

A nondisabled's guide to ableist language

Abstract.

The use of ableist language has always been problematic for the disabled community, as it is constantly pairing impairments with slurs, blurring the line that divides them. However, when ableist language is challenged, our initial reaction tends to gravitate around defence and justification, while we seldom end up adjusting the way we communicate. What lies behind the inability to accommodate our language in order to avoid harming certain sectors of society? The answer lies within the analysis of Anna Freud's defence mechanisms. At the same time, I propose an approach based on nonviolent communication in order to successfully manage a conversation about ableism and request a revision of other people's attitudes while avoiding confrontation and animosity.

Keywords.

Ableism, disability Studies, nonviolent communication, language, inclusion

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Resumen.

El uso de lenguaje discriminatorio contra la discapacidad siempre ha sido problemático para la comunidad con discapacidades, ya que está constantemente emparejando las deficiencias con los insultos, difuminando la línea que los divide.

Sin embargo, cuando se desafía el lenguaje del capacitismo, nuestra reacción inicial tiende a gravitar en torno a la defensa y la justificación, mientras que rara vez terminamos ajustando la forma en que nos comunicamos. ¿Qué hay detrás de la incapacidad de acomodar nuestro idioma para evitar dañar a ciertos sectores de la sociedad? La respuesta se encuentra dentro del análisis de los mecanismos de defensa de Anna Freud. Al mismo tiempo, propongo un enfoque basado en la comunicación no violenta para gestionar con éxito una conversación sobre el capacitismo y solicitar una revisión de las actitudes de otras personas, evitando al mismo tiempo la confrontación y la animosidad.

Palabras clave.

Capacitismo, discapacidad, comunicación no violenta, lenguaje, inclusión

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1. Introduction

// The metaphors that allude to disability or invoke disability imagery are everywhere, and the ideas they are based on are accepted so casually that we will have a hard time dissuading people from using them" (Linton, 1998:126)

"I hope you learn how to respect other people's opinions", a family member said to me. "Freedom of expression does not justify oppression. I hope you learn that.", I replied. After a twelve-hour discussion about ableism through an online messaging app, my objective of trying to change my family's member use of ableist language had officially failed. Not only that, I had very likely become the member of the family that's 'too sensitive' to discuss any topic with. How did I and my well-intentioned attitude create the opposite effect of what I was trying to achieve? Why did I, who do not identify as disabled, failed to explain to another nondisabled person how to make their language more inclusive and less potentially harming?

Ableism is everywhere. Once you understand its meaning, effects and, most importantly, its power, it is hard to stop coming across it in everyday life. Some examples are easy to spot, such as inaccessible public buildings or the lack of accessible transportation, whereas others are institutionalised and harder to pinpoint, like laws. There is, however, one type of ableism that has become so natural and routinely used that no one seems to notice it: ableist language. Used as adjectives or nouns, these words appear in movie titles, mass media, and even in mundane daily conversations. At the end of 2018, Google's CEO Sundar Pichai, had to explain to the United States' Congress why googling the word "idiot" came back with a picture of the United States' President Donald Trump (ABC News, 2018). In many daily television shows, this event appeared to make a laughing stock of the president, as it linked him to a slur. However, the connection between this 'joke' and the former legal and psychiatric term to describe an intellectual impairment was not mentioned. The fact that medically diagnosed idiots are still not allowed to vote in certain US States, such as Mississippi (Mississippi Constitution, 1890: s.241), was also avoided. The use of impairments as slurs has become so naturalised that we refuse to understand why they can be offensive to a certain group of society. The association of these terms with disabilities is barely done anymore. Even when clarified, nondisabled people still ignore (at best) or protest (at worst) the argument in favour of changing our language to a more inclusive alternative.

The conversation with my family member was not the first conversation about ableist language I had with a nondisabled person. In every single one of them, I failed to convey my point. In every single one of them, I heard the same counter-arguments thrown back at me. Though prepared to offset their arguments from a positive and approachable perspective, my strategy seemed to keep failing. This prompted the questions: what is behind our rejection to adjust our language? Is there a perfect formula to convey this message? Will, in the end, changing our language have a positive impact anyway? This paper will address these questions from a nondisabled's perspective and argue that, with the right tools, a conversation about ableist language can successfully happen, leading the way to a more inclusive society where everyone is willing to adapt their ways for the common good of its citizens.



