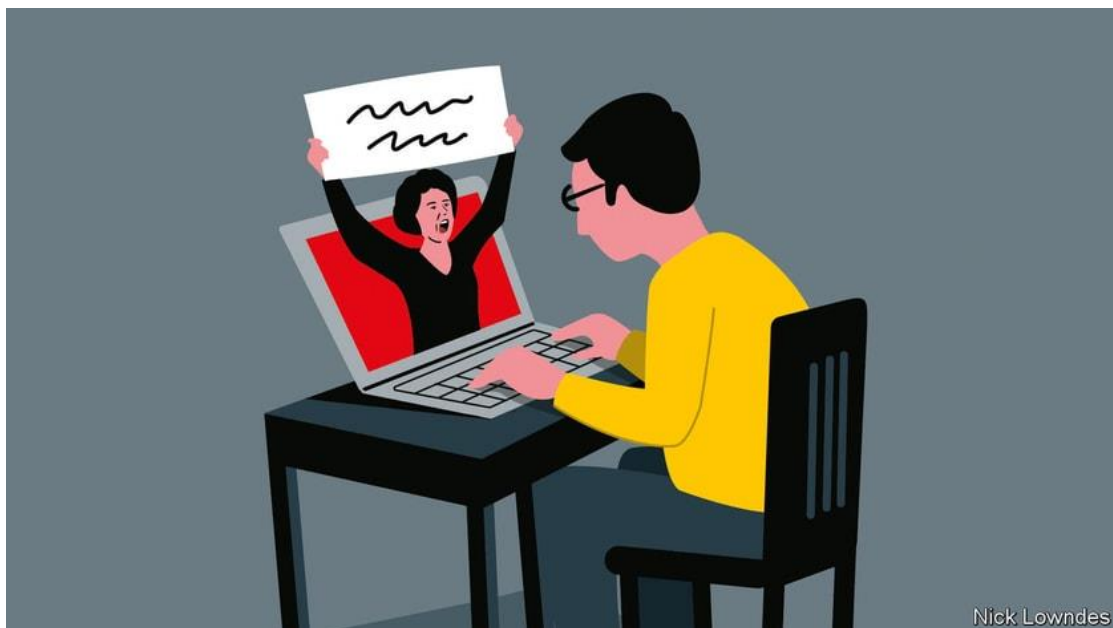


If stigma is the problem, using different words may not help

New terms can take on the pejorative undertones of the ones they replace



The associated press (ap) style book’s Twitter feed is not often a source of hilarity. But the wire service recently tweeted: “We recommend avoiding general and often dehumanising ‘the’ labels such as the poor, the mentally ill, the French, the disabled, the college-educated.” After the tweet went viral, the ap deleted it and apologised for dehumanising “the French”.

Despite the mockery, the ap advice has solid reasoning behind it: that of “people-centred” language. English (like many other languages) allows the use of an adjective as a noun: the good, the bad, the ugly. But in contrast to some other languages, it is increasingly considered essentialising to refer to “the poor” or “the disabled”, as though they are nothing else. This especially applies to characteristics that might be considered unfortunate. The ap did not apologise to “the college-educated” as it did to the French, but it did not need to; nobody really minds being lumped in either group. The issue is essentialising combined with stigma.

Some people are also troubled by bare group nouns such as “blacks”, “gays” and “Jews”, though these too seem to be on the decline. Fortunately, it is not hard to add another word without clunking up your prose—either “people” or, even better, something descriptive as in “black veterans”, “gay activists” or “Jewish voters”. These make these phrases a bit more three-dimensional, like the people they point to.

These are far from the only ideas flowing into journalists’ inboxes today. Suggestions abound: replace “slaves” with

“enslaved people”; “minorities” with “minoritised people” or “racialised people”; “addicts” with “drug users” or “people with a substance-abuse problem”; “obese people” with “people with obesity”; “convicts” or “inmates” with “those who are incarcerated”. And so on.

In each instance, the target is a term that is, or can be seen as, pejorative. The alternative is meant to be less so. But those who encourage these lexical replacements face several problems.

One is that though a case can be made for each individual change, adopting every one will quickly make a piece of writing lumbering, since every new option is longer than the one it is supposed to replace. It will also make prose seem more unnatural, since the entire point is to replace words in common use with phrases that are not. Good journalism is ideally conversational and accessible, calling for a brisk and compelling style.

Changing the world is hard; changing the language is a lot easier, which is why linguistic engineering can tempt people who may feel they have no other tools at hand apart from their keyboards.

But it does not seem to work out as hoped. Replacing a stigmatised word often merely results in the stigma attaching to the new word. “Retarded” was once a polite way of saying “feeble-minded”; it was in long-standing clinical use before becoming a playground insult and, ultimately, deeply offensive. “Special needs” came next, but now “special” is a mean-spirited taunt too.

In the same vein “handicapped” was a kinder replacement for “crippled”, and “homeless” for “vagrant”. Now “handicapped” is out and “disabled” is in (or, better yet, “person with a disability”). “Unhoused” is gaining ground over “homeless”. This “euphemism treadmill” has been observed since at least the 1970s. Nevertheless, people still hope to remake the world through language.

