



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 8.4
IJAR 2022; 8(4): 325-328
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 12-01-2022
Accepted: 15-02-2022

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Bias-free English language: A synopsis

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Abstract

The use of language often reflects different kinds of prejudice or bias existing in the minds of some people, which are not acceptable in a modern society where most people have become aware of their rights. English also has various words which reflect racial or ethnic bias. Americans of African origins were referred to as 'Negros' or 'Niggers'; Native Americans were called 'Red Indians'. In India many terms denoting caste or class prejudice are still in wide use – for example 'low caste', 'scheduled caste', 'and backward caste' etc. Similarly, people belonging to the aboriginal tribes are referred to as 'scheduled tribes', 'tribals', 'adivasis' etc. Unfortunately, no bias-free forms have been developed in India to replace these biased forms. 'Bias' is defined as a strong feeling in favour of or against, a thing, a group of people, or one side of an argument. It is often based on unfair judgment. Therefore, 'bias-free English' is free from any favour or discrimination. Bias is created by the use of discriminatory words. These words do not treat all people equally and with respect. These words refer negatively to groups of people such as by sex, race, nationality, age, disability etc. Such words are completely opposite to fair play and human decency. To establish good relationship with others you should be fair in your approach and language use. That is the reason why so much importance is given to 'bias-free-English'. This paper establishes a clear picture of different types of bias-free languages.

Keywords: Bias-free, language, communication, prejudice, judgment

Introduction

Bias-free communication is speech or writing that attempts to include people of all ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, religious affiliations, abilities, and ages by communicating in a way that makes no assumptions about the receiver of such communication. An important part of communicating in a bias-free manner is by making sure you are engaging in meaningful conversations, using bias-free language. The writer's word choice is vital in terms of effectively communicating in ways that do not offend the receiver. According to Locker, "Bias-free language is language that is sensitive to people's sex, race, age, physical condition and many other categories. Bias-free language does not discriminate and therefore includes all readers in a fair and friendly manner." Bias-free language is language that is sensitive to people's sex, race, age, physical condition and many other categories. Bias-free language does not discriminate and therefore includes all readers in a fair and friendly manner. Sometimes the language we use reflects our stereotypes. While in speech our facial expressions or even gestures may convince our listeners that we are not being offensive, in writing it is a lot harder to do. To avoid confusion and needless anger on the part of the reader, use language that is clear, objective, and stereotype-free. Avoid making generalizations when talking about gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, or people with disabilities.

By using language we show our social, personal and political attitudes. They may be favourable or unfavourable. Words which belong to the first type may be called plus (+) words and those of the second type may be called the minus words (-). Let's take the following examples: The young man is innocent. Here innocent means ignorance and inexperienced. It is necessary to avoid insult and to others and invite troubles. Misunderstandings do create serious problems. So, one must handle one's language with care. Bias typically involves a leaning or predisposition on an issue that may inhibit being neutral when communicating with others. When bias exists in attitudes, it is often reflected in the language and the way in which individuals interact with each other. Language can have a significant impact on the quality of our interactions.

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Many times, we do not intend to exclude or offend others by the words we choose. We may simply lack information about, and sensitivity to, certain words or phrases. Being aware and mindful of our language, both written and oral can help create a supportive and inclusive climate. While some basic suggestions are offered below, the key to effective bias-free communication is treating all people with respect and consideration regardless of characteristics such as age, gender, gender identity, race, colour, religion, national origin, height, weight, familial status, marital status, sexual orientation, disability, or political preference. Let's discuss varieties of bias-free languages with suitable examples:

1. Sexist Language

Language shows bias against sex. Some prefer the term gender which is a social idea while sex is a biological fact. Ours is a male dominated world. Language is felt to be contaminated by an attitude which stresses that man is superior to woman. We have a large number of words with man, chairman, spokesman, mankind, manpower, man-made, and so on. So to some people expressions like humanity, human beings, humans, mankind, and the man in the street are sexist, and are replaced by ordinary human beings. Bachelor is a plus word while spinster is not. Master is competent or powerful but mistress is a sexual and an economic dependent. A large number she words are simply unnecessary.

Table 1: Words containing man

Biased forms	Bias-free forms
Draftsman	drafter
Newsman	reporter
Mailman	mail carrier
Cameraman	camera operator
Man-made	artificial
Manpower	workers, workforce
Chairman	chairperson, chair
Salesman	salesperson
Businessman	business executive
Foreman	supervisor
Craftsman	artisan
Weatherman	meteorologist
Forefather	ancestor
Gentleman's agreement	unwritten agreement
Middle man	negotiator
Freshman	first year student

Words showing gender roles

Biased Words Bias-Free words

- Actor/actress actor
- Author/authoress author
- Doctor/lady doctor doctor
- Housewife home-maker
- Poet/poetess poet

Pronouns reflecting gender roles

Everyone thinks he alone is right. No one thinks they are at fault.
 Has anybody brought his book? Has anybody brought their book?
 An M.P. should nurse his constituency. M.P.s should nurse their constituencies.
 Who's manning the library? Who's running/staffing the library?

