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Abstract:
In this paper, Wolfensberger analyses the subtleties and fallacies of Politically Correct language, not just in reference to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, but the broader context of devalued human conditions and the people who 'have them'. He remarks that when people become afraid to say the wrong thing, they often quit talking about the issue altogether, which engenders miscommunications and misunderstandings. He outlines ten principles for the selection and use of language that would help overcome this, pointing out that is virtually impossible to find a term that would meet all ten criteria.

Keywords: social role valorization, person centred language, terminology, politically correct, devalued

Needed or at Least Wanted: Sanity in the Language Wars

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One arena in which the current *Kulturkampf* (culture war) is being waged is in the domain of language. I will not confine my comments to the terminology change our Association has been wrestling with, but the broader context in which this is occurring. First, I will spell out some of the assumptions, assertions, and dynamics that one encounters mostly from the politically correct (PC) protagonists, either implicitly in the current language wars, or that are explicated by them.

1. People should be referred to by whatever language they want, even if these demands change every few years.
2. By clever enough language manipulation, (a) one can remove all negative attitudes toward a human condition and (b) the very notion that certain human afflictions exist can and should be defeated.
3. One can improve attitudes and expectancies toward a class of people—especially societally devalued ones—by using language about and toward them that is enhancing, or at least not degrading.
4. The following seem to be the externally imposed and currently politically correct "rules" for language about certain human conditions, and apparently only certain ones at risk of social devaluation:

   (a) A human impairment must never be signified by converting an adjective to a noun. Thus, one must not say that a psychotic person is "a psychotic."
   (b) Rule 4a does not apply to valued or neutral human conditions, or to persons or classes devalued for reasons *other* than impairment, or to any nonhuman conditions. Thus, one may still refer to a "hero" rather than "a heroic person," one may still say "blacks" and "gays," and one may refer to "blood-suckers" rather than "blood-sucking insects."
   (c) No adjective referring to, or revealing, a party's impairment can be placed in front of the noun that refers to the party. For instance, one must not say "psychotic person."
   (d) Rule 4c does not apply to either nonimpaired persons, or to conditions of other entities. Thus, one may still say "smart woman," "ugly man," "crazy dog," or "red nose." One can even still speak in the normal fashion about parties devalued for reasons other than impairment (e.g., "black women" or "homosexual man").
   (e) In referring to a person devalued for reasons of impairment, the adjective referring to the impairment is to be replaced by a so-called adjectival phrase—but only one that contains no adjective. For instance, a person is not "handicapped," but "has a handicap," or "lives with a handicap." Even for certain (and only certain) nonimpaired devalued people, this rule holds. For instance, one may not say "colored people," but may say "people of color."
   (f) In adjectival phrases with or without adjectives, the words that reveal what the devalued impairment is must come *after* the noun that reveals the class at issue.

In combination, these six rules mean, for instance, that "psychotic person" becomes "person who is psychotic," "person with psychosis," "person who has psychosis," or "person diagnosed (or labeled) as psychotic," etc.

   (g) Rules 4e and 4f do not apply to nonimpaired persons, or to other entities. Thus, one may still talk about "redheads," "gays," "a wooden table," or "a derelict building."
   (h) If at all possible, one should avoid referring to impaired people in the collective; for example, instead of "the retarded," or even "people who are retarded," one should say

"if a person is retarded…", or even better, "if an individual has been labeled as 'retarded…', or "labeled with mental retardation."

(i) Rule 4h does not apply to other people or entities, including those devalued for reasons and conditions other than impairment. Thus, one can still say "Americans," "blondes," "lesbians," "thieves," etc.

(j) If at all possible, one should not use diagnosis-related terms for certain conditions referring to certain human impairments that one believes to be "constructed." Thus, one would avoid discourse about people being retarded, schizophrenic, autistic, brain-injured, etc., or "having" retardation, schizophrenia, etc.

(k) If one does use such diagnosis-related terms, one should either put them in quotation marks, or say "labeled with."

(l) Rules 4j and 4k do not apply to certain other impairing human conditions, even if they can be construed to be "constructed," such as anorexia.

(m) When referring to certain (but only certain) devalued parties, then in certain (but only certain) circumstances, the nature of their devalued condition should be kept concealed, and in the case of some parties, it should *always* be concealed. Above all, when a member of a devalued class has committed an offense, the person's devalued condition must always be concealed. Thus, a news item reporting a bank robbery may not mention that the robber was psychotic, retarded, an illegal immigrant, "Black," or oriental, even if the public is asked to help identify the person. (At least for the time being, the robber may still be identified as male or female.) However, the devalued condition may be revealed by other means (e.g., a picture of the suspect may be shown that reveals some of the above facts, or the suspect's name may be given, which often suggests some such facts).

