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Inclusive language: Easier said than done

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Abstract

Inclusive language is 'language free of stereotypes, implicit bias, and negative messages'. The inclusive language movement intends to 'acknowledge diversity, convey respect to all people, be sensitive to differences, and promote equal opportunities'. However, inclusive language is an idea or a value, not a widespread, organised effort to establish a definitive set of terms. Who decides what terms to use? What are the costs and consequences of establishing these terms? To better understand the movement, I looked at it from the perspective of diffusion theory, which seeks to explain how new products, services, and ideas are adopted (diffused) in a social system over time. The theory has identified five characteristics of successful innovations: 1) high relative advantage over alternatives, 2) high compatibility with personal and social norms, 3) low complexity in adoption and use, 4) high 'triability' or the chance to use the innovation before adoption, and 5) high visibility that confirms the choice of adoption. By these characteristics, many inclusive language terms face substantial barriers to widespread voluntary acceptance. These same five characteristics, however, can help inform the movement by identifying which terms are more likely to be accepted. Here, I identify where non-inclusive terms appear in the language and suggest how diffusion theory can be used to assess the likelihood of their adoption.

Keywords:

Audience analysis, cross-cultural communication, diversity, equity, inclusive language, sex and gender issues

Introduction: What is inclusive language?

Words are singularly the most powerful force available to humanity. We can choose to use this force constructively with words of encouragement, or destructively using words of despair. Words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate, and to humble.

Yehuda Berg, American author¹

To start, let me say that I believe everyone deserves respect and to be addressed and referred to as they wish. Changing language can and does change perceptions.²⁻⁶ Exclusive language can and does marginalise and misrepresent individuals and communities, perpetuates negative stereotypes, and offends.² My concern is not with the goals of the movement but with why those goals may or may not be achieved.

Inclusive language is 'language that is free from stereotypes, subtle discrimination, and negative messages'⁶ and that 'acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities'. It 'avoids the use of certain expressions or words that might be considered to exclude particular groups of people'.² However, inclusive language goes beyond merely avoiding exclusion. It also needs to be respectful, accurate, unbiased, and consistent with the preferences of the individuals and communities who are being discussed.²

Inclusive language is primarily concerned with changing how we talk to or about members of several groups. Many groups have been subject to bias for so long that the biases against them are named: sexism, racism, transphobia, homophobia, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, classism, nationalism, antisemitism, elitism, ageism, ableism (bias against people with disabilities), and sizeism (bias against people who are overweight.)

To this list could be added pregnancy and parental status, which are also sources of discrimination in employment, and violent language (including ridicule, putdowns, intimidation, and threats), which is increasingly considered to be inappropriate; for example, 'killing it' to indicate success, 'take your best shot' to indicate best effort, and 'cutthroat competition' to indicate tough competitors. 'My hands are tied', 'I feel like I have a noose around my neck', and 'getting away with murder' may fit into this category as well.⁷

Changing language means convincing enough speakers to use new words over long periods. Usually, these changes are 'from the bottom up' as new words 'catch on' among a community over time. That is, individuals voluntarily begin to use new words because there is some benefit to doing so (e.g., 'webinar', 'binge-watch', 'email'). In contrast, the inclusive language movement is more 'top-down' in that relatively few individuals and organisations have taken the lead in introducing new or replacement terms. The movement relies heavily on organisations to at least support the use of these terms if not to require their use. My purpose here is to consider some of the issues that might speed or slow the widespread adoption of new terms. This process of change is called 'diffusion', a social process of interest to advertisers, marketers, political parties, public health organizations, public relation firms, and organizations working on social change, among others.

Evaluating the Inclusive Language Movement with Diffusion Theory

Diffusion theory is one of the oldest and most-used theories in the social sciences.⁸ Many of its concepts may be familiar but are not always linked to the theory itself, such as 'the adopter groups': the **innovators** who

introduce new ideas; the **early adopters** who are willing to take a chance on implementing these new ideas; the **early majority** who are persuaded or encouraged by the early adopters to accept these new ideas; the **late majority** who tend to wait until the idea is established before they adopt it; and the **laggards** who are unlikely to adopt the innovation under any circumstances. (The pejorative term ‘laggard’ can be replaced with ‘**unlikely adopters**’. [Everett Rogers, personal communication, 1988.] The original term also reflects a pro-innovation bias, or the assumption that everyone should find the product or idea valuable and that they have the resources to adopt it if they choose.)

