

Blame the prejudice - not the words that are used

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In the 1940s and 1950s, if I remember rightly, schoolchildren who were seriously intellectually handicapped by difficulties with learning and understanding were, perhaps, given special help, and labelled “retarded”.

This was an originally innocent word which meant “delayed” – these children’s development was somewhat delayed compared to the average.

To retard was, and still is, a normal verb which English-speaking people use to refer to holding back or impeding something – as in fire retardant, for example.

Unfortunately, though, elements in our society were prejudiced against people who were handicapped in this way, and so the word “retarded” gradually took on very negative connotations. It was even used by spiteful children, and adults who should have known better, as an insult which they used for denigrating and abusing others.

In view of this abuse, it was natural that responsible people involved in education saw the need for another descriptive word to use instead, and “educationally subnormal” began to be employed. This was once again meant to be a neutral, descriptive term with no malice attached to it –



■ The words we use to describe situations and conditions sensitively are soon twisted to become as hurtful as the phrases they replaced.

subnormal simply meant below normal.

But then this term, too, sadly began to acquire negative overtones and so, quite naturally, it began to fall out of favour as well – and new words started appearing.

In the few last decades, different terms have been used, including “special needs”.

But now this phrase itself, it seems, is beginning to be used maliciously for hurling insults at others. We have to wonder how long we will be able to persevere with it as a designation.

It’s not my place as a linguist to intervene in this issue.

But one thing is clear to linguists – because of what we know about the way in which the meanings of words change: this

cycle of stigmatisation and replacement – it’s sometimes called the “euphemism treadmill” – is bound to continue until attitudes change.

We must of course be sensitive to the problem, refer to minority groups as they wish to be referred to, and drop words which are used to demean people. But these words are a symptom of this disease of prejudice, not the disease itself. When a patient is ill, it’s no good just removing their symptoms. You have to treat the sickness itself.

You can change words, but unless you can get rid of the sick underlying prejudice, you’ll have to change those words again and again – and again.