

A CASE STUDY ON CANCEL CULTURE DISCOURSE: THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

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Abstract: The present paper has two main objectives: one is to explore the ways in which political correctness may affect the world of the theatre, the other is to observe the characteristics of the cancel culture discourse. I define cancel culture as one of the many manifestations of political correctness which refers either to promoting or boycotting people and their work for politically correct reasons. The paper is divided into three parts: a presentation of the immediate context in which the discourse was created, a description of the linguistic features of discourse and an analysis of these characteristics from a pragmatic, rhetorical and logical perspective.

Keywords: cancel culture/call-out culture; political correctness; amplified pathos; binary structures.

1. Introduction

“Cancel culture” (or “call-out culture”) is a new term that has been frequently used in recent years to denote a contemporary phenomenon which has not been researched in depth. The term is problematic for two reasons: first of all because its meaning is not fixed and secondly because people tend to have their own private, sometimes opposite definitions and interpretations of it.

The Cambridge dictionary defines it as “a way of behaving in a society or a group, especially on social media, in which it is common to completely reject and stop supporting someone because they have said or done something that offends you”. (online Cambridge dictionary) I define it as an attempt of boycotting people and/or their work for politically correct reasons. (Scalcău, 2023) Some may consider this definition problematic and argue that cancel culture is not limited to political correctness and includes more forms of censorship. I agree that the attempts to cancel people and their work come from both sides of the political spectrum, but I associate cancel culture to political correctness as it is a way of pointing the finger at those who are believed to have done something offensive either in the present or in the past.

I have already conducted several case studies to see how cancel culture affects books, writers and translators (Scalcău, 2023), but I am also interested in studying the effects that political correctness may have on other cultural areas.

The present paper is a case study on cancelling the performance of “Waiting for Godot” at the Groningen University theatre in the Netherlands. The objectives of the case study are to explore one way in which political correctness may affect the world of the theatre and to observe the characteristics of the cancel culture discourse.

2. The Case Study

The case study is divided into three parts: the description of the context in which the discourse was created, the presentation of the linguistic features of the texts produced in the context described in part 1 and the analysis of these characteristics from a pragmatic, rhetorical and logical perspective.

2.1. The Context

This part represents the description of the context in which the cancel culture discourse was created and it contains no interpretation at this point. I have decided to include this section because it offers a better understanding of the phenomenon and also addresses the first main objective of this paper.

In November 2022 the GUTS theatre company from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands began rehearsals for Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot" that was to be performed the following March. At the end of January 2023 the venue discovered that the casting for the five male roles had been open to men only and decided this was at odds with the university's inclusivity policy and the performance was cancelled. (Aardema, 2023; Fabrizi, 2023; Hawken, 2023; O'Leary, 2023; Pavel, 2023; Unknown author in DutchNews.nl., 2023)

Samuel Beckett left certain specifications regarding the way in which his plays should be performed after his death. He banned the use of special effects and demanded that the male roles should be interpreted only by men. There have been several attempts to challenge these rules, but those who did that were sued by the foundation which is in charge of Samuel Beckett's rights and which will continue to be in charge until 2059. As they did not want to take the risk of being sued, the GUTS theatre company decided to audition only men for the five male roles in the play. (Aardema, 2023; Fabrizi, 2023; Hawken, 2023; O'Leary, 2023; Pavel, 2023; Unknown author in DutchNews.nl., 2023)

Some of the journalists who wrote about the event commented on the irony of the fact that most of the members of the production team were women and/or part of the LGBT community. (Fabrizi, 2023; Hawken, 2023; O'Leary, 2023; Pavel, 2023)

2.2. The Linguistic Features

This section presents the linguistic features of four texts that were produced in the context I have just described. The empirical material I have used includes several official statements which have been either given to journalists or published on social media. Text 1 is a short statement given by Usva theatre programmer, Mr Bram Douwes for the Ukrant newspaper (quoted in Fabrizi, 2023; O'Leary, 2023), Text 2 is another statement for the press given by the university press officer, Elies Kouwenhoven (quoted in O'Leary, 2023), Text 3 is a statement belonging to Fay Sterken, Usva chairwoman, for the online Ukrant newspaper (quoted in DutchNews, 2023) and Text 4 is the official statement from the GUTS board regarding "Waiting for Godot" distributed on GUTS Instagram page (quoted in White, 2003). Although all four texts have appeared in various newspapers, I have used only the discourse of those parties that supported the cancelling of the performance, not the discourse of the media when reporting the event.

