

# **“INCIVILITY” IN TV TALK SHOW AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE: MODERN LANGUAGE PICTURE OF THE WORLD**

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*The article focuses on incivil and vulgar language in mass media and politics that is treated as the language of the opposed in the USA or the language of democracy in Russia vs. the language of the conservative camp as unmarked value in both countries.*

When we consider ourselves at all, we see our ways as normal, rational, and good. These ways make sense because we have always done so; and we have always done so because they make sense. Their very routineness comforts us; and the knowledge that “everyone else” is acting and thinking similarly also comforts us. The fact that *we* all are this way separates us from the dangerous Other. We are both cognitively “rational” and societally “normal”, so are our ways.

Just as our ways are credible, they are so “civil”, an attribute of discourse currently considered endangered. The charge of “incivility” has been lodged against several TV talk show hosts and their guests. Dmitry Nagiev (Russia) and Jerry Springer (US) have lately become poster boys for talk-show incivility. On their shows guests are stimulated to scream (bleeped) obscenities at one another, demonstrate intemperate rage, even engage in physical altercation. Nagiev’s and Springer’s shows have been the subject of repeated critique and ridicule in the “responsible” media, yet (or therefore) are now the highest-rated talk shows, having displaced the stolidly respectable Pozner (Russia) or Oprah (US).

When the “problem” of talk-show incivility first arose a couple of years ago, there were suggestions that the complaints might stem from class differences between the critics and the show’s guests and audiences. The epithets “trailer trash” and “low rent” might have been minted for those guests. They are everything that middle-class respectability militates against: loud, boisterous, obscene, confrontational, direct, and impolite. They dress in clothes that are too short, too tight, too glitzy-tacky. They are *vulgar* – a word that means, etymologically, “of the common people”.

It is possible to say that the behavior of guests on, say, “School of Scandal” with Tatyana Tolstaya and Dunja Smirnova (Russia) or “The News Hour” with Jim Lehrer is just as exotic as that of guests on Jerry Springer or Dmitry Nagiev, or that the latter are just as “normal” as the former. Those would be the views of a totally objective observer stationed outside the Russian or American class structure – say, a visitor from the Moon. (You would have to go that far, since almost every place on earth has come under the influence of Russian or American culture and stereotypes.) But such statements would strike most of us as counterintuitive. And since it is the middle class, or those members of other classes who have approximated to its values and mores, who get media access, it is the middle class self-presentation that is portrayed as normal and right. All other classes are “marked”; their behavior is framed as requiring explanation, while middle-class mores go unremarked. This is why, in George Bernard Shaw’s 1914 play *Pygmalion*, the remonstrances (protests) of Alfred Doolittle, whom Professor Henry Higgins has indirectly transformed from a member of the underclass to a “gentleman”, are so comically absurd:

Who asked him to make a gentleman of me? I was happy. I was free. I touched pretty nigh everybody for money when I wanted it, same as I touched you, Enry Iggins. Now I am worried: tied neck and heels: and everybody touches me for money... And the next one to touch me will be you, Enry Iggins. I'll have to learn to speak middle class language from you, instead of speaking proper English. (Act 5).

The very idea that Doolittle's Cockney, rather than Higgins's "middle class language," is "proper English" had to be absurd ludicrous to the play's original middle-to-upper-class audience. But to Doolittle, that's a perfectly resonable perspective.

In a similar vein, but without Shaw's irony, Peggy Noonan [1] tries to exnominate the working class as normal ("the normal human beings who work in laundromats") and renominate the middle class ("the chattering classes"). The class warfare that provides a subtext to much recent political discourse in our classless society also receives comment from Katha Pollitt [2], who observes, speaking of the treatment of Paula Jones, "The good news is that the mainstream media have discovered their own class prejudice. The bad news is that so far they've managed to find only one victim: Paula Jones."

The complaint about "incivility" goes beyond a critique of television entertainment. Pundits on both sides have been grumbling for most of the decade about a perceived increase in rudeness or "coarsening" of public discourse. Some of the criticism is about the emergence into the public daylight of language formerly confined to the darkness of the most private confines of our lives: bedroom and bathroom talk. It is certainly the case that words are used with impunity in the mass media that a couple of generations ago gentlemen besitated to use in "mixed company," even in private, and ladies at least theoretically didn't even know. But the complaints extend further, into a tendency to revile opponents as miscreants and criminals. It is often suggested that this is a new phenomenon, unheard of before the emergence of the speaker's favorite anathema: feminism, rap music, adultery in high places. It is seen as a sign that moral turpitude is reaching new highs.

