EMPOWERMENT THROUGH LANGUAGE, INCLUSIVE MODELS, AND ACTIVISM: NURTURING INCLUSION FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

Cátia Casimiro - Lusófona University, CICANT; HEI-Lab, Portugal (0000-0002-5606-5474)

João Léste - PUC-Rio, LINC-Design, Brazil (0000-0001-7723-5041)

Carla Sousa - Lusófona University, CICANT, Portugal (0000-0003-1036-963X)

Abstract

This chapter explores the pivotal role of language in the inclusion and empowerment of People with Intellectual Disabilities (PwID). It critically examines the historical evolution of language, highlighting the shift from ableist terms to more inclusive expressions, and the significance of adopting plain language to enhance informational accessibility for PwID. Moreover, it discusses the challenges posed by attempts to integrate gender-neutral language in texts, which may inadvertently increase their complexity. Through examples, it underscores the transformative potential of inclusive employment models in enriching corporate culture and adding value to businesses, while exploring the intersectionality of linguistic changes, including the impacts of gender neutrality on cognitive load and accessibility, proposing a nuanced approach to language that respects diversity while ensuring inclusiveness. Ultimately, this comprehensive analysis is aimed at fostering a more inclusive society through strategic linguistic and employment practices.

Keywords: Inclusive Language; Intellectual Disability; Accessibility;

Employment Models.

Relevance of the Chapter for People with Intellectual Disability (PwID)

The focus of this chapter is on how language can promote the inclusion of People with Intellectual Disability (PwID). It discusses the historical roots of ableist terms, and how language can conversely act as a path for inclusion, moving forward. Moreover, it showcases the two facts of this approach: firstly, using inclusive language to talk about PwID; secondly, using plain language and adaptations of texts to promote informational accessibility to PwID. Some obstacles are also highlighted in the chapter, such as some conflicts between the usage of gender-neutral language and the heightened complexity of texts and sentences. Finally, we show examples of how having an inclusive business model through employment can help to add value to the company.

Objectives of this Training Subsection
- 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.

Introduction

There are many aspects that make humans differ from other social animals. One of the most important, if not the most, is the complexity of our communication. While there has been found evidence that other animals have the capacity for syntactic ability in communication, such as wild chimpanzees (Leroux, et al., 2023) and some types of birds (Engesser et. al., 2016), there is no denying that humans have by far the most complex system of signs and communication, filled with nuance and subjectivity. Moreover, our language is not only a means of communication but a way to exist in the world, which is filled with non-neutral discourse Bakhtin (2006 [1979]). Therefore, when a human communicates, their sentences are indissociable from their own ideologies and both individual and shared beliefs. Our relationship with speech is also dialogical because our choice of symbols, signs, speech patterns and lexical resources is also shaped by our perceptions of the recipient of the message (Bakhtin, 2006 [1979], p.289). What this means, in practice, is that our choice of words is very much intentional, and reveals much of *ourselves* and of *what we think of others, and how we value our relationship towards them*.

In this particular regard, this chapter intends to demonstrate how our choice of words towards PwID reveals the deeply rooted ableism that people without disabilities reproduce, and how we can combat these misconceptions through a more inclusive model of language, in order to promote a society with equal opportunities for PwID.

Euphemism Treadmill and Eugenics until Activism through the Social Model of Disability

Since its development, language and the meaning we give to words have faced many transformations. As society gains more knowledge and understanding of the discrimination that People with Disabilities (PwD) – and, in this specific case, those with Intellectual Disability (ID) – face, it is only natural that the way we identify this specific group has also changed drastically. This long process has involved many improvements, such as laws that protect the rights of PwD, the

foundation of institutions that promote these rights, and, not least importantly, the way in which we talk about PwID.

Throughout the centuries, there have been several changes made to the expression to designate PwID. From "idiocy" in the Roman era; the use of "imbecile" in the Mishnah – a collection of the Jewish oral traditions – by the end of the second century; to the use of "people with intellectual disability" in the modern era, several have been the designations of this particular social group (Keith & Keith, 2011). More specifically, some of the terms used throughout history were: mentally retarded, mental deficiency, feeble-minded, idiot, imbecile, moron, fool, lunatics "not *compos mentis*" (not of sound mind), innocent, to the one now used: ID – which, in a study conducted by Beart, Hardy, and Buchan in 2005 was concluded that is a powerful and dominant label (Keith & Keith, 2011).