2. Ableism and ableist language

Though hard to identify its first use, some say that the term ableism was originally coined by Thomas Hehir. He defines ableism as “the devaluation of disability” that “results in societal attitudes that uncritically assert that it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids” (Hehir, 2002). There is not one single definition of ableism nor a general consensus on its practices: this will vary depending, among other things, on the experiences lived by a person and their geographical location. Logically, what some societies consider ableist might not be generalizable to the whole world, as the topic has mainly been studied from a global north perspective. Australian scholar Fiona Campbell, one of the leading voices in ableism, defines it as a “network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability, then, is cast as a diminished state of being human” (Campbell, 2008).

Whichever definition one might choose to follow, ableism will always entail a power relation, as differences between human beings tend to be binary and hierarchized. On the one hand, we find the abled “natural” body while, on the other hand, the “others”. Consequently, we end up living in an ableist society, in which the public and the private sphere are built to serve nondisabled standards and needs, inherently excluding those with disabilities. Therefore, next generations become socialized in an ableist system that goes to such an extent that our ableist privilege is not noticed anymore. Attitudes, behaviours, interactions, and expectations — they are all defined from an ableist perspective. We can appreciate then how this becomes problematic in a

Imagen 1. Disability symbols.



Fuente: [Wikimedia Commons, 2019](#).

world where 15% of its population or, to put in simple numbers, one billion people, experience some form of disability (World Bank, 2018). Or, if it was to be approached from a narcissistic angle, where the other 85% face the continual possibility of becoming disabled. This ingrained ableism ends up turning into what Campbell defines as “ableistnormativity”, an “ableist homosocial world view that asserts the preferability and compulsoriness of the norms of ableism” (Campbell, 2008) where the able-bodied is presumed to be the norm in every aspect of life.

How we ended up living in a culture where ability is so valued and our worth is measured by what we can and cannot do is an inquiry for another paper. However, what is relevant to understand is that ableism, as all of the other -isms, is a form of discrimination. Whether unnoticed or meant as a joke, it singles out people because of a particular characteristic and designates them as inferior, second-class citizens.

Language is a particular form in which ableism can be manifested. As author Simi Linton asserts in



her 1998 book “Claiming Disability”, some words “affect individuals’ most private deliberations about their worth and acceptability, and they determine social position and societal response to behaviour” (Linton, 1998:24). That is, the way in which we use some words will determine our behaviour towards certain groups of society. To put it in simpler terms, our words can normalise the link between disabilities and unworthiness. Let’s take the word ‘retard’, for instance. Retard is short for retardation, which in medicine refers to a neurodevelopmental disorder characterised by an impaired intellectual and adaptive functioning. However, there are many examples in everyday life where the word gets tossed around naturally as a slur. I suspect, though, that those using this word are not unaware of its link to the medical term. This is a very straightforward example: by using the word ‘retard’ to describe a nondisabled person, the ultimate goal is to insult and degrade. Yet, it is not always as clear as this. The line becomes blurred when words like ‘stupid’, ‘lame’, and ‘crazy’ are used in everyday language. Many people, if not almost everyone, will contest the fact that a phrase such as “this TV show is lame” or “I had a crazy day” has anything to do with disabilities. Most would be even taken aback if one mentions that these terms are oppressing disabled people. However, the word lame refers to a physical impairment which causes a person to be unable to walk without difficulty, which, I believe, does not apply to the TV show (as it has no legs in the first place).

The same can be said about “crazy” and all the other ableist words that found their way into our daily communication. While not ill-intentioned, using these words and phrases inherently associate slurs to disabled people and reinforces the stereotypes and ideas of disabled people as less valuable.

It is clear then that the use of ableist language is problematic by itself. As a nondisabled person socialized in an ableist society, I grew up using

this type of language without thinking twice about its real meaning. Changing our language is a process that takes time and starts with the acknowledgement that the meaning that we ascribe to words go beyond our own subjective definitions. What is surprising, though, is the uncompromising defence towards the use of these terms from people who identify as nondisabled. A simple conversation about ableism will end up in common counter-arguments such as: oversensitivity; that these words have diverged from its original meaning and acquired a new social meaning; that it is used as a joke; that some people with disabilities do not find them offensive; that they would never use it in front of disabled people; and even that disabled people are not really a part of an oppressed group.

