

## The Debate Within: Authority and the Discourse of Blindness

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**Abstract:** This article reviews three articles that add to the debate on the terminology that is used to represent people who are blind. It argues that authority is not limited to just one person or one organization, but is shared through an intertextuality, or utterance, of other authorities, and that conflict within blind discourse communities does not dissolve the notion of community--as exemplified by the attempts by several organizations for people who are blind to express individual and competing desires for "appropriate" terminology.

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Bolt (2004) was right to have entitled his Comment "The Terminology Debate Continues." In his earlier Comment, "Blindness and the Problems of Terminology," Bolt (2003) proposed a new term, *persons with a visual inhibition*, to replace the collective phrase *the blind*. Wittenstein (2004) entered the debate through a letter to the editor, a response to Bolt's initial comment. Wittenstein argued succinctly that people who are blind should decide how they would like to be described (p. 133). The letter to the editor and Bolt's response to Wittenstein appeared side by side in the March 2004 issue of this journal. In his initial comment, Bolt (2003) invoked many forms of authority: the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) and its past president Kenneth Jernigan, blind scholar Georgina Kleege, psychologist Donald Kirtley, and a dictionary. By writing the comment and publishing it in an academic journal, Bolt further assumed a role of authority. Wittenstein, himself an authority figure--that is, the

superintendent of the California School for the Blind--deferred authority to those who are blind. The third comment (Bolt, 2004) in this sequence of responses revealed to me--and presumably to Wittenstein--another authoritative aspect of Bolt's writing: his blindness.

The authors of these comments are two authorities on blindness discourse, yet each has his own viewpoint on what terms should be used and who should determine the use of the terms. I assume that Wittenstein did not realize that Bolt was blind when he wrote his letter to the editor. Had Wittenstein known, would he have joined the conversation? Perhaps not. This chance does not negate the argument, however, since Wittenstein incited, albeit briefly, an argument for continuing the debate: Who gets to choose descriptors about blindness?

My purpose is to enter the debate at this point, although I hold no authority about what it means to be blind. I am not legally blind, so my part of the conversation comes from the perspective of that of a sighted rhetorician who advocates for disability rights. However, I must presently turn away from that advocacy and lean on the first half of my own self-ascription. As a rhetorician, I am concerned with the use of language: how it constructs power for some and thus how it subjugates others. I may ask myself, Why do I have authority to speak about the discourse of blindness? To answer this question briefly, I turn to another rhetorician, Glenn (2004), who noted in the introduction to her book, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, that

the complexity and difficulty in naming, ascribing, and identifying roles is beyond me, beyond any one of us. Whatever attributions I associate with myself resonate with some sort of overarching governing narrative by which I figure and refigure my bodily, social, and intellectual selves. If I cannot handle identifying myself, can I claim to identify others? (p. xxii)

My authority, then, comes from an attempt to understand how the power of language shapes and is shaped by reality, not from an attempt to seek the authority to label.

On this issue, I do not side with Bolt or Wittenstein--although I may agree with each on certain points--in their question, Who gets to choose? I only examine arguments that are related to this question to ask other questions: What does authority mean within a discourse community? What if everyone within the community does not agree on terminology? Does that disagreement negate the ideology of the whole community? If Wittenstein (2004) asserted that "the blind" should "lead the terminology decision-making process" (p. 133), who is he talking about? All blind people? Or perhaps someone in the blind community who has the authority to lead the process? As with every discourse community, leaders will emerge and others will follow--or resist.

## **Authority and utterance**

To analyze authority within blindness discourse, I follow literary theorist Bakhtin's notions of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses and his theory of utterance. Bakhtin (1989) discussed two modes of discourse. The first, authoritative discourse,

demands that we acknowledge [the authoritative word], that we make it our own; it binds us.... The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. (p. 342)

Furthermore, "authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it" (Bakhtin, 1989, p. 343). In other words, the authoritative word is fixed. This fixed discourse helps to solidify the ideologies

of a community: Members share the same values, beliefs, language, and terminology.

Contrasted with authoritative discourse is the second form, an internally persuasive discourse. The internally persuasive word, according to Bakhtin (1989),

is half-ours and half-someone else's. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition. (p. 345)

Once words are uttered, orally, in writing, or through some communicative agency, they are no longer fully the originator's words.