Having selected the texts, I began to look for their common linguistic features, which I divided into three main categories: morpho-syntactic features, lexical features and semantic features.

2.2.1. Morpho-Syntactic Features

The four texts I have chosen display several morpho-syntactic features such as: the nominal style, the abundance of attributes and nominal predicates, the high occurrence of pronouns and pronominal adjectives for the first person plural and the preference for the present tenses.

2.2.1.1. The nominal style

The nominal style refers to using long nominal groups. (Zafiu, 2007; Scalcău, 2023) The sentences which are characterised by the nominal style are therefore long and sometimes difficult to follow. Table 1 illustrates three of the longest patterns I have identified:

Pattern:	Example:	Text:
Pre-modifying noun + pre-modifying noun + head noun	"the university's inclusivity policy"	Text 1
Pre-modifying adjective + pre-modifying adjective + head noun + post-modifying relative clause	"open inclusive community where it is not appropriate to exclude others"	Text 2
Pre-modifying adjective + pre-modifying noun + pre-modifying noun + head noun	"a small student theatre association"	Text 4

Table 1. The nominal style

2.2.1.2. The abundance of attributes and nominal predicates

This characteristic represents one of the consequences of using the nominal style. The attributes and predicatives which appear in the texts are mostly adjectival, but they may also be nominal or even mixed.

Pattern:	Example:	Text:
Attributes or predicatives expressed by adjectives or participles (sometimes with an adverbial pre-modifier)	"the idea (...) is outdated and even discriminatory"	Text 2
	"open inclusive community"	
	"it is not appropriate"	
Attributes or predicatives expressed by one or several nouns	"an all-male clause"	Text 3
	"we are saddened"	Text 4
	"things that make theatre interesting and inclusive"	
Mixed attributes or predicatives containing at least one adjective/participle and at least one noun/gerund/numeral	"exemplary force"	
	"the university's inclusivity policy"	Text 1
	"rights requirements"	Text 4
	"gender identity"	
	"five white guys"	Text 1
	"we are a small student theatre association"	Text 4

Table 2. Attributes and predicatives

2.2.1.3. The high occurrence of pronouns and pronominal adjectives for the first person, especially plural

Table 3 illustrates the use of pronouns and pronominal adjectives in the four texts I have selected. I would like to mention the fact that I have not included the personal pronoun “it” when used demonstratively or as a false subject or the personal pronoun “you” when used as an indefinite pronoun (synonymous to “one” in order to generalise).

Text	First person singular	First person plural	Second person singular or plural	Third person singular	Third person plural	Dominant
Text 1	-	2	-	1	1	1 st person plural
Text 2	-	1	-	-	-	1 st person plural
Text 3	-	2	-	-	-	1 st person plural
Text 4	-	30	5	1	9	1 st person plural

Table 3. Pronouns and pronominal adjectives

2.2.1.4. The preference for the present tenses

One of the characteristics of this kind of discourse which is visible from the very beginning is the preference for the present tenses. Table 4 contains the number of all the predicative verbs in each tense that occurs in the five texts. The present time reference category includes verbs in the indicative present and the conditional present. The past time reference includes verbs in the indicative past and past perfect, the past conditional and the past subjunctive. There are only two verbs with a future time reference, both of them in the simple future indicative. I have decided to create a separate category for the present perfect, due to the fact that in some cases it has a present time reference, while in others a past one.

	Present time reference	Present Perfect	Past time reference	Future time reference
Text 1	5	-	2	-
Text 2	5	1	1	-
Text 3	1	-	3	-
Text 4	47	10	10	2

Table 4. The use of tenses

2.2.2. Lexical Features

2.2.2.1. Words formed through derivation, compounding and conversion

The texts I have selected contain a lot of words formed through derivation with suffixes and prefixes and a few terms formed through compounding or conversion. Table 5 provides several examples.

