Irish Centre for Diversity
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About this session

This programme has been designed to provide some detail and context about inclusive language.

It does not suggest what words or phrases should, or should not be used, but it will give participants enough information to decide on a personal and organisational glossary of acceptable terminology.

DISCLAIMER

Session content

The contexts and definitions of inclusive language.

The relationship between language, thoughts and behaviours.

The importance of history and etymology of language

The dynamic nature of language.

How unconscious bias influences language usage.

Banter in the workplace

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Session outcomes

Understanding the science and the relationship between thought, language and behaviour.

Acknowledging the impact of unconscious bias in language.

Recognising the nature of language as part of a power dynamic – the potential for inequality.

Developing the skills to create a glossary of acceptable and unacceptable terminology.
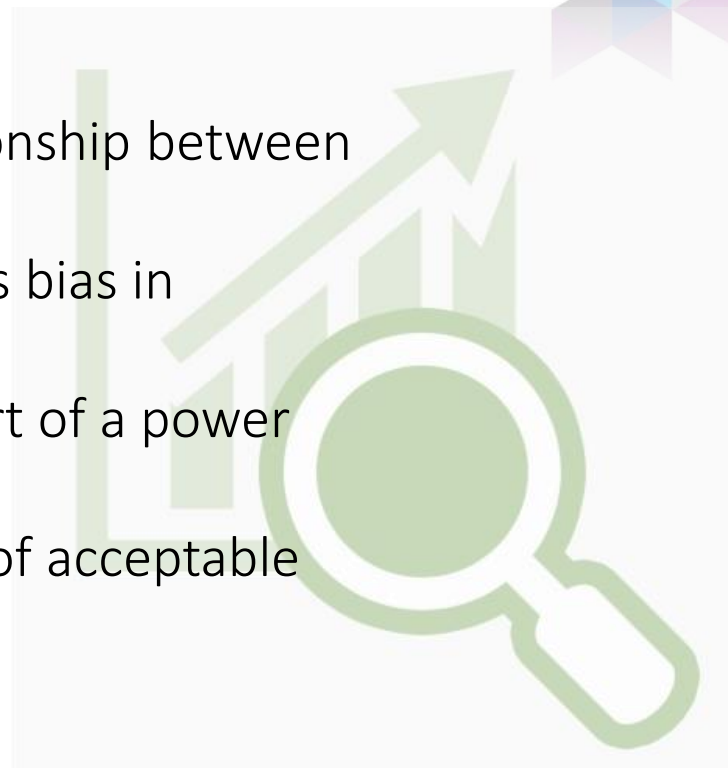
Key equality legislation

The Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services, accommodation and education.

Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015 provide the legislative support for employees and an inclusive framework for employers.

Both pieces of legislation quote the 9 Grounds

Nine grounds

- Age
- Civil status – single, married, civil partnered, widowed & divorced
- Disability
- Gender
- Family status - pregnancy, parent & carer
- Membership of traveller community
- Race
- Religious belief
- Sexual orientation

Being non-discriminatory, relating to the 9 Grounds, is about ensuring full compliance to equality legislation.

Types of discrimination

Direct discrimination

Indirect discrimination

Discrimination by Association

Discrimination by Imputation

Harassment

Victimisation

Reflecting on existing language

How often do we stop to think about the words we use?

- Where does this term come from and why am I choosing to use it?

- How well does this description capture the specific group or experience that I am referring to?

- Do the descriptions used, share only the characteristics pertinent to the discussion?

- Is this terminology or phrasing used by the people concerned? If not sure, verify it.

- Who is my audience - is this language welcoming and accessible to that audience?

- Are terms or acronym used widely understood, or would simplified language suffice?

- Are there wider implications of the language used beyond this immediate piece of work?

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Thought, language and behaviour

Thought

Language

Action

There are symbiotic relationships between thought, language and action/behaviour.
The neural pathways that exist in the brain are strengthened by what we hear – creating and reinforcing learned behaviours.
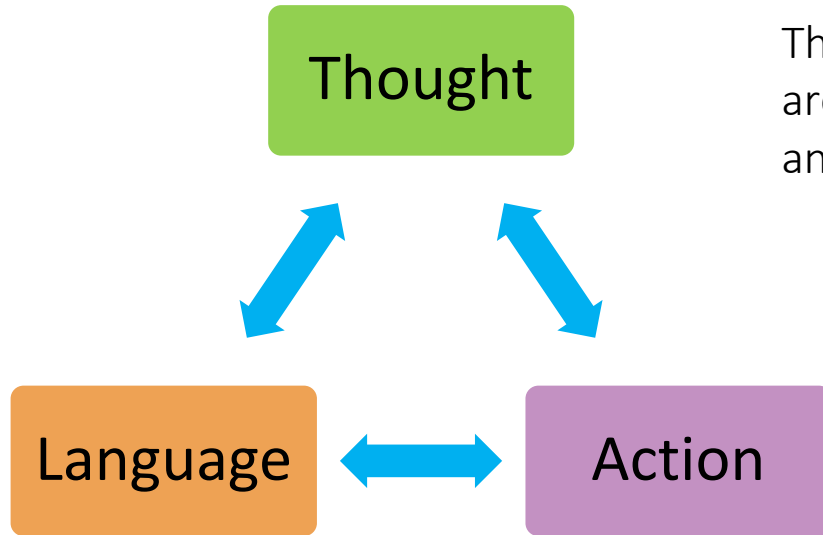
The power of language

"Speaking, writing and reading are integral to everyday life, where language is the primary tool for expression and communication.

Studying how people use language – what words and phrases they unconsciously choose and combine – can help us better understand ourselves and why we behave the way we do".

