Fixing Language: ‘People-First’ Language, Taxonomical Prescriptivism, and the Linguistic Location of Disability

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Introduction: ‘What do we call ‘em?’

CHANGING PACEs, an Ontario-based organization that provides accessibility training in order to help businesses and organizations adhere to 2005’s Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, advertises its banner program entitled ‘People First’ with a logo that gives symbolic coherence to its mission. The words ‘PEOPLE FIRST’ hover over two figures – on the right, a standing stick person, leaning forward to extend his or her hand in an apparent gesture of compassion, and on the left, the recipient of that gesture, a second stick figure in a wheelchair, reaching up to meet the other person’s hand. In the space where these two figures meet is a small yellow circle, coloured to match the font above them. This gesture, which physically brings the person in the wheelchair up to meet the figure on the right, whose extension of courtesy is literalized in the movement downward to the seated companion, becomes the site of a profound interpersonal exchange. True to the organization’s purpose, though, the focus is on the benevolent gesture that grants the person in the wheelchair a form of subjectivity beyond disability. The suggestion behind both this image and the organization’s title is that in spite of the apparent mutuality of this encounter – signaled by each party stretching its body to its physical limits for the sake of accommodating the other – it is the person in the wheelchair who is the beneficiary of the exchange. According to the visual logic of this logo, he or she is treated as a person first by a coworker who recognizes a fundamental humanity beyond the wheelchair.

Innocuous as this utopian sentiment of recognizing a disabled individual as a ‘person first’ might seem, it is part of a pervasive North American effort in both the government and private sector to reconceptualise disability. In an article entitled ‘What Do We Call ‘Em?’ a survey of the rhetoric of disability following the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, activist Tony K. Boatright claims that the growing prescriptive force of ‘people-first language’ (Boatright 2010, 54) in the wake of this momentous policy shift constitutes more than a mere sop to political correctness. The separation of an individual from his or her impairment implied by the increasingly accepted term ‘people with disabilities’ and by related terms like ‘wheelchair user’ marks for Boatright a turn from a totalizing language that labels an individual essentially
‘disabled’ to a descriptive terminology that depicts physical impairments as being detachable from the people who are said to possess them (Boatright 2010, 54). If disability in this prior incarnation is thus an ontological status, a mark that defines a subject entirely, the people-first formulation suggests that it is instead something far more incidental and by extension curable. In this competing model, to return to the evocative logo with which I opened, the stick figure in the wheelchair is not diminished by the downward flow of generosity so much as he or she is recognized in the process as someone who is capable of reaching upward and beyond his or her impairment.

Widespread as the people-first formulation has been, however, it has come under intense scrutiny within the burgeoning field of disability studies. While for Boatright this turn from premodified nouns (disabled people) to postmodified nouns (people with disabilities) reads as a progressive move to recognize the plurality of experiences within disability (Boatright 2010, 55), for Tanya Titchkosky it marks the depoliticization of disability. Although people-first language accounts for diversity among impairments, she admits – distinguishing between a wheelchair user and someone with visual impairments, for example – according to Titchkosky, ‘the version of diversity that disability is said to represent is...uniform in character’ (Titchkosky 2001, 132). Its emphasis on physiological impairments alienates individuals from a political understanding of disability, which would instead recognize ‘the actual political and social context within which disability is made manifest, and the actual work that a disabled person must do in order to negotiate a place in the world’ (Titchkosky 2001, 133). In other words, locating disability in this way is not just a utopian gesture; it also divests the disabled from seeing themselves within larger contexts, and considering how their experiences of disability are politically mediated rather than determined only by their impairments.

