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# **The power of language to confine or transform society's view of dyslexia.**

Language plays a major part in shaping peoples' attitudes and beliefs. In terms of linguistic studies and semiology, language creates and organises ways of looking at the world. Therefore language is a very persuasive tool in shaping our views and producing meaning through its codes and conventions.

Consequently, if we observe the conventional language around dyslexia we are met with the vocabulary of 'disability', 'impairment', 'difficulty', 'struggle', and unsurprisingly dyslexia is perceived by the world as a terrible affliction to be pitied. Imposing this negative language on this 'specific learning disability' formalises our view, and presents a false image of dyslexia to society in general.

We see the most influential vocabulary in the media where the negative language reaches its widest audience. Examples of famous people with dyslexia can be very encouraging and yet we are bombarded by stories of adversity and language where celebrities 'battled' with their 'disability' and 'despite suffering' from dyslexia they 'finally overcame' their 'difficulties'.

This negativity has strong implications for dyslexic people, and can even be accused of being ethically damaging, fuelling issues of poor self-esteem and low expectations.

In Saussurian terms what is 'signified' is that dyslexia is an almost insurmountable ordeal. These negative definitions are self-reinforcing, perpetuating an endless cycle of failure. Society has little expectation in the 'struggling' dyslexic's academic achievement and career opportunities.

In my own work with students with dyslexia, I can clearly see that these linguistic habits that shape peoples' attitudes frustrate and anger intelligent and ambitious individuals. These students are dismayed, and at worst demoralised, by the negative language around what they feel is their learning *difference* to be worked *with* rather than overcome. How can they 'overcome' something that is part of who they are and how they think?

If they confidently declare their dyslexia they are invariably faced with people who have absorbed these negative images and react in hushed tones with concern and sympathy. Well-meaning comments like 'it must be a terrible struggle' negate the hard work and achievements of these individuals. They don't want to be patronised or considered unable to achieve equal or better academic results than their peers. As one student has stated in frustration, 'what I don't like about having dyslexia is that people don't understand it'.



I am not dismissing the challenges that dyslexic students face to achieve their successes, far from it. Dyslexia may complicate life a little but it doesn't deserve this language of suffering around it. My wish is to emphasise that with the right intervention, support and hard work these negative terms don't equate with the reality of the dyslexic experience.

We need to reframe dyslexia as a learning *difference*, not only remaining realistic and recognising the difficulties dyslexics encounter, but also acknowledging the strengths, creativity and natural abilities of these right-hemispheric brained individuals.

To quote the neuroscientist Baroness Susan Greenfield, 'If we are to place more of a premium on creativity in the future, we should be mindful to preserve and celebrate the inherent, untaught abilities of people with dyslexia.' (*The Guardian*, 2006)

So how do we combat this powerful negative language that permeates dyslexia?

If language has such power to shape our attitudes then surely we can immerse the language around

dyslexia with positive, encouraging signifiers. We can influence linguistic choices and transform the perception of this learning 'disability'.

We can re-educate large numbers of people through the media and specialised training. We have a responsibility as educators, parents, and professionals to dispel this negative, demoralising vocabulary. It is in society's interest and for the self-esteem of 10% of the population that we insist on new definitions and language to transform notions of dyslexia.

Let's start by labelling dyslexia as a *different ability* rather than a disability, a learning *difference* rather than a difficulty. It is a different way of processing and seeing the world and should be celebrated.

The last word should go to one of my students who recently graduated with a degree in Energy Engineering: 'It's not a disability, it's an attribute.'

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(Linguistic studies reference - Jonathan Culler, *Saussure*, Harvester Press, 1976)

## B.D.A. Accreditation

There are two levels of qualification for qualified teachers:

### Diploma in SpLD, level 7.

A higher level post graduate course lasting approximately one year part time. This can lead to AMBDA status (Associate Member of the British Dyslexia Association).

### Certificate in SpLD, level 5.

A course lasting approximately one year part time. This can lead to ATS (Approved Teacher Status). Teachers completing this level can go on to complete the second part of the Diploma course.

Both Diploma and Certificate courses can be taken at either pre16 level or FE/HE level.

### Practicing Certificates

Candidates completing the Diploma course are eligible to apply for a Practising Certificate to carry out diagnostic assessments, including those for Disabled Students' Allowances, and assessments for Access Arrangements for examinations according under the JCQ regulations.

### Professional Membership

There are also a range of Professional Membership levels available to teachers to augment their Accreditation status and gives the individual full membership rights of the B.D.A..