

# Anna Ślebioda

---

## Stigmatized by the language – Linguistic labels of the disabled people in Poland and the United States

---

The Journal of Education, Culture and Society nr 2, 404-412

---

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach  
dozwolonego użytku.

ANNA ŚLEBIODA  
annaslebioda@gmail.com  
Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań,  
Poland

## STIGMATIZED BY THE LANGUAGE – LINGUISTIC LABELS OF THE DISABLED PEOPLE IN POLAND AND THE UNITED STATES

### ABSTRACT

Language is one of the elements that create reality. The following paper aims at showing the role of particular languages in constructing the image of disability. Speaking in a particular way, people portray different items, persons etc. The process of the construction may result in shaping varied attitudes and emerging different labels. The paper is a comparison of words used in the field of disability in two countries: Poland and the United States. The vocabulary comes from two sources: in the case of Poland it is the website *niepelnosprawoni.pl* while in the case of the United States – the resources of Disability History Museum, which are available online. There are two reference points for the analysis. The first one is the Stigma concept by Erving Goffman. It implies stereotyping and labeling. On the other side there is the Other – the idea by Emmanuel Levinas. In turn, the basis of his approach are respect and love. The paper aims at demonstrating in which country the vocabulary used is closer to the Levinas' theory. It is also a try to show where the usage of words may be more challenging.

**Key words:** disability, the Other, Stigma, language

“Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue, a wonderful living side by side can grow, if they succeeded in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole against the sky” (*www.thinkexist.com, 2012*). This quotation by Reiner Maria Rilke is an excellent starting point for the considerations. Because there is undoubtedly the great distance between disability and able-bodiedness. The difference is also supposed to be expressed linguistically. Creating new words for naming new phenomena has been practiced for ages. But the words can be used in different contexts what implies another perception of a phenomenon discussed. The following paper is an attempt to illustrate how the language-based perception of people with disability differs in Poland and the United States. The reference points for the following considerations are the Stigma and the Other – two sociological theories being of very big importance when it comes to disability.

### DEFINITION OF DISABILITY

Before the proper analysis will be performed, we need to clarify some terms. The first one is “disability”. In the United States one of the most important docu-

ments is the Americans *with Disability Act*. According to it, "disability" is understood as follows:

1. A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one of more major life activities of such individual.
2. A record of such an impairment.
3. Being regarded as having such an impairment. (ADA, 1990).

The meaning of the last one clarifies one of the next paragraphs in the Act:

"An individual meets the requirement of "being regarded as having such an impairment" if the individual establishes that he or she has been subjected to an action prohibited under this Act because of an actual or perceived physical or mental impairment whether or not the impairment limits or is perceived to limit a major life activity" (ADA, 1990).

In turn, there are two definitions of disability in Poland: legal (in this case an individual is entitled to obtain a certificate confirming his or her disability) and statistical (which is more subjective because a person assesses own limitations by himself/herself) ([www.niepelnosprawni.gov.pl](http://www.niepelnosprawni.gov.pl), 2012). Last year a new definition was introduced. It comes from the UN convention. According to it, persons with disabilities have long-lasting difficulties with participation in everyday life because of some limitations coexisting with particular barriers (UN 2006).

We can see that this definition as well as the definition from the ADA are similar, because they involve the impact of external barriers, sometimes caused by the society. Is this similarity mirrored also in the language? To answer this question, two reference points will be defined. These are namely the concept of the Other by Emmanuel Levinas (1969) and the theory of Stigma by Erving Goffman (1963). Both of them will be discussed in the next two sections.

## THE OTHER

The concept of the Other was developed by Emmanuel Levinas, a Jewish French philosopher born in Kovno in 1906. His youth took place during the Second World War. Then there is no wonder that experiences from the Nazi period have influenced philosopher's schools of thoughts. Especially that he was Jewish. In the very beginning Levinas' work was not appreciated. The situation began to change in the eighties. Then ethics were again hailed as of great importance. Further reasons are a return to phenomenology and an interest in religious themes. Because of these factors, Emmanuel Levinas has been acknowledged abroad (Simon Critchley & Robert Bernasconi, 2004, Introduction).

For the reason that the ethical issues became for Emmanuel Levinas (1969) of great significance, his teaching is extremely valid for social sciences and interpersonal relations. The concept I would like to write a few words about is the concept of the Other.