Of interest here is that the theory identifies 5 characteristics of successful innovations: 1) **high relative advantage** over alternatives, 2) **high compatibility** with personal and social norms, 3) **low complexity** in adoption and use, 4) **high ‘triability’** or the chance to use the innovation before adoption, and

5) **high visibility** that confirms the choice of adoption (Table 1).⁸ In this study, I applied diffusion theory to assess the likely adoption of inclusive terms and suggest how diffusion theory can be used to improve their adoption.

Linguistic Aspects of Inclusive and Exclusive Terms

Bias can be present in several aspects of language.

The Context of the Communication.

Meaning is the product of a message interpreted in a context; ‘spring’ means something different to a watchmaker, a gymnast, a field biologist, and a farmer. Same term, different context, different meaning. So, if a manager who identifies as a man refers to an employee who identifies as a woman as a ‘girl’, it may be seen as condescending and inappropriate, whereas people who identify as women can speak of ‘girl’s night out’ without offense.

Table 1. Diffusion Characteristics of the iPhone and the Vegan Diet, by the Five Characteristics of a Rapidly Diffusing Innovation.⁸

Characteristic	iPhone: An easy adoption	Vegan diet: A difficult adoption
Relative advantage	HIGH: more accessible than landlines, easily carried, many additional features (camera, calculator, internet access), world-wide access for voice and data transmission, no need for a landline	HIGH: much lower rates of chronic diseases, better health, more desirable weight, and longer life expectancy
Compatibility	HIGH: Generally affordable, always available in a pocket or purse, has multiple uses, provides synchronous (phone call) and asynchronous communication (posting on websites)	LOW: health is a value, but giving up favourite foods and changing a diet are challenging to do; harder to eat at restaurants that don’t consider the needs of vegans
Complexity	HIGH or VARIED: basic telephone functions require little-to-no instruction. With familiarity, complexity of other functions is greatly decreased	HIGH: requires considerable study about what can and can’t be eaten and substantial changes in lifestyle, including some social events
Triability	HIGH: buyers can try it without charge and can get a refund on request	ALMOST NONE: the diet must be adopted almost completely and followed for years or decades to be effective
Visibility	HIGH: it instantly provides multiple capabilities; widespread popularity because friends and family are also using them	LOW: early weight loss; health benefits may not appear for years, and the benefits may be what was prevented rather than what was accomplished with improved physical health

Denotative and Connotative Meanings. The denotative meaning of a word is its dictionary definition. The connotative meaning is an informal meaning that may vary by group, by region, or by time. In some parts of the US, the word ‘ignorant’ means ‘lacking knowledge or understanding’. In other parts, it implies that members of a group are uneducated, intellectually limited, and lack social graces.

One principle of inclusive language is to consider the possible connotative meanings of a term before using it. The word ‘homeless’, especially as a collective noun (‘the homeless’), often connotes people with personal failings, untreated medical issues, drug use, and no work ethic. ‘Unhoused’ has no such connotation and can easily include educated, working people who have been priced out of renting or buying a home as real estate prices increase, for example.

However, a major issue with inclusive language—and why some people call it only ‘politically correct speech’—is that many words now have connotations that are more widely accepted and that no longer have their original, denotative, meaning. Do ‘crazy’ or ‘insane’ still mean serious mental illness, or do they now usually mean ‘foolish, intense, or unbelievable?’ Does ‘terrific’ still mean ‘terror-inducing’ or has it evolved to mean ‘something good?’ In contrast, ‘gay’ used to mean carefree, bright, or showy. Now it is a widely accepted term to describe people who identify as one sex who are romantically attracted to people who identify as the same sex.

Explicit and Implicit Biases. ‘Bias’ is an inclination or preference for or against an individual or group that interferes with impartial judgement. Explicit bias refers to conscious insults, attitudes, and stereotypes, usually negative, such as racial, religious, or nationalist slurs (‘Bible-thumper’, ‘rag head’, ‘chink’), slang expressions (‘Indian giver’, ‘I got gipped’, ‘sold down the river’), and prejudicial

terms (‘airhead’, ‘cretin’, ‘jock’; although these examples may be limited to English as spoken in the US.) Implicit biases, which may be favourable or unfavourable, are activated involuntarily and without awareness. Implicit bias is pervasive and, most importantly, often predicts behaviour.

