Inclusive language

A   Before you read

Read just the first paragraph in the text. Can you think of any examples of inclusive language from German or another language? Why is it important to use inclusive language and to avoid non-inclusive language? Discuss these questions in class.

B   Reading

There is an ever-increasing awareness in society today of the importance of using inclusive language. This is language that does not exclude particular groups of people. It is language which aims to avoid making anyone feel hurt, offended, discriminated against or harmed in any other way. This article looks at how inclusive language works and gives some practical examples of inclusive language in everyday use.

Why is inclusive language important?

But first, why has inclusive language become a part of culture today? The main answer is that society has changed. If we want to live in a society which is fair, we now understand that everybody must have equal rights and everybody must be included. That means including everyone when we speak and write too. Keeping this in mind is especially important for groups of people who have been or are still marginalised or pushed away from the centre. In the past 100 years, movements for women's rights and civil rights have helped focus attention on the importance of equality in society. Other previously marginalised people are those who have a disability, people who are gay and people who for whatever reason do not feel that he/she/ him/her describes who they are. Using inclusive language shows people in marginalised groups that they are in a safe space and that they can be themselves without worrying about prejudice.

How does inclusive language work?

Unfortunately, injustice, prejudice and marginalisation are part of any society. Laws and habits are usually created by the people in power. Their 'traditional' language habits often include some terms which refer to marginalised groups in a disrespectful or even hateful way. Over the past several decades people have become increasingly aware of these bad habits through movements such as the Civil Rights, Black Lives Matter and #metoo movements. Inclusive language aims to avoid these bad habits in a number of ways. These include:

- Remembering that people are not defined by only one aspect of who they are. For example, a person who is deaf is not only hard of hearing: They are everything that anybody else is, plus they are deaf.
- Mentioning characteristics like ability, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or religion only when they are relevant. For example, we don't describe someone as an Asian doctor or a female footballer unless being Asian or female is essential information in the situation. Mentioning those irrelevant characteristics can suggest that, for example, a Muslim police officer is somehow in a different category to police officers who are not Muslims.
- Avoiding generalisations (positive or negative) about groups of people, especially marginalised groups. Generalisations keep stereotypes alive in a culture, and who wants to be stereotyped?

Examples of inclusive language

1. Gender

English has fewer gender-specific job titles than many languages, but there are still some. The suffix *–(r)ess* is much less common than it was, but it still exists in *actress, waitress and* (less frequently now) *manageress and air stewardess*. One inclusive language option is simply not to add *–(r)ess*: There are some female movies stars who refer to themselves as *actors*. Another option is to use a neutral term, such as *server* instead of *waiter/waitress* and *flight attendant* instead of *air steward/stewardess*.

Many job titles have traditionally ended in *-woman/-man: postman, policewoman, fireman, businesswoman, chairwoman* (the leader of a meeting). In these cases, non-gendered alternatives have become more common: *postal worker, police officer, firefighter, businessperson* or just *chair*.

Switching to non-gendered job titles is one of the older examples of inclusive language in English. More recently, there has been more awareness that some people do not feel that their gender identity is either male or female. A gender description some people prefer is *non-binary*. Non-binary people may prefer the pronouns *they* and *them* to *she/he* and *her/him*. For example:

- *Do you know if Charlie's coming to the party?*
- *I spoke to them yesterday, and they said that they'll come if they can.*

When people give their contact details (for example, their address and phone number at the bottom of an email) some also add:
Pronouns: she/her (or *they/them* or *he/him*).

2. Age

Generalisations based on age can also be a form of discrimination, and these have become associated with certain words. In particular, *old person / people* has become associated with negative stereotypes. For example, saying "If you want to know about how society has changed over the years, ask some old people" may seem disrespectful because of associations with those stereotypes. But if *old people* is replaced with *older people* or (more often in American English) *seniors*, then the sentence is no longer felt to be connected with the negative stereotypes of being old and seems more respectful and inclusive.

Even the word *teenager* has become associated with some negative stereotypes, and that may explain why *teen fiction* is now usually described as *young adult fiction*. The replacement words may not actually mean anything very different, but they can seem to be a 'fresh start' that is not connected with stereotyping and prejudice.

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3. Disability

Much of the language traditionally used to describe disability emphasised the disability rather than the person. Inclusive language aims to focus first on the person and second on the disability. Examples include:

traditional, non-inclusive	inclusive
disabled person	person with / living with a disability
in a wheelchair	wheelchair user
disabled toilet / parking / facilities	accessible toilet / parking / facilities
able-bodied person	person without a disability

How we understand people's disabilities has changed too. This is especially true in the area of mental health. In the past, society tended to judge anybody who did not seem 'normal' to be 'mad'. Now there is much better awareness that mental health problems are simply health issues in the same way that physical health problems are health issues.

There is also more acceptance that people whose minds work in a different way – for example, autistic people – are not somehow inferior because of that. This has led to the terms *neurodivergent* (as opposed to *neurotypical*) and *neurodiversity*. It can be argued that much of the world's greatest art and literature has been created by people who were at least to some extent neurodivergent.