The jeremiads are convincing to anyone whose knowledge of history goes back no further than last Wednesday. Political discourse has been marred by "coarseness" of various kinds ever since it was invented in fifth-century B.C.E. Athens. In the first century B.C.E. the Roman republic was in a state of class and ethnic fragmentation. We think of the rhetoric of the period as measured and sedate, laden with Ciceronian *gravitas*. But if you read what orators like Cicero actually said publicly about their political opponents, it is clear that we are a long way from achieving a comparable standard of incivility. In a campaign manual prepared about a year before Cicero's run for the consulship (Rome's highest electoral office), his brother gives him some advice. He worries at the outset that Cicero, a commoner, is at a disadvantage in a class-conscious society when running against aristocrats like his hated adversary, Catiline. Quintus Cicero provides his brother with a model diatribe against the opposition:

[T]hey are ideal opponents for an ambitious, hardworking, honest, well-educated man supported by influential people. They were juvenile delinquents, sexually irresponsible, always strapped for money... [One] was expelled from the senate on the excellent judgment of the censors... The other – good Lord, what a piece of work he is! He is a man of equally noble rank [as the first], maybe even higher. But he is

not afraid of his own ability. What do I mean by that? While [the first] is afraid of his own shadow, Catiline isn't even afraid of the law: born to a father on welfare, sexually educated by his sister, he came into power during the civil war, starting his murder spree under its cover. How can I even bring myself to say this man is running for the consulship – someone who killed a man of the greatest value to the Roman people, beating him with a centurion's staff, all through the city, driving him literally to his very grave, employing every form of torture; and while the man was still alive, cut off his head, grasping the sword in his right hand, with his left holding the head up by the hair, and keeping hold of it while rivers of blood flowed through his fingers... A man who never came to any holy place without leaving behind the taint of impiety... A man of such gall, wickedness, and sexual perversity that he practically seduces little boys in their parents' laps! (Commentariolum petitionis, 8-10)

We have not quite attained this nadir of political expression. although we do occasionally come close.

Nor was nasty political rhetoric unknown before the present in Russian or American politics. The Adams and Jefferson administrations are called, with good reason, the “era of bad feeling.” The same may be applied to the Putin administration. Paid propagandists churned out vitriol against the members of the opposition party; the Sedition Act mandated severe criminal penalties for anyone who spoke or wrote against the Adams administration. During the first sixty years of the nineteenth century, the discourse of Congress went from bad to worse, as the dispute over slavery got hotter and hotter and the possibility of a peaceful solution faded. There are records of fistfights and invitations to duels on the floor of Congress. The current “coarsening” has not quite reached this point.

For a brief period during and in the aftermath of the Second World War, partisan rhetoric receded to relative mildness (if we forget, as many critics of the “new incivility” seem to, the McCarthy period, when incivility went beyond mere semantics into pragmatics – lives and livelihoods were lost). One reason is that, throughout that period, we were effectively in a state of war against an external enemy. Once the Cold War ended, we had nowhere to vent our normal partisan spleen except back at one another.

Today there is another reason why “incivility” has become a catchword. It is not just a problem of rude language, but of the polarization of views in public discourse. We are continually mired in debates whose presuppositions permit no ground for compromise, give no quarter. Neither side is willing to acknowledge that there might be a middle ground. That leads inevitably to name-calling and ultimately even to death threats and occasionally more than threats by members of the lunatic fringe of one movement or another.

When there is sharp polarization and an essentially even division of the population between the sides; when the fight is such that there is, or seems to be, no possibility of compromise or commonality of view; the debate can only progress by turning up the heat, since there is little chance of turning up the light. In such discourse, we increasingly see the other side as “them,” those with whom we share no affinities, who become, in our demonizations, ever less human, more bestial, more satanic. Because we cannot win them over, they threaten our very existence, and we have to fight back with whatever we've got. Because we cannot imagine any future

reconciliation, we have nothing to lose by alienating them forever. And when you're getting nowhere, you feel better by letting off steam with heated language.

If those were the only reasons for intemperance, though, the grumbling about "incivility" would be dispersed on all sides. But most of it comes from the conservative camp, who see it as evidence of the decline of traditional values [3, c. 65]. They are right in that the heating up of the rhetoric does partly reflect deep social change. Our society and its discourse are becoming increasingly diverse. That means not only that there is serious pressure on the neutral status quo, but that the opposition is being posed by people who formerly would not have been able to speak or be taken seriously. Now they must be. More meanings are debatable, there is more competition for control of discourse, than ever before. And groups who have been silent for a long time are likely to express themselves in ways that seem "strident" to those who have for eons had control, and so have learned over time to modulate their rhetoric as "gentlemen." Those "gentlemen" shared "special interests" that tempered their rhetorical thrusts. And since they usually had similar upbringing and education (and often were related by blood or marriage), they were likely to "speak the same language," mitigating any distrust. So the reasonable-sounding critique of "incivility" (and who is *for* incivility?) masks a fear that *they* are taking over, that the neutral status quo will be revealed to be partisan and arbitrary.

#### *Literature*

1. Noonan P. A Bum Ride // New York Times, October, 15, 1991.
2. Pollitt K., Paula Jones. Class Act // Nation, March, 17, 1997.
3. Lakoff R.T. The Language War. Berkeley: University of California Press. – 2000. – 322 p.

#### *Анотація*

*Виникає необхідність у новому переосмисленні проблеми "вulgарності" мови у засобах масової інформації та виступах політиків. Сучасні ідеї когнітивної лінгвістики дозволяють подивитися на стару проблему "демократизації мови" у зовсім іншому ракурсі.*

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