Conspiracy Theories. A conspiracy theory is a story around an event in which (usually) an anonymous group or a secret government agency is falsely believed to be responsible for a traumatic or catastrophic event. The individuals presumed to be responsible may then be subject to discrimination or persecution. ‘Conspiracy theories are the source of the most damaging and most oppressive use of non-inclusive language’ because the threats to those involved can be deadly serious.^{9,10} Groups commonly accused of conspiracies include Zionists, who are believed to run the world; antivaxxers, who believe that government vaccination programs are experiments in social control; and Freemasons, who, among other things, are believed to worship Satan and to control the world’s financial institutions. Anyone thought to be a member of one of these groups can face some degree of discrimination.

Meta-Communication. When we speak or write, our intended or surface message is always accompanied by a ‘meta-message’, or the nonverbal or nontextual information contained in how the communication was delivered, such as tone of voice, gestures, or body language, and spelling, word choice, or sentence structure, for example. The meaning of the surface message depends in large part on the meta-messages that accompany it. In fact, the meta-message can be more important than the surface message. Someone who screams ‘I am *NOT* angry’ is obviously angry; the meta-message (‘I am angry’) is far louder than the surface message. To some groups, the meta-message of the question ‘what are

your preferred pronouns?’ expresses concern for the feelings of others. Another meta-message with the same surface message is that the speaker is disingenuously trying to be ‘politically correct.’

Identity-First and Person-First Language.

Identity-first language emphasizes a characteristic rather than the person. Saying ‘a disabled’ person emphasizes the disability and labels the person. In contrast, ‘person-first’ language emphasizes the person, not the characteristic: ‘a person with a disability.’ Disability is no longer a label; it’s only one aspect of a person’s life¹¹ (Box 1). Person-first language seems to be preferred in most instances. However, identity-first language can also be an expression of cultural pride. For example, many people in the deaf community prefer being described as ‘Deaf’ rather than as ‘people with deafness’ or ‘people who are hard of hearing.’ Thus, one complex issue in choosing inclusive terms is who does the choosing.

Inclusive Terms and the Characteristics of Successful Innovations

1. Relative Advantage of Inclusive Terms Over Alternatives

Assessing the relative advantage of inclusive terms is difficult for many reasons, among them is who gets the advantage. The proponents of the new term? Those to whom the term applies? Those who are asked to use the

term? The advantages are usually subjective (are the speaker and target group unhappy with the existing term and happy with the new term?), situation-specific (in what context is the new term appropriate?), and solution-specific (how well does the new term fit with similar terms or in grammatical expressions?). For example, what is the relative advantage of replacing ‘breastfeeding’ with ‘chestfeeding’ to men who identify as women to whom the term applies? To the medical community? To the general public? The relative advantage of a newer term over an older one also depends on when that assessment is made. Widespread acceptance may require decades (Boxes 1 and 2).^{11,12}

2. Compatibility of Inclusive Terms with Personal and Social Norms

The compatibility of new terms is likely to vary greatly among both speakers and the target group.

Political Correctness and Inclusive

Language. To some authorities, ‘politically correct’ language is about patronizing or not offending someone,¹³ whereas ‘inclusive language’ is focused on honouring people’s identities.¹⁴ The difference is intention—the meta-message—which is in the eye of the beholder. Inclusive language and politically correct speech are two sides of the same coin and depend on one’s perspective.

Determining Acceptable and Objectionable

Terms. Different subgroups may interpret the same terms differently. President Obama

Box 1. Change Takes Time: Rosa’s Law and the Person-First Movement.¹¹

The “person-first” movement began in the US in 1974, at a conference on self-advocacy for people with disabilities. “Person-first” language is increasingly replacing “identity-first” language. The term, “disabled person,” focuses on the disability, not on the person. A “person with disabilities” is someone who happens to have an intellectual impairment. In this case, the disability does not define the person.

Some 36 years later, a mother acted when her daughter, Rosa, a 9-year-old girl with trisomy 13 (Down’s Syndrome), was labelled as “retarded” at school. The mother’s action resulted in the 2010 Rosa’s Law, which mandated replacing “mental retardation” and “mentally retarded” with “having intellectual disabilities” in all relevant federal laws and regulations.

