

Exclusion of Persons with Impairment: Role of Language Vocabulary

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to examine the role of language in the lives of persons with impairment and how meanings get attached to words that make it discriminatory against a certain section of the society. The paper questions routinization and normalization of the insulting words used for persons with impairment. The objective of the research was to study the evolutionary change in disability vocabulary and to explore the exclusion of persons with impairment through language. The research highlights various themes such as normalization and acceptance of words like 'cripple', 'freak' and 'abnormal' etc. in our everyday vocabulary, the dichotomy between 'normal' and the 'other/deviant' and differences between the terms handicap, disabled and impairment. It highlights the importance of the social model of disability in creating an inclusive environment. Mixed method approach (sequential explanatory) was chosen for this research. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted and a questionnaire was circulated to record data. The findings revealed that the meanings of these words have not emerged in a vacuum and it is important to then trace their origin and understand the context in which they were used. The participants suggested that the best way to approach a person with impairment is to simply ask what they would be comfortable in while referring to them and that would only help in breaking the rigid segregations that have existed not just in physical spaces but also in our vocabulary, language, culture and mind.

Keywords: Impairment, Disability, Handicap, Inclusive Education, Normative, Segregation, Integration, Inclusion, Stigmas, Stereotypes, Labels, Socialization

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Introduction

Whenever a car bumps into another on a busy road, the first phrase that one gets to hear generally is “Are you blind?” or “Are you deaf”. This phrase that is so loosely used gets unnoticed and is never critically analyzed. What one can observe here is how someone’s impairment is being used to denote another individual’s dumbness or ignorance and this negative connotation attached to various impairments has become “Normalized “or “Routinized”.

An individual’s ideas and thoughts find expression through the powerful tool of words and language. A meaning that gets attached to any word heavily impacts and influences the attitudes formed toward the subjects of discussion. All the words and concepts which are used to describe persons with impairment have their own histories and implications for them, giving validity to the assertion that language is constitutive of social practices and culture. Language possesses the power to transform economic, political and social practices but its power flow spreads out in uneven currents. The way we use our language in everyday lives impact our thinking and how we interact with others in our society. There are various social institutions such as family, school, religion etc. which shape the way in which individuals use language in their daily lives.

This paper throws lights on the various terminologies (including derogatory terms) used for persons with impairment and how the various social institutions play a role in shaping them. It helps us to “de-normalize” various derogatory and insulting terms that are used for persons with impairment. A conscious choice has been made in the paper to use the terminology ‘Impairment’ which refers to the temporary or permanent loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function as per World Health Organization. However, it also important to distinguish it from two terminologies such as ‘Disability’ which refers to functional limitation with regard to special activity and ‘Handicap’ which refers to disadvantage in filling a role in life relative to a peer group.

This topic was chosen out of concern for the increasing normalization and usage of insulting terms for persons with impairment. “Persons with impairment” are not a homogenous category and there are vast differences amongst them as well which results to variation in the use of “derogatory” and “insulting” words against them. This paper will help enhance understanding of the terms ‘Impairment, Handicap and Disability’ and the various negative connotations attached to it with their origins and how they impact the lives of persons with impairment. Hence, the aim of this paper is to examine the role of language in the lives of persons with impairment and how meanings get attached to words that make it discriminatory against a certain section of the society.

Thus, the **research objectives** of the study are:

- To study the evolutionary change in vocabulary used for persons with impairment.
- To explore the inclusion/exclusion of Persons with Impairment through language.
- To understand the role of social institutions and processes in the stigmatization of persons with impairment.

To understand the objectives of the study, the following **research questions** were explored:

- What are the derogatory /insulting terms used to discriminate against persons with impairment?
- How has the vocabulary used for persons with impairment evolved with the changing meanings of various terminologies?
- What role does socialization play in establishing such stigmas and stereotypes in the society?

Impairment, Disability and Handicap

Terminologies used in our society are inscribed in language and culture. It is important to understand how meanings get attached to words and what is the root cause of discriminatory terms used for persons with impairment.