This paper explores this range of perspectives on people-first language, considering how the taxonomical prescriptivism Boatright and Titchkosky address in policy since the early 1990s locates disability as a detachable part of an individual and, for that reason, allocates responsibility for its attendant problems to the individual him or herself. I attend both to Boatright’s championing of this linguistic turn for its recognition of personhood outside of (or in the transcendence of) impairment and to Titchkosky’s charge that it restricts the conceptual domain of disability to physical impairment. Moreover, I examine how people-first language is both the product of prescriptive policy documents as well as a contributing factor in future policy – determining, for instance, whether disability initiatives are intended to focus on physical rehabilitation or improved accessibility. Lastly, I turn to recent work in sociolinguistics on political correctness and people-first language, positioning it against various approaches to the ethical valence of such linguistic modifications, and their potential to remake social realities. My purpose in tracing the status of people-first language in this multitude of discursive venues is to consider the extent to which it determines how disability is conceptualized and consequently realized in more practical settings. My contention, to that end, is that whether the wheelchair-using stick figure in the aforementioned logo is seen as a person in spite of his or her disability or as fundamentally disabled is largely a function of the linguistic location of disability, and the political discourses that location opens up.
The ADA: from object to person

The push for people-first language in documents ranging from social policy to psychological and educational literature stems largely from the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. As Sharon Snyder, Brenda Jo Bruegemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson observe, this landmark legislation sought to mandate civil rights for people with disabilities while defining disability as encompassing ‘physical, sensory, and mental impairments’ (Snyder, Bruegemann, and Thomson 2004, 1). The result, they claim, was the protection of civil rights for those who identified (or were identified) as possessing such disabilities. An unfortunate consequence of this emphasis on impairment, however, was the resultant attribution of stigma to individuals who were then forced, in order to secure legal protection, to identify themselves by their ‘acquired bodily variations’ (Snyder, Bruegemann, and Thomson, 2).

This critical drawback aside, in terms of the scope of its protections against discrimination, the ADA has been likened to civil rights legislation by disability scholars like Susan Schweik. Schweik approaches the ADA in her work on the Ugly Laws or ‘Unsightly Beggar Ordinances,’ which, from 1867 to the mid-1970s, sought to bar from public view in the United States anyone who was ‘diseased, maimed, mutilated or deformed in any way, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object’ (Schweik 2007, 60). For Schweik, the ADA is an ethical intervention into precisely this conception of disability as a bodily difference that renders a person an objectionable object. It is an attempt to argue for the humanity of this constituency group by treating impairment as a secondary rather than a quintessential feature of individuals – something they possess without necessary being (Schweik 2007, 61).

This emphasis on the basic humanity of the disabled, and its resultant de-emphasis on their status as unsightly objects, recurs throughout the language of the ADA, and is marked by the repetition of words like ‘person’ and ‘individual’. In the fifth and most substantial point of the ‘Findings and Purpose’ section that opens the Act, for instance, Congress finds that

Individuals with disabilities are a discrete and insular minority who have been faced with restrictions and limitations, subjected to a history of purposeful unequal treatment, and relegated to a position of political powerlessness in our society, based on characteristics that are beyond the control of such individuals and resulting from stereotypic assumptions not truly indicative of the individual ability of such individuals to participate in, and contribute to, society.

What the people-first project as formulated in the ADA proposes, then, is that impairments have been overstated in prior legal approaches to disability. Beneath every unsightly diseased, maimed, or mutilated body, to return to the language of the Ugly Laws, there lies an integral individual who can both participate in and contribute to society – a self-determining liberal subject in the making, however masked he or she might presently be. As Titchkosky puts it, people-first language makes the claim that people with disabilities can be restored to normalcy if only one emphasizes, ‘over and over again, that disabled people are indeed ‘people’” (Titchkosky 2001, 132), with each repetition ostensibly granting them further presence as individuals.
Locating disability

It is this attempt to redefine disability as simultaneously an impairment of a part, rather than the whole, of one’s body and as a detachable component of one’s more fundamental personhood that I want to explore in this section. I am particularly interested here in Titchkosky’s claim that such policy documents discursively produce as ‘people with disabilities’ individuals who possess easily legible impairments, typically to determine their eligibility for financial assistance from either government-based or non-profit organizations (Titchkosky 2001, 127). Titchkosky is implicitly drawing here upon Michel Foucault’s theories of governmentality – specifically the notion that the creation of new subject positions is both a representational boon and a subjection to increasing governmental control (Foucault 1978, 90). In other words, to be recognized as a person with a disability is at once economically beneficial, insofar as it renders one eligible for financial support, and restrictive, in the sense that one’s experience of disability must be aligned with the existing category, regardless of whether one personally identifies with it, in order to be recognized as such.