Box 2. Change Takes Time: Getting to Ms.¹²

In 1901, an unnamed writer in *The Sunday Republican* of Springfield, Mass., noted “a void in the English language. Everyone has been put in an embarrassing position by ignorance of the status of some woman. To call a maiden Mrs. is only a shade worse than to insult a matron with the inferior title Miss. Yet it is not always easy to know the facts.” The writer then suggested “Ms.” as a “tactfully ambiguous compromise between Miss and Mrs., so the person concerned can translate it properly according to circumstances.”

Some 60 years later, Sheila Michaels, then 22 years old, saw “Ms” on an envelope addressed to her, which she initially thought was a typo. Repulsed at having her identity defined by marital status, she became a lobbying force for adopting the title, Ms. During a radio interview in 1970, she made an impassioned plea for the use of Ms., and in the same year, on the 50th anniversary of women’s suffrage, “Ms. became recognized as a calling card of the feminist movement.” Not until 1986, however, did *The New York Times* embrace the use of Ms. and admit that the “void in the English language” had been filled.

was widely criticized by political opponents for saying his bowling skills were ‘like the Special Olympics thing.’¹¹ However, my wife, a licensed Mental Health Counsellor whose clients are people with developmental disabilities, said her clients were ecstatic that President Obama knew about their community and had included them in his statement.

For a long time, ‘queer’, which originally meant ‘odd’ or ‘strange’, was a derogatory term for people attracted to people identifying with the same sex. Now, however, parts of the LGBT community have ‘reclaimed’ the word as a way to empower themselves. But one language-assistance program says that ‘... it’s best to avoid using such terms.’¹⁵ In short, getting widespread agreement on terms and definitions can be problematic, as is the willingness of target groups to adopt terms recommended by others.

Acceptability of Replacement Terms and Phrases. Several objectionable words have been proposed to be replaced by phrases, but the examples are almost always presented in isolation. A sentence may be conceptually acceptable but becomes awkward and even irritating when used several times in a text (Box 3). Examples include replacing ‘a hypertensive patient’, with ‘a person with a history

of hypertension’ or substituting ‘non-birthing parent’ for ‘father.’

Ambiguities of Replacement Terms and Phrases. One publication noted that the word ‘competitive’ in a job description favoured people who identify as men over people who identify as women, but the same article did not describe the term ‘soft power’ (as expressed through empathy and support) as being associated more with people who identify as women.¹⁶ Likewise, the term ‘glass ceiling’ refers to the difficulty of upward mobility for people who identify as women in the labour force, but there is no talk about breaking the ‘glass basement’, in which people who identify as women compete with people (most of whom identify as men) for the most dangerous and least-sought-after jobs; in other words, full gender equality. Other ambiguities: Can only people who identify as women ‘give birth to an idea?’ Does the phrase ‘the devil is in the details’ reflect negatively on men? Is it ok to talk of ‘maiden voyages’ or ‘king-sized?’

Blandness and Forced Conformity. The richness of a language is often in its connotations; the images, memories, and emotions it invokes, both pleasant and offensive. By their nature, inclusive terms can reduce this richness by removing distinctions and negative or

Box 3. The Effect of Replacing Single Words with Phrases. Here, “women” and “men” have been replaced with “people who identify as women” and “people who identify as men,” and all instances of “obesity” have been replaced with “chronic appetite dysregulation.” One cost of using inclusive language is the possibility that texts will be substantively longer and more difficult to read. Also, “sex” is a biological term for male or female; “gender” is a psychosocial term for sexual orientation. Because obesity is associated with differences in sex, not in sexual orientation, that passage is misleading at best.

