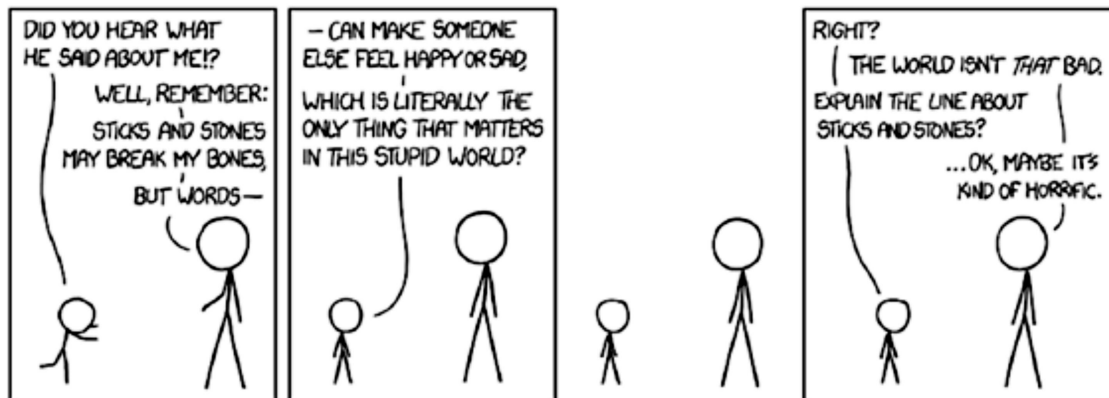# Landmarks

But Words can Never Hurt me[1]:
The Linguistic Construction of Disability in Text and Discourse

In memory of Barleen Kaur (16.08.84 – 12.11.13)*
Tanmoy Bhattacharya

Retrieved from https://www.explainxkcd.com/wiki/index.php/1216:_Sticks_and_Stones

Introduction

The baffled looks on the faces of teachers encountering the issue of disability in a classroom for the first time is largely due to our unpreparedness to accept that a "mixed" classroom may also include students with disabilities; we seem to be willing to stretch our definition of mixedness only as far as class, caste, ethnicity, race, and gender. What is it about disability that freezes us the moment we encounter it? I think in the heart of our hearts, we all know the answer but are unwilling to accept it even to ourselves. Disability is the only attribute of human condition that can happen to anyone at any time during one's lifetime, unlike race, ethnicity, etc. Is it possibly just a case of not being able to face up to our own possible future selves? There is no safety of a comforting thought such as *Thank God, I am not disabled.*

Thus, rather than doing something *for* a student with disability; it is more for our own selves that we must have more to do with disability than we are willing to. Understanding disability makes sense only from this perspective; it is not to understand the other but the self. The importance of "understanding" the representation of disability is yet another layer on top of understanding the self. The first step in understanding or rather approaching disability involves encountering the various surface forms of disability. These surface forms include the (in)visibility of the corporeal aspect of disability, including cognitive disability, and various representations of that corporeality. Within the corporeal aspect of disability, one of the longest-standing conceptualizations is the social construct of disability that views it as a disembodied environmental concern; specifically, disability is seen as a social

construct. The sociology of disability thus made the body with its impairment, invisible. With this invisibility, the representation of disability becomes challenging.

The Technology of Representing Disability

A primary procedure of representing disability is through the process of "labelling", at the core of which lies the natural human propensity to name things, groups, people, objects, etc. Naming is essential for language to operate, however, the use of language through naming is a form of social action, as "naming" creates a world around our conversations; this is the performative aspect of language (e.g. the pronouncement "It's a girl", when a female child is born). Labelling has a social and a political aspect. Socially, it results in greater segregation and negativity and therefore surveillance; politically it is bestowed upon those with less power by the ones with more power. In the field of disability, professionals are sanctioned by society to impose labels on persons with disabilities. A disabling label brings a host of other related descriptive terms which are negative. For example, "victims", "sufferers", *bechara* ('helpless'), etc. Often, Persons with Disabilities (PwD) are implied as a homogenous group, e.g. "the blind", "the disabled", etc. In the domain of entitlements, they are always shown to have "needs" (rather than "rights"), e.g. the "need for a ramp".