This emphasis on the legibility of people with disabilities to external bodies suggests that there are affinities between people-first language and what sociologists Marcia H. Rioux and Fraser Valentine term the medical model of disability, which conceptualizes it as a pathological condition recognizable by an individual’s physical incapacity in relation to an able-bodied norm (Rioux and Valentine 2006, 51). The medical model, Michael Davidson summarizes, ‘locates impairment in the individual as someone who lacks the full complement of physical and cognitive elements of true personhood and who must be cured or rehabilitated’ (Davidson 2006, 119). Disability studies work since the 1990s, he goes on to explain, seeks to mitigate the damaging potential of this historically dominant definition by championing an alternative in what it calls the social model, which ‘locates disability not in the individual’s impairment but in the environment – in social attitudes, institutional struggles, and physical or communicational barriers that prevent full participation as citizen subject’ (Davidson 2006, 119). According to the social model, then, disability is constituted through a person’s charged encounter with external barriers both literal and symbolic – a definition that runs sharply counter to that of people-first language, which instead sees disability as a physical feature that one might possess.

In recent years, disability studies scholars like Simi Linton have attempted to reposition disability at the interstice of such systemic barriers and physical impairments, in work that has inevitably called for a critical revision of this formerly progressive, now seemingly outmoded language. In her book Claiming Disability, Linton traces the terminological shifts regarding disability since the 1970s not just in social policy but also within the burgeoning field of disability studies itself. She notes that in the mid-1970s, disability rights activists pushed for ‘people with disabilities’ to replace ‘disabled’ or ‘handicapped’ to maintain disability ‘as a characteristic of the individual’ (Linton 1998, 11) as opposed to the ‘defining variable’ – a move well in line with both Boatright’s defense and the Changing Paces logo. But in the 1990s, Linton notes, this usage shifted again, so that ‘disabled people’ was increasingly seen as more appropriate by both activists and scholars, curiously around the same time of this policy shift to
 prescribe people-first language as correct. The rationale this time, she notes, was to recognize the term disabled as a ‘marker of the identity that the individual and group wish to highlight’ (Linton 1998, 13) – an identity that extends well beyond impairment and into the complex social experience disability entails.

What interests me here is this disjunction between policy that describes disability as a secondary characteristic of an individual’s body, and disability studies work that, since roughly this same period, relocates disability outside of the body, or finds it at the intersection of physical impairment and external forces as varied as social inequality and poor urban planning. Nonetheless, in each of these terminological phases, people-first language participates in the attempt to locate disability, either to pathologize it or to situate it within a broader social context – to effectively render as pathological inaccessible environments. Its waxing and waning popularity within disability studies, moreover, suggests that it is fundamentally imbricated with these discussions about whether disability is a medical and thus individually isolatable concern or a social phenomenon requiring significant policy intervention.

**Political correctness, euphemism, and rhetorical reality-making**

Although people-first language is clearly at the forefront of some of the defining arguments of disability studies, the extent to which its use is attributable to either of these ideological definitions of disability has been put in doubt by sociolinguist Helena Halmari’s recent study of the distribution of both premodified and postmodified nouns over 5 years in the electronic archives of the Houston Chronicle. In turning to Halmari’s work, I want to open my discussion to consider how, in addition to its status as either a progressive or regressive political statement, people-first language might additionally operate as what Keith Allan calls a ‘neutral locution’ (Allan 2001, 153) – a politically correct euphemism for terms now seen as discriminatory and harmful. I want to consider the extent to which the shift in its favour might, as Halmari proposes, be read variously as an accommodation to changing societal attitudes and as a reflection of ‘the chain reaction caused by the process of euphemism’ (Halmari 2011, 829).