4. Sexual orientation

There has traditionally been discrimination against lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people in most cultures around the world. An inclusive approach to referring to people's sexual orientation aims (a) to be accurate and respectful and (b) only to mention a person's sexual orientation when it is relevant to the topic being discussed. For example, in a general conversation "Is Alex gay? He looks gay to me" is probably not respectful or inclusive. It is irrelevant whether or not Alex is gay, and 'to look gay' has no real meaning except to refer to stereotypes. On the other hand, "Has Alex ever experienced any prejudice at work because of being gay?" is fine. Alex's sexual orientation is relevant to the topic and there is no reference to stereotypes.

5. Marriage / partnerships

Miss (like the German *Fräulein*) as the title of an unmarried woman has seemed old-fashioned for many years and has almost completely fallen out of use. Even *Mrs* [ˈmɪsɪz, ˈmɪsɪs], as the title of a married woman, has become less common than it used to be. Both can be replaced with *Ms* [mɪz, məz], which means the exact female equivalent of *Mr* [ˈmɪstə]: It states the gender without saying whether or not the person is married. After all, why should it matter whether the person is married for women and not for men?

Partner is often used instead of *husband/wife* to avoid stating whether two people are or are not married to each other. To avoid saying whether a person's married partner is male, female or non-binary, *spouse* can be used.

6. Ethnicity

The English language unfortunately still includes several racist terms of abuse. The worst racist terms are now considered by many people to be much more offensive than the worst swear words. English also includes words which were not originally intended to be offensive, but are now associated with the colonial era and the prejudiced attitudes of the past. Inclusive language aims to describe ethnic origins in ways which are completely disconnected from racist/colonial era terms. Examples of this include:

- *minority ethnic group*
- *person who is Black, Asian British, Jewish etc.*
- *person of color/colour* (especially in American English)
- *person of mixed heritage*

Black and *Indigenous* may both start with capital letters. For example, *Lily Gladstone became the first Indigenous American to win the Golden Globe award for Best Actress*. Using both words describes not a single, simple aspect of identity, but a connection with an entire cultural heritage.

Takeaway

Culture and language are both constantly evolving, and developments in inclusive language are an important part of that. Inclusive language is relevant to almost all aspects of life. Other areas where awareness and use of it are increasing include religion, physical health issues and physical characteristics such as height, weight and even hair colour. It may seem challenging to learn all the different aspects of inclusive language. One option in an uncertain situation can be to ask a person for their preferred terms (in a sensitive and respectful way, of course).

C   Comprehension

1. Read the text quickly. Choose ✓ the two main things that the text aims to do:
☐ a) to explain the history of inclusive language
☐ b) to explain the reasons for using inclusive language
☐ c) to discuss the pros and cons of using inclusive language
☐ d) to give a complete list of inclusive language
☐ e) to give useful examples of inclusive language

2. Read the text again and choose ✓ the correct words to complete the sentences based on information in the text.

1. Inclusive language is important because it …
☐ a) makes people feel good about themselves.
☐ b) is clearer.
☐ c) tries not to be unfair to people.

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2. Inclusive language mentions people's personal characteristics only when …

☐ a) it is necessary for the topic of discussion.

☐ b) they have given their permission.

☐ c) it is done in a positive way.

3. Gender-specific job titles …

☐ a) have changed or are changing to alternatives.

☐ b) have disappeared from English.

☐ c) can be very confusing.

4. People who identify as non-binary …

☐ a) were some of the first people to use inclusive language.

☐ b) do not see themselves as having one of two genders.

☐ c) may avoid using any pronouns at all.

5. The problem with saying 'old people' is that …

☐ a) many older people seem much younger than their age

☐ b) people only say it when they want to be rude.

☐ c) it can sound prejudiced or even negative.

6. The aim of inclusive language connected with disability is to …

☐ a) avoid defining people by their disability.

☐ b) use language in a more poetic way.

☐ c) avoid irrelevant description.

7. *Ms, partner* and *spouse* …

☐ a) are all very new words.

☐ b) are not yet used very much.

☐ c) all avoid giving some information.

8. *Black* and *Indigenous* may start with a capital letter to show that the words …

☐ a) can be offensive in some situations.

☐ b) describe something important connected with culture and history.

☐ c) can refer to one person or a number of people.

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D Vocabulary

1. Complete the crossword with words from the text that are useful for talking about this topic. If you need help, check the anagrams below.