The World Health Organization defines Impairment as any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function. Disability is defined as any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being and Handicap as a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or a disability, that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a role that is normal. Although these definitions have been provided to distinguish between the terminologies, they are still interchangeably used. However, before these definitions gained ground, there were other terminologies and often with derogatory connotations used for addressing persons with impairment.

Historically, words like “infirmity” and “affliction” as well as phenomenon like poverty, ugliness, weakness and sickness have been associated with persons with impairment and continues even till date. Words having supernatural connotations like “monstrosity” or ones like “Deformity” representing a detachment from godliness and entrance into physical and moral ugliness have also been attached to persons with impairment. Since the nineteenth century, discourses on medicines, law and statistics started linking persons with impairment and their lives as firmly connected to words such as “deviance”, “abnormality” and “disorder” (Davis, 1995). Human bodies have always been compared and measured against the idealized standards of what a perfect individual should look and behave like, hence the modern conception of “normalcy” that has been formed and against which Persons with Impairment are measured against has emerged from this ideology (Davis, 1995). It is also important to analyze the origin of the various negative connotations given to terminologies used for persons with impairment. These terminologies do not emerge in a vacuum, they are a result of the beliefs, practices, interactions, values, attitudes and culture of a society and its social structures and institutions.

Language- A Reflection of Social Interaction and Culture

Any kind of linguistic utterance or expression can be understood as the product of the relation between a “linguistic market” and a “linguistic habitus.” The language that an individual uses originate from their accumulated linguistic resources leading to attaching meanings to words that meet the demands of a social field or market that is their audience/listeners (Bourdieu,1991). Hence every linguistic interaction, however

personal or insignificant can be traced to the social structure out of which it emerges and helps to reproduce (Bourdieu, 1991). Language can also be understood as one which represents, manifests, and symbolizes power (Bourdieu, 1991). The choice of words used by both persons with impairment and non-impaired are clearly guided by their social structure and culture (Bourdieu, 1991).

Similar notions on the intersection of culture and language are given by Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski who argues that “language and culture are indivisible; our language is our culture and how we use it reflects on our culture”. Throughout history, culture has played a major role in dismissing and discarding those seen as different from the “normative”.

To get a better understanding of how these negative terminologies used for persons with impairment get accepted by the society, it is essential to examine the concept of performativity of language. Social reality does not emerge in a vacuum, instead gets continuously created through the use of language, gesture, and various kinds of symbolic social sign. A speech act gets its meaning only with reference to the existing and accepted norm, code and contract which gets repeated through its performance/pronouncement (Butler, 1997). By using words with predefined meanings, our reality is thus socially constructed and by citing the conventions and ideologies of the social world around us endlessly, we contribute to the reproduction of that very reality. Speaking can thus be seen as a performative act where we "incorporate" that reality by enacting it with our bodies (Butler, 1997). The hegemony of heteronormative standards maintains their power by our continual repetition of what is considered as the “normative” and “dominant” in the most mundane of daily activities (the way we walk, talk, gesticulate, etc.) (Butler, 1997). Thus, the continuance of the discriminatory words against persons with impairment contributes in the maintenance of the oppressive status quo where the most personal acts are regularly scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies (Butler, 1997).

Bronislaw Malinowski also suggested that “language and culture are indivisible, our language is our culture and how we use it reflects on our culture (G.W Hyatt, 2005). Through history, culture through its norms, rules, law and language has dismissed, discounted, and discarded those seen as different. These labels degrade individuals by focusing on their differences or incapability, rather than on the individuals themselves, they link individuals to stereotypes, and often trump other indicators of identity. Until recently, the prevalent model of disability had been the medical model in which the impaired person is seen as the problem, a social model of disability language is thus seen as one which would bring with its language of equality and inclusion. The social model of disability has also helped in the movement towards building inclusive environment and changing perspectives of the society when looking at persons with impairment.

