Empowerment through Language, Inclusive Models, and Activism:
Nurturing Inclusion for Individuals with Intellectual Disability

Polo Europeo della Conoscenza (IT) | Lusófona University, CICANT (PT) | Wise Academy (SE) | Yoncalar Association (TR)

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Objectives

- **Present the role of language in communication**, and how it shapes the way humans interact amongst themselves and with the world around us;

- Showcase bad examples of **how language was used to maintain ableist paradigms** and contrast this with other **positive and inclusive examples**;

- Offer guidelines on **how to apply plain language** to adapt texts in order to promote informational accessibility to PwID;

- **Discuss possible intersectional linguistic conflicts**, such as how gender neutrality in romance languages increases the complexity and cognitive load of texts.

The Role of Language in Communication

- **Language** is a composite of signs that embody ideologies and beliefs. It **reflects self-perceptions**, revealing *what we think of others*, and *how we value our relationship towards them*.

- Consequently, when addressing someone, **our choice of words**, the symbols we use, speech patterns and lexical resources **unveil its intrinsic intentions** (Bakhtin, 2006 [1979], p.289).

- This module intends to demonstrate how our choice of words towards Persons with Intellectual Disabilities (PwID) may reflect bias or notions of ableism, and, at the same time, to offer the different models of language and their respective perspectives, which can contribute to the elimination of some of these misconceptions.

- In addition, this module presents guidelines for informational accessibility in an attempt to build awareness and skills in providing PwID with easy-to-read information.

Examples of How Language can be Perceived

2022-1-SE01-KA220-ADU-000089826

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- When something is labelled, it is initially because it is different from what is said to be 'normal'. Determining exactly what is perceived as different. Therefore, ideologies and societal perceptions are expected to determine the way we identify this difference. **Which leads to the label being loaded with stigma and deviance**.

- The first terms used highlighted the condition of PwID as something to be treated. Creating the idea that treating these differences would be the way to improve the quality of the human species. Something that is now called eugenics and is seen as an ableist and undignified vision.

- As a result, **the evolution of terminology for PwID over time suggests an attempt to better adapt terms. We refer to this process of adapting concepts of marginalised groups as the Euphemism Treadmill**.

Models of Disability and Language

- **Medical Model of Disability:**

  o Consider disabilities as flaws that need to be overcome or cured.

- **Social Model of Disability:**

  o This model believes that it **is society itself that is disabled**. It sees **these barriers as a result of social oppression and exclusion, and that it should remove all barriers to enable full participation by PwD (Lau, 2019)**.

  o Its focus is not on what is *wrong* with people, but in **what resources are necessary so that anyone, no matter their condition, can live a comfortable, productive and meaningful life**.

On how PwD can contribute to the workforce:

- **Blue Ocean Strategy** (BOS) divides the market space into 2 different categories (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005):

  o the **red ocean**, which represents the industries that currently exist at the moment, with saturated competition, that reduces profit and growth;

  o and the **blue ocean**, the unidentified, unexplored market space where new demand exists, and profitable growth is likely to exist.

- Walgreens as an example (Ellinger et al., 2020):

  o PwD present low absenteeism and turnover, while being held to the same expectations as the rest of the coworkers.

Guidelines for Informational Accessibility

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- When giving a task to a PwID, there are some **aspects to consider**.

- Above all, the **language must be easy-to-read**.

- According to Inclusion Europe (Šveřepa, 2021), when developing written material, **there are three groups to take into consideration**:

  1. the aspect of the document;

  2. the sentence structure and words used;

  3. the way the information is organised.

1. The aspect of the document

- All pages, but the front cover, are numbered at the bottom right of the page;

- The text is at least in size 14 with sans-serif fonts (for example Arial, Tahoma, Helvetica, or Verdana) and aligned left;

- The use of <u>underlined</u> and *italic* text should be considered cautiously;

- Using images next to the text helps PwID to understand the text, and those images should be straightforward, avoiding much abstraction;

- The titles are easy to understand and in **bold**.

2.   The sentence structure and words used

- Each new sentence should start in a new line;

- Each sentence should have a maximum of 2 lines with 45 characters each;

- They should, mostly, be written in the affirmative;

- The words used should be easy to understand. If possible, use simpler synonyms.

- If it is not possible to use easier words, then they should be explained every time they are used – or be in a glossary at the beginning

  with the explanation and reference to each page where the word is used throughout the document;

- Do not split words into two lines;

- Numbers should be written in Arabic numerals '10', not Roman numerals 'X' nor in their word form 'ten'.