1. treating people unfairly because of who they are
2. pushed away from the centre of a culture
3. judging people because of who they are
4. a smaller ethnic group in a culture is an ethnic _____
5. does not exclude anybody
6. (across) a comment about a whole group of people in a society
6. (down) whether a person is male, female or does not identify as either
7. a word that avoids saying whether or not a couple are married
8. a person who does not identify as male or female may describe themselves as non-_____
9. a false or very simple image of people from a group in a society
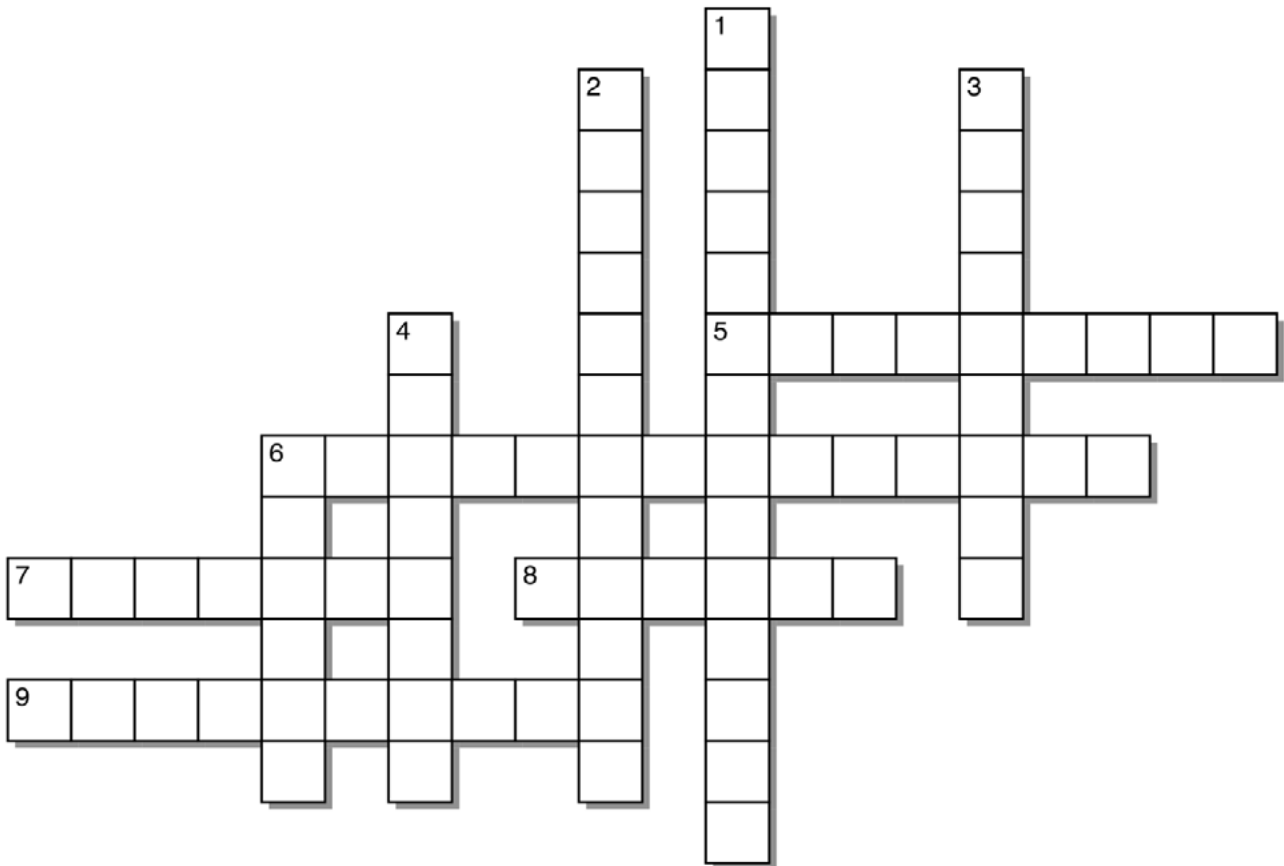
Anagram clues: 1 nimatoniscidir, 2 slainrigdame, 3 creejupid, 4 rontiyim, 5 sincivule 6 (across) realtinonagies, 6 (down) drenge, 7 naprert, 8 nayrib, 9 toyresteep

2. Highlight/underline all the examples of inclusive language in the text.

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E   Speaking

Discuss these statements. How much do you agree/disagree with them? Give your reasons.

1. Non-inclusive language isn't really a problem. They're only words, and words can't hurt you.
2. Inclusive language has a very important part to play in making society fairer.
3. There's so much inclusive language that it's impossible to remember it all.

F   Writing

Imagine that the statements in E above are statements that have been posted on the internet. Write a reply to each comment. You can give a strong opinion, but be polite!

A   Before you read

In German we see the *Gender-Sternchen* (Kellner*in, Geflüchtete*r) every day. Many people have become used to reformulating gender-specific words to make their language more inclusive, e.g. using plurals *Lernende* und *Lehrpersonen* or neutral terms like *Lehrkraft*. Gradually more and more people are also becoming aware of inclusive terms such as *indigene Menschen*, *neurotypisch* or *Transgender*.

C   Comprehension

1.   b & e
2.   1 c, 2 a, 3 a, 4 b, 5 c, 6 a, 7 c, 8 b

D   Vocabulary

1 discrimination, 2 marginalised, 3 prejudice, 4 minority, 5 inclusive, 6 (across) generalisation, 6 (down) gender, 7 partner, 8 binary, 9 stereotype

E   Speaking / F   Writing

Individual responses. If students have understood the text, they might be expected to at least mostly agree with statement 2 and at least mostly disagree with statements 1 & 3. Written responses should use polite language to express points of view clearly and in a logically structured way.