

RADICAL
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Conscious Language and the Power of Words

Alex Kapitan radicalcopyeditor.com

Language is power, in ways more literal than most people think.
When we speak, we exercise the power of language to transform reality.

Julia Penelope

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The purpose of standards

Standards don't matter. If you can't understand me, tough.

Standards
separate right
from wrong.
There's one "best"
way to speak
and write.

Standards help
us communicate.
Different
contexts call
for different
standards.

disregard

correctness

care

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The purpose of conscious language

Don't tell me
what I can and
can't say. You're
restricting my
free speech!

I want to be
"PC" and avoid
offense. Just
tell me the right
words to use.

I care about the impact of my words on others.
I want to use words as a tool for good.

disregard

correctness

care

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The spectrum of language

- Violent: actively communicates hate, disgust, intolerance
- Coded: consciously or unconsciously communicates prejudice, disdain, or judgment in covert ways
- Unquestioned: everyday language with subtle cues regarding who and what is valuable, normal
- Minimizing: well-intentioned language that unconsciously maintains oppressive norms and supports the status quo
- Liberatory: affirms all life; communicates compassion, love, and nonviolence; imbues subjects with agency

GOD HATES F*GS filthy n****r

disrespectful inner-city kids

traditional family values

clean, pure white

Have you met any nice girls?

You're so articulate!

think of you as gay!

I don't

all sexualities are sacred Black Lives Matter You can't be neutral on a moving train.

Howard Zinn

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The power of language to dehumanize



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The power of language to pathologize

invalid homebound AIDS victim afflicted with PTSD visually suffering from challenged stricken confined to a schizophrenia with autism wheelchair crippled by anxiety mentally ill teenagers brain-damaged struggling with struggling with her weight deformed their sexuality hearing birth defect impaired mental feeble-minded poverty-stricken deficiency

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The power of language to invisibilize

Native Americans believed...

Western countries

you don't look like an Indian primitive

the USA is a nation of immigrants

this land was once the home of...

real Indians wear headdresses

history starts with white people

a powwow is a quick business meeting

Indians are in the past

Indians are sports mascots

the New World

The Plains Indians were...

Columbus discovered the Americas

North America was a largely uninhabited wilderness artists are modern-day shamans

> real Indians are full blood

previous inhabitants

this land was made for you and me

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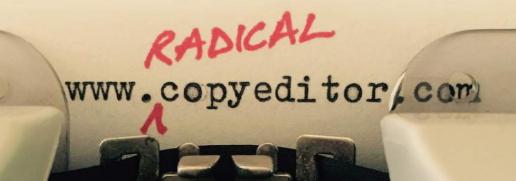
The words we use shape how we understand ourselves, how we interpret the world, how we treat others. Words make worlds.

Krista Tippett

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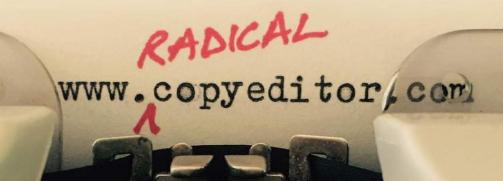
Countering harmful language

- Work to be aware of coded, unquestioned, and minimizing language, avoid it, and subvert it
- Constantly question the norms and values that are baked into language, and use language that reflects liberatory values
- Look to authors, scholars, and activists from communities targeted by oppression and follow their lead



Appropriate specificity

- Broad language is often used in stereotyping ways; using more specific language is a key way to counter this.
 - o Latino, Hispanic vs. Puerto Rican, Guatemalan, Peruvian
 - Africa vs. Morocco, Nigeria, West Africa
 - Native Americans vs. Coast Salish peoples, Lummi Nation
 - LGBTQ vs. same-sex relationships, trans/nonbinary
 - People of color vs. Black Americans
 - People with disabilities vs. wheelchair users,
 neurodivergent people, blind and/or deaf students



Mindfulness around euphemisms

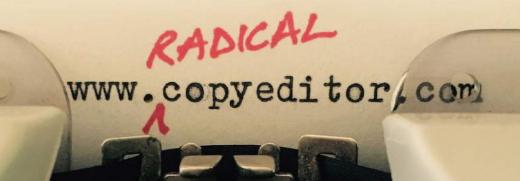
- "diverse," "minorities," "urban," "inner-city"
- "differently abled," "special needs," "handi-capable," "physically challenged"
- "disadvantaged," "at risk,""under-privileged,""under-represented"
- "discovery," "arrival"
- "racially charged"

- people of color, Black, low-income
- disabled, disabilities, autistic, neurodivergent
- systemically oppressed, historically excluded, marginalized
- invasion, colonization
- racist, racism