While most of these words are perceived as being very aggressive and derogatory by today's standards, we must not incur anachronisms, because most of them were thought of as just being plain definitions of PwID's situations. However, it is also important to note that labels usually are, directly or indirectly, intimately related to stigma and deviance – as what is considered "normal" never requires a specific label. Therefore, sooner or later, it is expected that the labels that are in use today will no longer be accepted, since these labels will become more negatively changed as they reflect the context, attitudes, and perceptions that current society has about what or who is being labelled (Keith & Keith, 2011).

In this sense, the process of continuously updating terms that refer to marginalised groups is called "euphemism treadmill": a term that describes the process of replacing words that were once considered adequate, but become pejorative over time – and, thus, evolve into a reference to offensive definitions (Stollznow, 2020).

PwD, which people with ID are a part of, are often seen as being less than, as being "Others", when compared to the rest of the "normal" population. They were usually seen as being monstrosities and "freaks". This led them to be involuntarily part of "freak shows" in circuses and carnivals in the late-nineteenth-century – furthering the dehumanisation process they went through (Baynton, 2013; Foucault,

1988; Keith & Keith, 2011), mostly because that was the only way most of them could find some semblance of employment at the time. Another factor that contributed to their dehumanisation was eugenics. This term was coined in 1883 by Francis Galton and has always had a negative connotation associated with it, especially because it intended to "perfect" the human race by diminishing what at the time was considered "problematic people" and their "problematic" or "imperfect" behaviours (Davis, 2013; Kevles, 1985).

In this context, PwID were seen as having defects that needed to be *cured* or *completely eliminated* so that they could achieve their "*full capacity*" as humans, shaping much of what is known as the medical model of disability: a deficiency that needs to be overcome by the individual, and that can, to some extent, be "cured". On the other hand, the social model of disability defends that the barriers that PwD encounter are the result of social oppression and exclusion and, thus, it is *society itself that is disabled* and has the moral responsibility to remove its obstacles to fully enable their participation (Lau, 2019; Shakespeare, 2013).

While the social model of disability is still not known to most people, the term was coined by Mike Oliver in 1983, and was a fundamental element in the development of the UPIAS, a British organisation formed by PwD that aimed to substitute segregated facilities with work opportunities for PwD and their main intention was to promote PwD's full participation in society, independent living, and to have control over their lives – which was one of the main pillars of the British Disability Movement (Shakespeare, 2013). Besides this, this model also had a huge impact on policies concerning PwD, and was used as a huge inspiration for what was later postulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

The usage of Blue Ocean Strategy in the employment of persons with intellectual disabilities

Although the CRPD states that Persons with Disabilities (PwD) have the right to work like the rest of the population, they still face barriers in accessing jobs, mainly due to problems related to physical

accessibility, work policies, attitudes from co-workers and company, and due to the job itself (Miralles et al., 2007; United Nations, 2006). To help combat this situation, Ellinger et al. (2020) presented the Blue Ocean Strategy (BOS) as a tool to strengthen the presence of PwD in the workforce. Very briefly, the BOS divides the market space into two different categories: the red ocean, which represents the industries that exist at the moment, and the blue ocean, the industries that still do not exist, or in other words the market space that hasn't been identified yet (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005).

Moreover, in the red oceans, the companies try their best to outperform the competition and gain a bigger market share. However, as the markets get more saturated with competition, the probability of profit and growth diminishes (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). On the other hand, as blue oceans are about unexplored markets, it creates new demand and heightens the probability of having profitable growth (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005).

Suppose we apply this strategy to the problem of lack of people in certain work areas and start to consider PwID as potential employees. In that case, a whole new recruitment market will suddenly become available. For example, in the study conducted by Ellinger et al. (2020), they showed examples of companies - Walgreens, Procter & Gamble, Lowe's, OfficeMax, UPS, XPO Logistics, and Peckham - that were facing shortages of people to work in their distribution centres. To face this challenge, they used the BOS to recruit and assimilate PwD for open job positions in those places.

Focusing on Walgreens as an example, they express that absenteeism and turnover from employees with disabilities are very low (Ellinger et al., 2020). At the same time, from a productivity standpoint, the employees are held to the same expectations as co-workers without disabilities. Notwithstanding, compared to other distribution centres, the one that employs PwD presents higher productivity than the rest (Ellinger et al., 2020). These results were due in part to the efforts of the, at the time, vice president of distribution and logistics, who ensured that the distribution centre had accessibility policies and design for its structure and processes.