Of particular note for this discussion of the ways in which people-first language reflects the broader terminological anxieties occurring within disability studies and emerges as a corrective force is Halmari’s insistence that the political impact of this usage has been overstated. In this discussion, she considers the prevalence of euphemism in policy and educational literature – for instance, President George W. Bush’s Executive Order in 2003 to rename the President’s Committee on Mental Retardation to The President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities, or, on the state level, the shift from Maine’s Mental Retardation Services to services for Adults with Cognitive and Physical Disabilities (Halmari 2011, 829). The ease with which this chain reaction of renaming came about, she proposes, shows that it is a mere euphemistic substitution rather than a fundamental attitudinal shift reflected in language (Halmari 2011, 830). As she points out, in time, such circumlocutions are typically associated with the very features of the referents they were designed to obscure, which results in further semantic change; euphemisms, after all, tend to become associated with the very term they once elided if they are only repeated enough times. The people-first proposal,
she claims, ignores this linguistic reality, coming from a naïve – and, she implies, outmoded – notion that ‘if we can fix the language, we can fix the world’ (Halmari 2001, 830). Halmari is referring here to linguist Benjamin Whorf’s conception of linguistic relativity, the principle that differences in the way languages encode cultural categories affect the way people think.

The people-first language project is thus grounded in an ethical impulse, which presupposes that language is inherently political, and can serve as both a weapon and a corrective force. This focus on language as the conceptual ground for both culture and cognition recalls rhetorician Kenneth Burke’s claim that the ‘terministic screens’ (Burke 1965, 3) through which concepts are articulated produce socio-political realities of their own. Wayne Booth’s contention that rhetoric ‘makes a vast part of our realities’ (Booth 2004, 12) – that when words remake one’s understanding of a situation, they also remake those who ‘accept the new realities’ (Booth 2004, 17) – is similarly instructive in its attention to how such linguistic formulations are often packaged with a utopian vision of reality that an audience must choose either to reject or to accept and subsequently integrate within their own worldview. What is at stake in the relative success of the project, according to this rationale, is the advancement of a rhetorical worldview and the location it prescribes for disability.

Halmari, though, is sceptical of this reading, and is critical not only of the presumption that mediated language can mediate the world, but on a more fundamental level, of the idea that language itself can unequivocally be mediated by such prescriptions, or fixed, as it were, onto the meanings it seeks to convey. Her first approach to this issue is unsurprisingly to ask whether the language can be fixed at all, which she explores by considering how widely it has been adopted in everyday usage by a newspaper that ideologically presents itself as fairly liberal – a ‘Washington Post for the southwest’ (Halmari 2011, 831) and thus in the target constituency for adoption. To this end, she finds that 74% of the references to the target groups did not conform to the proposed language. Moreover, whether one uses the politically correct form turns out to depend upon the nature of the subject being described: 83% of the time, criminals and killers especially are described with premodified nouns (Halmari 2011, 834).

Political correctness is hence expended with in the case of undesirable individuals. By contrast, the individuals referred to with the politically correct usage are seen as ‘potentially identifiable’ – ‘real human beings with real names’ (Halmari 2011, 834). What Halmari proposes, surveying these results, is that the question of ‘fixing the world’ with which Whorf is chiefly preoccupied scarcely enters into the discussion – that in the case of newspapers, brevity rules, and brevity means premodified nouns, particularly when the individual in question is unsympathetic. Her conclusion is that recognizing individual ability before a defining impairment, as the people-first project seeks to do, is little more than a sentimental goal, rarely realized.

Conclusions: ‘A rose by any other name?’