The matter in question is not to decide who is wrong or who is right. I, as a nondisabled person, have no right to assume how disabled people are affected by the language I use. What I can do, though, is avoid using language that some people might find offensive. If there is a slight possibility of generating oppression with my language, why not change it? In an entry for the online “Disability and Representation” blog, Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg states that “if a culture’s language is full of pejorative metaphors about a group of people, that culture is not going to see those people as fully entitled to the same housing, employment, medical care, education, access, and inclusion as people in a more favored group” (Cohen-Rottenberg, 2013). It becomes even more explicit when she says that “when a critique of language that makes reference to a disability is not welcome, it is nearly inevitable that, as a disabled person, I am not welcome either”. One would think that, surely, this is enough motivation to change our ways. However, as previously described, this is not usually the case. Why is it, then, that we still use ableist language even when informed that it could be potentially harming?



3. Ableist complicity

In the struggle for gender equality in Latin America, the place men should take within the feminist movement is still being debated. However, as a first step and starting point, men have been called to question the situations in which gender stereotypes are practised among themselves. Passivity and silence are no longer tolerated, and with good reason. The goal is simple: to generate social change and deconstruct the social aspects of gender which harm society as a whole (including men). Usual socialization practices, ingrained behaviours, and innate privilege are all called to be examined and challenged among men. The feminist movement is calling men to betray what it has defined as “sexist complicity” (Fabbri et al., 2018). This is not new: the fight against gender bias, such as jokes, casual sexism, and one-directional sexual harassment in the workplace has been going on for some time. The difference is that it now has a term where men who identify as feminists or “allies” can join the movement. The logic is clear: men can be of support not only by changing their own behaviours but by calling other men out.

The reason why I am bringing this example to light is that the parallels to the disability movement and ableism are evident. If we are to question disability as a social construction (that is, the process in which someone with an impairment becomes disabled due to barriers in society), both those who identify as disabled and those who do not need to work together. After all, a minority is inevitably defined as a counterpart to a majority. What, then, is the role for those of us who don't identify as disabled? My instant reaction is that it is not up to a nondisabled person to answer this question. So, I propose that the first step is always to ask. If we are really interested in creating a more equal society for disabled individuals, we need to start by inquiring what they need, instead of assuming it. Nevertheless, there is one exception I would propose to this rule.

I argue, with certainty, that there is one activity we could start carrying out: ending ableist complicity. Borrowing from the feminist movement, I define ableist complicity as any behaviour (or lack of) by a nondisabled person which adds to the system of oppression against the disabled community and goes unquestioned. It can manifest itself in the form of a joke, a laughter, a silence — all the way to the failure to challenge injustices where seen, both in the private or public sphere. Betraying ableist complicity does not imply avoiding certain words or actions in the presence of disabled people. It means avoiding them. Full stop. All the time, everywhere. Unlike the trend that we are starting to see in the feminist movement with men, we, the ones who do not identify as disabled, still have a long way to go to assist in breaking the patterns of oppression that disabled people have to bear in modern societies.

Having defined ableist complicity, it is now time to turn to the reasons behind the usual feelings that people go through and their responses when their ableist attitudes or actions are brought to their attention. Why is it that, in most conversations about ableist language, the immediate reaction is generally a defence in the form of justification or a counter-attack? “Don't be so pretentious, it was a joke”, I was advised several times. I believe that the answer lies in Anna Freud's writing about defence mechanisms.

Anna Freud (1936), wrote extensively about this type of mechanisms and managed to categorise them according to the specific actions and feelings involved. Simply put, they are processes triggered unconsciously with the purpose of protecting the ego from the anxiety that arises from thoughts or feelings considered unacceptable. One of these types, called “reaction formation”, proves useful to analyse the reception to discussions about ableism as it occurs when a person behaves in the opposite way in which they think. An unconscious compulsive behaviour, it is said to be an exaggerated response that looks



to protect the ego from the “embarrassment, guilt, or repulsion the person feels regarding his private thoughts. By using reaction formation, one’s self-identity remains ‘safe’ as the ego is kept in ignorance of a person’s true motives” (Pedersen, 2018).