(n) Where a party's impairment should be concealed, but cannot be entirely concealed, one reveals as little of it as possible, or only in euphemisms, even if these lack veridicality: "person with special needs," "person living with a challenge," etc. To avoid saying about mentally retarded persons that they are not smart, and that they will probably remain unsmart for life, people have come up with terms such as consumer, self-advocate, mentally challenged, differently-abled, "with learning difficulties," and up syndrome.

The combination of several of the above rules under No. 4 is called "people first" language, and to my knowledge, no one has ever explicated that it involves not just one rule but a combination of many.

5. Within the contemporary culture of radical self-centered individualism and hedonism, there hovers the unspoken idea that "the world and people ought to be the way I think they ought to be, or I want them to be, and I have a right to make them that way." This is evident especially from some more militant sectors of impaired or otherwise societally devalued people who demand that certain terminology be used, and that other terminology be banned.
6. Language issues are to be resolved by coercion, legislation, and even a form of terrorism. People who do not agree with one's language assumptions are to be silenced, delegitimized, denied a public forum, and de facto persecuted, perhaps even to the point of losing all positions of relevance in the field.

Next, I will critique at least some of the above assumptions and assertions.

1. I deeply appreciate the wounds that get inflicted on devalued people, that certain language about their conditions plays a role in their being wounded by others, that such language is painful to them, and can elicit in them negative emotionality and even irrationality, sometimes in ways that make their mental woundedness very manifest. However, one should not let others take over one's conscience, nor dictate what language one uses about them—or anything. Germans are designated by dozens of words in different languages: Allemagnes, Franks, Ashkenazim, Germans, etc., etc., and only the Germans call themselves *Deutsche*. Should they explode when called Franks by Arabs, or sue in the World Court to have everyone call them *deutsch*? Furthermore, if one calls people whatever they demand (at present) to be called, then what would one do if half of them demand one

term, and the other half another? Or if some day they demand to be called something that actually degrades or demeans their image? For example, suppose a group of people demands to be called "shitheads" (not farfetched, given today's popular music culture). Would one then call them that? One either does in fact want to appease people whatever the cost, or one needs to have other rationales for what one does—rationales that may displease the affected people.

2. Unfortunately, I believe that a lot of people—especially younger ones—have endorsed a name change for this Association because they are under the impression that what in culturally normative historical language is called "stupidity" is a "social construction" (i.e., it is not real but is due entirely to the perceiver's interpretation and to "labeling"). This is simply not true. People always and everywhere have known, and always will know, that there were/are people who were/are stupid for life.
3. Language about a class of people can indeed powerfully shape people's minds about the class, but only within certain constraints. Until ca. 1970, most people depreciated, or even denied, the mindshaping power of what the dictionaries call designations of, and appellations for, devalued human conditions. Today, vastly more power is attributed to such terms than they actually have, and much too little power is attributed to other ways of influencing perceptions, attitudes, and minds. The relentless and fanatical emphasis on language and terminology in recent years has obscured the fact that much of people's attitudes towards any human condition—such as the condition we call mental retardation, and the people who "have" it or "are retarded"—derives either *not* from language at all, or only in part so. Instead, it derives heavily from such things as the settings in which such people are commonly found; their personal appearance, hygiene, social graces, and demeanor; the people with whom they are grouped and associated; their activities; the imagery associated with fund-raising appeals on their behalf; how people personally experience contact with them, and with those who represent such persons; how such persons are portrayed in the arts; and so on. In *all* of these areas, actions could be taken that would improve attitudes towards mentally retarded people, as is explained in great detail in the literature on Social Role Valorization. In fact, language is often merely the expression of mindsets that have been created by other means. But the narrow focus on language has served to divert attention and action away from these other factors—a diversion that has suited many parties very well. For instance, service agencies can get away with the worst atrocities—even killings—as long as they meticulously spout the proper lingo.
4. The limited space allows only a selective critique of the currently PC rules (Nos. 4a through 4n above). These rules are incoherent, irrational, complex beyond human manageability, ridiculous, and even insane. Further, the common claim that these new rules will improve attitudes towards the people discoursed about is—as far as I know—almost entirely unproven, and not even very plausible. But the primary reason people are adopting them has nothing to do with evidence, but with reluctance to confront, and/or offend, the people who have demanded them.

Linguists talk of "natural" language rules, which are those that actually construct or constitute a particular tongue. The natural rules of English permit all the usages under rule No. 4, but these 14 rules become irrational, crazy, and even counterproductive if (a) these practices are *only* used when discoursing about a class of people that is somehow "special," even as (b) the ordinary rules continue to be used in reference to all other human attributes and classes of people, including valued ones. Relatedly, so-called "people first" argot is totally different from any other linguistic conventions of trying to bestow social value on a party. For instance, one does not show honor or respect by speaking about highly valued people *only* as "people who are rich" rather than "rich people," "people who hold high offices" rather than "office-holders," etc.