Sex Differences in Obesity	Gender Differences in Chronic Appetite Dysregulation
<p>The prevalence of obesity in men is higher than in women, but the percentage of body fat is higher in women. Also, sex appears to be an important factor in the degree of central (android) and peripheral (gynoid) obesity. In addition, while in most clinical trials, women are still underrepresented, in clinical trials of anti-obesity drugs, women are better represented, but sex-specific analyses are not commonly done.</p> <p>Given that adipose tissue affects the volume distribution of many drugs, sex differences might be expected in the pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics of anti-obesity drugs. However, differences in both characteristics have not yet been investigated in either men or women. Weight loss is similar in both sexes but has different effects: women need to lose more weight and have more related psychological challenges, whereas men have fewer physiological challenges but poorer improvements in comorbidities.</p>	<p>The prevalence of Chronic Appetite Dysregulation in people who identify as men is higher than in people who identify as women, but the percentage of body fat is higher in people who identify as women. Also, gender appears to be an important factor in the degree of central (android) and peripheral (gynoid) Chronic Appetite Dysregulation. In addition, while in most clinical trials, people who identify as women are still underrepresented, in clinical trials of anti-Chronic Appetite Dysregulation drugs, people who identify as women, are better represented, but gender-specific analyses are not commonly done.</p> <p>Given that adipose tissue affects the volume distribution of many drugs, gender differences might be expected in the pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics of anti-Chronic Appetite Dysregulation drugs. However, differences in both characteristics have not yet been investigated in either people who identify as men or people who identify as women. Weight loss is similar in both genders but has different effects: people who identify as women need to lose more weight and have more related psychological challenges, whereas people who identify as men, have fewer physiological challenges but poorer improvements in comorbidities.</p>
<p>144 words Number of sentences: 6 Average sentence length, 23 words</p>	<p>191 words, 47 words (25%) longer Number of sentences: 6 Average sentence length, 31 words, 8 words (26%) longer</p>

unflattering terms. Imagine movies or books that use only inclusionary terms: ‘a formerly incarcerated person’ rather than ‘an ex-con’ or ‘a demanding and self-important woman’, rather than ‘*prima donna*’. Presumably, this richness will be limited to literature because it is neither necessary nor desirable to meet the needs of public and professional communications.

The other possibility is that such administrative mandates to use given words may produce backlash. (Note: ‘backlash’ means ‘recoil between parts of a machine’, not punishment delivered with a whip.)

3. Complexity in Adoption and Use of Inclusive Terms

The complexity of inclusive language depends on how controversial the new terms or phrases might be to various groups, the presence of competing or acceptable alternative terms, the need to use the terms appropriately in a given context, and how deeply the terms are established in personal conversations, public and professional presentations, style guides, and legal documents.

The replacement term itself also has a degree of complexity: replacing ‘policeman’ with ‘police officer’ is not a complex process: both

are nouns, ‘officer’ has long been associated with ‘police’, and the new term is generally acceptable and can easily be substituted for the old. Replacing ‘Black women’ with ‘People who identify as women of the African diaspora’ is more complex, in addition to being much longer and including the word ‘diaspora’, whose meaning is not well known (it means ‘the spread of a people from their original homeland’). These examples are the ends of a continuum. Reducing the complexity of replacement terms should improve their acceptability.

The below and other sources make small distinctions in meaning that can make adoption more complex.

- ‘Capitalize Black, but avoid capitalizing dominant identities such as white’.¹⁷
- ‘People with disabilities express a range of opinions regarding person-first and identity-first language, all communication should reflect this nuance’. What does this advice mean?¹⁸
- ‘Avoid euphemisms, such as ‘special needs’ and ‘physically challenged.’ Preferred terms include ‘disabled person’ (unfortunately, an ‘identity-first’ term), a person or student with a disability’, or ‘a person with a mental illness, deaf person, autistic person.’ However, in the US, ‘a special needs trust’ is a legal term, which complicates its replacement.¹⁸

Historical Factors Affecting Inclusive

Language. In the US, the use of ‘master bedroom’ has recently been criticized because the ‘master’ used to refer to slave masters.¹⁹ Realtors now use ‘primary bedroom’ or ‘owner’s suite’ instead.²⁰ However, most Americans are unaware of this history—the term has a different connotation now—and do not consider it offensive. The complexity comes from wondering whether banning the word is a slippery slope to banning all terms that might be even remotely offensive

to someone, somewhere, at some time. An example is the word ‘picnic’, which has a truly horrific historical racial meaning—except that has never had that meaning and has never been associated with slavery. Too, ending the use of historically charged but now-benign words may not have much effect because they are now accepted as appropriate.

The Number and Complexity of Options.

Inclusive language is an idea or movement, not a definitive set of terms and phrases. As a result, hundreds of organizations have issued their own lists of preferred terms in their fields, and these efforts are not coordinated enough to intentionally (and intelligently) change the language. The result is an overwhelming number of sources, some of which are overwhelmingly long, and hence complex:

- *The Diversity Style Guide* contains more than 700 terms related to race/ethnicity, disability, immigration, sexuality and gender identity, drugs and alcohol, and geography.²¹
- The books, *Say This, Not That: A Guide for Inclusive Language*, and *The Inclusive Language Field Guide: 6 Simple Principles for Avoiding Painful Mistakes and Communicating Respectfully*, are each 250 pages long.
- *Teaching Everyone: An Introduction to Inclusive Education*, is 400 pages long.