Sometimes the labels seem positive on the surface, like "brave" and "extraordinary", giving the image that disabled people are superhuman and anything they achieve is praiseworthy. This is known as the "supercrip" phenomenon. Sometimes, the labels are expressed through stereotypes, e.g. one common stereotype is that blind people are talented singers/musicians. The well known American blind activist Kenneth Jernigan realized this very early and remarked drily: "The blind are simple, spiritual, musical; they have a special sixth sense; their other senses are more acute—in short, they are different and apart from the rest of society" (Jernigan, 1983, pp. 58-59). One the one hand, this process spectacularizes the difference from what is considered to be the normative, and on the other, the real motive behind this process seems to be an erasure of the real issues that face the persons labelled thus. This is clear in the case of the so-called positive stereotypes for blind people, as it hides the reality of the constraining social and educational system where very few blind students are either encouraged or allowed to choose science-related disciplines. Similarly *divyang* is an ascription, which although has come about from basic ignorance of disability issues and unfamiliarity with the reality of the life of a PwD in India, is also damaging from the perspective of erasing the struggle and the reality of disability in the country (see Chander, this issue, for a more detailed discussion on this). It has also come about from the same primitive desire to create the impression of doing something new by renaming or relabelling that which had given rise to the expression "differently abled" earlier. I do think that both these ascriptions are of the same nature as they accentuate the social function of segregation and the political functions of erasure of responsibilities of the State. This is however not without precedence in recent memory within the Indian context; the following are some of the examples:

> The "advice" given by the Governor of Uttarakhand, on the need for public awareness to awaken the people "to the love and not sympathy needed by these kids as God always compensates such people with extra abilities,"[2]

> "Children with special needs are unique individuals. Their uniqueness may be noticed in one or more of the following dimensions: vision, hearing, movement, …" (Dash, 2006, p. 3)

Other Representational Technologies

Moving beyond the issue of labelling which directly connotes negativity and inferiority, there are other linguistic and literary devices that are often employed to connote negativity indirectly. Among the literary devices, rhetoric in general and metaphors in particular stand out.

Among the other representational procedures, one that pervades in representing disability is the use of disability terms metaphorically. Using disability as an analogy is quite common as a literary, journalistic, and performatory device. Examples include the following: lame idea, blind justice, dumb luck, feeling paralysed, argument falling on deaf ears, crippling, crazy, insane, idiotic, retarded, etc.[3] None of these signifying expressions imply positive interpretations. Thus, a lame idea is a bad or an ill-constructed idea[4]. Recently, somebody commented to a post on Facebook by Beth Ferri, ironically, a Professor of Inclusive Education at Syracuse University, by saying "the blind leading the blind". Again on Facebook, a friend recently posted: "Cataract is the third biggest cause of blindness. Religion and politics are the other two"; here, blindness is clearly equated with ignorance.

What lies behind such usages is the troubling concept of the rhetoric of ableism—a biased use of ableist language/concept, that is used deliberately to hurt the sentiments of PwDs. Abelist language can be seen at the same level as sexist or racist or casteist language, with the difference that those areas of bias have been admitted to be socially constructed and activism and awareness have worked to reduce such biases to a large extent, and yet in the case of ableist or disablist language, the practice continues.

Ableism is also at work behind many other cases of language use, where the implicature of the negativity of disability is even more indirect. Some idiomatic expressions, despite their lack of negative disability-oriented connotation as far as their intended meaning is concerned, are none-the-less ableist, since they take it for granted that movement of certain sort is the normative for positivity: "Stand up on your own two feet", to stay "one step ahead", "stand up for oneself", to take "one step at a time", to "hold one's head up high", etc.[5]

Even more indirect use of disability as a metaphor is seen in performances (TV, theatre, film, etc.). Ratan Thiyam's latest production of the Manipuri version of "Macbeth" was the opening play of the 18th *Bharat Rang Mahotsav* at Kamani Auditorium on 1 February 2016. In the scene where Macbeth and Lady Macbeth breakdown after they plot and kill King Duncan, they are taken away metaphorically in a couple of wheelchairs, with many other wheelchairs with dummies in various uncontrollable and deviant postures being wheeled around the stage. Of course, the scene got the loudest applause from the audience.

