

MITIGATION AND ERASURE: REMOVING UNPLEASANT CONCEPTS FROM LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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Abstract

Mitigation and avoidance of certain linguistic expressions constitute a persistent feature of human communication. These behaviours manifest in multiple forms, ranging from simple politeness to euphemism and linguistic taboo, and from politically correct and woke language to the contemporary practices collectively referred to as cancel culture. The latter, like the ancient *damnatio memoriae*, may involve not only linguistic avoidance but also physical interventions such as the removal of monuments or the exclusion of specific texts from educational curricula. Although these practices differ in motivation and intensity, they originate from long-standing cultural beliefs and social mechanisms aimed at regulating the expression of concepts considered unpleasant, dangerous, or morally problematic.

Recent controversies—such as the banning of the Bible or of Homer’s *Odyssey* in certain school contexts, or disputes over the display of Michelangelo’s *David*—illustrate how moral realignments can produce temporary extremes before stabilising into new normative frameworks. While political thought since the Renaissance appeared to move away from morally judging past societies, current debates suggest a renewed inclination to evaluate historical artefacts and figures according to contemporary ethical standards. The study presented here examines these phenomena comparatively, demonstrating that modern avoidance practices continue patterns deeply rooted in linguistic behaviour and cultural history. The long-term outcomes of the present moral reconfiguration remain uncertain.

Keywords: Cancel culture; Politically correct language; Woke language; Euphemism and linguistic taboo; Ethics and communication.

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1 Introduction

The avoidance of unpleasant, disturbing, or morally contentious concepts is a recurrent feature of human communication, observable across historical periods, languages, and cultures. Speakers throughout history have modified their linguistic behaviour to soften references to sensitive subjects, to avert the evocation of unwelcome realities, or to comply with prevailing social expectations about what may be openly expressed. These practices—ranging from simple politeness strategies to elaborate euphemisms, from politically charged linguistic reforms to the physical erasure of cultural symbols—constitute a continuum of mitigation and avoidance whose underlying motivations remain remarkably consistent despite their diverse manifestations. The present study aims to examine these phenomena systematically by situating them within a broader communicative and cultural framework, tracing their origins, and analysing the mechanisms through which speakers and communities regulate the presence of “unpleasant concepts” in everyday life.

The general phenomenon of avoidance has received scholarly attention in pragmatics, sociolinguistics, historical linguistics, and cultural history, yet these research traditions are often treated separately. Politeness theory, for instance, focuses primarily on interpersonal relations and the mitigation of face-threatening acts, while studies on euphemism and taboo explore lexical substitution and semantic shift motivated by fear, respect, or social delicacy. More recent debates on politically correct and woke language introduce a new ideological dimension: linguistic choices become instruments for negotiating social identity, inclusion, and equality. At the extreme end of the spectrum, practices such as cancel culture and the ancient *damnatio memoriae* extend avoidance to the material sphere, seeking to remove offending persons, texts, or monuments from public memory. Although these domains have typically been analysed in isolation, the continuity among them becomes evident when examined through the common lens of conceptual and communicative avoidance.

The purpose of this study is to articulate a unified perspective on avoidance behaviours by identifying the common motivations and communicative strategies that underlie them. While the specific triggers differ—ranging from interpersonal politeness to superstition, moral sensitivity, or ideological pressure—the actions taken by speakers and communities consistently aim to limit exposure to concepts judged dangerous, impolite, discriminatory, or offensive. This comparative approach highlights both the persistence of certain mechanisms across time and the adaptability of avoidance practices to new moral frameworks. In particular, the study considers whether recent developments—especially in politically charged linguistic reform and cultural censorship—represent genuinely novel phenomena or rather the reactivation of long-established patterns in response to shifting moral and social conditions.

From an academic perspective, the study addresses a gap in the literature by connecting disparate traditions of linguistic and cultural analysis. Politeness,

taboo, euphemism, politically correct language, and cancellation practices are rarely considered together, despite their shared reliance on the avoidance of unwanted content. By drawing these strands into a single analytical framework, this article offers a clearer understanding of the historical, conceptual, and linguistic continuities that unite them. In doing so, it sheds light on the mechanisms through which language both reflects and shapes the moral and ideological landscapes of the communities that use it.

In addition to these aims, the study highlights how the boundaries of what counts as “unpleasant” are historically variable and culturally contingent. What earlier societies viewed as dangerous because of supernatural beliefs may correspond, in contemporary settings, to terms avoided for ethical or ideological reasons. Conversely, practices now regarded as excessive or intrusive—such as the banning of literary texts or the removal of monuments—have clear precedents in earlier periods of moral or religious transformation. Understanding these shifts is essential for interpreting current debates about language, censorship, and cultural heritage, as well as for evaluating the long-term viability of attempts to regulate or reform linguistic norms.