As a whole, what contributed to these companies' strategy success

was: the continuous partnerships with local agencies that support PwID; maintaining equal pay for equal work; providing training to co-workers, supervisors, and managers about the specificities of hiring and integrating PwID; having a company culture that fosters a disability-friendly and inclusive workplace; and investing in the development processes and equipment to promote the assimilation and productivity of their employees with disabilities (Ellinger et al., 2020).

Plain Language as a Communication Tool and Other Linguistic Approaches

Following what was proposed at the beginning of this chapter, it now remains to be seen how to communicate with PwID. For this, we will present considerations and guidelines on how to produce text in easy-to-read language.

According to Inclusion Europe (Šveřepa, 2021), when developing written material, there are three groups to take into consideration, mainly (1) the aspect of the document, (2) the sentence structure and words used, and (3) the way the information is organised.

Referring to the first group, is important that:

- 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 underlined 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**.

Regarding 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'.

Finally, when it comes to how the information is organised, it is important that:
- 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.

For more information about this topic, we recommend going to the website of Inclusion Europe (Šveřepa, 2021) where it is possible to find a more extensive description of easy-to-read standards in several languages, not only for written text but for other formats too.

Considering the specific context of writing instructions for tasks that need to be performed by workers, one should pay extra attention to the order in which the information is written: it should follow the exact order of the steps that the person will need to accomplish to complete their task. For instance, step 1 should always come before step 2, which should always come before step 3, and so on. This includes, for instance, safety checks and preparations that should be taken before

the task begins, and should also be properly ordered. The ordering of the information is crucial to help establish the working pattern, which will be easier to remember and follow from then on.

However, following the BOS, more than using plain language, there also needs to be a shift in the tone of messages written for and about PwID. Much of the discourse surrounding PwID has historically focused on what they are lacking, in which ways they are different (with negative connotations), and on what they can't do. The way forward needs to include a whole paradigm shift that focuses on the capabilities and celebrates the diversity of PwID. An approach that encompasses this paradigm shift is the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) method, which revolutionised research about young people, in particular from marginalised groups. Instead of treating them as research subjects, YPAR aims to empower them to become partners in the research.

> Conventional wisdom would have us believe that young people, especially young people of colour who live in poverty, have little to bring to their education, and even less to teach their elders. The deficit discourses surrounding these young people focus principally on what they can't do, don't have, and can't learn. (Nieto, 2016, p.10)

This deficit discourse not only is based on a flawed assumption that formal education and socioeconomic status are necessarily tied to one's ability to positively contribute to research, but it also broadens the gaps that society as a whole should instead be attempting to bridge. Other contexts, such as the ones surrounding people with autism, ADHD, etc. have already adopted medically neutral terms that do not solely focus on people who present some sort of variance: neurodiversity, which represents the diversity of neurological characteristics that are possible within the scope of human biology. In that sense, "neurodiversity" does not specifically apply to people who are perceived as "deviant", but encompasses all types of people, both neurotypical and neuroatypical.

The topic of "typicality" is a whole other matter entirely, because those labels do imply that there is a matter of right and wrong – the neuro*typicals* being the right, and the neuro*atypicals* being deviant

from the *norm*. Although it is certainly less egregious than previously used terms, it is a safe assumption that these terms will become less acceptable due to the euphemism treadmill phenomenon. What would be, then, the most neutral term to accurately refer to PwID without implying a negative connotation? Is the term "disability" going to falter under the euphemism treadmill?

Initially, we must consider the "Nothing about Us without Us" (Sassaki, 2004) motto, which perfectly summarises the main point of the Global Disability Movement: that all discourse for and about PwD should include them as protagonists. For this reason, we do not recommend any shift in the term, since it was coined by PwD themselves. On the other hand, we must also take into consideration that, under the social model of disability, the concept of disability is neither set in stone nor solely based on the physiological characteristics of the person. It is, instead, defined when there is a gap between a person's needs and the availability of the appropriate resources to meet those needs (Sousa et al., 2022).