Alex Shasgkevich, The Power of Language, Stamford University

"Even what might be deemed frivolous aspects of language can have far-reaching subconscious effects on how we see the world."

Lera Boroditsky, Professor of Cognitive Science at UCSD

"Language can impact on the way we think about the world. At the same time thoughts and behaviours may be created by the words we use".

Linguistic Society of America

Language and power

Powerful institutions and individuals use verbal and non-verbal language as both a means to construct their power and as a method of maintaining it.

Words, phrases or actions can empower, whilst changing the perspective of how we see the world.

Powerful	Disempowered
Educated	Uneducated
Employed	Unemployed
Wealthy	Poor
Teacher	Pupil
Politicians	Citizens
Parent	Child
Police	Suspect
Owner	Tenant
Manager	Staff member

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Inclusive language - definitions

Inclusive language recognises full diversity within society, whilst offering respect and value to all people.

It is verbal (or non-verbal) communication that proactively uses words, phrases and expressions that welcome all people and never exclude an individual, or any group of people.

Written language also must be inclusive, including emails, marketing material, social media content, websites and all other forms of communication, internal and external.

Why use inclusive language?

Inclusive language demonstrates a person's willingness to embrace diversity – a full cross-section of identities within society, without making any assumptions that can harm relationships before they begin.

Inclusive language shows sensitivity, respect and open-mindedness toward individuals and groups of people through positive, accurate and equitable representation.

Benefits of using inclusive language?

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Helps connecting people	Demonstrates commitment to inclusion	Boost employee morale, loyalty and retention	Makes people feel accepted and welcomed
Encourages authenticity	Encourages diverse participation	Enhances reputation	Exhibits humility and empathetic behaviours
No-one feels excluded	Minimises possible claims of discrimination	Creates a sense of belonging	Builds team confidence and strength

Language is dynamic

Language is fluid – always changing.

Meanings and connotations of words also change.

What is a respectable word/phrase one year may, in a short time, become pejorative.

It is more important to apply inclusive language principles, rather than continually have to learn contemporary phrases.

To welcome everyone and exclude no-one.

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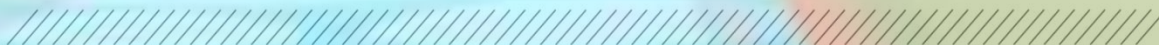
Language betrays our biases

- Language is a crucial part of unconscious bias – what we have heard and experienced.

- Also, judgements and evaluations are made about us, based on language we use and how we construct phrases.

"Girls are as good as boys at maths". A study shows that well-meaning statements can reinforce stereotypes.

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Unconscious Bias

- Our biases impact on all our decision making

- Unconscious biases are preferences that we are totally unaware of but nevertheless act upon.

- We process a person's ethnicity, gender, age, size, looks, disability and other characteristics before we even know we've done it.

- It's not easy, but we each have the power to overcome our biases by identifying them and then learning how to manage them – bringing them from an unconscious level into our conscious mind.

Unconscious bias

The language we heard in our formative years (often from parents/carers) was in part responsible for creating our unconscious biases.

Understanding these biases, and bringing them into our conscious thought, is the first step in dealing with them.

Jokes and banter

Inclusive best practice does not seek a workplace without humour or personal interest, but recognises that comments, banter and joke telling should never point at an individual or group of people.

People who are marginalized, experience in their day-to-day interactions, slights, indignities, put-downs and insults that that are hurtful and damaging and may be deemed discriminatory.

Joke telling or banter that point at an individual or characteristics of a group of people, is not funny and may be considered harassment and discrimination.

Non-inclusive phrases in common parlance

- Cut the apron strings
- Nitty gritty
- Guys
- Blind spot/Are you deaf?/dummy run
- Sold down the river
- Big boys don't cry
- Man-up
- Blacklisted/whitelisted
- Are you crazy/nuts?

- No can do & Long time no see
- Wheelchair (bed) bound
- Job titles with man – chairman, handyman, fireman etc.
- Hip hip hooray
- Brainstorm
- Rule of thumb
- Black and white situation
- Ladies and gentlemen
- Native English speaker

Developing personal best practices

1. Unless necessary, try to not to describe people by their 9 Grounds

2. Focus on behaviours not characteristics

3. Never assume – gender, race, sexuality, ability etc.

4. Challenge non-inclusive language – but don't humiliate

5. Think "people first" – is often a beneficial principle

6. Contextualise your use of language

7. Check words/phrases you're not sure of – how important is derivation and etymology?

8. Be empathetic – try to put yourself in the other person's place

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Developing organisational best practices

1. Set up working groups to explore best words/phrases to use – create a glossary of acceptable and unacceptable terminology.

2. As new written material (marketing, recruitment, websites etc.) is produced, it should be written in neutral language.

3. Produce an addendum to any Diversity and Inclusive Policy to describe language requirements and share this with staff members.

4. Set up a learning (not disciplinary) system to challenge non-inclusive language (jokes and banter) – mentor and coach

5. Create system for staff members to anonymously report incidents of non-inclusive language.

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For watching:

[Would Gender Neutral Language be Better for Humankind? – YouTube](https://youtu.be/QhENGl3XviM)
https://youtu.be/QhENGl3XviM

For reading:

GSMA-Inclusive-Language-Guide_2020.pdf
https://www.un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language/guidelines.shtml
https://buffer.com/resources/inclusive-language-tech/
https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog/2021/08/inclusive-language-health-and-care

Books

Man Made Language; Dale Spender; Routledge
The Accidental Sexist; Ford, Koch and Armstrong; Rethink Press
What's Your Pronoun, Beyond He & She; Dennis Baron; Liveright Publishing
Better Allies (Ch.9 Everyday Language); Karen Catlin; Better Allies Press

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