There are very specific areas of language structure that by default help carry out the ableist agenda of establishing the normative of ableism. Indexicals is an aspect of language structure that is inherently biased against blind people. Indexicals are expressions which are anaphoric (dependent) on the context of use. For example, pronominals such as *she, he, they, you, I, we*; demonstratives such as *this, that, those*; deictic expressions such as *here, there*, etc.; all of these expressions get their value depending on what the reference of that particular expression is in the context of the conversation. The value is often resolved by pointing. Such uses of indexicals can be completely exclusionary and establish an ableist bias.

However, mere policing of language use can never be the solution, the disability community must actively challenge ableist designs and reclaim the disability metaphors for themselves.

The Role of Language in Definitions

The many-faceted feature of the concepts underlying the issue of disability has led to complications at several levels, not least of which is the use of various terms and definitions. This state of affairs sometimes leads to confusion, especially for practitioners who deal with disability and disabled persons. However, the same state of affairs is also frequently misused to deprive and to discriminate. For example, Muscular Dystrophy, Multiple Sclerosis, Specific Learning Disabilities, etc., are not included in the list of disabilities in the current Act (PwD, 1995)[6], leading to much confusion and denial of entitlements that would have been otherwise due in hospitals, courts of law, educational institutions, public transport, etc.

Apart from the reason outlined earlier—the multi-facetedness of the concept underlying disability—there is also the obvious issue of the ever elusive neutrality of language itself. Due to its ever-changing nature and the possibility of personalized and privative semantics that words and phrases may engender, using an accurate expression is often impossible. For example, terms such as idiot, mentally challenged, handicapped, etc., have all been used as technical terms to label certain types of disability at one time or another, but fell into disuse due to the negative connotations that each of these terms acquired over time.

A rights-based movement in both UK and the US gave rise to two dominant usages (in English), namely, Disabled Persons and Persons with Disability (PwD), respectively. PwD is a predominantly American usage (now preferred in most countries and organizations) which highlights the person-hood of a disabled person, whereas "Disabled Persons" is predominantly a British usage that instead highlights the reality of the disability of the person involved in order to bring forth and display the disability of the person as his/her strongest identity; these usages

have been appropriately called Person first and Disability first usages, respectively.

It is well-known (Bhattacharya, 2010, p. 18), that within the Indian context, the definition of disability emerged with the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1968, which has been identified as a visionary document in many senses. However, the term "handicap" has fallen into disuse now due to the acquisition of negative connotations, for instance, *having* a handicap has become *being* handicapped. At present, all the following terms are used in India in governmental policies, documents, Acts, signs, by the media, and common usage (their vernacular versions having equally negative connotations): handicapped, physical impairment, physically challenged, persons with disabilities, disabled persons, differently-abled. The last one has gained some currency due to a misconstrued ascription to its relative harmlessness. However, "different" is equally effective in marking out an "other" that all the other terms are accused of doing. Moreover, the perceived harmlessness of the term is misleading and the term is totally a-historic in its context.

On the other hand, the two dominant current usages the world over—PwD and Disabled persons—are historically associated with rights-based movements led by disabled persons in the 1970s or even earlier, which successfully brought about epoch-changing legislations in the field. Due to their historic associations, these two terms can be also used interchangeably.

Prejudice and Stereotype in Disability Discourse

As a result of the prevailing terminology in disability, the discourse around disability is necessarily coloured by these terms of reference. Over a period, the usage of these terms has left an indelible mark in the form of prejudice, stereotype, and finally, discrimination

of PwDs. Prejudice and stereotype can be seen in action in our society at every level. It is also known that one leads to the other: "When prejudice takes on the form of a specific belief regarding a particular group, it is a stereotype" (Bogdan & Knoll, 1988, p. 67). In this section, I will briefly discuss my experiences at the Equal Opportunity Cell (EOC), University of Delhi, which highlight some of the prominent stereotypes of disability in general, and deafness and Sign Language (SL) in particular.

