

Why “Phrasebook Diversity” is not Enough

UK Trans Rights Campaigner Christine Burns argues that it's time to learn Diversity's Grammar and Vocabulary if we want to be consistent about respect for all people.

A few months ago in the UK an experienced and much-admired chair of one of Britain's major nursing institutions found herself obliged to resign after using the expression “Ten Little Niggers” in a light-hearted way to summon her committee members back to the table after a coffee break. Two of them were black.

Pat Bottrill resigned shortly afterwards from the Royal College of Nursing in a hastily convened emergency meeting. Her acknowledgment that the reference to the title of a well-known Agatha Christie novel was “inappropriate and offensive” reminds everyone afresh of the link between language and manners in a diverse society.

Doubtless, many will have felt at least a twinge of sympathy for the lady concerned in these particular circumstances, and will have gone on to reassure themselves that they would *never* make an error of that kind.

After all, if the protocols for what's acceptable and what's not weren't so universally acknowledged these days, the outcome in this case would not have been so swift and unequivocal.

Choice of “label” language is an important display of respect. And if in doubt, the accepted wisdom is to ask the person affected by your choice of vocabulary what *they* would prefer.

As in matters of harassment, the arbiter of whether your behaviour is acceptable or not is the person on the receiving end. What you *meant* is not what counts, it's what the recipient *felt*.

Given the degree of contemporary acceptance of these principles, it therefore seems strange that transsexual people still seem to be treated as some sort of exception to the politeness principle though.

We all talk about “disabled people”, “black people”, “people with learning difficulties”, “gay and lesbian people”, and so forth, but it never seems to have occurred to anyone that to talk about “transsexuals” or describe someone as “a transsexual” is just as rude as calling someone “a black” or referring to a community of people as “the disabled”.

In fact it suggests that people learn Diversity awareness by rote, like multiplication tables or lines from a foreign language phrasebook, rather than understanding the principles that are being applied.

Understanding the grammar of any language is very different to merely learning a few phrases. If you understand the grammar then all you need in order to cope with a new situation is the vocabulary. In contrast, merely understanding the phrases to use in common situations tells you nothing about how to deal with the unfamiliar when it comes along.

So what is the underlying principle for why we generally refer to people by adjectives rather than as nouns?

Turning the adjective "Black" or "Disabled" or even "Female" into a noun allows people to conveniently forget that an individual's colour, physical limitations or sex are just some of many attributes which might qualify the more universal idea of them being a person.

The same idea applies to transsexual people. Combining adjectives also allows us to recognise that there are elderly disabled black lesbian transsexual women too, without any one attribute blotting out all the others.

This grammar is still not sufficient if you want to be polite though. Referring to someone as a transsexual person, or a transsexual woman, or a transsexual campaigner certainly isn't a bad start. But in order to get the terminology really right one needs to listen to the terms that people select for themselves.

When you begin to explore and understand the history of the trans community's struggle to remove themselves from the pathologising effects of life under an exclusively medical label, then it doesn't take much imagination to understand why even the adjective "transsexual" has come under scrutiny as trans people began to examine their position in society on both sides of the Atlantic.

Transsexual is a term coined by doctors. It is a particularly bad term too, because it misleads. The issue is about personal identity, not sex or an illness of some kind. The "sexual" part has condemned bearers of the label to around fifty years of vilification and marginalisation on grounds of some vague supposition that to be "a transsexual" involved some weird and distasteful thing to do with having sex, rather than struggling with the identity issues associated with having a particular sex. Accepting a medical label also characterises the bearer as "ill" in some way. Staking a claim to your gender identity is not an illness.

For this reason, one of the defining acts of political self-awareness for transsexual people has been to deconstruct their labelling completely.

As with other groups the deconstruction involves reclaiming the right to define words, who gets to apply them to whom, and in what way. It can be compared to homosexual people having seized and coined the word "Gay", or people with Cerebral Palsy rejecting the term "Spastic".

Because this is about self-definition, none of it is entirely prescriptive though. You will find people who choose variants they feel more comfortable with. And, because of that, the only reliable thing to do when in doubt is to ask how someone would like to be described.

The nearest thing you will find to a global consensus is that the simple word "trans" is preferred as an adjective though. So we talk of "trans people" and "trans women", "trans campaigners", "trans politics" and "trans issues", to give just a few examples. (Please don't remove the space between the words either; otherwise they turn back into nouns!).

"Trans" is not only an expression of political consciousness on the part of a community escaping from fifty years of bullying and marginalisation. It also has vital semantic importance, removing the suffix "sexual" which has been responsible for the root of much of that discrimination.

It bears repeating: Being a trans person isn't about having sex in some way that sounds inherently deviant. It's about struggling for identity as a result of the sex you were labelled at birth, and doing no more than to address that in ways you want people to see and understand.

But whilst it's useful to understand why trans people ask others to refer to them in that way, it is not essential in order to accede to the request with no more than an apology for previously getting it wrong.

But if you understand Diversity from a grammatical perspective then none of this should be surprising. After all, nothing in what I'm arguing is essentially different to the calls made by campaigners on behalf of other diverse groups over the last hundred years. However it begs the question that if so many continue to make this fundamental error of manners when dealing with trans people, how many other groups are they inadvertently insulting as well?

So please everyone, you've now been asked. Trans people from now on. Yes? We've grown up resigned to our fate. But let that be the only resignation that's called for in this case.

(1176 words)

About the author

Christine Burns has campaigned for the rights of trans people for a decade, as a leader of the lobby group, Press for Change. (<http://www.pfc.org.uk>). She negotiated the 1999 change to the UK's Sex Discrimination Act, which formally outlawed discrimination against trans people in employment. She is also a member of the Parliamentary Forum on Transsexualism, has written extensively on all the issues which affect trans people's lives and integration and has provided extensive advice to Government officials and Parliamentarians examining how to change the rest of the legal framework for such people. A landmark decision by the European Court of Human Rights in July 2002 means that long-awaited legal recognition should now at last be on its way for trans people in the UK, which is one of very few countries still to legislate for transsexual people's privacy, marriage rights and general welfare. As in other areas, merely changing the law doesn't change people's attitudes, so Christine anticipates a long career still to be spent in education. Getting people to think about the language they use is for her a fundamental starting point for that. In her day job Christine manages a company providing care for people with learning difficulties, following a 25 year career as a business and IT consultant.