

Political Correctness, Language and Rights.

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Over the last twelve months some journalists and pseudo intellectuals have begun to critically trivialize attempts to transform the language of disability. This has important and ominous implications for the disability rights movement.

Critics suggest that the recent and growing use of euphemisms to avoid 'offensive' terminology smacks of calculation and compromise, robs us of more direct and colourful words, and rarely has a lasting effect because new words and phrases quickly take on old meanings.

The first and most important thing to remember about discussions of language and disability is that they arise because disabled people experience discrimination daily and are denied the same rights and opportunities as the rest of the population. Apart from the fact that words can be deeply hurtful to disabled individuals, they have power and are used extensively to justify oppression. The phrase 'special educational needs', for example, frequently justifies the separation of disabled children from non-disabled children into segregated special schools.

Not too long ago in Nazi Germany similar words and phrases were used to justify the attempted genocide of disabled people. This is especially important given the recent rise of the far right in Germany and the rest of Europe.

But such things are rarely mentioned by those who criticize the use of 'politically correct' language. Indeed, most never even refer to the work of disabled people or their organizations. Nigel Rees's book 'The Politically Correct Phrasebook' (1993) ridiculing the use of certain words and phrases, for instance, cites sixty-three references to support his case, none of them are from disabled writers or organizations controlled and run by disabled people.

It's not as if the use of euphemisms is new. Take for example the 'F' word, direct, colourful and with a very precise meaning - to have sex. But instead of using it we use a variety of unwieldy, colourless and pretentious terms and phrases such as 'copulate', 'fornicate' or 'make love'. Why? Because those with power have decreed that this particular word is offensive. Clearly, the only time euphemisms become an issue is when they are being advocated by the powerless - disabled people.

As the articles by Davis and Findlay in the last issue of Rights not Charity clearly show our choice of language is important. Using appropriate terminology, not only, provides us with a sense of individual and collective identity, but also,

reminds non-disabled people of our oppression and our role in society. If currently preferred terms acquire negative meanings then we shall continue to search for new ones until there is no need to do so - until we have real equality.

It's a pity (that) those who spend so much time undermining debates about terminology don't devote the same amount of time to the reasons for their existence.

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