



ALPHA



White Paper

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# The Language of Diversity

The language of diversity is evolving constantly, as human beings become more adept at recognising the damaging power of words, and its effects on different groups of people, throughout history. Diversity is becoming a more rapidly learnt language as we become more 'woke'.

Slowly we are learning that language should be affirming, though without being unnecessarily sugarcoated, and should never knowingly assert guilt, blame or - maybe surprisingly to some - pity, as this is a patronising and negative emotion, and should not be confused with sympathy.

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We can travel back through every century, every decade even, to find instances of how language has been used as a tool of oppression, to forcefully yet slyly establish and perpetuate the rhetoric of certain groups, in order to subjugate other groups for the purpose of gaining political and economic power.

Throughout the last five centuries, Europeans travelled the world to build their empire. They literally conquered foreign lands through violence and oppression, holding their so-called advanced civilisation over indigenous people as a means to control them, to steal their wealth, their land, and their human dignity.

Language, all language, is peppered with instances of exploitative, harmful and negative terms and words aimed at demeaning groups of people, races, sexes, economics groups, cultural and political groups. Some terms seem so innocent, even complimentary. Take the use of the word 'girl' in English. A girl is a female child who has not reached adulthood, or even puberty.

The word 'girl' is often used to refer to women of all ages. It is even the case that some women find being labelled a 'girl' more complimentary than being called a 'woman', as it implies youth. Stigma and discrimination work on two levels here, through sexism and ageism. The only positive it affords is to the person applying the label, most especially if it is a man, as it reinforces that person's dominance in a hierarchical sense.

Many people in the world are striving for equality in all aspects of life. While laws are updated and changed, work practices improved and made fairer, and education made more widely available, language sometimes lags behind, weighed down by cultural, historical, economic and political associations that are sometimes very hard to dig out. Much of this language can be due to habitual use and thoughtlessness, allowing it to slip through, excused or unnoticed, again and again.

In "The Evolving Language of Diversity", Kathy Castania provides some insights into how words can shape our thoughts and convey beliefs about certain groups of people. Her aim is to help us contextualise the evolution of language around diversity, by weeding out harmful terms and discovering language that is fairer and more representative to a greater number of peoples.

Humanity still has a long way to go in addressing and improving its behaviour towards and treatment of numerous sections of society. It can be hard and will be a long time yet for all the injurious terms to be excised, throughout all levels of life, from the professional to the personal. In the meantime, we can all do our 'bit', by following that old adage, and choosing to think before we speak.

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