figures, bloggers, and television hosts increasingly employ language that is traditionally considered coarse or provocative, thereby shifting the boundaries of acceptable public dialogue. This evolution reflects a broader cultural movement wherein the deliberate use of politically incorrect expressions serves to challenge established norms and provoke discourse. Such linguistic strategies often aim to resonate with specific audience segments by rejecting conventional standards of political correctness, thus fostering a sense of authenticity or defiance. However, this shift

also raises concerns regarding the potential erosion of respectful communication and the reinforcement of divisive or discriminatory attitudes within the public sphere[Aitchison, Lewis 2004: 37-44].

Political incorrectness is a term that has existed for quite some time, referring to the use of language or actions that are not considered socially acceptable. Essentially, it represents the opposite of political correctness, which aims to avoid offending individuals based on gender, race, religion, or other characteristics. In contemporary media discourse, political incorrectness is often associated with provocative statements and opinions that diverge from mainstream societal beliefs and values [Merriam-Webster Dictionary].

One of the most frequently cited arguments against political correctness is the claim that it suppresses freedom of speech and promotes self-censorship. Advocates of political incorrectness argue that individuals should be able to express their views without fear of being labeled as bigoted or insensitive. They contend that political correctness has gone too far and is now used as a tool to silence dissenting voices [Britannica].

One prominent example in media discourse is the statements made by U.S. President Donald Trump, which illustrate the use of politically incorrect rhetoric. In June 2015, during his first presidential term, after referring to Mexicans as "**rapists**," NBC, the network broadcasting his reality show *The Apprentice*, announced the termination of its partnership with him. In response, Trump's team declared: "NBC is weak, and like everyone else, they are trying to be politically correct." During the second presidential debate, when asked about his proposed "**Muslim ban**," Trump remarked: "*We can be very politically correct, but whether we like it or not, there is a problem [The Guardian].*" On the one hand, political correctness implies a careful, measured, and cautious approach in statements to avoid causing offense. On the other hand, politically incorrect discourse, in which Trump actively employs crude and provocative statements, has gained popularity as a means of demonstrating freedom of speech and a critical stance towards existing norms.

Even today, former President Donald Trump continues to astonish with his politically incorrect remarks, which have become a central feature of his public persona. One notable example is when he declared his intention to withhold funding from any city or state that provides sanctuary to illegal immigrants, stating: "No more sanctuary cities! They protect criminals, not victims. They disgrace our country and are ridiculed worldwide," said the U.S. President. This statement, typical of Trump's rhetoric, underscores his strategic use of political incorrectness to galvanize his political base while critiquing what he perceives as the weaknesses of liberal policies.

This example illustrates how politically incorrect discourse functions not only as a form of expressing controversial or offensive opinions but also as a rhetorical device for strengthening political messages[Aitchison, Lewis 2004]. In this case, Trump's statement frames illegal immigrants as criminals and positions sanctuary cities as complicit in this criminality, effectively shifting the discourse around immigration from a humanitarian or legal perspective to one of security and criminality. The statement aims to invoke fear and urgency, positioning sanctuary cities as un-American and a threat to national safety, thereby appealing to a segment of the population that feels alienated by more liberal immigration policies. The strategic use of politically incorrect language in this context goes beyond simply making a controversial statement. It actively reshapes the debate by framing opponents of his policies as defenders of lawlessness and undermining their moral authority. The language evokes strong emotional reactions and reinforces a narrative of "**us vs. them**," where the political elite (and those who support sanctuary policies) are portrayed as out of touch with the "**real**" concerns of ordinary citizens.

Additionally, Trump's rhetoric exemplifies the broader phenomenon of political incorrectness as a tool for challenging societal norms and institutions. By employing such language, Trump often positioned himself as an outsider willing to defy political correctness in order to speak "the truth" as he saw it. This positioning resonated with voters who were disillusioned with traditional political discourse,

particularly in the wake of perceived political and cultural shifts that they believed undermined national values. His use of politically incorrect rhetoric became a key element in the populist appeal, serving to differentiate him from establishment politicians and presenting him as a champion of free speech and national identity. Furthermore, the widespread media coverage of his statements, both for and against, highlights how politically incorrect discourse in the public sphere can generate significant attention, thereby amplifying the speaker's visibility and influence. In this way, Trump's statements were not just political commentary; they were calculated moves in a broader strategy of media manipulation and political messaging, leveraging controversial rhetoric to create a sense of division and mobilize support.

Emotionally Charged Rhetoric in Officials

In certain instances, even representatives of authority or figures of public significance resort to emotionally expressive rhetoric. Examples can be found on online platforms, where political figures, during debates, employ harsh expressions to discredit their opponents, thereby intensifying political discourse. Such instances demonstrate that high emotionality and aggressiveness in public discourse have become tools for both personal and group influence [Levin, Roddy 1997; Tannen 1998].

Emotional Rhetoric in the 2024 Donald Trump Election Campaign:

During the 2024 presidential campaign, there were instances of emotionally charged rhetoric directed against his opponents, including Democratic candidate Kamala Harris. For example, during live televised debates on ABC News, Trump stated that *"Kamala Harris lacks the necessary qualifications to lead the country; her proposals are nothing more than empty slogans devoid of specifics,"* aiming to cast doubt on her competence in the eyes of voters. In another speech, he used a phrase highlighting, in his view, her lack of resolve: *"Harris is a candidate who is incapable of making the tough but necessary decisions in times of crisis."*

Trump's statement, *"If she is ever elected, she will change everything. And it will be the end of our country. She is **a Marxist**, everyone knows she is **a Marxist**. Her father is **a Marxist economics professor**, and he taught her well,"* serves as a vivid example of populist rhetoric, employing emotionally charged and polarizing statements to create a negative image of his opponent. From the perspective of media discourse, the use of the label *"**Marxist**"* and the reference to her father's economic orientation, presented as a *"**Marxist professor**,"* are strategies aimed at discrediting the candidate by associating her with radical ideologies. This framing creates an image of the opponent as someone foreign to traditional values, thereby fostering societal division between "us" and "them."

The use of the term *"**Marxist**"* and the emphasis on the opponent's father as a *"**Marxist professor**"* serve to associate Kamala Harris with an ideology that is frequently used in American political discourse as a negative label, especially among conservative audiences. It also reflects a broader trend where ideological battles are framed in a way that divides society into two opposing camps—those who adhere to "traditional" values and those who are perceived as threatening to those values.

Conclusion

Thus, the contemporary discursive landscape is characterized by the expanding boundaries of what is considered acceptable language, where traditional norms give way to more flexible and dynamic forms of communication. The influence of digital technologies and mass media contributes to the emergence of "impoliteness" and "rudeness" as new tools of social influence, argumentation, and attention-grabbing. This underscores the need for further study into how communication norms are evolving within the modern information environment.

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