Some groups have taken another tack, and reclaimed older terms. “African-American” had a 30-year heyday, but now “black” is back, and even given a capital B by many. Though “hearing-impaired” is still in medical parlance, many “Deaf” people proudly refer to themselves as such, also with a capital D. Other activists have decided there is nothing wrong with being

“fat”, and have wholeheartedly embraced the term. As with reclaiming slurs, the idea seems to be that showing pride is likely to be more effective than swapping words.

As for writers, good work should humanise whatever it is about, which is why stories often begin with a named person before going into causation and abstraction. If such writing is sharply as well as humanely done, it will be compelling to readers, and may even be of benefit to its subjects. To that end, the language of everyday conversation is likely to be at least as useful as the latest terminology recommended by activists. People-centred writing is indeed a good thing—but there is more than one way of putting people at its heart. ■

如果成见是问题所在，使用不同的词汇可能没有帮助

新的术语可能带有它们所取代的术语的贬义色彩。

联合通讯社(AP)风格书的推特饲料并不经常是搞笑的来源。但该通讯社最近发了一条推特。"我们建议避免使用一般的、往往是非人性的'the'标签，如穷人、精神病患者、法国人、残疾人、受过大学教育的人。" 在这条推文传开后，ap 删除了它，并为非人性化的 "法国人 "道歉。

尽管受到嘲讽，但 ap 的建议背后有坚实的理由：即 "以人为本 "的语言。英语（像许多其他语言一样）允许将形容词作为名词使用：好的、坏的、丑的。但与其他一些语言不同的是，人们越来越多地认为提及 "穷人 "或 "残疾人 "是本质化的，仿佛他们不是别的东西。这尤其适用于那些可能被认为是不幸的特征。ap 没有像对法国人那样向 "受过大学教育的人 "道歉，但它不需要这样做；没有人真正介意被归入这两个群体。问题是本质化与污名化的结合。

一些人也被 "黑人"、"同性恋 "和 "犹太人 "等赤裸裸的群体名词所困扰，尽管这些名词似乎也在减少。幸运的是，在不影响散文的情况下再加一个词并不难--要么是 "人"，要么是描述性的东西，如 "黑人退伍军人"、"同性恋活动家 "或 "犹太裔选民"，甚至更好。这些使这些短语更加立体，就像它们指向的人一样。

这些远远不是今天流入记者收件箱的唯一想法。建议比比皆是：用 "被奴役的人"取代 "奴隶"；用 "少数族裔 "取代 "少数人 "或 "种族化的人"；用 "吸毒者 "或 "有药物滥用问题的人 "取代 "成瘾者"；用 "肥胖的人 "取代 "肥胖的人"；用 "被监禁的人 "取代 "罪犯 "或 "被监禁者"。以此类推。

在每一个例子中，目标都是一个具有或可能被视为贬义的术语。另一种说法则是为了减少贬义。但那些鼓励这些词汇替换的人面临几个问题。

一个问题是，尽管每一个单独的变化都有理由，但采用每一个变化都会很快使一篇文章变得冗长，因为每一个新的选项都比它所要替代的选项要长。它还会使散文看起来更不自然，因为整个重点是用不常用的短语取代常用的词语。好的新闻报道最好是对话式的，易于理解的，需要一种轻快而引人注目的风格。

改变世界很难，改变语言就容易多了，这就是为什么语言工程可以诱惑那些可能觉得自己除了键盘之外没有其他工具的人。但结果似乎并不尽如人意。取代一个被污名化的词往往只是导致新词被污名化。"弱智 "曾经是 "智力低下 "的礼貌说法；在成为操场上的侮辱之前，它在临床上被长期使用，最终成为一种深深的冒犯。接下来是 "特殊需要"，但现在 "特殊 "也是一种恶意的嘲弄。

同样，"残障 "是对 "残废 "的一种较好的替代，而 "无家可归 "是对 "流浪者 "的替代。现在，"残障 "被淘汰了，"残疾 "被纳入其中（或者，更好的是，"有残疾的人"）。"无家可归 "比 "无家可归 "更有优势。这种 "委婉的跑步机 "至少从

20 世纪 70 年代就开始出现了。尽管如此，人们仍然希望通过语言来重塑世界。

一些团体已经采取了另一种策略，并重新获得了旧的术语。"非裔美国人"曾有过 30 年的全盛时期，但现在"黑人"又回来了，甚至许多人给它加上了大写的 B。虽然"听障"仍然是医学术语，但许多"聋人"自豪地称自己为"聋人"，也是大写的 D。另一些活动家认为"胖"没有错，并全心全意地接受了这个术语。与收回污名一样，人们的想法似乎是，表现出自豪感可能比交换词语更有效。

对于作家来说，好的作品应该把它所涉及的东西人性化，这就是为什么故事在进入因果关系和抽象之前常常以一个人的名字开始。如果这样的写作既犀利又有人情味，就会让读者信服，甚至可能对其对象有好处。为此，日常对话的语言可能至少与活动家推荐的最新术语一样有用。以人为本的写作的确是一件好事--但把人放在核心位置的方式不止一种。■