The rationale is straightforward: no one appreciates being told that the language and attitudes they have used their whole lives are a source of domination towards a minority. This is a direct attack on one’s identity and ego, which will certainly create feelings that go all the way from embarrassment to guilt. And that’s when Freud comes in. With a little help of our mind, reaction formation is triggered and, just like magic, we are suddenly safe again (and in denial). Reaction formation is not easy to understand and, ironically, I am certain that my attempt to characterise reaction formation will, in many cases, provoke reaction formation.

The idea of illustrating our reactions to disability with Freud’s theories is by no means my discovery. Already in 1998, Simi Linton used reaction formation to explain the link between language and the societal responses to disability. “It is my feeling that the nation in general responds to disabled people with great ambivalence. Whatever antipathy and disdain is felt is in competition with feelings of empathy, guilt, and identification” (Linton, 1998:15). “Projection”, another key defence mechanism in Freud’s theory, is also linked to the othering of disabled people in Rebecca Maskos’ analysis of ableism in capitalistic societies. “The very common anxiety caused by the unacceptable and threatening notion of a potentially non-perfect body (...) is projected onto persons labelled and viewed as disabled” (Maskos, 2013:5). However, while this theory provides valuable insights into my arguments around ableist language, it falls short of providing a solution that does not involve 6.5 billion sessions of psychoanalysis for all of us nondisabled people (assuming we would be able to understand ableism in just one session each).

At this stage, there is a clarification I feel compelled to make: by no means do I believe nondisabled people are to be judged by their innate ableism. One of the main features of privilege is that it is invisible to those who enjoy it. Additionally, as previously mentioned, we’ve been socialized into ableist attitudes so, if anything, we can blame the abstract concept of society as a whole (another example of a defence mechanism at its best). Is there, then, no hope in the fight against ableist language? Are there any “quick fix” solutions that we can implement from the moment we finish reading this paper?

Imagen 2. The Spastic Society collection tins were around until the 1980s.



Fuente: BBC.com

4. Overcoming barriers

Jumping back into the conversation with my family member, my approach to the subject was evidently not the appropriate one. The fact that he will not stop using ableist language is more my responsibility than his. After a lot of reflection, I've realised that bringing up the Nazism's genocide was probably not the best parallel I could have made in trying to prove my point. My choice of words greatly influenced the direction the conversation took. In that context, words like "oppression", "genocide", "privilege" and "minority" were the perfect recipe for reaction formation and, after that, there was no other course I could have possibly taken to prove my point. It was too late. In my eagerness to get him to change his language, I failed to realise that it was actually my terminology which was hindering my goals. What's more, if throughout this paper you were able to identify within yourself negative perceptions towards my arguments, that is because I purposely chose to use the word "oppression" four times, I employed expressions such as "the fight against ableism" and "power relations", and even, at times, adopted an ironic tone. This, again, is highly likely to have triggered in you unconscious defence mechanisms. And therefore, we arrive to the essence of my argument: transforming hegemonic language involves the use of language and, if not careful, the opposite effect will be produced.

The role that words and language play in communication have been widely analysed by American psychologist Marshall B. Rosenberg (2003). In his book "Nonviolent Communication", he proposes a process to restructure communication, all the way from the forms one uses to disclose ideas to the way one listens to feedback. To Rosenberg, many of the words we use on a daily basis are violent and will harm other people, creating in them reactions which involve resistance, defence and violence. In his new structure, sincerity, clarity and empathy are at the core of every exchange.

By utilizing this method, one can "identify and clearly articulate what we are concretely wanting on a given situation" (Rosenberg, 2003:3). His approach consists in applying four steps to every communication: observation, feelings, needs and request. If we apply these components to every interaction while at the same time identifying them in the feedback we receive, a connection will be generated between the parties that will create a real understating of the reasons behind our requests.