As Léste and Farbiarz (2023) suggest, hundreds of thousands of years ago, when early humans had no way to address myopia, the condition would be considered a disability, because people with myopia would be unable to perform the basic activities that were expected of them as part of a group: keeping a lookout for predators, spotting prey, distinguishing edible plants from poisonous ones, and so forth. Léste and Farbiarz (2023) further explain that, nowadays, myopia and other mild visual conditions are not considered visual disabilities only because the current infrastructure surrounding ophthalmological care is so advanced and pervasive that most people with myopia have access to different options of care to choose from: using prescription glasses, prescription lenses, or undergoing eye surgery – and, therefore, can live comfortably in society without facing additional barriers that stem from their condition.

Similarly, when considering the BOS, would (or should) a person with an intellectual disability be considered "disabled" if the workplace is properly equipped to accommodate their needs and they can perform the same tasks, under the same standards? When we consider that they, in actuality, outperform people without intellectual disability

(Ellinger et al., 2020) when conducting the same tasks, it becomes apparent that their perceived disability is, at least, irrelevant in that context and, thus, could be simply regarded as their *condition*. This word, in particular, evokes a very neutral response, as it in itself is not charged with judgement – positive or negative –, but merely describes the context of the person – which is the key aspect of the social model of disability. After all, every characteristic that each person has is, in a way, part of the *human condition*.

This process, however, will only be complete when PwID are truly integrated into society because it is only by coexisting that we can normalise situations that can initially seem foreign to us. Therefore, we urge companies and other institutions to adapt their documents and materials to have more inclusive language and formatting, to consider the BOS, and, most importantly, to consider employing PwID as consultants in how to conduct these processes in an ethical, constructive manner.

Conclusions

The way that humanity perceives disability has greatly shifted over the last millennia. From the moral model of disability, which considered disabilities as divine punishments from the gods; to the medical model of disability, which considered disabilities as physical flaws of each individual's body, and charges them with the daunting task of "overcoming their limitations"; we are now employing the social model of disability – which focus 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.

The first step towards this shift is to use more neutral and positive language to describe the conditions of people with disability. 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. However, simply updating the current terms is not enough, we must combat the euphemism treadmill at its source – the perception of otherness that society projects onto PwID.

In order to do that, 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. As they are kept from being part of the Economically Active Population, they become more dependent on their families, caretakers, and support networks; and, in turn, their families must, sometimes, sacrifice even their own independence to become caretakers. In this regard, the Blue Ocean Strategy (BOS) provides a very effective approach to integrating PwID in the job market, addressing this deeply rooted issue – with the benefit of having proven monetary benefits to the companies that adopt it.

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".

Considerations for Future Studies

While this chapter presents many already-validated guidelines for plain language usage in communication, we would also like to point out that, as language evolves, many of its signs and structures shift over time. Currently, romance languages have been going through some slow progress towards the usage of more gender-neutral language, since their improper nouns are mostly gendered by the usage of -o and -a suffixes, in most cases, to distinguish the male and female counterparts of the same improper noun. For instance, the radical of one of the words for "student" in Portuguese is "*alun-*", which can be complemented with an "-a" to form the female version of the student noun "*aluna*", or "-o" to form the male version "*aluno*". The problem arises when we notice that romance languages suffer from the "male as a norm" grammatical phenomenon, which makes it so the improper noun to address a multi-gendered group will always be the male version, by default. So, in a group of 100 students with 99 female students and 1 male student, the group would be addressed as "alunos".

Some strategies to address this desire for gender neutrality is the

preference for terms that are gender neutral by default, for instance, the word "*estudante*" also means student and can be applied to both female and male students. However, the problem stands because the usage of articles is also gendered, so the aforementioned group would still be called "*os estudantes*". Another common strategy that has been proposed is to substitute the articles and suffixes with gender-neutral versions, such as -e, -u, -x, and -@. However, it is there that we face a common intersectional issue: current screen-reading software is very incompatible with such neologisms – resulting in a decrease of accessibility for people with visual disabilities –, while also increasing the cognitive load required to interpret sentences, since they are formed by unfamiliar words – resulting in less accessibility for PwID and, for instance, people with ADHD.

Currently, a final solution for this issue has not yet been proposed, but we strongly suggest the preference for gender-neutral terms that are already part of the common lexis of the population, as well as rewriting sentences to avoid using gendered words, if possible. Some specific accents and dialects also eliminate the usage of gendered articles altogether, which is the case for the city of Niterói, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

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