Bakhtin (1986) termed these communicative means "utterances," which can be any signifier-signified relationship: a textbook, everyday conversation, or even people who are alone with their thoughts. The important thing to know about utterances is that they do not exist in themselves. A sentence, for example, is not an utterance unless it is responded to or somehow becomes attached to meaning. "I am visually impaired" is a sentence, but its constituent four words mean nothing until the person who is stating the sentence is responded to. It is the perception of blindness that makes a person blind, whether it is a self-perception or the perception of others, and that perception is presented through some response. A boy may grow up without the perception that he has low vision because he sees the world through this impairment as "normal." He does not have any other comparable screen through which to view his world. It is not until, for example, his father witnesses through his own "normal" eyesight that his son is stumbling or performing something that is not "quite right" that his father may suggest, on the basis of his own notion of what "normal" vision is, that his son's vision should be checked. The father's action is a response to his son's

performative sentence--in this case, the son "acting" visually impaired--that fulfills the utterance. There is now meaning to the sentence, an utterance.

Utterances, then, have a history. They exist because someone has uttered words before and someone else takes them into the future, adding to their meaning. For Bakhtin (1986, p. 69), "any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances." There is a sense of intertextuality because "all texts are interdependent: We understand a text only insofar as we understand its precursors" (Porter, 1986, p. 34). Intertextuality defies the notion of a true, single author, since all texts, all utterances, are born from and incorporate other texts. Porter, a composition theorist, gave the example of the writing of the Declaration of Independence, whose author was historically believed to have been Thomas Jefferson. Yet tracing the document reveals other sources, such as a First Continental Congress resolution, a Massachusetts Council declaration, and even a colonial play (p. 36). Although we can agree that Jefferson had an authority that gave him the ethos to write the Declaration of Independence, we cannot ignore the fact that there were other authors/authorities whom he consulted. Thus, according to Porter, "authorial intention is less significant than social context; the writer is simply a part of a discourse tradition, a member of a team, and a participant in a community of discourse that creates its own collective meaning" (p. 35). Through these theories of utterances and intertextuality, then, one can consider how blindness discourse becomes debatable: There is no one "true" terminology that can be used, for every word and its meaning beget another word and meaning that someone will disagree with.

## **The debate begins**

To reiterate, Bolt (2003) proposed an alternative phrase to *the blind: persons with a visual inhibition*. He cited Jernigan, former

president of NFB, who argued against the person-first principle that is advocated by many people with disabilities. According to Bolt, NFB argues that the phrase *people who are blind* is "unacceptable as a form of political correctness," amounting to a "strained and ludicrous endeavor to avoid such straightforward, respectable words as *blindness, blind, the blind, blind person, or blind persons.*" Bolt countered the NFB argument, saying that one of those "straightforward, respectable words" [*blind*] is anything but straightforward (quoted in Bolt, 2003, p. 519). As proof, Bolt referred to a dictionary definition of *blind*, citing 13 entries in a 1999 edition of *Encarta World English Dictionary* (1999). Only one definition, he said, is related to the medical condition. Ten of the entries focus on metaphorical meanings, relegated to the pejorative. Thus, to get away from the pejorative meanings ascribed to *the blind*, Bolt considered the phrase *persons with a visual inhibition*.

Wittenstein (2004) responded to Bolt by asking, "Why not let the blind decide how they would like to be identified?... (sp)Let the blind decide for themselves." He further argued, "Society should affirm the rights of the blind to follow that process of self-determination and let the blind lead the terminology decision-making process" (p. 133). The use of these three instances of "letting" within a three-paragraph letter may demonstrate Wittenstein's adamancy that non-visually impaired people should not choose what to call those who are visually impaired.

Wittenstein did not mention whether he is blind or not, but since he is a superintendent of a school for blind students, one can assume that he is at least an advocate. Of course, it would be logistically impossible for blind people to agree unanimously on an appropriate term to call themselves. But Wittenstein did not argue for this impossibility. He argued that one person alone cannot choose terminology that encapsulates a multitude of other people. Perhaps Wittenstein did not realize that Bolt himself is blind. Bolt (2003) did not mention this fact in his initial comment.



He did so, however, in his 2004 response. Mentioning his own blindness in his original comment may have given Bolt more credibility and thus no reason for Wittenstein's response. However, Bolt, in this new comment, addressed Wittenstein's concern, saying,

I am tempted to ask just who is being encouraged to do this "letting." I am tempted to assert that innovative, egalitarian ideas can be advanced by all persons, irrespective of high or low visual acuity. I am tempted to argue that "the blind" do not exist, that there is no such homogeneous group. Instead I will play by the same rules as Wittenstein and simply agree that "the blind" should indeed lead the discussion on terminology. (p. 134)

One could argue that Bolt's publishing of a set of temptations is, in reality, fulfilling those temptations. They are intent. But Bolt backed away from it, calling Wittenstein's game--and authority--by "playing by the same rules," as if the whole matter were a sport.