Adapting to Changes in Terms. Inclusive language is ever evolving, sometimes rapidly. Choosing the most appropriate term is an ongoing process that requires being attentive to changes in language use among identity communities when some terms become outdated and new terms emerge.²

In the late 1980s, the initialism LGB (for lesbian, gay, and bisexual) was expanded to LGBT (adding transexual), then to LGBTQ (adding queer or questioning), then to LGBTQIAN+ (adding intersex, asexual, non-binary) and +, referring to ‘all of the other gender identities and sexual orientations

that letters and words cannot yet fully describe.’ The current initialism is 11 letters: LGBTTTQQIAA for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirited, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, and ally’, a long, complex, and an unworkable initialism.

Inclusive Language vs. Group-Specific Language. The inclusive language movement wants to include more groups under the same term. ‘If we’re talking about “pregnant people,” that language says to transgender men and nonbinary people that “we see you”²² However, the identity of smaller subgroups can’t be dismissed: ‘Whether or not these groups feel “seen,” replacing “women” and “mothers” with terms like “birth-givers” and “pregnant people” in research risks dehumanizing women and would harm decades of work to improve the visibility of women in the medical literature.’²³ ‘Considerations against gender-neutral language for female-specific health issues include the history of struggle for women’s representation in language, which our feminist foremothers fought hard to win’²⁴

4. ‘Triability’: Using of Inclusive Terms Before Adoption.

Triability depends mostly on the medium of communication. Triability in personal conversations and perhaps in on-line texts is easy—use the new term and see how it is received—but is harder in recorded or broadcast communications, such as publications, audio recordings, television, and legal documents, given the costs to implement the term and to remove or replace other terms.

The ‘Cost-Benefits’ of Change. Humanistic and political implications aside, the cost of changing the language can be high; revising laws, signage, and reference works is not necessarily trivial, even if desirable, and the higher the cost, the lower the triability. Under

what circumstances are these changes cost-effective or affordable?

In 2018, of 228 Australians who identified as transgender or nonbinary, 22 became pregnant, 0.009% of 25 million Australians. Formally replacing ‘pregnant women’ with ‘pregnant people’²⁵ or ‘breast feeding’ with ‘chest feeding’ is difficult for several reasons, one of which is whether the hoped-for benefits justify the time, effort, cost, legislation, social reactions, confusion, and structural accommodations needed to establish the use of the terms.

5. Visibility that Confirms the Choice of Adopting Inclusive Terms

‘A difference, to be a difference, must make a difference.’²⁶ New terms are more likely to be used if speakers believe the terms will be beneficial. How can these benefits be communicated to people to encourage them to use them? Who pays?

Evaluating the Effects of Inclusive Language. Given the costs of promoting new terms, how—and after what period of time—will we know whether inclusive language has made a difference? How and in which groups should inclusive language be measured? What data should be collected and how? Which terms and phrases? Who pays?

Discussion

Promoting Inclusive Language

Actors in the inclusive language movement might profit by considering the five characteristics of successful innovations. They might also consider the three kinds of information—awareness, how-to, and principles information. The innovators or proponents of the inclusive movement are driving the efforts. They are likely to be most effective by targeting early adopter groups with **awareness information**. This targeting is critical because

early adopters are watched by the early majority. One strategy then, is to focus first and most aggressively on the early adopters and wait to address the early and late majorities who are less likely to adopt new terms until they see that certain groups are already using them. Targeting the late majority and unlikely adopters (who are defined by their reluctance to use new terms) too soon may not be as effective as initially focusing on the early adopters and early majority.

How-to information is necessary to educate people about the new terms and how and when they can be used. Currently the inclusive language movement is decentralized and not coordinated, which greatly complicates the process because different groups may support different terms (Table 2).

Finally, **principles information** can be enormously useful in the inclusive language movement. Principles information is the ‘why’ of the new terms. Is it obvious why ‘brown bag’ should be replaced by ‘paper bag’? It’s an easy substitution, but how strong of an argument can be made for this replacement? On the other hand, the argument for recommending non-gendered language is stronger; there is no need to regularly ignore half the population.