Defining ‘Inclusion’

A shift was seen from the Medical Model of Disability to a Social Model with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995. The Medical Model emphasized that is the individual who is the problem and it is their “impairment” that is the cause for their exclusion from the society and the negative associations attached with the Persons with Impairment. However, the Social Model recognized that it is the lack of

facilities in the surrounding and infrastructure, insensitive attitudes, culture and values of the society as well as the process of socialization which needs improvement. Society must be aware of their responsibility of creating an inclusive environment.

Figure 1: Medical Model of Disability

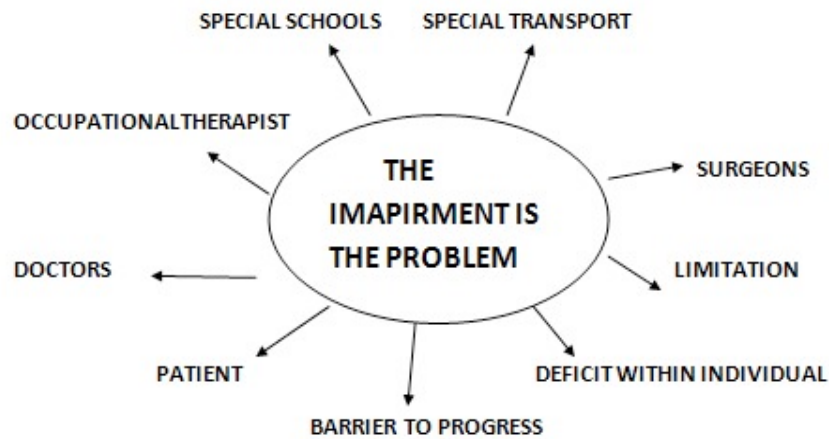
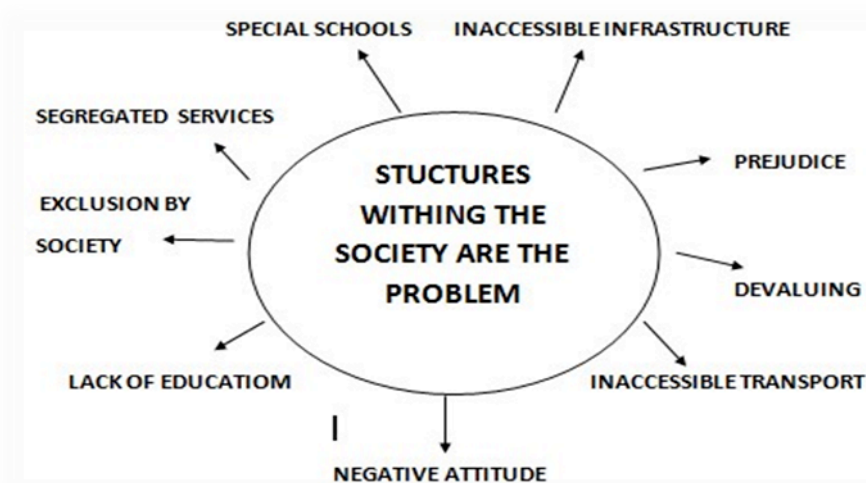


Figure 2: Social Model of Disability



The social model also influenced greatly the schooling system for children with impairment. Before Inclusion, as a movement gained momentum, it was believed that segregated special education supported by the medical model of disability was ideal for children with impairments. As people with impairments showed their dissatisfaction and anger with segregated education, issues of equality of access and educational opportunity gained impetus. Integration soon replaced the Segregation Model however; it was realized that it was also not a complete attempt for attaining full inclusion of all students. However, Inclusive model of education encouraged the society to be aware of their responsibility of creating an inclusive environment in which everyone can live. Starting from making changes in the physical environment, for example ramps for wheelchair users to the need for changing negative attitudes

about Persons with Impairment so that they are not discriminated against, the inclusive model based on social model of disability promoted it all.

In the backdrop of such developments, 'Inclusive Education' as a movement started to gain momentum with the United Nations Salamanca Statement which was signed by 92 member countries and came into existence (1994). The Statement debated that "Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all."