Words showing marital status

Mrs. Dash/Miss Dash Ms. Dash

Racial/Ethnic Bias

- Negro/black African-American
- Red Indian Native American
- Japan man Japanese
- Scotch Scots/Scottish people

The question of race has caused bloodbaths throughout history. Take the case of the Negro. A Negro is someone with black skin who comes from Africa. It is an old-fashioned word and is offensive. Spelt with a small 'n', it is even more insulting. Some people used to write that way deliberately. The word nigger is also very offensive. The word was later replaced by coloured which gave way to black. Black is a colour with negative suggestions. So, we have expressions like black deed, black day, and black mail. So no wonder the word black too assumed unfavourable meanings. In the year 1960s the famous slogan 'Black is beautiful' was coined, and it did not help. The blacks of the United States therefore came to be called Afro Americans.

2. Class/Caste Biased

Harijan Dalit

3. Disability Bias/Physical Attributes

Blind	visually impaired
Deaf	hearing impaired
Dumb	speech impaired
Handicapped	physically challenged
Mad	intellectually challenged
Bald	folically challenged
Tall	vertically blessed
Short	vertically challenged
Fat	over weight

4. Social attributes

Peon	Attendant
Adopted child	Child
Illegitimate child	Child of unmarried parents
Co-worker	Colleague
Oriental	Asian
Occidental	Western
Girl friend/boy friend	Friend
Dear sir	Dear sir/madam
Clerk	Assistant
Maiden	Unmarried girl

5. Sexual Orientation

"Gender orientation" and "sexual orientation" are preferred to "sexual preference," a term which implies that being homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual is a matter of choice, and that sex is the focus of the relationship. Most gay people prefer the term "gay" to the some-what clinical "homosexual." The term "gay" may be used to refer to both men and women, but "lesbian" is the term preferred by gay women. Keep in mind that people of a bisexual orientation may not consider themselves to be part of either the gay or heterosexual community. As a matter of principle, refer to societal groups in the way that members of each group prefer. Ask people what term they prefer. Avoid using "gay lifestyle" or "lesbian lifestyle." Being gay or lesbian is not a

lifestyle; it is a fundamental orientation. In addition, gays' lives and relationships are as diverse as those of the rest of the population. "Gay community is an umbrella term used in the same manner that phrases such as 'the Italian American community' is used to describe groups with similar, but not identical backgrounds and social agendas. The term may be used to refer to both men and women, but, again, 'lesbian and gay community' is preferred."

6. Ageism

Age too is a sensitive area. A female human being of age 18+ is a woman and not a girl. The male of the same age is a man and not a boy. For an elderly, old or aged person one should use the expression senior citizen or simply senior. Most of time, the people of India do not accept their sons or daughters as men or women till they have not married. This is the interference of cultural bias in language. You have to take care of this. Otherwise, you will make the mistake. For example, Mr. Atal Behari Bajpayee, the former Prime Minister of India and Mr. Nabin Patnaik, the present Chief Minister of Odisha as good boys. This is an unacceptable sentence.

7. Politically Biased language

What is the difference between a terrorist and freedom fighter? Bhagat Singh and Khudiram were freedom fighters to us. But to the British they were terrorists. Words like liberal, socialism, democracy, reveal the user's prejudice. Nationalism is all very good. But chauvinism and xenophobia criticise and blame. A young person who avoids joining a war when it is compulsory is a dodger. But one can potentially call oneself a conscientious objector too. Similarly, a highly respected politician has been described by a fellow politician as a criminal, it is a view not many share. The word reflects the speaker's extreme prejudice. Talking of politicians, the word politician itself has so many unfavourable meanings. In England, at least it is not so while in the USA it is a minus word. The pompous word statesman is preferred there.

8. Bias Free Language is the Need of the Hour

Being sensitive to the context is not the whole thing. One also needs to be aware of the biases s/he might be susceptible to. When the act of communication is being transacted within a community, there is little chance of the message being misinterpreted or misunderstood. On the other hand, in case of inter-community or inter-cultural communication, there might be interruption in the transmission of the message due to socio-cultural biases like class/caste-based bias, racial/ethnic bias, disability bias and gender bias. Being the citizens of an open and globalised world, we should be sensitive to the issues which affect the lives of common people. Both in spoken and written communication we should avoid words and expressions that may hurt people belonging to a certain gender, caste, class, religion, race or ethnicity.

It is always wise to use neutral language which does not favour a particular community at the cost of another. Instead of saying 'salesman' or 'saleswoman', it is better for us to use 'salesperson' which includes people from both the genders. Likewise, it is better to use the phrase 'all communities' than to use 'people belonging to the scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, general and other backward categories'. Now-a-days, a new trend has started coming up.

Now we have started using the word 'actor' to mean both the 'actor' and the 'actress'. It is heinous to call people by the disabilities they suffer from. If we call someone blind, we directly attack his/her disability and remind him/her of the pain that he/she has been suffering from. But if we call the same person 'visually challenged', we just hint at his disability but with a lot of respect, in a more polite and mild tone. In the same manner, we can use 'hearing impaired' for the 'deaf' people, 'speech-impaired' for the dumb people and differently-abled for the 'physically handicapped' people.