Another finding of diffusion theory is the importance of naming the innovation. In inclusive language, the theory suggests that proposed terms and phrases should be tested in focus groups or surveys to see which are most acceptable to a given audience. For example, in a conversation about the phrase, ‘people who identify as men or women’, the comment was ‘why not just call them men or women, which is how they want to be perceived? The qualification that they *identify* as one group or the other implies that they are not really men or women, they just want to be treated as though they were.’ The point here is not the relevance of the comment but the fact that not everyone sees the same terms in the same way.

Limitations of the Study

The biggest limitations of this analysis are the breadth, complexity, and rapidly changing nature of the topic. I am not involved in the inclusive language movement, although I support it and have read widely on the topic, but whether this article adequately addresses the most current and important issues is unknown.

Conclusions

The most successful replacement terms are likely to meet four criteria: they accurately reflect (or eliminate) the concept(s) involved, are acceptable to the target group(s), are acceptable to the group(s) most likely to use them, and are not awkward in context. For example, ‘neurodivergent’ (vs neurotypical, which may be considered complex by the general public) is an adjective, whereas the terms it replaces are nouns, for example autism, dyslexia, and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). However, neurodivergent is also a category, whereas autism, dyslexia, and ADHD are diagnoses.

The easiest inclusive-language changes will be the ‘low-hanging fruit’—common and generally noncontroversial words that are easily replaced by more inclusive terms—like changing from ‘congressman’ to ‘[congressional] representative’, ‘postman’ to ‘mail carrier’, and ‘chairman’ to ‘chair.’ More difficult are terms to be replaced by longer and more complex phrases: changing ‘men’ and ‘women’ to ‘people who identify as men’ and ‘people who identify as women.’ (You may have noticed the awkwardness of these phrases throughout this article; Figure 3). In fact, I suspect that one of the larger barriers to the diffusion of inclusive language is the substitution of phrases for single words. Not only are the substitutions textually awkward, they often include qualifiers or distinctions that increase their complexity.

Ideally, participants in the inclusive language movement will 1) begin to coordinate their

Table 2. Inclusive Terms Proposed to Replace Current Ones.

Current Term	Proposed Replacement	Possible issues with adoption
Patient	Health care consumer	Long and awkward phrase
Poor person	Person with limited financial resources	Long and maybe presumptuous phrase
‘Non-white’	BIPOC (black, indigenous, and other people of colour)	A complex initialism that has to be learned
Pregnant women	Pregnant people	May be seen as unnecessary or criticized as ‘politically correct’
Grandfathered in	Exempted or pre-approved	A good alternative but competes with an established term seldom associated now with its racist origin (relates to slavery)
Minority	Underrepresented community	Longer than perhaps desirable
Blind person ^a	Person with vision impairments	Ok by some groups and not others?
Visually Impaired ^a	Blind or low vision	Ok by some groups and not others?
Obesity	Chronic appetite dysregulation	An awkward or complex phrase
Manpower	Workforce	An easy and probably acceptable substitution
Sexual preference	Sexual orientation	‘Preference’ implies a choice, which can be criticized; ‘orientation’ connotes a self-defined characteristic
Hacker	Computer engineer, developer	May be seen as gendered, but a ‘hacker’ ‘uses computers to gain unauthorized access to data’, a meaning not reflected in the proposed substitutes
AHN	African/Blacks, Hispanic/Latino, and Native Americans/Alaska Natives	Maybe. Initialisms have to be learned, and this one represents a list made complex by the slashes
Trigger-happy	Quick to react	Maybe. Easy substitution with a different connotation
Drawing first blood	Starting a conflict	Maybe. Easy substitution with a different connotation
Blacklist, whitelist	Deny list, trust list, approved list	May be seen as unnecessary or criticized as trivial or ‘politically correct’; when do black and white simply refer to colours and not race?
Cakewalk	A breeze, easy, a walk in the park	Not likely to catch on because 1) few know the origin of the term (relates to slavery) and 2) it no longer has its original meaning
Brown bag	Paper bag	Probably not because few know the original of the term (it was used to determine whether Black citizens were “light enough” to vote)

^aAn example of the nonsystematic implementation of inclusive terms

efforts, 2) survey target groups to determine their preferences, 3) hold focus groups with likely user groups, 4) keep in mind the five characteristics of a successful innovation, and 5) develop terms that people will adopt without feeling that the terms are being imposed.

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