At the very first moment of an encounter with other people we discover their faces. The word "face" suggests something visible, either in someone's appearance or in the behavior or in both of them. Erving Goffman, the author of the theory discus-

sed in the next section, defined "face" as an image delineated in terms of approved social attributes (Erving Goffman, 1955). E. Levinas claimed, in turn, that face is not only the visible. It is much more. So, the face of the Other consists of more elements, not only appearance and behavior. It includes also individual's personality, customs, cultural background and many other components. These are the foundations of the otherness. The otherness does not mean any particular aspect of a person. The otherness needs to be treated as a whole (Critchley & Bernasconi, 2004, p. 100).

In the book *Totality and Infinity* E. Levinas provided two opposite terms. "Totality" limits the self and forces it to use different masks. In turn, in the sphere of "infinity", the otherness ignores limits and orders (Critchley & Bernasconi, 2004, p. 140). The Other is assisted in Totality by the face. And the face speaks (Levinas, 1969, p. 40). What does it mean? "The face, expression simpliciter, forms the first word, the face is the signifier which appears on the top of his sign, like eyes looking at you" (Levinas, 1969, p. 153). It shows that the Other is in fact the essence of ourselves. The other individual makes our life meaningful. Besides, he or she is our teacher. "The otherness of the other manifests the impossibility of our own possibilities" (Critchley & Bernasconi 2004, p. 70).

In his later book entitled *Otherwise than Being* the philosopher underscored the role of proximity increasing the distance between me and the Other. The closer to the Other, the more distant we are. In the same volume the face is determined as an enigma. The enigma means here a phenomenon located between the visible and the invisible. This is the bridge to a person we are responsible for (Critchley & Bernasconi 2004, p. 78).

The Other is a person we are supposed to treat in a respectful manner. But acting in this way in the case of the Other with any stigma causes often more difficulties than with non-stigmatized people. Because before a person is perceived as the Other, his/her stigma needs to be managed.

## STIGMA

A Canadian-born sociologist who spread the concept of stigma is Erving Goffman (1963). He studied in the United States. His interests in the stigma of mental illness was caused by personal experience – his wife, Angelica, suffered from a psychiatric disorder that led her to suicide. Although the concept of stigma was developed by ancient Greeks, it was not introduced to sociology until 1895. However, the most influential person in this area nowadays seems to be Erving Goffman. He defined stigma as a "highly discrediting attribute" (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). The word "attribute" can cover different issues: race, ethnicity, appearance. It can be also applied considering disability – the subject of this paper. E. Goffman distinguished three types of stigma: physical, personal and social. Besides, he differentiated between discredited and discreditable persons (Goffman 1963). It is once again the issue of visibility and invisibility. The discredited persons are individuals immediately classified as deviants because the distinctive features are identified at once. In turn, the stigma of the discreditable persons is hidden. The disclosure depends on a stigmatized individual. But if the stigma is discovered by

others, it can cause additional obstacles for this man. Thus it evokes a change of the attitude. This is of course determined by labeling and biases. Irrespective of the type, it always needs to be managed. The management concerns not only an affected person, but also the society. But what does it really mean?

“It should be seen, then, that stigma management is a general feature of society, a process occurring wherever there are identity norms. The same features are involved whether a major differentness is at question, of the kind traditionally defined as stigmatic, or a picayune differentness, of which the shamed person is ashamed to be ashamed. One can therefore suspect that the role of the normal and the role of stigmatized are parts of the same complex, cut from the same standard cloth. . . . One can assume that the stigmatized and the normal have the same mental make-up, and that this necessarily is the standard one in our society; he who can play one of these roles, then, has exactly the required equipment for playing out the other, and in fact in regard to one stigma or another is likely to have developed some experience in doing so” (Goffman, 1963, pp. 130 – 131).

The quotation above touches upon one more issue: every stigma is relative. Its relativity, as well as the otherness, are in some way demonstrated by language. In the empirical part an effort to show it will be made.

## THE UNITED STATES

The American expressions come from the collection of the Disability History Museum. There are many resources within different collections. I chose ten texts connected with physical disability.

At the very beginning the text from a postcard coming from ca. 1900 will be analyzed. On the opposite side of the postcard there is the statement “I am stiff in both hip joints and suffer with curvature of the spine, leaving me bent over permanently in nearly a sitting position. I have in this unfortunate condition existed for many years” ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013). We can conclude that it is a self-description made by a person with disability. It seems to be pretty negative. It can be assumed that this negative evaluation might be caused by the society (considering the time of creating the document).