The next section provides a review of the relevant literature on politeness, euphemism, taboo, politically correct and woke language, and cancellation practices, highlighting the main theoretical and historical contributions to each area. Section 3 outlines the methodological approach adopted in the study, which consists of a descriptive and comparative analysis of these avoidance phenomena based solely on documented examples and prior scholarship. Section 4 presents the results, organised into a four-part classification corresponding to the main forms of avoidance behaviour. Section 5 discusses the relationships among these categories, emphasising points of continuity and contrast. Section 6 concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of the findings for understanding the interaction between language, morality, and cultural memory.

In all these respects, the study seeks to demonstrate that avoidance, far from being a marginal or occasional feature of communication, constitutes a central mechanism through which societies negotiate shifting moral boundaries and regulate the visibility of sensitive concepts. The following sections explore this mechanism in detail.

2 Literature Review

Scholarly research on linguistic and cultural avoidance spans several disciplines, including pragmatics, sociolinguistics, historical linguistics, and cultural history. Although these traditions have developed largely independently, they converge on a shared insight: human communication is systematically shaped by mechanisms that limit, soften, or suppress the expression of concepts perceived as unpleasant, dangerous, offensive, or morally problematic. This section reviews the main strands of scholarship relevant to the present study, focusing on how different

forms of avoidance have been theorised, what motivations have been identified, and how these phenomena have been situated within broader social and historical frameworks.

Rather than providing an exhaustive survey, the review highlights the theoretical contributions most directly relevant to the comparative perspective adopted here. Politeness theory accounts for avoidance at the level of interpersonal interaction; studies of euphemism and taboo address lexical and semantic restructuring motivated by fear or propriety; research on politically correct and woke language examines ideologically driven reforms aimed at reducing discrimination; and cultural-historical analyses of cancel culture and *damnatio memoriae* explore the suppression of persons, texts, or symbols from public memory. Although these bodies of literature differ in scope and methodology, together they outline a continuum of avoidance practices that informs the analytical framework developed in the following sections.

2.1 Politeness and interpersonal mitigation

The study of politeness provides one of the earliest and most influential accounts of avoidance in linguistic interaction. Goffman's (1956) concept of *face*—the socially recognised image individuals claim for themselves—established the idea that communicative behaviour is regulated by the need to protect both one's own and others' social standing. On this view, interaction is inherently fragile, and speakers continually adjust their linguistic choices to minimise the risk of offence or embarrassment.

Building on Goffman's insights, Brown and Levinson (1987) developed a systematic theory of politeness strategies, distinguishing between positive and negative politeness and analysing the linguistic means by which speakers mitigate face-threatening acts. Their model has been widely adopted in pragmatics and remains a central reference point for understanding how avoidance operates at the conversational level. Complementary approaches by Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1980) further articulated the pragmatic principles governing polite interaction, proposing maxims and rules designed to ensure cooperative and socially acceptable communication.

Across these approaches, avoidance is conceptualised not as silence or censorship, but as strategic mitigation. Speakers do not necessarily refrain from expressing sensitive content; rather, they reformulate it in ways that align with social expectations. Subsequent work has shown that what counts as face-threatening varies across cultures and historical periods, reflecting changing norms of propriety and social hierarchy (e.g., Załęska & Ferrari, 2023). Politeness thus represents a foundational and relatively non-intrusive form of avoidance, embedded in the pragmatics of everyday interaction.

2.2 Euphemism, taboo, and lexical change

The study of euphemism and linguistic taboo constitutes a second major tradition relevant to the analysis of avoidance phenomena. Because euphemisms arise in response to culturally sensitive, feared, or morally charged concepts, their development has long been recognised as a revealing indicator of underlying cultural assumptions. Early scholarship frequently emphasised the role of magical or quasi-magical thinking in taboo behaviour: certain words were avoided on the belief that naming a dangerous entity could summon it, provoke misfortune, or exert harmful influence. Although such beliefs are no longer explicit in most modern societies, their historical legacy continues to shape lexical evolution in subtle but persistent ways.

Historical linguistics provides extensive evidence that taboo avoidance has played a decisive role in processes of lexical replacement. A frequently cited example is the substitution of the Indo-European word for “bear” by euphemistic expressions such as *medved* (“honey eater”) in several Slavic languages, motivated by fear of the animal and reluctance to name it directly. Semantic inversion offers a related strategy in the treatment of ill-omened concepts: Latin *sinister* reflects the traditional association of the left with misfortune, whereas modern Greek *aristerá* (“the best one”) represents an apotropaic reinterpretation designed to neutralise negative connotations.