Pattern:	Example:	Text:
Compound Words:	all-male	Text 3
	gender-swapped	Text 4
	same-sex	
Conversion and derivation with a prefix	cisgender	Text 4
Verb + adjectival suffix	inclusive	Texts 2 & 4
	discriminatory	Text 2

Words formed through derivation with suffixes	Verb + adjectival suffix + nominal suffix	inclusivity	Texts 1 & 4
	Verb + nominal suffix	requirement restriction	Text 4
	Noun + adjectival suffix	exemplary	Text 4
	Adjective + nominal suffix	wokeness	Text 4
	Adjective + verbal suffix	sadden(ed)	Text 4
	Adjective + adverbial suffix	anxiously	Text 4
Words formed through derivation with prefixes	Negative prefix + adjective	unfair dishonest	Text 4
	Prefix + verb	outdate	Text 2

Table 5. Words formed through derivation, compounding and conversion

2.2.2.2. The use of pretentious words

This characteristic is mostly visible in Text 4, which is longer. These pretentious words are not many, but they stand out due to the fact that they are not the kind of terms to be used in everyday speech. Most of them come from French or Latin and they have simpler and more commonly used synonyms.

- (1) stance (position, opinion, viewpoint)
- (2) saddened (sad)
- (3) multiple (many)
- (4) to regard (to see)
- (5) exemplary (perfect, ideal, flawless)
- (6) to aid (to help)

2.2.2.3. The presence of acronyms

The acronyms appear only in Text 4, but they are noticeable, due to the fact that they are used many times.

- (1) GUTS (Groningen University Theatre Society)
- (2) WFG (Waiting for Godot)

2.2.3. Semantic Features

2.2.3.1. Words belonging to certain semantic fields

Different kinds of discourse include vocabulary which is specific to certain semantic fields, even jargon. The four texts I have chosen contain words belonging to several semantic fields such as: the one of human rights and of political correctness, the one of morality and the one of certainty, totality and authority.

2.2.3.1.1. The semantic field of human rights and political correctness

Political correctness in democratic societies started out as a way of helping people belonging to certain categories which had been previously overlooked or discriminated against (people belonging to certain races, ethnic or sexual minorities, women, people with disabilities, etc.). (Scalcău, 2023) Therefore, it is not surprising that words related to human rights should appear.

- (1) “the university’s *inclusivity* policy” (Text 1)
- (2) “the idea (...) is both *outdated* and *discriminatory*” (Text 2)
- (3) “we (...) stand for an *open inclusive community*” (Text 2)
- (4) “*inclusivity* is very important to GUTS” (Text 4)

- (5) "GUTS is in no way against *inclusivity*" (Text 4)
- (6) "We (...) will always strive to be as *inclusive* as possible." (Text 4)

2.2.3.1.2. The semantic field of morality

People who support political correctness in general and cancel culture in particular believe that their cause is a just one, which is why one of the semantic features of these texts is the presence of moralising words, phrases and sentences. Text 2 tells us what "is not appropriate", Text 3 mentions the idea of principles, while the authors of Text 4 write about their values and mention what they consider to be "unfair".

2.2.3.1.3. The semantic field of totality, certainty and authority

There are several ways in which the idea of totality/certainty/authority is conveyed in the four texts, but, at this stage I will only mention the semantic ones. These include: the use of certain indefinite pronouns and pronominal adjectives (no, none, all, everyone, anyone), adverbs (always, fully, obviously) or other words and phrases (only, as a whole, it is clear, in no way).

2.2.3.2. Words which lack precision

Another semantic feature which is obvious in Text 4 is the occurrence of words or phrases that lack precision. These include words which do not have a fixed meaning and banal statements.

Adjectives such as "interesting" (Text 4) or "open" (Texts 2 and 4) are highly subjective; people might interpret terms such as "open community" (Text 2) or "open production" (Text 4) in very different ways and have their own definitions that differ from somebody else's.

Banal statements include those sentences that add to the length of a text, but which do not have a semantic content.