The passages entitled *Comebacks from Polio* consists of stories about different patients recovered from polio. The attention is paid to the sentence “He was a wheel-chair patient and could do practically nothing for himself” ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013). It is a neutral description of one of the patients. Another patient told: “Instead of a setback polio should be the inception of a comeback to an original goal, from the standpoint of physical as well as mental being” ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013). I decided to quote it, because it shows the mechanism of positive self-perception with regard to disability.

The title of the text *Car of the crippled child* contains the word “crippled”. It means a person who cannot move with limbs or, alternatively, can do it in a limited way. It is regarded nowadays as offensive. The article comes from Elyria Rotary Archives. It concerns the project for children with physical disability. The author seems to be unconscious of using offensive terms ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013).

The next publication comes from *Friends of the Samuel Gridley Howe Library and the Dybwad Family* and is entitled *Are we retarding the Retarded?* ([www.disability-museum.org](http://www.disability-museum.org), 2013). The word "Retarded" is used to describe people with mental health problems. However, the word is, according to dictionaries, regarded as offensive. But at this point it could be perceived as a stylistic element. Then in the text the word "retardation" appears. In the next passage the following expression can be found: "humane treatment of the mentally ill and the mentally retarded" ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013). This distinction may be a little bit confusing. It is unclear, whether "the mentally ill" and "the mentally retarded" are used as synonyms or maybe they were applied to distinguish between really ill people and individuals whose problems seems to be not so serious.

The title of the text *Why a crusade against polio?* suggests that either the author is prejudiced against polio-affected people or writes about people being prejudiced against them. But it may be used also in a positive sense. It is possible that the author does not agree with the way polio is regarded and treated. And the last option is really true. Then it is said about "a group composed of polios". The word "polio" loses the human aspect of the patients. It makes such an impression that this sentence is about the illness itself. Then we have to do with the identification "We who have had the disease and who bear its marks" ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013). In the section "Pledges" the author uses the word "physical handicap". Although "handicap" is a word not welcomed, here the term seems to be applied appropriately. Because he intends to draw readers' attention to barriers constructed by the society And this is the real meaning of the word "handicap" (*Farlex Dictionary* 2013).

The author of the article *The American Public Likes To Be Humbugged - Still Hold Good?* ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013) intended to describe different kinds of circus performance. A two-headed man is described as "the feature of a certain big circus side show" ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013). Then we can read the following sentence: "This man had a head growing out of the top of what we will term his normal head" ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013). In this context the word "normal" seems to be used as if the writer had no idea what should be said at this point. It is obvious to the author that it is an inappropriate word, but has no idea which one needed to be chosen. A similar situation is to be noted in the next sentence: "The upper head was somewhat smaller than the other, with eyes, features, ears, and general conformation apparently normal" ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013). The mechanism can be also observed in another expression: "living curiosity" ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013). Written in quotation mark, it suggests also the awareness of irrelevance for this expression.

The article *Playing Polio at Warm Springs* contains at first glance no labelling expressions. It is about an innovative idea of a cottage for polio affected people. The article was published in 1932 by Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute for Rehabilitation Archives. It is a praise of such an initiative. The language is neutral. What is important, it is the belief of the author. He is convinced about the validity of this idea and for this reason the language cannot be regarded as offensive in this context.

Subsequently I would like to analyze the article *Wonderful letters from abroad* from the *Gazette International Networking Institute*. What is interesting about this short text is the fact that it was written only by people with disabilities. These are their responses to an article on polio published in the same magazine before. A man from Germany wrote "I have been delighted with your letter, especially because it is from a polio patient like myself, a man who is in the best manner instructed in my illness" ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013). We can experience how the patient defines himself. And it is neutral, because it describes only the state of affairs. But what is here also important is a hidden suggestion that individuals affected by certain illnesses are the most entitled ones to deal with this particular issue. It is in some way analogous Mark Oliver's opinion. He claimed that the insider perspective in talking about something is the only true one. Because considering something we are not involved in, reflecting the real state of affairs may be impossible (Oliver 1994, p. 5).