Taboo-induced lexical change is particularly visible in the Romance languages. The replacement of Latin *caput* (“head”) by *testa* (“vase”, “roof tile”) in Italian and French, and the substitution of *iecur* (“liver”) with (*iecur*) *ficatum*—yielding Italian *fegato*, French *foie*, Spanish *hígado*, and Romanian *ficat*—are well-documented cases in which direct reference to vital body parts was avoided. Such substitutions have been interpreted as responses to beliefs concerning bodily vulnerability and exposure to harm. Similar mechanisms operate in the extensive euphemisation of death and serious illness across languages: expressions such as English *pass away*, Italian *passare a miglior vita*, or Romanian *a se duce*, as well as circumlocutions for diseases such as cancer (“a long illness”), reflect enduring cultural impulses to soften reference to frightening or emotionally charged realities.

Lehman (1992) documents comparable tendencies in the linguistic treatment of sexuality, where euphemistic expressions proliferate in order to avoid explicit mention of sexual organs or acts. Across these domains, the literature consistently shows that euphemism and taboo function not merely as strategies of interpersonal politeness, but as powerful long-term drivers of semantic and etymological change. Their effects are deeper and more durable than those of situational mitigation, as they actively reshape the lexicon and leave lasting traces in the historical development of languages.

2.3 Politically correct and woke language

The emergence of politically correct (PC) language in the late twentieth century introduced a distinct form of avoidance, in which lexical substitution is motivated not by fear or decorum but by explicit ethical and ideological concerns. In this framework, linguistic reform is conceived as a means of reshaping social attitudes and reducing perceived discrimination. Research in sociolinguistics has shown that politically correct language seeks to mitigate the stigmatization of professions, ethnic categories, and social groups by replacing terms considered demeaning or outdated with expressions perceived as neutral, respectful, or inclusive. Łuczowska (2008), for example, documents extensive patterns of euphemistic substitution in English and Polish, particularly in occupational terminology.

Political correctness has also had a significant impact on racial and ethnic nomenclature. In American English, terms such as *negro* and *nigger*—the latter unambiguously pejorative—have been replaced by expressions such as *Afro-American* or *colored*, while labels including *Latino*, *Hispanic*, and *ABC* (American-Born Chinese) have gained currency. Comparable developments are reported in European languages, where broader descriptors such as *North African* increasingly replace specific national labels perceived as carrying negative connotations. The literature commonly interprets these changes as reflecting two implicit assumptions: first, that certain professions or social groups are culturally devalued and therefore linguistically vulnerable; and second, that modifying the linguistic label can attenuate or neutralise negative social judgement. Although scholars disagree on the effectiveness of such strategies, there is broad consensus that politically correct language has produced substantial and lasting lexical restructuring.

The more recent shift from politically correct to *woke* language represents a further intensification of avoidance practices. In this phase, reform extends beyond lexical substitution to include grammatical and orthographic intervention, particularly in gender-marked languages. In Italian, for instance, efforts to feminise professional titles—such as *sindaco/sindaca* and *ministro/ministra*—have been analysed by Robustelli (2018) as attempts to correct the systematic invisibility of women in institutional language. More radical proposals seek to neutralise gender marking altogether through graphic innovations, including the use of the schwa (ə) (Ghenò, 2020), the asterisk (*), and related symbols (Comandini, 2021), especially in plural forms.

These developments have generated extensive debate within both linguistic and public discourse. Central points of contention concern the feasibility of deliberate, top-down modification of grammatical systems, the role of written conventions in shaping spoken language, and the broader sociopolitical motivations driving such reforms. As the literature makes clear, politically correct and woke language constitute not merely a continuation of traditional euphemism, but a qualitatively distinct form of avoidance, one that explicitly seeks to intervene in the relationship between language, social identity, and power.

2.4 Cancel culture and *damnatio memoriae*

The most far-reaching forms of avoidance identified in the literature extend beyond linguistic practices to encompass symbolic and material interventions in the cultural sphere. Research on *cancel culture* examines contemporary tendencies to restrict access to cultural artefacts—literary, artistic, or historical—that are judged incompatible with prevailing moral standards. Within this body of scholarship, cancellation is typically analysed as a mechanism of exclusion aimed at preventing the circulation of ideas or representations perceived as harmful or offensive.

