

POLITICS AND LANGUAGE: THE NEED FOR A NEW UNDERSTANDING

Mike Oliver 1989

So the issue of the language of disability has resurfaced again in a recent edition of *Worldview*. In reading the comments by Acton and Mitchell, I find it difficult to decide whether they are being deliberately obtuse, or simply don't understand what the issues really are.

The both argue that the prime function of language is communication and that language develops through consensus. Well, it is certainly true that a function of language is communication but language is also about power, domination and control. Hence language emerges through the ability of some groups in society to impose meaning on others, and is a product of domination rather than consensus.

The imposition of colonial languages on the natives, Oxford English on the regions, sexist language on women, racist language on black people, spoken language on deaf people and so on, are all forms of cultural domination. Pidgin, dialects, slang, anti-sexist and anti-racist language and sign language are not, therefore, quaint and archaic forms of language use but forms of cultural resistance. In short language is as much about politics as it is about semantics.

What has all this got to do with the language of disability? Well, to start with, the development of ICIDH is not an attempt to improve communication through consensus but an attempt to classify, categorize, treat and control disabled people. Thus the resistance of disabled people to his schema over the last ten years is not simply a failure to agree on the precise meaning of terminology, but more fundamentally, a refusal to accept that medical and other professionals have the right to decide what terminology will be used.

As to Acton's hopes that ICIDH would be a step in the right direction, and his, and Mitchell's, claims that it is a useful tool in enhancing international understanding, the question can only be, for whom? For medical and other professionals whose positions of power remain unchallenged and who get careers, money, prestige and free international trips to talk about what disabled people should be called. Disabled people, unfortunately, have not benefited on iota in terms of material provision nor enhanced understanding of their social situations.

Able-bodied people should understand that as disabled people continue to empower themselves in all areas and aspects of their lives, their resistance to linguistic domination will continue to grow. It doesn't matter if some of their more laughable attempts to confront the politics of language use, as discussed in Anne Rae's article, are deliberately placed alongside what appear to be more sensible discussions, for ultimately, we, disabled people will decide what we want to be called; whether we want to change the meaning of existing or create a whole new terminology.

The solution to these terminological disputes is not, as Acton suggests, the coining of new terms, but the recognition of the right of disabled to determine their own terminology and the provision of proper funding and resourcing to organisations controlled and run by disabled people, to enable them to secure agreement on this fundamental issue.

If Acton is not being entirely disingenuous in his suggestion that a sufficient grant to prepare and publish a new schema is the only solution, then we, disabled people should be in control of that grant. All we will need is the equivalent resourcing to that which WHO, Rehabilitation International and all the various national governments have spent in the past twenty years, on funding medical and other professionals to decide what we should be called.

Oh, and it won't take us twenty years to get the job done because we won't waste time on pursuing careers, building empires and going on social junkets of one kind or another. Nor, more importantly, will we encounter the formidable cultural resistance of disabled people. We'll get the job done in ten years, and only then can communication begin and consensus be established.

Mike Oliver, Reader in Disability Studies, Thames Polytechnic
8 August 1989