- (1) "Moving forward, times have changed" (Text 2)
- (2) "We have always strived and will always strive to be as inclusive as possible." (Text 4)

2.3. The Analysis

While the first two parts of this paper have been entirely descriptive, this section is both descriptive and analytical. The linguistic analysis is based on pragmatics and rhetoric. Starting from the linguistic features described in the previous section, I have identified three more characteristics of all four texts: the amplified pathos, the presence of antonymic binary structures and a tendency towards certainty and authority.

2.3.1. The amplified pathos

Aristotle identifies three techniques that can make discourse more persuasive: the logos, the ethos and the pathos. The logos represents the appeal to reason and logic and is based on facts, the ethos is the appeal to ethics and its purpose is to give credibility to what is said, while the pathos refers to the appeal to the emotions of the readers/listeners, which makes it directly linked to the audience. (Aristotle, 2019)

In the texts that I have chosen the pathos is built in several ways: through the use of pronouns and pronominal adjectives for the first person plural (we, us, our) which are dominant in all four texts, through the use of many adjectives, especially in the superlative ("the strictest definition") or those belonging to the semantic fields of morality

or of human rights and political correctness (“discriminatory”, “inclusive”, “appropriate”, “open”, “unfair and dishonest”, “exemplary”), the use of metaphors, especially if they manage to create a powerful mental image (“legal battle”, “we bit the bullet”), the use of modal verbs (“can’t ban”, “can’t agree”, “cannot allow”) and of verbs which repeat themselves, especially if they denote emotions (“we felt and still feel”, “we have always strived and will always strive”).

2.3.2. The antonymic binary structures

Binary thinking has been a characteristic of the human brain since the beginning of times and has played a vital role in the survival of the human species, allowing people to make the distinction between what was safe and what was dangerous. However, binary thinking cannot help with solving more complex problems because it does not perceive any nuances. (Dutton, 2020)

In rhetoric, the binary thinking has manifested itself through the use of myths based on several dichotomies, such as: us versus them or good versus evil.

2.3.2.1. Us versus Them

At the linguistic level, this dichotomy is best reflected in the use of pronouns and pronominal adjectives. As I have already mentioned in the previous section, most of the pronouns and pronominal adjectives in these texts are in the first person plural. However, there are some for the third person as well, although they are not as numerous. Text 3, which is made up of three short sentences is the only one in which there are no pronouns for the third person, only for the first person plural.

Text	US	THEM
Text 1	“we have no say”, “that’s none of our business”	“they’d held auditions for”
Text 2	“We as a university stand for an open inclusive community”	“[Beckett] explicitly stated”
Text 3	“We found out”, “We really can’t agree”	-
Text 4	“we are the board of GUTS”, “our society”, “We are a small student theatre association”, “Our relationship”, etc.	“their theatre”, “their decision”, “they are composed”, “They perform”, etc.

Table 6. Us versus Them dichotomy

2.3.2.2. Good versus Evil

As I have already mentioned in the previous section, the texts contain many adjectives as well as words belonging to the semantic fields of morality or human rights, which are employed to denote either a positive or a negative value.

Text	GOOD	EVIL
Text 1	“fine”, “inclusivity policy”	“at odds with”
Text 2	“an open, inclusive community”	“outdated and even discriminatory”, “it is not appropriate to exclude”
Text 3	“on principle”	“That came as a shock”
Text 4	“make theatre interesting and inclusive”, “fully support”, “you are welcome here”, “as inclusive as possible”	“(…) would be unfair and dishonest”, “the media have twisted”, “an exemplary force set opposed to ‘wokeness’ and ‘forced inclusivity’”

Table 7. Good versus Evil dichotomy

2.3.3. The tendency towards certainty and authority

All four texts contain the idea of totality, certainty and authority, expressed at the semantic level. However, certainty and authority are also expressed pragmatically in several ways.

The use of the modal verbs of certainty has this effect. The modal auxiliary “can’t” or “cannot” appears several times: “can’t ban” (Text 1), “can’t agree” (Text 3), “cannot allow” (twice in Text 4) and its use implies that the authors of the texts are in a position of authority.

