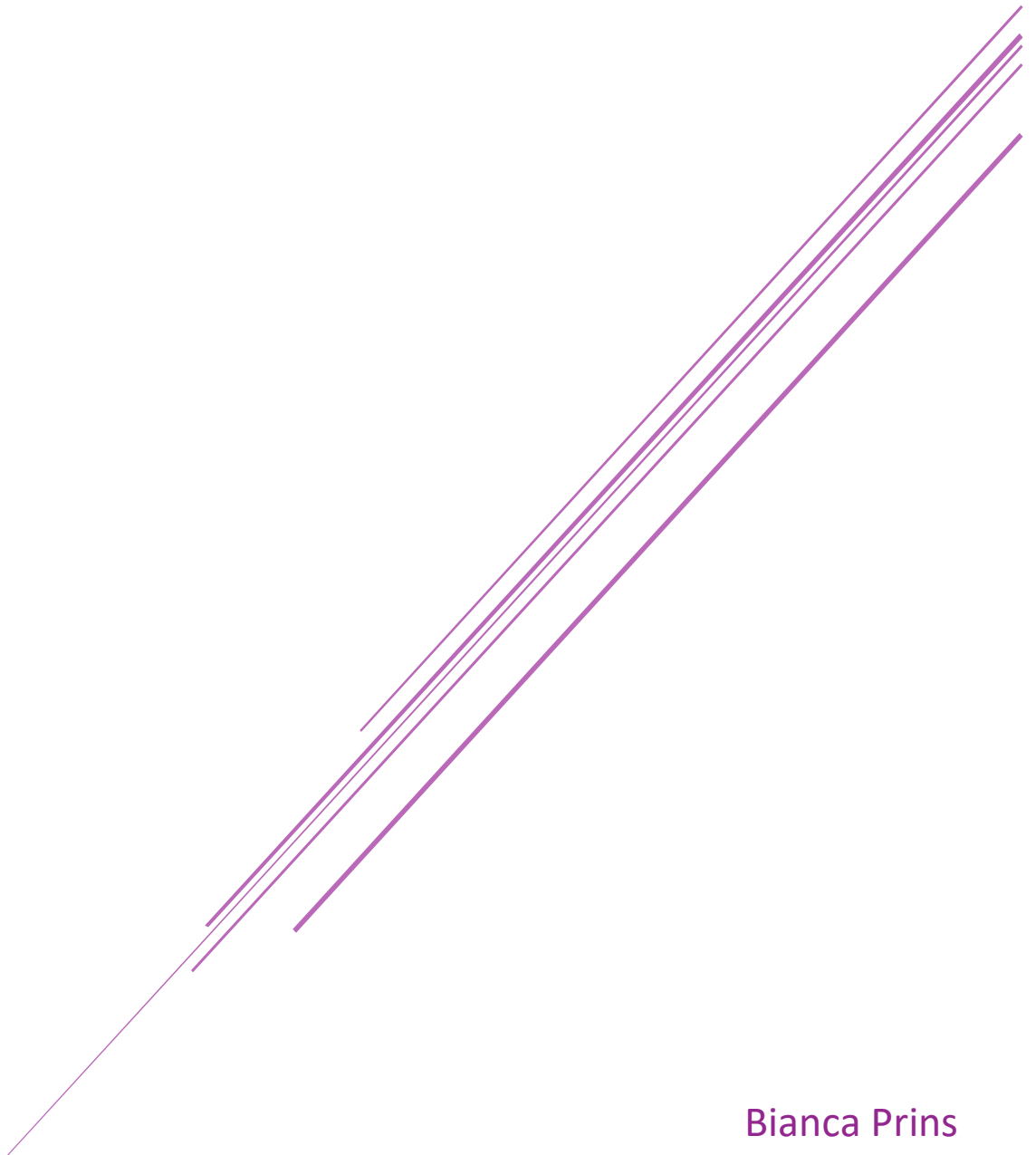


INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

In Business Communication



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Inclusive Language – in business

This document is set to become a base for the application of inclusive language within business, with information resources and articles about the impact of exclusion by language, unintended discrimination and micro aggressions.