It may be just that, at least metaphorically. Bolt played with the words, modifying their forms, trying to pitch us something "appropriate." In "The Terminology Debate Continues" (2004), he stated that he also proposed the form *persons with inhibited vision*, a phrase that is not much different from his original, *persons with a visual inhibition*. Bolt personally received many responses to his initial proposal. He noted that disabilities scholar Lennard Davis, for example, advised that "the word *inhibited* has connotations of someone who is repressed and awkward" (p. 133). Bolt struggled to find some neutral phrase and suggested "the only accurate umbrella term,... (sp)persons with visual disabilities" (p. 134). This "resolution" finally yielded Bolt's sense of authority, since he stated at the end of this response that he has been "registered as blind for nearly 20 years, which makes [him] as much a representative of 'the blind' as is anyone else, and though [he] is not exactly leading, [he] certainly will go on

contributing to the debate" (p. 134).

## **The debate deconstructed**

The concept of the utterance is important throughout these three texts. All three responses--and I can assign Bolt's first comment as a response to the historical debate over terminology, even though he introduced the topic in this set of articles--become utterances through their interplay with each other. Within each text, though, there is also a sense of utterance. Bolt's first comment invoked the authorities of many agents, as I noted earlier. Wittenstein invoked "the blind" as an authoritative entity and suggested his own authority as a superintendent. Bolt's second comment called on other scholars who personally responded to him. These intertextual performances heightened the sense of authority by "attempting to gain authority in their writing by citing other authors" (Clough, 1996, p. 24).

At the same time, though, these textual performances complicate the notion of authority. Taking Bakhtin's (1989) theory of authoritative discourse, for example, there is no room to play with words. Words have a history that has set them in place within the discourse community. There is, according to this definition, a consensus on which words will be used and which will not. However, as can be seen in his two comments, Bolt (2003, 2004) could not gain a consensus with himself. He allowed other authorities in disability studies to comment upon his own, and he was grateful for these comments, since his purpose was to stimulate conversation about issues of terminology.

Stimulating conversation negates absolute authority. If there is no conversation, the debate must be settled, and someone or some entity has "won" absolute authority over that argument and has maintained that a consensus has been reached. Authority, though, is somehow shared and becomes, in that sense, a set of utterances



itself. Discourse communities, like the blind, may never come to a consensus; however, Harris (1989, p. 20), a composition scholar, noted that "one does not need to have consensus to have a community. Matters of accident, necessity, and convenience hold groups together as well." In essence, then, discourse communities do not break down because members disagree with a proposed language that may be set out to "define" the community. Although Wittenstein (2004) advocated that "the blind" should lead the decision-making process, he ignored the point that not all members of that community will agree. Bolt (2003, 2004) understood this assertion, since he continued to labor over his own neologisms--expressions that he himself created. There are, however, entities that suggest that there is a consensus, those whom discourse theorist and philosopher Foucault (1976, p. 225) would call "fellowships of discourse," "whose function is to preserve or to reproduce discourse, but in order that it should circulate within a closed community, according to strict regulations, without those in possession being dispossessed by this very distribution." First, though, a consensus must be reached as to which language is going to be preserved. Using Bakhtin's (1986) theory of the utterance, one can see that language has a history, that it must come from somewhere, even though Bakhtin himself may disagree, since he said that the history of that language has already been acknowledged and fixed, as if it had existed all along. Despite this contradiction, one can apply theories of authoritative discourse to one of Bolt's intertextual authorities, the NFB.

## **Resolutions?**

The 1993 NFB convention drew up many resolutions within the organization's constitution. One, Resolution 93-01, states,

We believe that it is respectable to be blind, and although we have no particular pride in the fact of our blindness, neither do we have any

shame in it. To the extent that euphemisms are used to convey any other concept or image, we deplore such use. We can make our own way in the world on equal terms with others, and we intend to do it. (NFB, n.d., para. 28)

Some of the charges against these euphemisms include the following:

Some [euphemisms] (such as *hard of seeing*, *visually challenged*, and *people with blindness*) [are] totally unacceptable and deserv[e] only ridicule because of their strained and ludicrous attempt to avoid such straightforward, respectable words as *blindness*, *blind*, *the blind*, *blind person*, or *blind persons*." (para. 24, italics added)

Bolt (2003) cited this charge against the use of euphemisms in his initial comment and supported his claim by citing another, textual authority: "The briefest analysis of any dictionary definition will reveal the word *blind* to be neither straightforward nor respectable" (p. 519).