The next excerpt dates back to 1960. It comes from the *Gazette International Networking Institute*. It is an article on a new regulation introduced in the United States within the scope of disability insurance ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013). At the very beginning the expressions used are neutral - "young disabled", "disabled worker". But then we can read about a "severely handicapped worker". Considering the word "handicapped", this is an example of a politically incorrect word. It implies namely only the disadvantaging of socially excluded persons. But it should be mentioned that the intention of the author is here of great importance. If the aim was to underscore the unfairness of the legal system, the word is in the right place. The goal of the writer could be then to stress the maltreating of disabled persons. But on the other hand, it could be also a stylistic element applied in order to not repeat the same word. And such situation is inadmissible.

The last document I would like to analyze dates from 1914. It is entitled *Zip, The "What Is It?" Plays Host to All The Other Circus Freaks* ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013). The title itself does not bring any piece of information that the article is somehow related to disability. But the subtitle gives already a hint about it. Because it is "The Armless Wonder Shows How Useful Are Feet, and Sword Swallower Samples the Knives" ([www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org), 2013). Reviewing a matter of the phrase "armless wonder", it is expected that it will be the name of a circus performer. And in fact, it is. But whilst other names of particular artists indicate their activities, it is an example emphasizing the limitation of the subject. Besides, the word "wonder" signifies the abnormality in this context. Then the expression "armless woman" appears. It is basically neutral, because it names only her feature evoking no associations. In the texts all persons are defined as "freaks". According to *Farlex Dictionary* "freak" is "an abnormally formed organism, especially a person or animal regarded as a curiosity or monstrosity". Considering the fact that the armless woman belongs to this group, she is also regarded by the author as "curiosity". And disability does not mean curiosity at all (*Farlex Dictionary*, 2013).

In the next section I would like to focus on the Polish vocabulary from this field.

## POLAND

In this case finding relevant examples of the language used in relation to disabled people turned out to be more complicated. There is one reason: no Polish source of such data, that would be at least similar to the American one, could be found. Therefore I decided to perform an investigation of ten texts from the website *niepełnosprawni.pl*. These are more current examples of language usage than in the previous section, but they also show the phenomenon of linguistic labeling.

The first article to be analyzed is entitled *Rodzice nie chcą szkoły integracyjnej* [Parents do not accept integrated school] (*www.niepełnosprawni.pl*, 2013). Here the attribute *integracyjna* [integrated] is of great relevance. *Szkoła integracyjna* [integrated school] is a school where able-bodied children and children with disabilities learn together. So, the expression itself evokes rather nice associations. But what can be read, it is true only in the case of persons influenced somehow by the issue of disability. The parents of the children with disabilities reject then the adjective to be used in documents. In their opinion, it functions in a discrediting manner. In this context it can be claimed, that word being a derivation from *integracja* [integration], which is pretty positive, can be perceived as a symptom of some abnormalities.

Maybe it is then no wonder when we read another article on this portal about a Polish politician who concluded that he would not like to send his child to school to such a class, because being together with children with disabilities means the risk of "getting infected".

In a very short paragraph *Nie mów o mnie kaleka* [Do not call me a cripp] (*www.niepełnosprawni.pl*, 2013) pays attention to the linguistic revolution which took place in Poland. The words *inwalida* [invalid] (bringing to mind war in Polish) *kaleka* [cripp], *upośledzony* [handicapped], *kulawy* [lame], *ślepy* [blind], *niedorozwinięty umysłowo* [mentally retarded] (stressing the limitations) were replaced by the terms *osoba niepełnosprawna* [disabled person] and *osoba z niepełnosprawnością* [person with disability]. The latter is much more suitable, because it emphasizes the human aspect, not the limitations.

The report *Z kamerą wśród ludzi* [investigating people] (*www.niepełnosprawni.pl*, 2013) contains a short description of a broadcast entitled *Sprawni inaczej* [The differently abled]. The title is a term used in relation to people with disabilities. It is perceived as politically correct. It is assumed that the usage of such expressions causes a particular group feels better. It is supposed not to underscore that the person is in some way limited. But in fact, it does it. What is here emphasized, it is the otherness. But not in the understanding by E. Levinas. Some borders between able-bodiedness and disability are here created due to this emphasis.