If people hear their tongue spoken in a way that violates its natural rules, they experience this as either extremely funny or jarring. It quickly results in the speaker being classified as either mentally impaired, a foreigner, a jokester, or (least likely of all) as holding some ideology that dictates an unnatural language practice. For instance, it is a natural rule in English to put the verb in a sentence immediately or soon after the subject. But for some reason, the Great Who Sayz may proclaim that

henceforth, when about purple people speaking, the verb at the end of a sentence must be put. This much attention draw will, commonly people laugh will, and the purple people thus talked about certainly different considered will be. Many of the ridiculous PC language rules appropriately elicit ridicule, which is counterproductive.

Another problem is that if people need to communicate about something but are put under rules that do not allow it, then they get stressed and perhaps even crazified; they may start repressing; and if they do communicate about forbidden subjects, they may invent euphemisms to do so. This explains why we now have so many words in English for formerly unmentionable pieces of clothing. One of several problems with euphemisms is that they are often more vulgar than the original, as turned out with words for sexual parts and functions.

5. If people are put under threat for not conforming to PC language rules, and especially if they are censored for using the same natural language convention to speak about a devalued party that they use about valued parties, then they will start hemming and hawing because the PC conventions are not part of their deeply embedded language. It further contributes to becoming tongue-tied when the rules are complicated: Which rule applies to what condition, what party, and when? How is one to remember them, especially when the rules change rapidly? How can one avoid being outdated without knowing it?

When people become afraid to say the wrong thing, they often quit talking (or at least communicating) about the issue altogether, which engenders miscommunications, misunderstanding, accidents, and unconsciousness. I believe that generally, it is *far less worse* for people to talk "the way their mouth is grown," even if it comes out poorly, than to quit talking altogether.

Finally, people resent coercion, especially when it becomes multifarious and relentless, and they will lash back in all sorts of ways that will prove to be counterproductive to the intent of the language tyrants.

An example of these last two points is that the very media that virtually overnight have consistently adopted the phrase "challenged" in efforts to be PC have also begun to run a small avalanche of jokes about that convention. I have scores of examples in my files if anyone doubts this. Obviously, although these media people feel driven to use the "challenge" convention, they think it is ridiculous—which it is.

I have written at length about some of the current language insanities (see Wolfensberger, 1997), and have also developed much material to teach about language about devalued human conditions and the people who "have" them. In this limited space, I can only mention a few relevant principles for the selection and use of such language, and those only briefly.

1. Language should be respectful of standard and long-standing meanings of terms. It is better to coin entirely new words than to use old words in confusing ways.
2. If the primary purpose of language is communication, then it is not rational to exalt other purposes *above* this, even if those purposes are legitimate.
3. Language about devalued conditions and people should be clear and communicative. That is, people ought to be able to easily figure out what is meant by it.
4. Such language should not violate the broader rules of language use (e.g., grammatical conventions) of the tongue at issue.
5. Such language should not deliberately and unnecessarily degrade the image of the people at issue. If at all possible, it should be image-protective and enhancing of them—without riding roughshod over the other rules here.
6. Members of our field must firmly come to grips with the fact that "term-hopping" cannot possibly solve the problem it is proposed to address. Above all, term-hopping cannot work where a term stands for something that carries a negative meaning. No word for human excrement can improve public attitudes toward it. The only way a term standing for stupidity (pardon the juxtaposition) can acquire neutral or positive value is for stupidity itself to be considered neutral or valued. Thus, changing the name given to a condition every few years, or even more often (as has been the case recently), will not address negative attitudes, or clarify communication. What it *will* do is confuse almost everyone, because only those currently "in the know" will understand what and who is being discussed. It will also make historical research extremely difficult. Because term-hopping

so rarely works, one does not readily give up old bad terms in favor of new terms, and usually even new bad terms, but only abandons old bad terms if one can come up with a new term that, after meticulous linguistic analysis, one has every reason to believe—optimally, on the basis of actual evidence—to be *unequivocally* better. Usually, it is highly advisable to instead invest great effort into the *defense* of the image of previously used and currently used terms if their current negativity is due mostly to their representing a negatively valued human condition, and not because the terms are *inherently* false, uncommunicative, or demeaning. So one must distinguish between terms that have acquired negative connotations only by association (such as *idiocy* and *moron* did), versus those that are inherently flawed. For instance, to call someone "vegetative" is inherently untrue, "challenged" is uncommunicative, fanciful and euphemistic, and "lowgrade" has been demeaning from the first.