Documented examples include the temporary ban of the film *E.T.* in Sweden for its portrayal of adults as antagonistic toward children (Lambie, 2017), the removal of Homer’s *Odyssey* from certain school curricula on grounds of violence or sexism, and controversies surrounding the public display of Michelangelo’s *David*. More recently, Matza (2023) reports on decisions by school authorities in Utah to ban the Bible from primary schools because of alleged “vulgarity and violence.” Although these cases differ in context and motivation, the literature treats them as manifestations of a broader impulse to align cultural transmission with contemporary ethical sensibilities, particularly within educational and public institutions.

Scholars have frequently noted that such practices bear structural similarities to the ancient phenomenon of *damnatio memoriae*. In classical and medieval contexts, political or religious authorities deliberately sought to erase individuals deemed morally, politically, or theologically unacceptable by removing their names, images, and monuments from public space. Well-documented historical cases include the systematic destruction of Akhenaton’s monuments in ancient Egypt and the posthumous trial and condemnation of Pope Formosus, both of which illustrate how moral judgement was translated into material acts of erasure.

The literature on *damnatio memoriae* emphasises its dual function: it operates simultaneously as a form of punishment and as a strategy for reshaping collective identity through the regulation of cultural memory (Redford, 1984; Wilkinson, 2011; Zawadzki, 2011). By controlling what remains visible from the past, authorities sought not only to condemn specific figures but also to redefine acceptable values for the present. This historical scholarship provides an essential framework for understanding contemporary debates on cancel culture, suggesting that the impulse to suppress morally troubling elements of cultural heritage is neither new nor confined to modern ideological contexts.

3 Research Methodology

The methodological approach adopted in this study is primarily descriptive, analytical, and comparative, and it reflects the nature of the data on which the argument is based. The purpose of the research is not to propose new empirical

findings derived from fieldwork or corpus-linguistic experimentation, but rather to examine and reinterpret a broad set of attested phenomena—linguistic and non-linguistic—whose existence is well documented across historical periods and scholarly traditions. Because avoidance behaviours such as politeness strategies, euphemism, linguistic taboo, politically correct and woke language, cancel culture, and *damnatio memoriae* have already received extensive attention in pragmatic theory, historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, and cultural history, the present study does not aim to replicate or revise those empirical findings. Instead, it seeks to integrate them into a coherent analytical framework that highlights their structural and functional continuities.

For this reason, the methodology consists first of a critical examination of existing scholarship. Relevant studies from pragmatics (e.g., Goffman, 1956; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1980), historical semantics (on euphemism, taboo, and lexical substitution), sociolinguistics (on politically correct and woke language), and cultural history (on cancel culture and *damnatio memoriae*) provide the evidential basis for the analysis. These works supply both the theoretical models and the empirical examples necessary to describe the mechanisms of avoidance across cultures and epochs. The analysis therefore relies on documented cases, published linguistic descriptions, etymological evidence, and well-attested historical episodes, rather than on newly collected linguistic data.

A second methodological component of the study is comparative classification. Drawing on the descriptions provided in the literature, the study identifies four principal categories of avoidance behaviour and analyses them on the basis of their linguistic form (lexical, grammatical, or pragmatic), their degree of intervention (from simple substitution to physical erasure), and their underlying motivations (face-saving, fear of supernatural harm, avoidance of discrimination, or moral condemnation). This classificatory procedure is not imposed arbitrarily but arises inductively from patterns observed across languages and historical contexts. By presenting each category separately in the Results section and subsequently comparing them, the study highlights the shifts in motivation and intensity that distinguish them, while also bringing to light the underlying continuities that justify their analysis within a single framework.

A third methodological dimension concerns the diachronic perspective adopted throughout the study. Avoidance mechanisms are not static; their motivations and social evaluations change across time. To account for this, the study incorporates examples from ancient languages (Indo-European, Greek, Latin), medieval and early modern history (e.g., censorship associated with religious reform), and contemporary sociopolitical debates (e.g., woke language, cancel culture). This temporal breadth is not intended to produce a historical narrative but rather to demonstrate that similar avoidance mechanisms arise whenever societies undergo major moral or ideological transitions. The diachronic comparison therefore provides support for the study's argument that avoidance is not confined to a particular epoch or cultural context but constitutes a recurring response to shifts in social values.

Finally, the study adopts a functional-analytic perspective, examining what avoidance practices *do* within a community rather than evaluating their moral legitimacy or socio-political desirability. This functional approach makes it possible to compare phenomena that, on the surface, appear unrelated or even incompatible—such as polite circumlocutions, euphemistic lexical innovations, ideological language reform, and the erasure of monuments—by focusing on their shared communicative purpose. The aim is not to judge these practices but to shed light on their common structural features and the motivations that underlie them.