In India, various policies and reports have attempted to define inclusive education. The recent Rights of Persons with Impairment Act, 2016 (RPWD) defined inclusive education as "a system of education wherein students with and without disability learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities".

Even though a universal definition of 'Inclusive Education' has not been established, the ideas of equity and accessibility have been the underlying themes of all interpretations. They all emphasize that children with or without impairments have the same rights to educational opportunities. However, one also needs to observe the barriers of the successful inclusion of children with impairment, one of which is the attitude and language used in the society for them which leads to labels and stigmas. Here, it becomes essential to analyze the role school as a social institution.

An institution such as a school is not just a physical space but can be conceptualized as a shared system of meaning (Skrtic 1991). It plays an important role in the development of students as well as the society, however it can also become a source of exclusion by failing to promote equal participation, access and also by the use of labels and stigmas for children with impairment.

Methodology

To overcome the limitations of a single design, mixed method approach (sequential explanatory) was chosen for this research. The research involved collection and analysis of quantitative data followed by a collection and analysis of qualitative data.

Interview

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were selected to carry out this research study. In choosing the sample of participants the researcher used a convenience sampling method. The researcher chose to interview 20 individuals aged between 20-35 years.

Questionnaire

Questionnaires are a good way to get quick results at a low cost and can produce reliable, quantitative results if the right questions are asked. In choosing the participants of this survey, snowball sampling method was selected. A total of 70 responses were recorded and the age selection was restricted between 20-50.

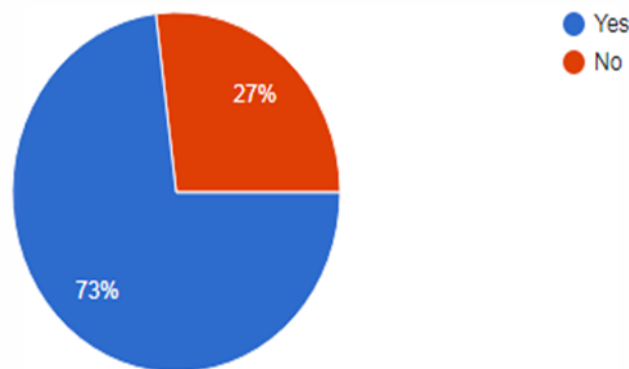
Findings and Analysis

Role of Vocabulary in Enforcing Social Domination

Through the responses to the survey, a list of derogatory names used commonly for Persons with Impairment came out, some of them being Apahij, Autistic Person, Abhanga, Andha, Behera ,Retarded ,Psycho , Divyangjan, Dumb, Mand Buddhi, Crippled, Lame , Dwarf and Apang etc Disability discourse and its intersection with language can then be seen as a vocabulary which is created to maintain certain forms of social domination as Foucault elaborates in his book, Madness and Civilization.

Similarly, terminologies with negative connotations such as “cripple”, “retard”, “spastic”, “handicapped” is one aspect of knowledge that contributes to the social construction of disability and these terms create stigmas around Persons with Impairment which are then seen as acceptable because being labeled as one of these terms’ means being labeled as “Different’ and the “Deviant other”.

Figure 3: Percentage of people considering “feeble” and “dumb” as derogatory



In the figure 3 we observe the responses to the question ‘if people considered words like “feeble”, “weak” and “dumb” as derogatory and insulting, although 46 out of 65 people acknowledged them as derogatory and discriminatory, there were around 17 people who considered these terms as normal and common. Since these terminologies have become extremely normalized in our society and culture, there is no space left to even question their usage which clearly discriminates against a significant section of the population.