The NFB further disagreed with the use of politically correct terms for the sole purpose of being politically correct: "The recent trendy, politically correct form does the exact opposite of what it purports to do since it is overly defensive, implies shame instead of true equality, and portrays the blind as touchy and belligerent" (para. 25). In addition, NFB is against the "person-first" movement, which, as the name asserts, puts the person before the disability, such as Bolt's effort, *persons with a visual inhibition*. NFB believes that "person-first" is "harmless and not objectionable when used in occasional and ordinary speech but [is] totally unacceptable and pernicious when used as a form of political correctness to imply that the word *persons* must invariably precede the word *blind* to emphasize the fact that a blind person is first and foremost a person" (para. 24, italics added). It may be difficult, though, to judge the difference between "occasional and ordinary speech" and "political correctness." Becoming aware of political correctness, however

flawed its concept may be, may be second nature for some and may be incorporated into "ordinary" speech.

NFB's authority develops in many ways through this resolution and elsewhere. First, NFB (2005) stated that it is "the nation's largest and most influential membership organization of blind persons," 50,000 members strong (para. 1). Second, the use of "we" throughout the resolution suggests a collectivity, pronouncing the authority of the whole, not of individual representatives. Every member, supposedly, agrees with the intentions of the resolution. Even though any member can initiate a resolution, the Resolutions Committee votes to pass or not to pass the resolution to a full vote by participating members at the national convention. However, only 2,500 to 3,000 members participate at each annual convention (Linda McCarty, NFB public relations director, personal communication, May 4, 2005). The "we" in this case may be those who were present to vote, but the "we" does not necessarily mean that only those who voted agree with the resolution's remarks. On the other hand, it does not prove that there is a consensus among all the members. Third, NFB's critique of euphemisms displays authority over others outside its organization. By claiming that members of the community can make their own way in the world on equal terms with others takes them out of the realm of their own community, since they must, for example, live and work with those others. However, does the resolution as a community-written document do any good only within the community? Must it not be published elsewhere, outside the NFB, to effect change in the attitudes of those whom NFB is addressing?

McCarty (personal communication, May 4, 2005) could "find no evidence that [the resolution] was circulated beyond [NFB] membership." But, she said, "it is publicly available in our printed literature and on our web site." However, the general public must know to go to the web site to retrieve the resolution. Since this

document is not distributed beyond the membership, the resolution becomes a form of authoritative discourse, in which decisions are made to preserve the language and customs of the community. The authors of the resolution, the Resolutions Committee, and the voting membership thus become part of a fellowship of discourse. The resolution, then, as Bakhtin (1989, p. 343) would put it, "permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders [outside the discourse community],... (sp)no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it."

To support this analysis, McCarty and NFB "hold [their] ground" when asked why they do not use more politically correct words. At the same time, NFB, according to McCarty, must "compromise"--or, in her terms, "when compromise is called for," putting the emphasis on someone else's authority, in this case, a corporation--"as with a recent press release we issued about Merck & Co., Inc., receiving NFB Nonvisual Certification of its web site. Merck's diversity chief prefers to use [the expression] 'people who are... (sp),' so we used both 'blind people' and 'people who are blind' throughout the press release." This dialogic creates what Bakhtin called an internally persuasive discourse, when the words become half-ours and half-theirs. Merck and NFB, then, must share authority and power for their desire to use what each feels is the appropriate terminology. Concepts of authority, in this case, must move away from "autonomy, individual rights, and abstract rules" toward "a model based on dialogue, connectedness, and contextual rules" (Mortensen & Kirsch, 1993, p. 557).

## **Other agents of authority**

Along with NFB, governmental and social service agencies have attempted to spread the "appropriate" expressions for people with disabilities. Yet all of these agencies do not agree. For example, the Office of Disability Employment Policy of the U.S.