In summary, the methodology of this study combines (i) a synthesis of existing scholarly research, (ii) a comparative classification of avoidance phenomena, (iii) a diachronic and cross-cultural perspective on their development, and (iv) a functional analysis aimed at identifying the communicative logic that unites them. This approach allows the study to articulate a unified account of linguistic and non-linguistic avoidance while preserving the empirical richness of documented cases. The following section presents the results of this analysis in the form of a four-part classification.

4 Results and Interpretation

The descriptive and comparative analysis conducted in this study distinguishes four principal forms of avoidance behaviour: simple politeness, euphemism and linguistic taboo, politically correct and woke language, and cancel culture. Although these phenomena differ in scope and motivation, they share a common functional orientation: each mitigates, displaces, or eliminates the explicit presence of concepts perceived as unpleasant, offensive, dangerous, or morally problematic. Together, they illustrate how avoidance operates across linguistic and extra-linguistic domains, from interpersonal interaction to ideological language reform and the regulation of cultural memory.

4.1 Simple politeness

From a comparative perspective, simple politeness represents the least intrusive form of avoidance identified in this study. It operates primarily at the level of situational interaction, regulating how potentially sensitive content is expressed without requiring changes to the lexical or grammatical structure of the language. Politeness thus functions through contextual modulation rather than through permanent linguistic substitution or suppression.

Because assessments of offence and appropriateness are socially defined, the range of expressions subject to polite avoidance varies across cultures and historical periods. Speakers must constantly evaluate what an interlocutor may find threatening or inappropriate and adapt their linguistic choices accordingly. This adaptive process reflects prevailing social norms rather than fixed linguistic constraints, making politeness highly sensitive to contextual and cultural variation.

Historical examples illustrate the extent to which politeness norms can constrain everyday discourse. The Victorian period is frequently cited as a case of particularly restrictive conventions, during which topics such as sexuality, bodily functions, and emotional expression were widely excluded from polite conversation (Heinz, 2010). In such contexts, avoidance does not eliminate the underlying concepts but renders them communicatively inaccessible within specific interactional settings. Politeness, in this sense, exemplifies minimal avoidance: it mitigates expression in order to preserve social harmony while leaving the broader linguistic system intact.

4.2 Euphemism and linguistic taboo

In contrast to simple politeness, euphemism and linguistic taboo constitute a more intrusive form of avoidance, as they operate through lexical substitution rather than situational modulation. Instead of merely adjusting expression within a given interaction, speakers replace or reformulate lexical items in order to limit direct reference to realities perceived as dangerous, frightening, offensive, or otherwise undesirable. As a result, euphemism and taboo often produce durable effects on the lexicon and contribute to long-term semantic change.

A recurrent mechanism in this domain is the avoidance of direct naming. In several Slavic languages, for example, the Indo-European term for “bear” (**ṛtkos*) is replaced by euphemistic expressions such as *medved* (“honey eater”), reflecting reluctance to name a feared animal directly. Comparable strategies apply to dangerous natural phenomena: modern Greek *fourtína* and Italian *fortunale* (“storm”), both derived from Latin *fortuna*, shift attention away from danger toward fate or chance. Semantic inversion provides a related strategy in the treatment of ill-omened concepts. While Latin *sinister* preserves the negative cultural association of the left, modern Greek *aristerá* (“the best one”) exemplifies an apotropaic reinterpretation aimed at neutralising negative connotations.

Taboo-driven lexical substitution is particularly visible in the Romance languages. The replacement of Latin *caput* (“head”) by Italian *testa* and French *tête*, originally meaning “vase” or “roof tile,” illustrates the displacement of a basic anatomical term by a less direct designation. A similar process affected Latin *iecur* (“liver”), which was replaced by (*iecur*) *ficatum* (“engorged with figs”), yielding modern Italian *fegato*, French *foie*, Spanish *hígado*, and Romanian *ficat*. These substitutions have commonly been interpreted as reflecting concerns about bodily vulnerability and the need to protect vital organs from harm or malign influence.

Beyond lexical replacement, euphemism frequently takes the form of periphrasis. Death, one of the most culturally sensitive domains across languages, is routinely avoided through indirect expressions such as English *pass away*, Italian *manicare* or *passare a miglior vita*, and Romanian *a se duce*. Comparable strategies apply to serious illnesses: cancer, for instance, was traditionally referred to as “a long illness” or “a bad disease,” while tuberculosis was subject to similar

circumlocutions. In each case, periphrasis allows speakers to acknowledge the referent while softening its emotional and symbolic impact.

Sexual organs and activities are likewise subject to systematic euphemistic avoidance. As Lehman (1992) observes, expressions referring to sexuality undergo continual reformulation in order to circumvent explicit reference. Across these domains, lexical innovation arises from recurrent motivations: avoiding harm, protecting vulnerable entities, mitigating reference to negative life events, and defusing concepts associated with danger.