These terminologies are not just single words used to address a section of the society but express very strong ideas about what is desirable and undesirable in a particular culture. The words "disabled", "cripple", "spastic", "invalid", "weak" and "abnormal" manage to evoke very intense, very negative images. However, one need to observe the framework within which these words are embedded, the sentences that are formulated and the discourses which inform their use and their possibilities, which bring us to intimate connection that lies between language and power. If one hears the word "disability" for instance, it conjures up a certain kind of image as it mediates between the recipient of the word and the larger discourse within which disability is framed. This discourse includes certain sites like media representation, medical

models, sociological discourse, education syllabus and political programs that contribute in the vocabulary and knowledge creation/dissemination about Persons with Impairment. Therefore, it is essential to understand not only how language functions symbolically, but also how these symbols are tied, through discourse, to systems of power.

All social practices have meanings attached to them and these meanings have the power to shape and influence our conduct and activities, hence all practices can then be seen to be having a discursive aspect. Discourses can then be observed as production of knowledge through language and they cannot be seen as separate from each other as each plays a major role in the operation of the other.

What has been examined is how labels stigmatize but what needs to be paid attention to is how discourses also silence. Discourse have silenced Persons with Impairment in various ways as it rejects personal tragedy narratives and identifies impairment as part of human experience to be valued on its own terms. It leaves them with no language with which to express themselves, it invalidates their narratives and, therefore, their subjective realities, and it renders them invisible. Discourse, in creating the space for subject formation by marking the boundaries of exclusion instead creates a "silent majority" who has no way of telling their stories and articulating their subjecthood or lack of it. In some cases, it also creates a 'culture of silence' which has been discussed by Paulo Freire where a negative, passive and self-image is instilled onto the oppressed such as persons with impairment.

Stigmas and Stereotypes

Stigma as a form of negative stereotyping has a way of neutralizing positive qualities and undermining the identity of stigmatized individuals. This kind of social categorization has also been described by one sociologist as a "discordance with personal attributes". Thus, many stigmatized people are not expected to be intelligent, attractive, or upper class (Coleman 1997: 221 222). This stigmatization becomes more apparent with the usage of certain discriminatory and insulting terms for Persons with Impairment as they propagate the creation of stereotypical identities. In this way key words, such as "cripple", "disabled", "handicapped" are attached to a set of images which, regardless of whether they describe the person in question are assumed to do so because they are associated with persons with impairment in general.

One of the interview participants was quoted as saying *"It is very common for people in my surrounding be it friends, relatives and even neighbors to show sympathy to my parents for my condition and also discouraging them from letting me go to school or pursue higher education, go on vacations and wanting to go out for an event or simply a movie. There have been all kinds of judgments and stereotypes formed around what am I capable of doing and what all should i not even be thinking about doing"*.

Stereotypes become very powerful political tools in their concise and incisive ability to subjectify as it emanates from and contributes to the process of normalization through the construction of binary oppositions. For the norm is also represented by a "stereotypical" image of an active, independent, achievement-oriented worker who is usually male, wealthy, non-disabled and heterosexual. Through this negative

stereotyping, persons with impairment cannot avoid becoming the 'Other' and they become representative of what not to be. Stereotyping, in other words, is part of the maintenance of the social and symbolic order as it sets up a symbolic frontier between the 'normal' and the 'deviant', the 'normal' and the 'pathological,' the 'acceptable' and the 'unacceptable', what 'belongs' and what does not or is 'Other', between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', Us and Them. It facilitates the 'binding' or bonding together of all of those who are 'normal' into one 'imagined community'; and it sends into symbolic exile all of them- 'the Others' who are in some way different or 'beyond the pale' (Hall 1997: 258). These stigmas have an adverse effect on the self-esteem and confidence of Persons with Impairment making it extremely hard for them to come out of it. The experience of persons with impairment is thus far more often of exclusion and, segregation and prejudice than it is of integration and welcome.

What Role Does Socialization Play?

Socialization is the process and the result of the inclusion of an individual in social relations [Nikitin, 1998]. However, socialization is a multidirectional process. Socialization takes place both as the process of integration of an individual in the social system (T. Parsons, R. Merton), and as a self-actualization process of "self-identity", self-actualization of one's potentialities and abilities as the process of overcoming the environmental influences that hinder self-development and self-assertion of a concrete personality (A. Maslow, C. Rogers).

