

Ziauddin Sardar

# The Language of Equality

A discussion paper





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## Introduction

What do we talk about? How do we talk about it? These are the two most basic questions that confront any new organisation. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has begun to consider these questions in an atmosphere of growing concern about the misuse and general lack of understanding of the language of equality and human rights. Inevitably, language – and the fact that the use of language will be a key tool by which the Commission can move people on in terms of vision and understanding of equality and human rights – has been a priority from the start.

The Commission's language group was established several months before the organisation's formal launch in October 2007 in order to examine the issues surrounding the use of language. Our objective was to explore how to develop language in such a way as to transform public debate on equality and human rights, how to overcome the risks of language reinforcing received ideas and how to avoid possible suspicion and hostility. This essay is the outcome of those discussions. We wanted to:

- Explore basic principles.
- Consider the use of language in talking about equality and human rights.
- Examine the concept of political correctness.
- Identify problematic terms and explore new ones.

Our discussions did not take place in a vacuum. We had access to work already done in this field by our predecessors, such as the Commission for Racial Equality and the Disability Rights Commission, as well as other institutions like the British Council. We also had access

to specific reports and documents, such as *Mind Your Language* by Diversity Matters<sup>1</sup> and the TUC/UNISON guide *Diversity in Diction, Equality in Action*,<sup>2</sup> as well as a growing body of academic studies relevant to our concerns.

We cast our net wide in terms of source material but in the end relied on our own reasoning and analysis. What follows is intended to open up a broader discussion. I should also point out at the outset that this paper is written from an English perspective and would necessarily be different if written from, for example, a Welsh or Scottish viewpoint. The problem here is not limited to the fact that ‘Britishness’ is perceived in different ways across the United Kingdom. It is also that different words are favoured in different parts of Britain. In Wales, for example, the term ‘inclusion’ is much more commonly used than ‘integration’.

Inclusion suggests an amalgam of cultures on an equal basis rather than an incorporation of cultures into a dominant culture. This is part of the prevailing political philosophy in Wales, possibly befitting a nation where 30 per cent of the population was born elsewhere. Translation therefore presents a special challenge.<sup>3</sup>

## Why language?

Language is our most basic tool of everyday communication. It is the medium through which we interact with other people and make ourselves understood. It is also our largest and most flexible store of information, the tool that allows us to learn, to teach, to adapt and to change. Language is an inseparable part of how we shape our perceptions of the world around us – indeed, of how we conceive of ourselves as individuals.

We cannot do without language, yet we must acknowledge our use of language is and can be fraught with ambiguity. Between what we mean to say, what we intend to mean and what our words signify and convey to other people exist multiple opportunities for miscommunication, for saying more or less than was intended or implied: ‘I hear what you say. But that’s not what I meant at all.’ Language is fertile ground for misunderstanding, misinterpretation and offence, intended or inadvertent.

Meaning what we say is not always equivalent to saying what we mean. It is possible to talk at cross purposes in a variety of ways that have significant social consequences: deliberate and positive or unintentional and negative as well as intended and negative. Most significant of all, we can continue to use language that does not accurately reflect or convey our understanding of the kind of society in which we live. Language is a living element of society: if it does not reflect how we live today it may not be able to express our aspirations for the kind of society we wish to become in the future.

The Commission has a mission to promote the practical and conceptual causes of equality and human rights. Yet even such a fundamental notion as human rights, essential to its work, has negative connotations for a significant

proportion of the British population. A market survey carried out on behalf of the Commission by GfK NOP Social Research in September 2007<sup>4</sup> found that 68 per cent of respondents had a negative understanding of human rights and agreed with the statement that ‘government is more concerned about the human rights of minority groups rather than those of the average person’. In addition, 56 per cent thought that ‘people only talk about their human rights when they are trying to get something they are not entitled to’. Others thought that the term applied mostly to prisoners or terrorists and that it provided an excuse for certain behaviour. Most people also felt frustrated and found it difficult to identify where the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate language lay.

Making society more conscious of the potential of equality and human rights means overcoming such common perceptions and frustrations as well as transcending conventional and inherited understandings of the language of equality. It also means encouraging the development of new interpretations with practical applications that meet the actual needs of our society today and for the future.

It is important to appreciate from the outset that language is not just a means of communication: it is also a means of control. As Raymond Williams once put it, ‘a definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world’.<sup>5</sup> The way we define and use words implicitly or explicitly involves defining others in certain ways and can be used to ‘put them in their place’. So language has the power to create and reinforce human barriers. The function of a language of equality is both to undermine the use of language as a tool of power and control and to transcend the barriers it may create. We want language to be used to bring people together, to create a common bond among them, to

promote mutual respect across the areas of race, culture, religion, gender, disability, age and sexual orientation, and hence to promote a society based on equality and fairness where people are confident in all aspects of their diversity.

Communication and fostering greater understanding are central to the Commission's work. Therefore we have considered how language facilitates or impedes the Commission's efforts, how it enhances or restricts understanding of goals and intentions. Our discussions concerned areas of human behaviour and social interaction fraught with misunderstandings and misinterpretations – difficult areas. There is resistance to change, whether piecemeal or radical, owing both to entrenched negative attitudes and to complacency and a reluctance to think things through.

As part of our discussions we identified three cardinal principles that also serve as practical values to guide our activities: consideration, courtesy and civility. We believe these values command support and endorsement across the spectrum of British society. They are common principles irrespective of our individual backgrounds, heritage or beliefs. They define how we as individuals wish to be treated and understood and, ideally, what we consider is due to other people. These values are enduring aspirations for how we would like to live today and for the kind of society we seek to build for future generations. But to make them meaningful we have to be aware of the part language plays in the understanding of our core tasks. We have to reason with the misunderstandings, misinterpretation and offence inherent in our language and we have to look at how to make these principles work in practice.

## What is language?

We acquire language. It is something we are taught from the moment of birth. Our capacity to use language grows as we mature. Our store of language, how it is used, the meanings it conveys, is profoundly influenced by our own experiences – where we are born, how we are educated, the community, organisations, employment or profession, religion or even political party we choose or are affiliated to as well as a host of other interests and activities that distinguish our lives as individuals.

Behaviour acquired in society is the classic definition of culture and language is the cultural tool *par excellence*. Language, like culture, has a history; it is layered like some vast archaeological site, the repository of collectively acquired experience. According to Wittgenstein ‘language is like a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses’.<sup>6</sup> Like an ancient but thriving city, language is alive, lived in, adapting the old to new purposes, keeping venerable words for specific purposes as well as developing new words to express new experience and capabilities.

Our language records the contribution of the various peoples who, over millennia, have settled in these islands. It also reflects the influence of the peoples and places Britons have been in contact with down the ages – language has always been the companion of Empire. An English dictionary is full of loan words for products, customs, ideas, innovations borrowed from people who have contributed to the history of Britain at home and abroad. Our language has never been insular. Our use of language also reflects the rich regional variations within the British Isles, the diversity of lifestyles, status and occupations, ideas and interests.













































































**The Equality and Human Rights Commission** champions equality and human rights for all, working to eliminate discrimination, reduce inequality, protect human rights and to build good relations, ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to participate in society.