Over time, such innovations may supplement older terms or replace them entirely, demonstrating the enduring influence of linguistic taboo on lexical development.

4.3 Politically correct and woke language

Politically correct language represents a further intensification of avoidance strategies, extending beyond the mitigation of offence to the deliberate reform of linguistic labels associated with social groups, professions, and identities. Unlike traditional euphemism, which is often motivated by fear or propriety, politically correct language is explicitly oriented toward the reduction of discrimination. In this framework, certain terms are avoided or rendered inappropriate because they are perceived as reinforcing negative social evaluations.

At the lexical level, this form of avoidance is particularly visible in occupational terminology. In English, expressions such as *bin man*, *garbage collector*, and *road sweeper* are frequently replaced by formulations like *cleanliness technician*, *sanitation engineer*, or *waste manager*. A comparable shift is observed in the replacement of *prostitute* with *sex worker*. As documented by Łuczkowska (2008), similar euphemistic strategies are attested in Polish and other languages. Italian exhibits parallel developments, for instance in the substitution of *spazzino* (“garbage collector”) with *operatore ecologico* (“ecology operator”), a term that reframes the occupation in more technical terms.

Avoidance motivated by political correctness also affects ethnic and racial terminology. In American English, words such as *negro* and *nigger*—the latter unequivocally pejorative—have been replaced by expressions including *Afro-American* or *colored*, while labels such as *ABC* (American-Born Chinese), *Latino*, and *Hispanic* have gained widespread use. Comparable tendencies are observable in European contexts, where broader descriptors such as *North African* increasingly replace more specific national labels like *Moroccan* or *Tunisian*. In the literature, these shifts are commonly interpreted as attempts to weaken associations between linguistic labels and negative social stereotypes. From an analytical perspective, politically correct lexical substitution operates by reclassifying socially sensitive referents through linguistic elevation or technicalisation. Similar mechanisms underlie changes in disability-related terminology, such as the shift from *disabled* or *handicapped* to *differently abled*. In each case, avoidance does not suppress the

referent itself but seeks to modify its social interpretation by altering the linguistic form through which it is accessed.

The transition from politically correct to *woke* language marks a further extension of avoidance practices, particularly in relation to gender. In English, this is reflected in substitutions such as *chairperson* for *chairman*. In gender-marked languages, however, avoidance may require intervention at the level of grammatical morphology. In Italian, for example, masculine professional titles ending in *-o* have increasingly been complemented by feminine forms ending in *-a*, as in *sindaco/sindaca*, *ministro/ministra*, and *avvocato/avvocata* (Robustelli 2018). At the same time, older feminine forms such as *sindachessa* and *avvocatessa* are sometimes avoided because of perceived derogatory connotations.

More radical proposals aim to neutralise gender marking altogether by introducing graphic innovations into plural morphology. These include the use of the schwa (ə) (Ghenò, 2020), the asterisk (*), and related symbols (Comandini, 2021), particularly in written discourse. In Italian, mixed-gender groups are traditionally referred to using the masculine plural, as in *tutti i signori e le signore presenti sono invitati a sedersi*, where *tutti*, *presenti*, and *invitati* are masculine forms. Proposed alternatives such as *tutt... present... invitat** or *tuttə... presentə... invitatə* introduce graphic solutions intended to avoid gender marking, but at the cost of altering established morphological conventions.

These developments illustrate a shift from lexical avoidance to structural intervention. Rather than merely substituting individual words, woke language seeks to modify broader grammatical patterns in order to address perceived asymmetries embedded in linguistic systems. The adoption of such forms remains uneven and largely restricted to social and political contexts, including activist discourse and LGBTQ+ communities (see Figure 1). As with other forms of avoidance discussed in this study, their long-term integration into general language use will depend on wider social uptake and stabilisation.



Figure 1. The use of schwa (*tuttə*) in a leftist poster

4.4 Cancel culture and *damnatio memoriae*

At the most intrusive end of the avoidance continuum lie practices that extend beyond linguistic reform to the restriction, removal, or physical alteration of cultural artefacts. In contemporary contexts, these practices are commonly described as *cancel culture* and involve limiting access to texts, images, or monuments judged incompatible with prevailing moral standards. Unlike politeness, euphemism, or politically correct language, which modify how concepts are expressed, cancel culture acts by suppressing their public visibility altogether.

