

# The beauty and perils of language

*Inclusive language seeks to counter stereotypic assessments that deny respect, dignity, and opportunity. Patterns of thought underlie discourse, so what is said is a visceral manifestation of what is thought. **Odessa Hamilton** writes that by acknowledging the ability of language to shape and reflect reality, diversity and equality initiatives can become more powerful vehicles for social change, inclusion, and justice.*

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Language is dynamic. It changes with societal struggles and is shaped by the collective construction of social justice, so it is thought to be a key ingredient in a winning theory of change. It can build bridges. It can change minds. Yet, there exists an interesting paradox in language, in that it also constitutes and perpetuates negative social identities as well as stereotypes. So inclusive language seeks to counter stereotypic assessments that deny respect, dignity, and opportunity. There is often a misconception that inclusive language only applies to marginalised groups, but the reality reflects a very real potential to affect everyone.

Despite the different implications, we must repudiate the misconception that inclusive language applies only to marginalised groups, it can apply to age, height, weight, appearance [on a number of dimensions], personality and so much more. It is an issue in which we all have an invested interest.

Some will find familiar the English saying, “*sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt you*”. This old axiom is intended to express indifference to verbal insult, but we all know this to be grossly ill-informed. Words do matter. Inclusive language is constructed to bring everyone into the fold, and to help everyone feel unlimited by their socio-demographic status. It does, however, ask something of each of us. It asks us to try. To change deeply embedded habits. To consider the implications of words and phrases that have long gone unchallenged. To dig deep into empathy and imagine an experience that is not our own ([Seiter, 2018](#)). Words can prime others towards psychological safety or strain. It’s about verbal economics – using words as currency to have the best impact.

## Wokeness mania

Inclusive language pays homage to the concept of tolerance and reflects a legitimate respect for others. However, it appears we have regressed into a state of self-absorption; centrally focused on our right to language autonomy. Given that we do not exist in a vacuum, there is a need to balance free speech against harmful speech. So, for those on the precipice of igniting a war on culture – stoking flames with accusations of *wokeness mania* – some perspective is required. Too often we forget that respect is a basic premise of positive social interaction that requires reciprocity. What is the cost to add a few words to your vocabulary versus what is the potential harm to others when using exclusive language? It almost feels like a moot point to argue, as we engage in pointless diatribe about who’s woke and who’s not.

In many ways language has become unnecessarily political. A fundamental problem is that there is much focus on what one cannot say, rather than all that one can say through the big wide world of linguistics. The breadth and depth of language that can be used to edify others who have historically been exposed to marginalising language is frequently overlooked. Inclusive language is simply about expanding one’s lexicon, so as not to be needlessly offensive. It is not censorship. It is merely an adjustment to how one expresses themselves and presents the opportunity for us to become better communicators while caring for those we’re communicating with ([Seiter, 2018](#)).

## Humility. Vulnerability. Authenticity.

It is not easy to traverse the terrain of appropriate language, particularly when there is not always consensus among those that it relates to, and language is always evolving. While it can sometimes feel like the goalpost is constantly moving, one immutable component of language is compassion, which requires maturity, humility, vulnerability, and authenticity. Something seldom considered is that patterns of thought underlie discourse, so what is said is a visceral manifestation of what is thought. It is very hard to conceal true values, so the process towards inclusive language requires sincerity. It is about truly embracing inclusive attitudes that will invariably materialise in speech.

People in this respect are not easily fooled. There is a certain strength in humility and vulnerability, sharing a naivety but desiring to learn. This sincerity will likely be appreciated, as it shows the individual that you respect them enough to put their feelings ahead of your own, and that you have an awareness that inappropriate language is a problem. It acknowledges, in advance, a personal shortcoming that calls for patience through the learning process. This positions intent as sincere, as opposed to retrospective apologies after the offence has been made, with an expectation for eternal absolution despite repeated offense. Most will forgive minor errors in speech if behaviours are respectful and otherwise underline a spirit of inclusion.

### **Discernment**

On the reverse, marginalised groups unfortunately have to become open to the idea that people will not necessarily get it right every time, and sometimes it is about looking beyond what is said by looking at intent. Invariably, it is extremely difficult to untangle the unintentional offense from the intentional slur, so it does require some discernment. Consider whether the individual's actions predominately reflect a person who supports inclusion and respect. Consider whether they are open to correction. Ruminates over historical mistakes to determine whether a pattern is building. Consider whether an insult made in public was corrected in public, if ownership is being taken. Finally, beyond language, are they actively engaging in inclusivity and displaying inclusive behaviours? This is of course cognitively laborious, and in an ideal world should not be the responsibility of the marginalised individual. However, the reality is that the process towards inclusion requires reciprocity. Therefore, regrettably, some of the onus is positioned with the marginalised to openly impart knowledge. To share what is and what is not appropriate – with a caveat that most groups are not monolithic. It is less preferable for people to resort to search engines, because it can take the well-intentioned down a rabbit hole to further ignorance.

### **A signal**

As companies become more heterogenous, the risk for offense externally becomes less likely, but the risk for offense internally becomes more likely. Especially in globalised organisations, it is near impossible to know about all customs and cultures. To abate the risk for offence, there is a greater need for clarity through language policies that reduce uncertainty. Inclusive language is a *signal* of the culture of an organisation. It will dictate the calibre of the applicant pool, and retain premium talent, critical for competitiveness. A [2020 McKinsey](#) study revealed that over a third of respondents abandoned a job opportunity at each stage of the recruitment process because of language that was used in either a job description, during an interview, or within brand material given to them post-offer.

Inclusive language also supports individual authenticity, and people tend to be more creative and productive under those conditions because of the removal of normative constraints. According to [Deloitte \(2018\)](#), companies that embrace inclusive language have a 39% higher customer satisfaction rating, because inclusive culture fosters more diverse teams that are therefore better positioned to understand and address different consumer needs. So, there is a component of insider knowledge that can increase your addressable market and can direct consumer feelings and attitudes towards a brand. In this way, consumers become more connected with the message and the values of an organisation, such that it increases loyalty. In contrast, the potential costs to an organisation are diverse and many: advertising spots being pulled, a reduced rate of product success, lawsuits, diminished competitive advantage, and a damaged reputation. I would submit that the issue of reputation or brand equity is perhaps the most vulnerable commodity, while equally being the most valuable.

### **Do no harm**

Then there is the most basic responsibility of a company to *do no harm*. This includes examining and eliminating any biases that may exist within their structure, including an active defining of appropriate language. Compliance is not enough. It is about developing a culture of inclusivity; leading by example, training, developing a language taxonomy to reduce ambiguity or all the above. A language taxonomy will reduce ambiguity, while serving as a tool that can be used as a reference point – particularly for those concerned about the potential for offence. The enforcement of language awareness at work will support team cohesiveness and effectiveness because it builds the foundation for a strong, welcoming culture ([Zendesk, 2021](#)). Organisations must consider the role and benefits of stakeholder capitalism and the long-term value that it brings. This means seeing all stakeholders, including talent and end-users, as core to the business strategy, which will structure the way that language is used. Driving accountability, a series of evaluations and risk management will also build a foundation for a formidable culture that will spill over to brand equity, value creation, stronger metrics, and overall better outcomes.

Ultimately, there is power in words, at the individual and corporate level. We must consider the opportunity cost here – changing just a few words can open the door for many individuals, with increases seen at the bottom line. Inclusive language reflects a growing respect for others and pays homage to the concepts of tolerance and inclusion. By acknowledging the ability of language to shape and reflect reality, diversity and equality initiatives can become, more powerful vehicles for social change, inclusion, and justice.



*Notes:*

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