7. When a term has *acquired* considerable negative imagery, then changing to a new term may be justifiable, but only if the successor term is a clear improvement not only in terms of imagery, but in respect to other criteria as well. The reason is that, as mentioned, *any* such term will, in time, assuredly also acquire negative imagery baggage. A rare example of where term-hopping was probably justified was the introduction of the term Hansen's disease for leprosy—unless one were to speak about leprosy in a historical context, before Hansen's disease was distinguishable from other skin afflictions.
8. A proposed term should be critically analyzed for the degree of its information content, and the relevance of that information to the purpose at hand. Many of our current diagnostic terms provide little in terms of information content, unless they are modified with an adjective or more information; for example, "cerebral palsy" tells one very little unless modified by terms signifying type and severity.
9. There are innumerable problems—too many to analyze here—in using coercive means and de facto terrorism to get people to abandon one language convention, and practice another. Suffice it to say that language changes should be pursued by a process of courtship, and gentle, rational argument and persuasion. This is largely how the change from "mongolism" to "Down's syndrome" came about.

Of course, it is not only in our field where language terrorism is being practiced; it is becoming culture-wide. In some contexts, one will be skewered for mentioning "history." We recently learned that a teacher was denounced for using the terms *husband* and *wife*, instead of *partners*. Will the use of the word *reality* carry the death penalty soon? I believe that some of the current language terrorism calls for active resistance, but I am aware that few people will follow the course that I have decided upon and recommend: to live with opprobrium, harassment (even from the people I have long advocated for), and marginalization for rejecting many currently popular language conventions.

10. Because human beings are very imperfect, so are their language and communication processes. (Apparently, hardly anybody really believes this, even if they say it.) Therefore, living with what I call the "least worst" situation is usually the best one can hope for.

In regard to several of these principles, it is very important to the credibility of language whether it is perceived to be accurate, honest, veridical. If one discovers that a reality does not accord with what one had been led to believe and expect by communications about it, then one gets, at least, discombobulated. For instance, a person may turn out to be more or less competent than the descriptions of the person had led one to expect, and the arrangements one had made for the person then do not fit, and may even be life-endangering. This is an issue quite aside from the one that some people can be said to have an outright entitlement to full disclosure because they need it for the decisions they are expected to make, or even must make.

Also, people typically tend to get angry toward parties that give them false or misleading information, or that withhold relevant information from them. People then also tend to generalize such anger toward the party that had been communicated about, or toward the condition of that party which played a major role in the transaction. For example, if one is told that a person is nearsighted but discovers that the person is really almost blind, one's anger at this deceit may spread from the communicator to the blindness itself, and hence toward the blind person, all of which can happen very unconsciously. This is not mere speculation, because research has shown that (a) feeling tone

can readily generalize to anything associated to it, and that (b) people already have a tendency to blame victims for their plight, even when the blamers are fully aware that the blaming is irrational. We have recently seen some public backlash against the new language rules, which turns into anger against not only the rule-makers, but also against the people being talked about (or *not* talked about).

Now, suppose a class of people cannot see, hear, speak, or walk, and shows many indicators of being very unintelligent. Terms such as *differently abled* or *profoundly gifted* or *people with different learning and communication styles* do not communicate honestly about such people. Such people might have many gifts and communicate in other ways, but even so, something very real and important about their identities is being denied by such language. Those who hear such language used about such people may inwardly snigger, and think "what fools these human service workers (advocates, or whatever) be," and eventually associate their disgust at such foolishness to the handicapped people themselves, which is the opposite of what the communicators tried to achieve.

Principles 1 to 4, 6, 7, and to some degree 10 would actually argue for at least colloquial use of the historically longest-standing terms that people have always understood and will always understand, regardless of what the currently reigning professional or politically correct terms may be. In English, one of the oldest, most honest, and most widely-recognized and understood terms for what we are concerned with would probably be "stupidity from birth or early age." Of course, this phrase has image problems, and would not get much support from within professional circles such as this Association, or from the so-called "self-advocacy" movement, though it would probably give most members of the public a sense of relief that "finally, they are not pretending, and they are talking a language that I can understand!"

Relevant to several of the above points and issues is that the think-gooders in our Association and work have totally failed to appreciate one thing: Most people who "have" the condition that for about 50 years we have termed *mental retardation*, and some of their allies, will *never* be satisfied with *any* designating term for them whatsoever, even though some designation is necessary in many situations in order for the state, condition, person, or class at issue to be appropriately communicated about. If one is trying to find a term that would meet my 10 criteria that will finally satisfy those to whom it will be applied, one may as well give up this quest as futile, because there is no such term, and never will be.

Reference

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