Recent cases illustrate how moral evaluation increasingly influences cultural transmission, particularly in educational and public settings. These include the temporary restriction of the film *E.T.* in Sweden for its portrayal of adults as antagonistic toward children (Lambie, 2017), the removal of Homer's *Odyssey* from certain school curricula, and controversies surrounding the display of Michelangelo's *David*, including the forced resignation of a teacher who presented the work to students. Similar concerns motivated earlier historical interventions, such as the covering of nude figures in the Sistine Chapel by Daniele Ricciarelli ("Il Braghettone") following the Council of Trent. More recently, the decision by school authorities in Utah to ban the Bible for "vulgarity and violence" (Matza, 2023) represents a further instance in which moral criteria override the canonical status of a text.

Cancel culture also manifests in the removal of monuments commemorating historical figures now regarded as morally unacceptable, including Columbus, General Lee, and Jefferson Davis. Functionally, these actions closely parallel the ancient practice of *damnatio memoriae*, through which political or religious authorities ordered the erasure of individuals deemed undesirable. Historical precedents include the destruction of Akhenaton's monuments in Egypt, senatorial condemnations of Roman emperors, and the medieval trial and posthumous condemnation of Pope Formosus.

Despite differences in historical and ideological context, both ancient and modern practices pursue the same objective: the elimination of morally troubling individuals, symbols, or works from collective visibility. In antiquity, *damnatio memoriae* primarily served as a punitive response to political failure; in contemporary settings, cancel culture more often aims to prevent the continued circulation of representations perceived as harmful. In both cases, avoidance reaches its maximal form, seeking not merely to reform expression but to remove selected elements of the past from public memory.

5 Discussion

A comparative examination of the four forms of avoidance discussed in the previous section—simple politeness, euphemism and linguistic taboo, politically correct and woke language, and cancel culture—reveals both their shared

foundations and their significant differences. All these behaviours arise from the desire to regulate the presence of concepts perceived as unpleasant, dangerous, offensive, or morally problematic. Nevertheless, the degree to which they intervene in linguistic or cultural systems differs considerably, ranging from minimal adjustments in conversational practice to the deliberate erasure of historical memory.

Simple politeness represents the mildest form of avoidance, functioning within everyday communicative exchanges and relying on the speaker's sensitivity to the interlocutor's face. Its purpose is to avoid offending the hearer by adapting expressions to prevailing social conventions. Although these conventions vary across time and cultural context, the underlying mechanism remains stable: politeness moderates the explicitness of linguistic expression but does not alter the lexical or grammatical structure of the language.

Euphemism and linguistic taboo, by contrast, exert a deeper influence on language, often leading to permanent lexical substitution. The examples drawn from Indo-European, Romance, Slavic, and Greek languages illustrate that taboo avoidance can reshape the lexicon itself through processes motivated either by social propriety or by ancient apotropaic beliefs. The replacement of terms for dangerous animals, bodily organs, or death, as well as the creation of extended periphrases for illness and dying, demonstrates how linguistic taboo may introduce lasting etymological and semantic change. In this respect, euphemism occupies an intermediate position in the continuum: it is more intrusive than politeness but still confined to linguistic form rather than involving extra-linguistic action.

Politically correct and woke language represent a further development in avoidance practices, driven by modern ethical concerns about discrimination and inclusivity. Unlike euphemism, whose motivations lie in fear or propriety, politically correct language seeks to modify social hierarchies by altering the vocabulary associated with professions, ethnicities, or physical conditions. Woke language extends this aim to the grammatical domain in languages with gender morphology, prompting proposals for new feminine forms and for graphic symbols meant to neutralise gender marking. Although such innovations may reshape usage, their long-term impact remains uncertain and depends on community acceptance. This form of avoidance differs from earlier ones in its explicit ideological orientation: the intention is not merely to avoid offence but to influence the social interpretation of the referent.

Cancel culture, together with practices reminiscent of *damnatio memoriae*, represents the most drastic form of avoidance, extending beyond linguistic reform to the physical and symbolic erasure of cultural objects. The banning of literary works, the censorship of artistic images, and the removal of public monuments demonstrate an attempt to eliminate from cultural consciousness those aspects of the past considered incompatible with contemporary values. The comparison with ancient *damnatio memoriae* confirms that the impulse to suppress undesirable historical figures is not new; rather, it reflects a recurring cultural mechanism invoked during periods of moral transformation. Whereas politeness mitigates

interpersonal offence and euphemism masks unpleasant realities, cancel culture seeks to erase them altogether, influencing not only present discourse but also the memory of the past.