In one of the interviews, a participant narrated how during her school education there was always a gap and awkwardness that existed between the other students and her as they were uncomfortable in approaching her. She explained how students around her had been brought up in able-bodied ghettos and if one sees a body that varies from one's own notion of the "normal body" then it is considered as "abnormal" and "pathological".

Language then becomes a double-edged sword as it can play a role of both easing out the process of socialization for both Persons with Impairment and the rest of the population or make it even more difficult by not being able to use the right and appropriate kind of words to address Persons with Impairment. Since majority of the individuals haven't been socialized in being comfortable with Persons with Impairment around them, they tend to make a lot of assumptions like Persons with Impairment cannot speak for themselves.

Is Formation of New Vocabulary the Solution?

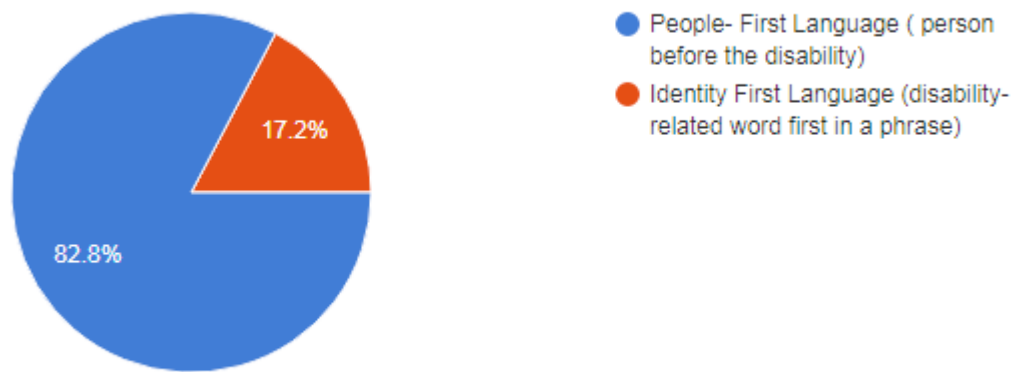
While interviewing, one of the participants showed discontent with the new terminology for Persons with Impairment - "Divyang" (bodies are possessed by divine power or divya shakti). She was quoted as saying "*Mere change of terminology is not going to bring about any change in the manner in which people with disabilities are treated. Invoking divinity will in no way lessen the stigma and discrimination that Persons with Impairment have been historically subjected to and continue to encounter in their daily lives. Disability is not a divine gift. And the use of phrases like 'divyang' in no way ensures de-stigmatization or an end to discrimination on grounds of disability*". What one examines is how exclusion and

marginalization cannot be addressed by using patronizing terms like 'divyang'. On the contrary, they will only invoke sympathy and underline that charity is what counts.

While closely examining the new terminologies used for Persons with Impairment, it has proven to be largely ineffectual as a strategy for resistance as it sometimes actually serves to mask some of the more deeply oppressive realities that frame disabled people's lives (Marks, 1999). The adoption of terms such as "special needs" for the resources required by Persons with Impairment to function independently, and "self-advocate" for people who have intellectual impairments can conceal the very real problems faced by Persons with Impairment by suggesting that they are enjoying equity in society. But, whether politically correct language derives from well-meaning attempts to reverse discrimination or from those who wish to conceal oppressive ideologies, the important thing to recognize here is that an elementary semiotic approach is doomed to failure because the introduction of simple labels on their own cannot dismantle deeply rooted discrimination. What is also wrong with many of the new words which have been developed to describe Persons with Impairment is that they have not been chosen by Persons with Impairment themselves and are not seen by them to reflect their identities or political desires. Words such as "physically challenged," "able disabled," "handicapped", "special people/children," "differently abled," and "people with differing abilities" are all attempts to raise the status of Persons with Impairment by providing more positive sounding labels but they have been rejected by Persons with Impairment as undesirable.