Halmari’s study is fascinating for what it reveals about the occasional inefficacy and incidental success of initiatives to prescribe politically correct language, as well as the myriad of existing sociolinguistic and aesthetic factors that undermine such top-down prescriptions, ensuring their success or failure for reasons quite distinct from the utopian aims championed by organizations like Changing Paces. Interesting as Halmari’s findings are, though, I depart from some of her
conclusions, particularly her final claim that the people-first proposal is doomed to fail because it incorrectly assumes that ‘once new words have been introduced for old concepts, these new words will not be subject to the common fate of euphemisms’ (Halmari 2011, 839). While this naiveté about semantic change is worth identifying, the defenses and condemnations of Boatright, Titchkosky, and Linton respectively demonstrate that there is in fact a great deal of conceptual variety behind these different uses. There is more to this debate, in other words, than the economy of using ‘disabled’ versus ‘people with disabilities’ in newspaper headlines, and there is much at stake politically in which formulation is championed as being more correct in a given situation. People-first language, I want to propose, may variously signal an effort to frame disability as an individual problem, a gesture to the variety of experiences signified by disability, and the largely untheorized recitation of a euphemism that sounds correct because the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship’s Office for Disability Issues, among others, have said it is.

To Halmari’s suggestion that such terminology is strictly euphemistic, and not conceptual, I would propose that one need only look to the policies of a non-profit organization like Easter Seals. In a number of its policy documents from the mid-2000s, Easter Seals promises ‘disability solutions’ in granting assistive devices to children with disabilities and unlocking their heretofore buried ‘independence’, a term that recurs throughout these documents with the frequency of a mantra. This conception of disability as a problem that may be solved through the implementation of assistive devices that enable a child to fulfill his or her potential independent of further support reveals the extent to which people-first language might be made to speak in tandem with the language of liberalism. Far from being a hollow replacement of another term, the people-first formulation in such instances mobilizes both an ideological and an economic approach to disability: it establishes the parameters under which such economic interventions may be pursued – in this case, where the prospect is the creation of a self-determining liberal individual – as well as the boundaries between a disabled and a nondisabled subject, in one’s relative capacity for independence.

Turning to governmental policy, the aforementioned Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act similarly demonstrates that people-first language is a means of conceptualizing disability and marshaling particular forms of intervention into the problems it raises. The use of people-first language in the Act’s stated intention to ‘achieve accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities with respect to goods, services, facilities, accommodation, employment, buildings, structures and premises on or before January 1, 2025’ is a telling example. This phrasing at once divorces accessibility from disability, so that one’s status as an Ontarian with a disability is deemed incidental to one’s inability to access buildings or structures, except insofar as the former unfortunately causes the latter, and argues for the ethical necessity of increased accessibility in spite of this disconnect. In other words, this iteration of people-first language at once locates disability in the individual Ontarian’s physical impairment and acknowledges that government intervention into social, economic, and geographic structures that exacerbate that impairment is nevertheless a communitarian ethical goal worth pursuing in order ‘to benefit all Ontarians’. The Act’s use of people-first language, by this token, presupposes an able-bodied base of Ontarians working to better the accessibility of their impaired fellow citizens.

It is insufficient, then, to characterize the people-first language project as simply a failed idealistic effort to fix the world by fixing the language that governs it. Rather, people-first
language operates variously as an empty circumlocution and a deliberate reconceptualization of disability as a secondary rather than a definitive trait, depending on the context in which it is used. Similarly, this politically correct prescription might both create a subject position of ‘wheelchair-user’, and, in its focus on the paraphernalia of impairment, divorce itself – to varying degrees, as the case of the Ontario government demonstrates – from the disabling social conditions of being a wheelchair-user. If the vision of diversity that people-first language puts forth is limited, thus neglecting the very real economic and social differences disability makes, and if its conception of accessibility is largely that of a cartoon figure’s transcendence of his or her wheelchair and graduation into full personhood, then the range of uses to which it is put is nevertheless quite varied. To borrow the title of Titchkosky’s article, people-first language is not merely a rose by another name but rather a purposive attempt to fix language in both senses of the term: attaching a particular meaning to disability while correcting its antecedents.
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‘People-first’ language, semantic variation, euphemism


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Policy and mission statements