Humanizing language

- Avoid using adjectives as nouns
 - X "Blacks" "transgenders" "paraplegics" "the disabled"
 - X "the poor" "the deaf" "the homeless" "the elderly"
- Avoid equating people with a condition or label
 - X "schizophrenics" "addict" "felon" "high-school dropout"
- Avoid negative, stigmatizing, and pathologizing language
 - X "victims" "suffering from" "stricken with" "afflicted with"
 - X "struggling with" "mentally ill" "confined to a wheelchair"



Respecting self-identity language

Never "correct" the language people use for themselves

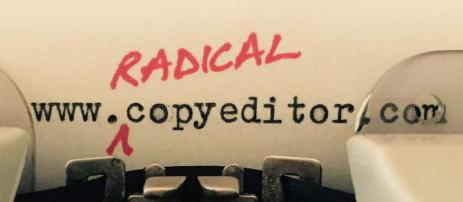
No, you're a person with autism spectrum disorder and blindness.

I'm autistic and blind.

Um, no. I'm autistic and blind.

Accept that words change with time and with context That's incorrect language.

Find out what language groups and organizations led by the people being written about use, and follow their lead



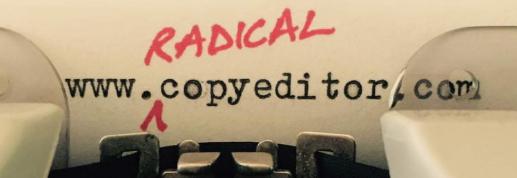
Nuance and context in identity language

- invert, homosexual, gay, queer, SOGI, LGBT, LGBTQ+
- Hispanic, Latino, Latina/o, Latin@, Latinx, Latine
- Negro, African American, African descent, African diaspora, coloured, Black
- people of color, Black and Brown, BIPOC, BAME, people of the global majority
- fat, Mad, crip, deaf and hard of hearing vs Deaf
- disability rights vs. disability justice



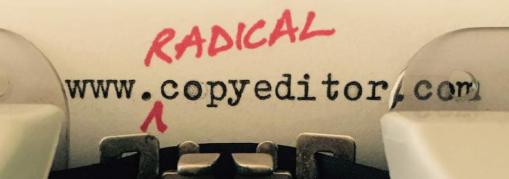
"Gender-inclusive" language

- Use neutral, non-sexist language
 - X "mankind" "fireman" "man the table" "Dr. Smith and Judy"
 - √ "humanity" "fire fighter" "staff the table" "Bob and Judy Smith"
- Avoid gender binary language
 - X "boys and girls" "both genders" "the opposite gender"
 - √ "young people" "all genders" "a different gender"
- Use singular "they"
 - √ As a personal pronoun for people who go by they/them
 - √ As a generic third-person singular pronoun (instead of "he/she")



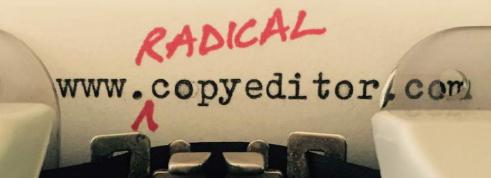
Mindfulness regarding metaphors

- Blackness/darkness universally used for negative concepts
 - "black-hearted" "kept in the dark" "dark forces" "blacklist"
 - "dark times" "black mark" "blackmail" "as black as sin"
- Whiteness/lightness universally used for positive concepts
 - o "come into the light" "white as snow" "white collar"
 - o "white lie" "illuminating" "unblemished" "white knight"
- Disability language universally used for negative concepts
 - o "blind to the truth" "fell on deaf ears" "paralyzed with fear"
 - "the economy was crippled" "crazy" "insane" "OCD"



Awareness of imperialism

- America, American vs. United States, U.S.
- international, foreign language vs. non-U.S., non-English
- Western vs. European, imperialist, individualistic, white
- Developing countries, Third World vs. non-industrialized countries, Global South
- Our culture... We learned in school that... We believe... vs. U.S. culture... Mainstream culture... Those of us who are white...



We die. That may
be the meaning of
life. But we do
language. That may
be the measure of
our lives.

Toni Morrison

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Questions for editors to consider

- Where are my own areas of discomfort or ignorance? What biases might I be bringing to my work, and how might I expand my worldview?
- How can I help authors improve without making edits that misrepresent their perspective?
- Where is my line in the sand when it comes to issues of inclusion/justice?
- How can I constantly center care over correctness?



Further resources

Radical Copyeditor

radicalcopyeditor.com / patreon.com/radicalcopyeditor @ZrAlexKapitan

- Conscious Style Guide consciousstyleguide.com
- Rabbit with a Red Pen rabbitwitharedpen.com
- The Diversity Style Guide diversitystyleguide.com
- APA Style's online resources apastyle.apa.org