All of these adjectives used as abstract nouns contribute to the process of stigmatization by reinforcing the tendency to "see" Persons with Impairment only in terms of those disabilities. These labels rivet attention on what is usually the most visible or apparent characteristic of the person. They obscure all other characteristics behind that one and swallow up the social identity of the individual within that restrictive category (Dajani, 2001: 198 199). They are rarely used by activists who are impaired and scholars. Although they may be considered well-meaning attempts to inflate the value of people with disabilities, they convey the boosterism and do-gooder mentality endemic to the paternalistic agencies that control many disabled people's lives' (Linton, 1998:14). These euphemisms have the effect of depoliticizing our own terminology and devaluing our own view of ourselves as Persons with Impairment (Gilson, Tusler and Gill, 1997). These attempts of formulating new terminologies have been seen as rehabilitation moves or efforts but they have not been very successful because they place responsibility for change on the individual when the problem is in fact a social one. What needs to be questioned then are the words and phrases which are used to describe persons with impairment, to unearth the concepts which inform the meaning that they carry and to reshape and restructure the culture and orientation of social institutions such as schools, family, workspaces to become more inclusive.

Figure 4: Preference on People First or Identity First Language.



In figure 4 we examine that in the survey, 82.8% of the participants preferred People-First Language while addressing Persons with Impairment while there were 17.2% of the participants who advocated for Identity First Language. Whereas interviews with Persons with Impairment gave mixed responses as some preferred People-First Language and others preferred Identity First Language. Those who advocated the former believed that this is one such category of terminologies that can foster positive attitudes about Persons with Impairment and lead to major improvements in communicating with and about people with impairment. People-First Language emphasizes the person, not the impairment. By placing the person first, the impairment is no longer the primary, defining characteristic of an individual, but one of several aspects of the whole person. People-First Language is an objective way of acknowledging, communicating, and reporting on impairments. It eliminates generalizations and stereotypes, by focusing on the person rather than the impairment.

Conclusion

The findings of the research are relevant to the wider study of the role of language in exclusion and inclusion of Persons with Impairment and its implication on them. The research examines the evolution of terms to contextualize how the negative connotations were attached to them. The formation and culmination of such negative meanings and connotations of terminologies used for Persons with Impairment are then found in the society, within its culture and the process of socialization and conditioning of individuals. Because most individuals are brought up in “able-bodied” ghettos, the bodies that do not confirm to their version of the “normal” are labeled as “different” and “abnormal”. The use of such words is not just discriminatory but also have stigmas and stereotypes attached to them that highly affect the lives of Persons with Impairment as it makes them feel that they are not a part of the society and lowers their self-esteem and confidence. The meanings of these words have not emerged in a vacuum and it is important to then trace their origin and understand the context in which they were used. Only when one identifies the origin of such words can one refute its usage in the present context. Individuals might not even know where and for what did a terminology emerge but increasingly use the actual conditions of Persons with Impairment as derogatory terms or to define “abnormality” or “defect” in any kind of situation. Starting from bickering on the roads, scholarly

literatures to even school curriculum and textbooks, the various conditions that Persons with Impairment have has been used to define the “restrictive” and “limiting” aspects of the society, not acknowledging the role that it is not the individual but the society that makes Persons with Impairment’ activities restrictive and limited. It is the lack of infrastructure, lack of sensitivity and awareness on how to appropriately address Persons with Impairment, social conditioning to not accept anything that deviates from our ideals of “normative” and then forming prejudices and excluding them from being part of the society is what makes them the “others”.

The question that then emerges from all these findings and analysis is what is then the appropriate way to address Persons with Impairment? What vocabulary is the most suitable? While there is no fixed universal answer to this, however the society and its structures must start becoming more inclusive in their approach. The participants of the research suggested that the best approach is to approach a person with disability and simply ask what they would be comfortable in while referring to them and that would only help in breaking the rigid segregations that have existed not just in physical spaces but also in our vocabulary, language, culture and mind.

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