This document can be revised over time, in recognition that the disability community views can change over time. Current version December 2021

Background of this research

Since I've been working as accessibility expert, I've been looking into the use of inclusive language in business. Which language type will be supported and is preferred by the disability community and customers of corporate businesses with a disability? We found that the use of language differs amongst international markets and is highly dependent on cultural background. For example, many businesses use British English and highly focused on identity first at the same time mainland Europe and the US mainstream uses people first language. This might seem like a small difference, not for the people of minorities who feel excluded when 'others' identify them by their disability. It's simply said, 'not polite' and can even be experienced as stigmatizing. Which can damage your brand immensely. This brings us to the difference is use of language.

People First Language (PFL) versus Identity First Language (IFL)

It's a general accepted belief that PFL originated in the medical society and IFL from the social model movement in the disability community. Research does not support this assumption, as we found that PFL is actually originated from the Civil Rights Movement (US) in the sixties and was officially introduced in the [Denver Principles](#) (1983) by the self-empowerment movement of the People with AIDS, and advocated for by the US disability community in preparation to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The medical community started to use PFL later, the first official documents date from the late eighties.

Key findings on the preferred use of PFL:

- In prevention of the use of labels or adjectives to define someone
- Prevents unintentional exclusion by marginalization (for example, not our target group)
- Puts the person first, not being a victim of a disability instead being a person who happens to have a disability
- Most disability communities support PFL, as they do not wish to be identified by their disability

Key findings on the preferred use of IFL

- The deaf community, with accompanying culture and identity, often prefer to be reached out to in IFL
- The autism community, as people with autism often connect their autism to their identity, often prefer IFL
- Considering the Social Model movement, IFL creates equity

The difference in PFL and IFL can best be explained as:

- PFL: putting the person before the diagnose/disability in pursuit of equality and dignity
- IFL: positioning a disability as identity of the person as they do not view their disability as an inability (specifically people with Autism and hearing disabilities)

Use of language in international organisations

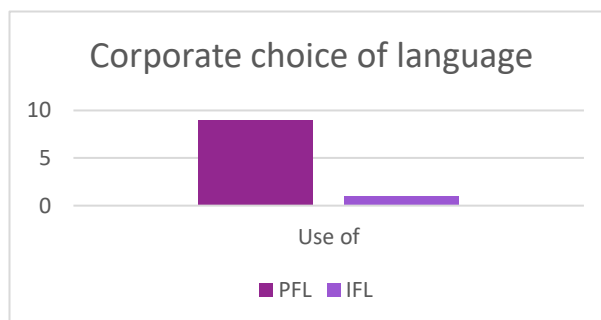
Researching into the use of language by organisations such as the Worldbank, UN and ILO, we found that that these organisations only use PFL in their public communications. We do find that relief organisations originating in the UK often use IFL in their communications, this includes Cordaid and some African based organisations. In general, most specialized organisations in disability inclusions use PFL in their communications.

Research into businesses lead us to the interesting finding that even many UK based global organisations prefer the use of PFL in their communications. As short overview below:

The Global 5 frontrunners in support of disability inclusion and accessibility use PFL in their communications, in prevention of stigma and exclusion of people with a disability.

- Accenture
- EY
- Microsoft
- Unilever
- JP Morgan Chase

Further research into the use of PFL versus IFL in business leads to the following results in the [Investopedia top 10 of largest businesses worldwide](#). The list of businesses: Walmart, China Petroleum & Chemical Corp, Amazon, apple, CVS Health Corp, Shell, Berkshire Hathaway, Toyota Motor Corp, Volkswagen all use PFL and Petro China uses IFL in their corporate communication.



Use of language in by governments

Researching the use of PFL versus IFL by governments learns that

- IFL is used by the United Kingdom and Scottish government
- PFL is used by the USA, Australia, Ireland, Northern Ireland and the European Union

It's interesting to find that the use of IFL is only restricted to the English-speaking UK government and Scotland, where many businesses use UK English in corporate language and do not use IFL in their corporate communications.