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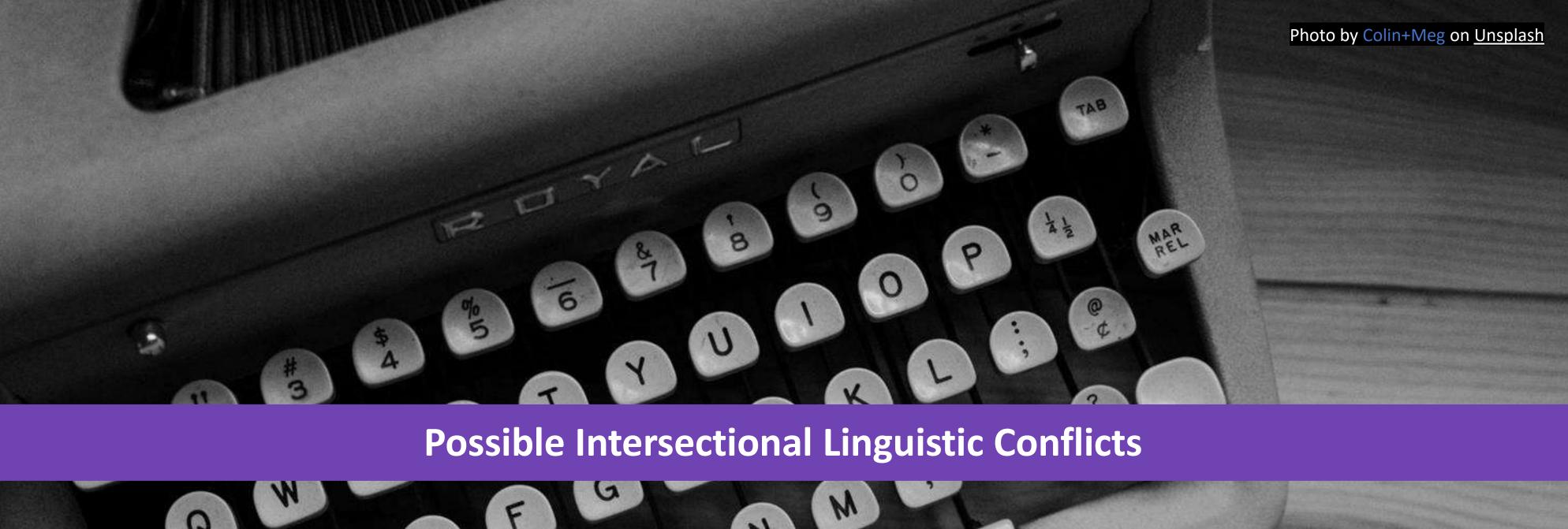Erasmus+ Programme
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3. <u>The way the information is organised</u>

- The main information is easy to find, either at the centre of the document or following the reading pattern of the language being used to write it. For instance, in Romance, Slavic and Nordic languages, Afrikaner, and Modern Chinese, that is the upper-left corner of the document, while for Arabic, Japanese, and ancient Chinese, that is instead the upper-right corner;

- The information appears in order and it is easy to follow;

- The paragraphs are divided by defined topics;

- Examples are used to explain what is written;

- Bullet points are used when doing lists;

- It is clear what or who the information is about.

Some things to consider:

- The order in which the information is written:

  o It should **follow the exact order of the steps that the person will need to accomplish** to complete their task;

  o **Safety checks and preparations** that should be made before starting the task should come before all other tasks;

  o This helps establishing the **working pattern**, providing means to remember and follow from then on.

- The tone of messages written for and about PwID:

  o Breaking the historical focus on what they lack and their differences, usually with negative connotations;

  o To now **focus on the abilities and celebrate the diversity of PwID**.

Possible Intersectional Linguistic Conflicts

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- Although there are interventions and tools available to help PwID with reading and comprehension, as outlined previously, other

  barriers may arise at the intersection of language development. The slow progress towards gender-neutral language in Romance

  languages is an example of this.

- Improper nouns, with –o and –a suffixes, have been substituted by gender-neutral versions, such as -e, -u, -x and -@.

Where does the barrier arise?

- Current screen-reading software is very incompatible with such neologisms;

- Resulting in:

  o   a decrease of accessibility for people with visual disabilities

  o   an increase in the cognitive load required to interpret sentences, for PwID, like individuals with ADHD.

Final Thoughts

- We must acknowledge that, by not ensuring that PwID have proper access to equitable job prospects, we are ever-so-slowly contributing to the maintenance of the perception that PwID are incapable of living fruitful, independent lives.

- Overcoming these misconceptions start by **using more neutral and positive language to describe the conditions of PwD**.

- Instead of focusing on the "deficit discourse", we must **acknowledge particular differences amongst people, and celebrate their differences, as these differences allow them to provide a different and unique point of view**.

- Moreover, PwID should not only occupy entry-level positions but also be considered as consultants on how to promote this more inclusive paradigm shift. As the motto says: **"Nothing about Us without Us"**.

Practical Activity

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- Materials needed: computer and internet connection.

- In light of Inclusion Europe's instructions for written material, we ask you to prepare a document with instructions for a PwID on how to complete a task.

- You will be given a document with disordered information. We expect you to organise all the steps so that they are easy to follow, but also easy to read.

- We expect you to incorporate the different methods and be aware of errors that may need to be corrected.

This training module was based on:

Casimiro, C., Léste, J., & Sousa, C. (2024). Empowerment through Language,
Inclusive Models, and Activism: Nurturing Inclusion for Individuals with Intellectual Disability.
In C. Sousa, J. Pereira, & C. Casimiro (Eds.), No Barriers: Strategies and Best Practices for
the Employment of Individuals with Intellectual Disability (pp. 59-73). Edições Universitárias
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- Ellinger, A. E., Naidoo, J., Ellinger, A. D., Filips, K., & Herrin, G. D. (2020). Applying blue ocean strategy to hire and assimilate workers with disabilities into distribution centers. *Business Horizons, 63*(3), 339–350. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2020.01.009

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- Lau, T. C. W. (2019). Cripping immunity: Disability and the immune self. In K. Ellis, R. Garland-Thomson, M. Kent, & R. Robertson (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Disability: Looking Towards the Future* (Vol. 2, pp. 164–172). Routledge.

- Šveřepa, M. (2021, October 6). Information for all: European standards for making information easy to read and understand. *Inclusion Europe.* https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/easy-to-read-standards-guidelines/

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Questions?

Thank you