

BLINDNESS AND THE PROBLEMS OF TERMINOLOGY

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Discussion about the terminology of blindness has remained lively for decades, as is evident in the work of psychologist Donald Kirtley (1975) and former National Federation of the Blind (NFB) president Kenneth Jernigan (1993). At the heart of this debate is the inherently problematic nature of the word blind, which the article will illustrate in order that an alternative might be considered.

The NFB has argued against usage of person-first phrases such as *people who are blind*, saying that while harmless in occasional and ordinary speech they are totally unacceptable as a form of political correctness (Jernigan, 1993). In fact, the aim of

the linguistic response to social prejudice is not to emphasise, but rather to reflect that the subject is primarily a person, that her or his blindness is nothing more than a characteristic.

Nevertheless, for the NFB the euphemism concerning persons who are blind is overly defensive, since it implies shame instead of equality, and portrays the blind as touchy and belligerent. In short, the message is that since blindness is not a shameful characteristic, a blind person needs to be called a person who is blind no more than, say, an intelligent person needs to be referred to as a person who is intelligent.

The NFB argues that it is a strained and ludicrous endeavour to avoid such straightforward, respectable words as *blindness, blind, the blind, blind person, or blind persons* (Jernigan, 1993). However, the briefest analysis of any dictionary definition will reveal the word *blind* to be neither straightforward nor respectable.

To deal with the notion of straightforwardness, attention might be paid to the fact that *The Encarta World English*

Dictionary (1999) provides thirteen entries for the adjective *blind*, only one of which pertains to the medical condition. With allusion to the ancient Samson myth, another definition explains blind rage and blind fear as something that is so extreme and uncontrollable as to make somebody behave irrationally. Another entry, though botanical in its usage, alludes to the slightly less ancient myth of Oedipus on which the psychoanalytic synonymity between blindness and castration is predicated. Apparently, the adjective *blind* is sometimes employed to describe a plant in which growth stops because the growing point is damaged. It is perhaps most notable that the ten definitions that remain are split between ignorance and concealment. Pertaining to ignorance, an individual is rendered blind to the consequence of her or his actions if unwilling or unable to understand something; to be in a blind stupor is to be lacking awareness; blind prejudice is a total and unquestioning attitude that is not based on fact; a blind taste test is done without looking; and a blind presentation is done without preparation or relevant information. Pertaining to

concealment, a blind corner does not give a clear view and is possibly dangerous; a blind stitch is hidden from sight on the underside of a fabric; a blind wall is without doors or windows; a blind experiment is one in which data is withheld in order to obtain an unprejudiced result; and a blind tunnel is closed off at one end.

As well as illustrating that the word *blind* is far from being straightforward, the list of definitions provides basis for an argument against the notion of respectability. This is not, after all, a quality that is usually evoked by citations of fear, rage, concealment, ignorance and castration. Not only because of the numerous pejorative connotations, the adjective *blind* is problematic due to its derivation from the same Indo-European expression as *blunder*, the underlying idea of which, according to *The Encarta World English Dictionary*, is of someone wandering around in darkness. It is 'clear', as Kirtley says, 'that the anti-blind prejudices of society are built into our very language' (1975, p.41).

When the word *blind* is used as a noun and combined with the definite article, the denotation is of a homogenous group. Individuality is displaced in favour of a jaded, representational construct of "the blind". The same is true of (1) *the sightless* and (2) *the visually impaired*, which are erroneous with or without the definite article. Firstly, to be sightless is to be without sight, but, as Georgina Kleege (1999) points out, 'only about 10 percent of the legally blind' have a 'complete absence of any visual experience' (p.14). Secondly, if vision is to be impaired, is it not the case that at some point it must have been intact? This claim cannot be made of individuals who are sightless from birth.

One suggestion is that with no implication of homogeneity the term *persons with a visual inhibition* can be applied to sightless, visually impaired and partially sighted individuals alike. Any such term would not be accepted easily into colloquial speech, since ancient constructs of "the blind" provide considerable comfort for numerous individuals who still feel the need to endorse stereotypes and other forms of social prejudice.

Even when the prejudicial position is discarded, two sides of the issue remain. There is an empowering argument for the appropriation of terminology that is inaccurate but commonplace, while coinage of a new term would enable visually inhibited individuals to relinquish the age-old burden of misrepresentation. Before declaring the latter position preferable, consideration should be given to Kirtley's point that new terminology is 'not likely to be effective unless such attitudes have already improved, for without this change, the older, prejudicial meanings would simply become reattached to the liberalized vocabulary' (1975, p.41). This is true, but so too is the unlikelihood that attitudes will improve through the use of terminology to which prejudicial meanings are inherent.

References

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