Use of language in the international disability community

The businesses, hopefully, follow the disability community, and when continuing research this theory seems to be supported. Most European based disability organisations collectively represented by European Disability Forum (EDF) use PFL in their communication. In the US the use of PFL is standardized in governmental communications based on input of the disability organisations lobbying for the use of PFL. The UK government prefers IFL in their communications, and this seems to be supported by the disability community. Where after inquiries with several disability advocates,

we learned the support for the use of IFL isn't collective, as some find it stigmatizing and excluding if others identify you by your disability.

Since PFL is widely used, and accepted by most of the disability community, without feeling offended by the people preferring IFL. I feel free to conclude that the use of PFL would best fit the wish of the global disability community.

What is disability inclusive communication?

Various resources write about both PFL as IFL as preferred language, and we also need to recognize that local differences can apply. That's what makes it quite difficult to 'do it right for all' as people will have different views based on their personal preferences. In respect of the discussion regarding the background of PFL and IFL it's important to remind ourselves who is the receiver: our customers and employees, and for 1 out of 5 this includes customers/employees with a disability

First note to make is, there is no right or wrong in general communications. As you can learn from the [article about PFL versus IFL](#) in publications. This is mainly due to the difference as described above, it depends if the person identifies him/herself by a disability or prefers to be referred to as person instead of an identity.

Second note is a summary of the [disability style guide](#) set by the *National Center on Disability and Journalism at Arizona State University* which I summarized in the following advice:

- Only use the term disability when it is essential to the story
- When you write in general, use people first language unless the receiver/source request differently (personal setting such as interview)
- When you interview an employee, customer make sure you ask the interviewee which reference the person prefers and state this in the article
- Avoid make up words, these are at high risk of a negative impact on the receiver
- Avoid any references where 'they, their' can be received as not being included

Third note it's important to realize the messaging and role of a business to address the disability community. What is our message and what would we like to see as best outcome?

In general, we address customers and/or employees in our messaging, this means the general message should stay the same as we do not single out customer groups in general communication. When informing customers/employees about specific disability related topics, it's important to make sure we address the disability community without prejudice.

Fourth note might be the most important, when we communicate, we do not wish to marginalize or dehumanize customers and employees, that is why it's important to prevent the use of IFL as a business. The use of PFL reduced the risk of unintentional discrimination, exclusion or addressing the disability community as 'the other' instead of your customer/employee. Which must always be the first position of a person in our messaging, we address our customer and employees and this message can include people with a disability (and other minority groups)

Sixth note, [micro aggression](#) often goes unseen at the same time high impact on the feeling to belong to the business you work for. These vary from 'those with...' putting a group/minority outside the crowd, to 'because he can do it, we're inclusive' because one success does not quantify for an inclusive organization. The last even be negative compliment to the person in question, as he/she may feel as excuse, instead of deserving a job on merits.

Disability Inclusive Messaging

Considering the research done, the learnings about cultural impact of language and following the European and United States based interest groups, international organisations like the United Nations (UN) And International Labour Organisation (ILO). I can strongly advise to use PFL in business communications. As the use of IFL can be received as offensive by most of your markets and the use of PFL does not bring that risk.

Guidelines

In follow up of the advice set by the disability style guide I provide businesses with these guidelines:

- **Use PFL in the forms: person, people, customer, employees with a disability** when your message is directly aimed at the disability community
- For general messaging where you have a specific message to employees with a disability **do not use disabled persons/people, use above PFL instead**
- When messaging directly to the wide disability community, do not use the standard icon of a wheelchair, preferably use the accessibility icon (below) (not all disabilities are visible)
- Include the disability community in your message and preferably **try to avoid the use of those, they** to refer to people with a disability or the disability community in prevention to set people with a disability aside as 'the other'
- When we share an interview with an employee with a disability or customer with a disability, we need to make sure we ask if the employee/customer prefers PFL or IFL in the article and explain this in the article, when disability is not a specific topic we don't emphasize on disability and won't use the term in the article
- Do not use the word impairment, as it states what a person cannot do instead of what somebody can do (except in situations where this is of high importance to the story)

Resources

All resources where consulted in a period between August and September 2021

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