6 ways to practice better language habits

Understand that many words have racially motivated origins

Look into their history and use them (if ever) appropriately. For example ‘gyp’ refers to being cheated, however it is a reference to the term ‘gypsy’ who are a group of people stereotyped as cheaters and scammers. Another example is ‘barbarians,’ which refers to an uncivilized brutish person however ‘barbarian’ originated in ancient Greece and referred to non-Greek speakers.

Pay attention to labeling and language use

Common triggering language, labeling stereotypes, and jargon terms to know and generally avoid include:

- Geographical -- first world, third world, developing and developed countries
- Mental health -- OCD, depression, suicide, and retard
- People’s origins and groups of people -- immigrant and expat, ex-con and ex-felon, uppity, terrorist, and exotic
- Racial and racist vocabulary -- N-word, thug, and tribe
- Development and aid jargon -- in the field, beneficiaries

Look out for your biases

Many tend to biasly associate foreign accents with inferior culture or education, partly due to our brain using more power to process foreign accents thus deeming them inferior, and partly due to negative reinforcements of certain accents in the media.

Be aware of manipulative language

Language has the power to shape and manipulate thought, so many take advantage of that to advance their own agenda. For example many politicians use the term ‘welfare’ under negative light even thought it was a positive term successfully used in the United States by FDR to promote public responsibility. Due to language manipulation, ‘welfare’ became such an intensely hated term, that in a poll, people thought government should increase “assistance to the poor” but decrease “welfare.”

Be inclusive, and don’t use jargon in your language

Many professionals in the development field use highly jargonized language that not only excludes those they are they are trying help, but others who are not professionals in the field.

Teach kids language that does not generalize and stereotype

Did you know when adults make a generalized statement about a population such as, “boys have short hair,” children develop stereotypes about ‘all boys’ being a single distinct social group who are all the same.

LensShift is committed to addressing misguided social impact work and misguided perceptions. We do so by facilitating learning, critical reflection and discourse on social change. Learn more at lensshift.org.