9. Guidelines for Bias-free Communication

Pay special attention not to limit or imply limitations for anyone to participate in any activity, occupation or area of study, e.g. "his disability will preclude him from doing this job," "women shouldn't play certain sports." Assign tasks on the basis of ability rather than gender, race, disability, or other irrelevant stereotypical characteristics, e.g. "we need a man to lift this computer." Diversity in leadership and presenters is important in demonstrating bias-free communication. Every reasonable effort should be made to assure that meeting places are barrier-free and can accommodate persons with disabilities. Every person at a meeting or gathering should be given opportunities to participate. "In-group" references and comments, while they may enhance the workplace for the in-group, may create an unwelcoming or hostile working or educational environment for non-members. Lesbian-bisexual-gay-transgender (LBGT) persons are likely to be present at every meeting or event and in every racial and ethnic group. Be sure to avoid language that stereotypes or patronizes LBGT persons.

Avoid stereotyping or patronizing racial or ethnic groups, LBGT persons, or persons with disabilities in news stories, anecdotes or hiring practices. There are other, more characteristic-specific guidelines for bias-free communication that can increase awareness of, and confidence in, our use of inclusive language. These guidelines change from time-to-time, and individuals or groups most often affected by bias suggest such changes. While these guidelines are common recommendations, they may not be the preference of every individual. The overall goal is to be sensitive and try to communicate in a way that everyone can feel included.

10. Race and Ethnicity

Avoid qualifiers that imply that all members of specific ethnic groups or races are the same, e.g., suggesting that all persons of a certain ethnicity are good at athletics or math. If you avoid language, that has questionable racial or ethnic connotations, e.g., "you people," or "those foreigners." Specify race or ethnic origin, be certain it is relevant. Avoid language that has questionable racial or ethnic connotations, e.g., "you people," or "those foreigners."

Be sensitive to religion when referring to various ethnic groups. Don't make assumptions. For instance, just as not all Arabs are Muslims, most nationalities and ethnicities will embody different religious practices. Avoid stereotyping a race, nationality or ethnic group with a specific religion.

11. Gender and Gender Identity

Use gender-neutral words/phrases in your language, e.g. journalist, fire fighter, chairperson. Avoid the use of "man" or "woman" in job titles. Address both female and male

perspectives with phrases like "employees and their spouses or partners." Use pronouns and references that include both genders instead of only male. For Example, "he/she" or "women/men." Avoid describing men by profession and women by physical attributes. Use "gender" rather than "sex" to differentiate between men and women.

Ability Status

Use "person first" language, e.g., "person with a disability," "student with a disability." Avoid using the term "disability" as an adjective, e.g. the disability community. Avoid using adjectives as nouns, e.g. "the deaf, the blind, the disabled." Rather, use "people who are deaf." Plan for and provide alternate forms of communications at events and gathering. This might include having interpreters, providing written materials in print format or in Braille, or providing oral interpretation for all visual information.

Sexual Orientation

Use "sexual orientation" rather than phrases like "the gay lifestyle" or "sexual preference."

Use the phrase "partner or spouse". When discussing families, be inclusive of families that are headed by same gender partners or lesbian, bisexual, gay, or transgender single parents and recognize the presence of LGBT youth in families. When using the terms "diversity" or "multicultural," and reference is made to specific groups, include lesbian-bi-gay-transgender persons in such statements.

Age

Mention the age only when it is relevant. Permit people of all ages to speak for themselves rather than assuming you know what they want. Avoid making inappropriate assumptions about people based on their age. Ending bias takes awareness, openness and practice. Many biased statements seem so natural and familiar that we are unaware of the discomfort they cause for others. Become conscious of your communication and what it may imply. For more information, please seek assistance by contacting the following offices:

Conclusion

People in our community are increasingly aware of the need to use language that recognizes our diversity and does not offend people on the basis of gender, race, ethnic group, religion, age, ability/disability or sexual orientation. Changing our language usage, however, does not come easily or automatically. Familiar ways of writing and speaking are more comfortable; substitute phrases do not always spring quickly to mind. While in speech our facial expressions or even gestures may convince our listeners that we are not being offensive, in writing it is a lot harder to do. To avoid confusion and needless anger on the part of the reader, use language that is clear, objective, and stereotype-free. Avoid making generalizations when talking about gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, or people with disabilities. As a professional communicator, you should actively use language that includes people of all genders/sexual orientations, ages, races/ethnicities, socio-economic statuses, and disabilities in a way that makes no assumptions of the groups discussed. By using bias-free, inclusive language in your communications, you can: "Promote Your Organization's Principles of Representation

and Visibility", "Build Trust and Establish Relationships in Communities Where Your Organization Works" and "Increase Your Organization's Innovation and Success." However, the use of bias-free language is quite essential for all the fields.

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