The same idea is also reflected in the choice of tenses. As I have already mentioned, the tenses which have a present time reference are dominant. The simple present is often used to denote general truths or what the authors of the texts believe to be general truths. Moreover, the use of the present tense is often linked to another pragmatic feature which has the same effect: the presupposition. When the authors of the texts state some things without giving arguments they make certain assumptions and take some things for granted, expecting their audience to do the same. I would like to point out the fact that I am not questioning the validity of all the statements which have the value of general truths and all the presuppositions; I am merely drawing attention to the fact that some of them may not be true in spite of the fact that they are introduced as such. For example, “these (gender-swapped roles and plots that include same-sex attraction) are things that make theatre interesting and inclusive to anyone who loves theatre” presupposes (among several other things) the fact that all people who love theatre have seen at least one play with gender-swapped roles or with same-sex attraction. The use of the indefinite pronoun “anyone” allows no exception, which leads me to believe this presupposition may be false. The credibility of such statements becomes even more difficult to question when they are linked to politically correct ideas. For example, questioning the credibility of a presupposition related to plays about same-sex couples is not a criticism of same-sex couples, but it may be perceived as such.

2.3.4. Beyond the linguistic analysis

Due to the fact that cancel culture is such a sensitive topic, I have decided to include a logical analysis of the arguments that the authors of the texts use in order to support the cancelling of the performance.

The author of Text 1 (Mr. Bram Douwes) argues that the problem arose from the auditions having been held for white men exclusively which banned some people from the very beginning. His only argument is that this choice contradicts the university’s inclusivity policy and that people cannot be banned from the very start. The argument is valid if one considers that a university’s policy (regardless of topic, in this case on inclusivity) carries more weight than the law. From a legal point of view, nobody is allowed to change Beckett’s play until 2059. Secondly, non-male actors have been banned “from the start”, i.e. from the early 50’s, when the play was performed for the first time. Moreover, this argument (formulated as such) implies that the production team could have chosen to audition women as well without any intention of hiring them which would have meant wasting their time.

The author of Text 2 (Elies Kouwenhoven) argues that times have changed and that rejecting some people on any grounds is discriminatory. The statement “times have changed” is built on the presupposition that the times we live in are extraordinary compared to the past ones and also implies that people living in these new and

extraordinary times are exempt from the rules of the past. The second argument is identical to the one mentioned in the previous text. Moreover, the fact that she considers the writer's stipulations to be "outdated and even discriminatory" points to the fact that she believes art should be ethical. I am not saying that art should be unethical, but I do not believe ethics ought to be a priority in art. It should not matter if the actors are all men or all women or all trans, if they are all white or not; if they are attracted to the same sex or the opposite one; what should matter is that they create something that will move the audience.

The author of Text 3 (Fay Sterken) has arguments based on emotion ("That came as a shock") and morality ("We really can't agree to that on principle").

The authors of Text 4 (the GUTS production team) initially respected Beckett's wishes and allowed auditions for male actors exclusively. They changed their minds after they had realised that Usva theatre required productions "to be open to all from beginning to end at all sections", which is the same argument that appears in texts 1 and 2.

3. Conclusions

This paper has presented a case study on the discourse produced in the context of cancelling a performance of "Waiting for Godot" at the University of Groningen theatre in the Netherlands.

The first part of the case study has been a presentation of the context in which the discourse was created, the second part has described the morpho-syntactic, lexical and semantic features of the texts and the last section has been an interpretation of the findings from a rhetorical, pragmatic and logical perspective.

The linguistic description has revealed the fact that the texts display several common features: the nominal style, the abundance of attributes and nominal predicates, the high occurrence of the pronouns and pronominal adjectives for the first person plural, the preference for the present tense (morpho-syntactic features), the use of long words formed through derivation, conversion and compounding, of pretentious words and of acronyms (lexical features) and the presence of words belonging to specific semantic fields, such as the one of human rights and political correctness, the one of morality or the one of authority/certainty/totality and of words which lack precision (semantic features).

The linguistic analysis has revealed three rhetorical and pragmatic characteristics of the texts: the amplified pathos, the presence of antonymic binary pairs and a tendency towards certainty and authority. The analysis of the motives for supporting the cancelling of the performance has shown that the arguments have either an ethical or an emotional reasoning.

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