I believe his method proves advantageous when facing a conversation about ableism and can be the key to success. In fact, the situation described with my family member clearly falls under one of his types of communication that blocks compassion. What I did in that conversation is defined by Rosenberg as a "moralistic judgment" (Rosenberg, 2003:15). This means that, either consciously or unconsciously, my attitude presupposed that because my family member did not agree with me, he was wrong, selfish and bigoted — a clear judgment from my side. Undoubtedly, my language choice supported this argument. The underlying belief in this form of interaction is that something is failing in the other person because they do not behave as we wish them to. It derives from this, logically, that my request (to stop using ableist language) was ill-fated from the start. What's more, if by any chance he would have accepted these changes, it would have been done out of guilt or shame, not out of a sincere wish to change. So, how does applying nonviolent communication actually look like in the context of an ableist language conversation?

The first step consists in being able to create a division between what we feel and the judgments that emerge from those feelings. This is what Rosenberg characterizes as observation. In other words, one should be able to inspect without judging. Not doing this will hinder the other person's understanding of what we are trying to convey and generate an instant



defensive attitude. The second step is about expressing those previously identified feelings. In the society we live in, expressing feelings has gotten harder and harder. This specifically affects men, where notions of masculinity equate the avoidance of disclosing one's most personal feelings. If unable to name what we feel, we will never be able to connect with anybody else. For instance, in the case of the conversation with my family member, having begun by saying "you should stop using ableist language because it is oppressive" was already charged with judgment. On the contrary, I could have started by saying: "I've noticed that you are using words linked to disability in a context that is unrelated to impairments. This makes me feel sad and hurt". In this example, steps one and two (observation and feelings) of nonviolent communication are attended to. Thirdly, we should pay attention to needs. Every feeling represents hidden needs and identifying them (and therefore expressing them) will enable others to understand us in an effortless way. Once again, I should clarify that this is not a simple task, as we live in a society that tends to judge the expression of our needs.

Once we have learnt how to observe, connect with our feelings and understand our needs, we are ready to make a request to other people so our needs can be satisfied. Our requests should be clear, concise and phrased in a positive way. If we have followed the previous steps, it is probable that our request will be welcome and understood. Otherwise, it will come across as a requirement. In the previous example, an adequate formulation of a request could take the following shape: "would you be willing to find other words not related to disabilities to express what you mean in this context?". Finally, we need to make sure if the other person understood what we meant by asking for clarification and following with appreciation.

These simple steps can go to great lengths in conversations about ableism and ableist language. However, they are not a recipe that can be indiscriminately applied in every situation: every approach has to take into account the context it is happening in. I am by no means an expert in nonviolent communication nor do I expect people to become so after one attempt. It is not an easy process and it takes a huge amount of energy and time to master these skills. The essential aspect is to be able to start identifying the already mentioned steps in every interaction and to strive for an empathetic communication. Mistakes and frustration should be welcomed, as long as one is able to identify the underlying feelings and needs and is able to successfully express them.



5. Final thoughts

There are times where discrimination against disabled people are overt, straightforward and generally repudiated by a big part of society. In 2006, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) entered into force and prohibited any discrimination on the basis of disability. Nevertheless, bias against disabled people still continues in our societies and, in some cases, has gone underground and unnoticed, becoming a part of one's habits. "Disability is best understood as a marker of identity", asserts Simi Linton at the beginning of the aforementioned book (Linton, 1998:12). But when someone's identity is continually undermined by the use of certain language, it is then high time to ask ourselves if there is anything we can do to avoid it. In the case of ableism, and I would argue that in any other case too, the answer is yes. Though true that a change needs to happen at a cultural and institutional level (for instance, tackling the curricula in educational institutions), transformation at an individual level can go to great lengths. After all, it is people who construct culture.

I began this paper by mentioning that there was a possibility of earning the title of being labelled "too sensitive" or "too pretentious" for the fact that I was opening the door to conversations about ableist language. In general, if that was what it took to expose ableist language, my initial reaction would have been to take those titles with pride. After all, I knew I was doing the right thing. However, by introducing nonviolent direct communication, there is no wrong or right anymore, and the purpose in a conversation ceases to be to "win". This type of communication is not simple and by no means will solve the problem, but it's a start. The idea is that, through empathy, we are able to deconstruct the symbolic uses of ableist language together. Slowly, but steadily, we can erase the imbalance of power in favour of nondisabled people that language produces in our modern society.



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