Across all four categories, the dominant motivations may be summarised by two recurrent impulses: avoidance and erasure. Whether the aim is to prevent offence, to avert misfortune, to reduce discrimination, or to exclude morally troubling figures from public visibility, each practice functions to remove certain concepts from direct representation. The comparison also shows that avoidance behaviours tend to intensify whenever societies undergo significant shifts in ethical norms. During such periods, extremes may arise—including the banning of canonical works or the dismantling of public monuments—until new value systems stabilise and communicative practices adjust accordingly.

In order to highlight the relationships among the phenomena analysed, the following table summarises the main areas, methods, and motivations associated with each form of avoidance, reflecting the author's classification and providing a comparative overview that unifies the findings presented above.

Table 1. Summary of mitigation and avoidance phenomena

Communication form	Area	Method	Motivation
Politeness	Linguistic	Remove and/or substitute words or phrases	Avoid threatening the face of the interlocutor
Euphemism	Linguistic	Remove and/or substitute words	Avoid evil eye; avoid crude language
Politically correct / Woke	Linguistic	Substitute words (or phrases)	Avoid discrimination; extend inclusion
Damnatio memoriae	Non-linguistic	Erasing any object celebrating a person	Erase persons from history
Cancel Culture (linguistic)	Linguistic	Ban the reading of some books	Protect people from offending contents
Cancel culture (non-linguistic)	Non-linguistic	Removing statues or other memories	Erase persons or values from public memory

6 Conclusions

The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that the diverse forms of avoidance examined—simple politeness, euphemism and linguistic taboo, politically correct and woke language, and cancel culture together with *damnatio memoriae*—are best understood as points along a continuum of communicative mitigation. Despite their differences in historical context, linguistic domain, intensity, and ideological orientation, they share a fundamental purpose: the regulation of concepts perceived as undesirable, dangerous, offensive, or morally problematic. In each case, speakers or communities intervene—linguistically,

symbolically, or materially—to restrict the explicit presence of these concepts in communication or public space.

One of the central insights of this study is that avoidance is not an accidental or marginal linguistic phenomenon, but a deeply rooted cognitive and social mechanism. Politeness mitigates face-threatening acts and supports social harmony. Euphemism and linguistic taboo, grounded in ancient apotropaic beliefs as well as social propriety, contribute to long-term lexical change. Politically correct and woke language introduce ideological motivations, seeking to reshape social hierarchies and promote inclusion through deliberate lexical and grammatical reforms. Cancel culture and *damnatio memoriae* extend avoidance into the material domain, functioning as tools for reshaping or even erasing collective memory. Although the motivations differ—face management, fear, propriety, discrimination avoidance, or moral condemnation—the underlying action is consistent: each practice removes or transforms an element deemed incompatible with prevailing values.

A further conclusion concerns the historical recurrence of extreme forms of avoidance. Present-day controversies surrounding the removal of monuments, the banning of canonical literary works, or the introduction of gender-neutral morphemes may appear unprecedented. Yet historical parallels demonstrate that similar reactions arise whenever societies experience deep moral transformation. The posthumous trial of Pope Formosus, the erasure of Akhenaton's monuments, and the censorship of nudity after the Council of Trent illustrate that moral realignments have long been accompanied by attempts to suppress or symbolically eliminate elements of the past. The present moment is not an exception but another instance in a recurrent pattern: periods of ideological transition tend to produce overshooting reactions, followed by later stabilisation.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study also highlights the limits of prescriptive language reform. Historical attempts to impose new terms, including those introduced during the fascist period in Italy, illustrate that linguistic innovations endure only when embraced by the community. While the adoption of inclusive or gender-neutral forms is increasingly widespread in certain circles, their long-term survival will depend on whether speakers perceive them as useful, natural, or ideologically necessary. Language may influence thought, but its capacity to reshape deeply rooted cultural structures is limited; in many cases, the direction of causality runs from social change to linguistic change, rather than the reverse.

Ultimately, the findings of this study underscore the value of examining avoidance phenomena within a unified framework. Only by comparing politeness, euphemism, modern ideological language reform, and practices of cultural erasure can we appreciate the structural parallels that cut across historical periods and communicative domains. Avoidance is not confined to polite conversation, nor to taboo, nor to political ideology; it is a pervasive strategy through which communities negotiate the limits of what may be spoken, displayed, or remembered. The durability of certain avoidance practices and the fragility of

others reflect the dynamic interplay between language, morality, and cultural identity.

The long-term trajectory of current avoidance trends—whether in gender-inclusive language, cultural censorship, or other emerging domains—remains uncertain. What can be affirmed, however, is that avoidance will persist as a central dimension of linguistic and cultural behaviour. As societies continue to re-evaluate their moral frameworks, avoidance will remain one of the primary mechanisms through which such reassessments are expressed, negotiated, contested, and eventually stabilised.

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