

Creating Just Language

Ephesians 4:29: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

Words matter and they impact the way any person can feel about themselves or other people. As leaders, we have the ability to set the pace and change norms in our community. This can start with the way we talk, and will lead to influencing what others perceive as acceptable ("the norm").

Whereas political correctness dilutes the meaning of words to avoid being offensive and can inhibit natural dialogue, Just Language intentionally **adds** meaning to words to create more powerful terms that promote a discussion that gives both dignity and content.

There are different categories to group unjust language. They are:

- *Sexism*: Masculine pronouns, job titles, etc. (i.e.: Congressman, Freshman)
- *Heterosexism*: Using the word "gay" or "homo" as a general negative term.
- *Ableism*: Using the word "lame" or "retarded" as a general negative term.
- *Racism*: Clearly using racial slurs, but also phraseology like "Indian giver."
- *Classism*: Grouping people as "the poor," "unskilled labor," "the homeless," etc.
- *Militarism*: So much of our wording is very violent. This reinforces violence in our society. (i.e.: Take a "shot in the dark," "blow them away" with your skill, "spearhead" an initiative, pull out "the big guns.")

This idea is not to have you lose your mind. Just start to notice! Try to be increasingly aware.

Some alternatives to unjust language include:

- ***Eliminating offensive wording from your vocabulary***
 - Choose to filter your usage of wording that could be offensive, biased, or militaristic. Think about the words that you use on a daily basis and what they communicate.
- ***Introducing gender-neutral phraseology into your vocabulary***
 - Be careful to use "he or she," etc., especially in writing. This may seem clumsy grammatically, but just try to be creative.

- **Using “Person-First Language”**

- For example, say “people who are experiencing homelessness,” or “individuals who are differently abled.”
- “Person-first language” has a positive impact on both the speaker and the hearer. It makes the speaker think as he or she challenges him or herself to be forward thinking while speaking, and ultimately because it acknowledges that there is a person behind that statement.

Just Language is a TOOL that we have to offer our communities in the pursuit of diversity. It is a challenge because it requires effort and time to get used to the idea and to put it into practice with more and more of your language. The first step towards adopting Just Language is recognizing its importance and becoming conscious of the implications of words.

Just Language must not become legalistic. It is meant to be used as a tool to make YOURSELF think primarily, and to make others think. This is not something to be frustrated about, but to hold as an ideal and a value.

Be a pace-setter in your community! Share this information with others, but in a way that is encouraging and thought provoking, NOT legalistic.

References:

Creating Just Language (3rd ed.). (1999). Chicago, IL: 8th Day Center for Justice.

Watson, Ariell. (2009, July). *Just Language: More than politically correct*. Workshop presented at the annual National Jesuit Student Leadership Conference at Creighton University, Omaha, NE.