The text *Widzę tylko taniec (taniec na wózku)* [I can see only dance (in a wheelchair)] contains the following sentence: *W niektórych tańcach niepełnosprawni muszą się wykazać nie mniejszymi umiejętnościami niż tancerze sprawni* [In some dances persons with disabilities have to show skills not smaller than the able-bodied dancers]. In my opinion, this statement may a little disconcerting because it theorizes that sometimes it is easier for people with disabilities to dance. It makes a kind of hierarchy placing the able-bodied people a little bit higher.



The article *Co zamula mózg?* [What impedes the brain?] ([www.niepelnosprawni.pl](http://www.niepelnosprawni.pl), 2013) deals with the issue of autostereotypes. A psychologist explains here the mechanism of the linguistic label “niepełnosprawny”. It indicates that an individual does not manage to do a lot of things and does not fit certain activities. Such opinions contribute to the creation of autostereotypes in the mind of people with disabilities. Particular ways of thinking are strengthened by the media where different labels, also the linguistic ones, are used. These are for instance the above mentioned words *kaleka* [crip] and *inwalida* [invalid]. Such a message may cause members of the group feel worse and underestimated.

In the article *Od ofiary do herosa* [From victim to hero] ([www.niepelnosprawni.pl](http://www.niepelnosprawni.pl), 2013) the topic of the image of people with disability is touched upon. My attention was drawn by a couple of titles of press articles on disability. These are: *Każdy ma prawo do szczęścia* [Everyone has the right to be happy], “*Dzieci nie gorszego Boga*” [Children by God who is not worse], *Dzieci niższego Boga* [Children by less important God], *Spisani na straty* [Written off], *Wołanie o pomoc* [Cry for help] and *Wykluczeni* [The excluded]. All terms stress the disadvantaging of this group. For that reason they diminish in some way the worth of these persons..

In a very interesting article on fashion *Moda siadła! Na wózku...* [Fashion is sitting In a wheelchair] there is one sentence that deserves to be analyzed: *Od osób kalekich (nawet od kobiet) nie oczekuje się większego dbania o siebie, bo przecież „mają ważniejsze problemy”* [It is not expected from the crippled persons (even women) that they will groom more intensively, they have “more important problems” yet] ([www.niepelnosprawni.pl](http://www.niepelnosprawni.pl), 2013). Here two phenomena may be observed. The first one is the use of the word *kaleka* [cripple]. Then this sentence shows the way many people think about women with disabilities and contribute to their self-perception. Because it is quite common that they treat themselves as unattractive. Besides, this sentence contains hidden sympathy.

Related to this topic is the article *Niepełnosprawne jest piękne* [disabled is beautiful] ([www.niepelnosprawni.pl](http://www.niepelnosprawni.pl), 2013) containing utterances of women with disabilities on associations between beauty and disability. One of them claims that wheelchair or walker guarantee a brilliant entry and are very impressive, so there is no worry about details catching people’s attention.

*Czas na media* [Media time] ([www.niepelnosprawni.pl](http://www.niepelnosprawni.pl), 2013) contains a description of the image of people with intellectual disabilities. According to the survey performed in 2008 among Polish people, they are perceived as: suffering, unpredictable, sad, slow, loving, aggressive, capable of making friends. As it can be seen, negative features dominate.

## CONCLUSIONS

What can we conclude on the base of the analysis performed? One could say that the texts are so different and come from various periods and therefore cannot be compared. But on the base of these sources a process of constructing the image of disability could be displayed. The paper aimed at answering the question, terminology from which country is closer to the Levinas` approach. And there is no

unequivocal answer. Both languages contain labeling expressions. Everything is context- and user-dependent.

### REFERENCES

- Critchley, S. & Bernasconi, R. (2004). *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Farlex Dictionary: [www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com).
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the Spoiled Identity*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Goffman, E. (1955). On face-work: an Analysis of Social Elements of Ritual Interactions. *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes* 18(3), 213-231.
- Levinas, E. (1990). *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1981). *Otherwise than Being or Beyond the Essence*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Oliver, M. (1994). *Politics and Language. Understanding the Disability Discourse. Paper prepared for inclusion in the MA in Disability Studies Programme: Dept of Psychotherapy, University of Sheffield*. Retrieved from <http://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/files/library/Oliver-pol-and-lang-94.pdf>.
- United Nations (2006), *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. Retrieved from: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>.
- U. S. Congress (1990), *American with Disabilities Act*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm>.
- Disability History Museum (2013): [www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org).