In my capacity as a member, and later coordinator of the EOC, I was responsible for introducing, designing, and running various short term courses at the EOC, typically lasting a semester. Students were admitted to these courses through an entrance test followed by an interview. One of the standard questions that were asked for the two Sign Language (A- and B-level) and "Disability and Human Rights" courses was: "Why do you want to do the course?" In an analysis of the responses given, the word "help" appeared 48 times, along with the following words which appeared with varied frequencies: "curiosity"; "burden"; "natural drawback"; "deformities"; "illiterate"; "prone to crime"; "dangerous"; "suffering/needy"; "helpless and unsupported"; "inner fear"; "lack of inner strength"; "good human being"; "very innocent"; "not blessed with"; "*aksham log*" (incapable people); "*asaamaanyaa*" (extraordinary/unequal); "deaf and dumb"; "speech organ defect". Some of these terms were self-assigned reasons for taking an interest in disability (e.g., "curiosity"). Others were terms ascribed to PwDs, most of which are copy-book illustrations of stereotypes and/or highlighting an inadequacy. Often, there was an attempt to evade categorization altogether.

The general disability stereotypes were tested by asking five questions, where students were asked to respond by either "Yes" or "No". Table 1 shows the result for a sample size of 152 students:

Table 1

Stereotypes about Disability

Questions	Yes %	No %
(1) People with disabilities are naturally inferior.	25	75
(2) All deaf people can read lips.	84.38	15.62
(3) Blind people acquire a sixth sense.	75	25
(4) People with disabilities are more comfortable with "their own kind".	65.63	34.37
(5) People with disabilities are innocent.	68.75	31.25

Answers to questions (2) and (4) clearly depict negative stereotypes with regards to deafness, and to a perceived herd mentality of disabled persons in general, while answers to questions (3) and (5) show so-called positive stereotyping, i.e. an affirmative answer to these questions may seem to be a positive ascription to people possessing these qualities, but as the Jernigan quote cited earlier shows, these ascriptions stem from the tendency to consider PwDs as somehow "special" or unique.

In order to test stereotypes with regards to SL, five questions were asked and students were asked to mark their response as "Yes" or "No". The following table shows the results in percentages:

Table 2

Stereotypes About SL

Questions	Yes %	No %
(1) SL is not a complete language.	63	37
(2) SL is only a set of gestures.	41	59
(3) SL has no grammar.	50	50
(4) Deaf people cannot speak as they do not possess the necessary speech organs.	43	57
(5) Deaf students lack the mental capacity to learn at the same speed as other students.	73	27

Table 2 clearly shows negative stereotypes about the linguistic status of SL in answers to questions (1) and (2). In addition, as is often the case, disability in one area is associated with

less ability in other areas as well; thus, deafness is associated with a lack in mental capacity (question 5).

It also became clear during the tests that the stereotypes influence how the groups/individuals think about themselves (Medgyesi, 1996, p. 44). Often PwDs identify a non-disabled person as "normal", thus strengthening the stereotype further. This tendency is reflected in comments such as, "we are not special but unique", and most astoundingly, "blindness helps us to increase our sixth sense."

Teachers' Discourse[7]

The lexical ontology of a certain concept and the discourse of the practitioner surrounding that concept, are a window to the mind and they reveal much more than policies. The state of inclusive education, where out of 20,759 children with special needs in Delhi, 11,463 are out of school[8], the perspective of ontology and teachers' discourse confirms that it is a failure. As part of a symposium on disability, a panel discussion on Inclusive Education was held on 29th September 2012 at the Institute of Development Studies (IDSK), Kolkata. The principal of a famous school who proudly proclaimed that they practised inclusion in their teaching/learning, used many objectionable words in her opening remarks. The following is a list of the lexical items and phrases used by her:

> Single words: "help"; "challenge"; "symptoms"; "wheelchair bound"; "suffering";
>
> Phrases/clauses: "They do things like throwing things, etc."; "When they start socializing then they have a problem"; "We help them out"; "Needs help"; "They prefer working alone"; "We select the star child mong them", etc.

A teacher from another school who is involved with inclusive education talked about a child "suffering" from Asperger's, and how "*they* don't easily mingle". She also talked about "praising the star children". Another teacher, who is a theatre person working with "special" children, talked about how the children "suffer" from "acute problems". Furthermore, he was amazed at the "tremendous hearing and smelling ability of blind people". Thus, prejudices and stereotypes are rampant even among the so-called "experts" dealing with "special" children.

So long as *they* have a *problem*, those 11,463 children are destined to remain outside school.