Department of Labor (USDOL, 2002) issued a fact sheet that delineates "affirmative" from "negative" uses of certain terms, stating that the negative term *the blind* should be replaced by *person who is blind* or *person who is visually impaired*. In this case, the USDOL took on the person-first stance, which NFB diligently criticized. The USDOL also stated that "group designations such as 'the blind,'... (sp)are inappropriate because they do not reflect the individuality, equality, or dignity of people with disabilities" (para. 2). NFB has no problem with this group designation, since it appears in its very name.

Furthermore, the Research and Training Center on Independent Living (RTC/IL, 2001), which aided the USDOL in compiling the fact sheet, published the detailed *Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities*. The introduction states, "As professional communicators, educators, and human service providers, you are in a unique position to shape the public image of people with disabilities" (para. 1). In this statement, the authors are shaping our own images of how we write and communicate by authorizing us to follow "preferred terminology." They "offer suggestions for appropriate ways to describe people with disabilities. The guidelines reflect input from over 100 national disability organizations and has [sic] been reviewed and endorsed by media and disability experts throughout the country" (para. 2). Here, we see other utterances that have helped to form the guidelines, including an endorsement from those who have historically been criticized for disability misrepresentation: the media. Yet, even though the media are endorsing the guidelines, they are not strictly enforcing them, since media outlets continue to appeal to the emotions and pocketbooks of consumers who read stories about, for example, "supercrips"--a term that some people with disabilities ascribe to the media's representation of those who have "overcome" their disabilities or are "superachievers" despite having a disability. With the intertextuality of input from other authorities--the media, other

disability groups, and the RTC/IL's assistance to the USDOL--the authors of the guidelines are establishing their own authority.

The authors of style guides, then, attempt an authoritative discourse by suggesting that seemingly everyone use the terms they "prefer" or find "affirmative" or "appropriate." But what are we others to do when the very discourse communities, whom many of us would like to help, do not agree on what terminology should be used? If Wittenstein advocates that the blind should choose how they would like to be described, what "blind" is he talking about? Again, not all blind people will agree on the same term. Some blind people, in fact, may unknowingly be represented by authorities within their own communities as to which language should be applied to them. If not every member of NFB votes on a resolution to state the organization's dismissal of euphemisms and person-first ascriptions, then we do not know if every member agrees. Furthermore, the authors of the USDOL and RTC/IL guidelines are speaking for many people with disabilities, the latter organization acknowledging that there is only a consensus--if *consensus* means "a general understanding." There are some communities of people with disabilities, then, who will not agree with that consensus, NFB being one.

## **The debate continues**

The purpose of this article is not to say that we others should disregard these pleas to use "affirmative" language when referring to people who are blind or anyone with a disability. We should think about the ways in which we represent the blind. As I wrote the previous sentence, I had to consider which road to take: toward NFB, which would not mind if I used *the blind*, or toward the RTC/IL, which would. As we stop to consider the words we choose, which is one of the tenets of rhetoric, we always have to consider our reasons for using specific expressions. Bolt certainly has the right to coin new phrases, just as does anyone else within



the blindness community. Wittenstein has the right to advocate for the blind's choosing their own terminology, just as any of those who are blind has the right to disagree.

Authority is socially constructed; it is not individualistic. As we see through theories of utterances and intertextuality, we co-opt our authority with others. Following Porter (1986, p. 35), we must acknowledge that "authorial intention is less significant than social context." I read *authorial* two ways. First, *authorial* means that we author text, and my intention as an author may not always match the expectations or the interpretations of my audience--each audience member brings with her or him a set of ideologies that provides the member with authority. Second, the member and others--parents, friends, those from other relationships--author their own authority, and the member incorporates those authorities into her or his own ideology, just as a writer does by citing many references to support a claim. With this assertion, we can see that authority is shared, bringing us back to Mortensen and Kirsch's (1993) idea that authority is contextual and dialogic.

Furthermore, writers of neologisms must consider what Kirtley (1975) said in his authoritative work, *The Psychology of Blindness*: "It is clear that the anti-blind prejudices of society are built into our very language"; however,

it is doubtful that mere name changing would appreciably mitigate the negative attitudes in question. New terminology is not likely to be effective unless such attitudes have already improved, for without this change, the older, prejudicial meanings would simply become reattached to the liberalized vocabulary. (p. 41)

This last point, I believe, is one of the most important aspects of understanding language: Without a change in attitude about language, without becoming sensitized to the power that language gives us, we will ultimately reapply old notions to new words. And thus the new words will no longer have the effective

meanings they set out to have. If we stop debating over words and their meanings, then we lose the authority over them, and they will continue to have authority over us.

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