Intervention at the School Level

The failure to approach disability from an epistemological, or at least a rights-based approach, has led to a formal and informal labelling of children in special schools or with "special needs". This in turn has put undue pressure on the small minority of special educators, as a result of which there has been a higher rate of school dropouts in the case of disabled children. Intervention at the school level as far as the education of students with disability is concerned is an essential step, given the extremely low Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of students with disabilities in higher education, even in premiere institutes of the country. One of the major concerns with regard to low enrolment is the lack of efforts made at school level to disseminate information with respect to entitlements and provisions for students with disabilities at college/university level. In addition, early dropouts reduce the number of students with disabilities even further, with the result that very few students end up graduating to higher secondary level.

In 2011, I conducted six workshops with 300 resource teachers or special educators from all the districts and zones of Delhi in order to increase the intake of students at the university

level. The problems and issues that surfaced included travails of disability certification, large numbers of students assigned per teacher, lack of cross-disability training, rigidity of the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) syllabus, attitude of authorities, lack of vocational training, etc. Special educators are most often assigned to different schools to look after students with disabilities, and sometimes they are assigned six or more schools per week, where the number of students handled each week can be more than 300 across various disability categories. This easily leads to over-work and less time devoted per child. Moreover, these teachers were not given cross-disability training during their graduation degree/diploma programme of B.Ed. in Special Education, thereby making them unqualified to handle all categories of disabilities together. In addition, they are often asked to substitute for teachers of other subjects, thus cutting into the workload of an already over-worked staff. All this combined with poor salaries, lack of incentives, inadequate travel allowances and no payments for summer vacation, makes the task of a special educator almost impossible. Exploitation of these teachers by the school principals, makes it even less attractive as a career.

One of the main issues that I believe contributes to the failure of school education of children with disabilities to a large extent, is the manner of training imparted to the special educators. For example, all the B.Ed. Special Education programmes are run as per the syllabus prescribed by the RCI, which is in dire need of revision. For example, the RCI syllabus for B.Ed. Special Education (Hearing Impaired) still practices the ancient method of speech training or "Oralism" as far as teaching Deaf students are concerned. The present RCI syllabus assigns exactly 3.25% of the total time of the course to Sign Language, contra Article 24(3)b of the UNCRPD[9] (on facilitating learning of SL and promoting linguistic identity of the Deaf community). Therefore, a revision of the syllabus from this perspective is urgently required before greater harm is caused.

Conclusion

The task ahead therefore involves the first step of identifying language use in a classroom context and outside that has the power to marginalize disabled students, be they direct terms or indirect metaphoric terms. Based on this, a "linguistic etiquette" can be maintained which can have transformative potentials as far as empowering a marginalized group of students is concerned. However, most significantly, such a step can also bring about alternative text interpretations in class where new knowledge may initiate by centring disability (Bhattacharya, 2014, forthcoming). Finally, training and working conditions of special educators must be revised to enable more inclusive training and better work schedules.

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Barleen Kaur passed away very suddenly at 29. She taught English at Lakshmibai College, University of Delhi and also taught English communication to students with disabilities at the Equal Opportunity Cell. It was from Barleen that I learnt many things about teaching English communication to disabled students, especially about a boy with cerebral palsy, who excelled in her class and was clearly the most organised student in the whole class. Barleen taught us that we do not need special courses or even special ways of teaching English, but rather a new way of looking at what English teaching really means.

Endnotes

[1] The title here refers to the relevant second line of an old English rhyme, the earliest citation of which has been found in an American periodical for mainly black audience, The Christian Recorder, March 1862: 'Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never harm me'. Retrieved from http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/sticks-and-stones-may-break-my-bones.html

[2] The Governor at that time was Margaret Alva, reported in *The Hindu* (Delhi Edition), 4 December 2009, p. 5.

[3] For examples of equivalents in vernacular languages, see Kumar (forthcoming) for an analysis of Hindi proverbs that are ridden with disability-biased expressions.

[4] See Ben-Moshe (2005) for more such interpretations.

[5] See Brignell (2007) for more examples of this sort.

[6] The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995

[7] Part of the data in this section was presented in Bhattacharya (2014).

[8] Figures provided by the Directorate of Education, Delhi in response to an RTI filed by Khagesh Jha; reposted in *Times of India*, 18 October 2013.

[9] United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

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