TERMS AND CONDITIONS: DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN NEWSPAPER COVERAGE IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

Historically, terminology has been a site of struggle, with the disability rights movement rejecting, embracing, and coining new terms, mirroring the changing landscape of the lived experiences of persons with disabilities and our deeper understanding of human rights. Word choice is deemed the embodiment of one's positionality, with two broad camps of person-first and identity-first terminology emerging. The media, including the press, plays a significant role in informing the public and forming public opinion, making the language choice and sensitivity of portrayal important features of a newspaper article. This study aimed to critically review selected local newspaper articles in Sinhala, Tamil, and English featuring or referencing disability to explore the use of terms or word choice and conditions or representation. An online database search was conducted to identify relevant articles using a range of search terms. The articles identified were critically reviewed for language use and the portrayal of persons with disabilities using the key principles of simple thematic analysis and through the lens of the models of disability and critical disability theory. The key findings are the use of a plethora of terms to refer to disability, suggesting a lack of cohesion and positionality. The word choice used in the press articles ranges from derogatory and archaic to representative of current terms proposed by the local disability rights movement. The five emergent themes in the portrayal of persons with disabilities were to evoke humor/satire, highlighting inequality as recipients of discrimination, objects of pity, or as inspiration. There is a lack of consistency in the terms used within the local press, though there is a trend towards using less derogatory language. The conditions or representation is mixed, with evidence of the charity model and the social and human rights models to inform the portrayal of persons with disabilities. Both the terms and conditions/representation of persons with disabilities must be informed by the disability rights movement with close links advocated, as well as more disability representation in the field of journalism.

Keywords: Press, Terms, Representation, Disability

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Introduction

'What is in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet is an often quoted Shakespearian line. 'Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can never hurt me' is the adage we grew up hearing in the playground. A spin on this adage by *Robert Fulghum* in his famous book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (1988) reads as 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will break our hearts'. Do the words we use when referencing disability really not matter, as long as the intentions are broadly acceptable? Do words not have the power to hurt, upset, vilify, subjugate, and even exclude people? Can we rise above archaic stereotypical prejudicial pejorative terminology that is inherently pathologizing and disrespectful, on the assumption that the intention is 'not to harm'? Or, do we each have a responsibility to use terminology that signals dignity and respect, mirroring our intention for an inclusive, equal world? The above encapsulates the ongoing discourse on terminology within the discipline of disability studies. In addition, the apparent lack of consensus on terminology, even among persons with disabilities and/or the disability rights movement in different countries, makes navigating the disability terminology a quagmire, particularly for people who do not identify as persons with disability. Is the discussion or preoccupation (depending on which side of the argument you are on) with the terminology or 'political correctness' a global North issue or in the local context, Colombo-centric or the prerogative of the middle classes? Do we in the global South or parents from working-class backgrounds have more pressing existential issues to contend with, making terminology a non-issue? This study reviews the cultural representation of the disability community within selected local newspapers by examining terminology and representation via the lens of critical disability theory.

Literature review

Language choice remains a site of struggle, whether by people identifying as persons with disabilities, the disability rights movement, or people without disabilities. Words continue to be contested, decried, and reclaimed. Isaacson-Kailes (1985) proposes that '…a significant element in the struggle for basic human rights is what people call themselves …Disability culture is the commonality of the experience of living with a disability, and language is one of the keys to acknowledging this culture' (p.5). As in the case of race, gender, and sexuality, terminology related to disability has evolved considerably over time. The changing terminology has paralleled and reflected the prevailing understanding of human rights and fundamental freedoms and mirrored the dominant disability explanatory models.

Disability terminology has been underscored by past or present models of disability that offer a theoretical standpoint. Individual language preferences among people with disabilities may be consistent or at variance with current terms purported by the disability rights movement. Arguably, portrayals and terms used can accentuate prevalent societal stereotypical views and perpetuate ableist tropes of disability. Reiser (2001) notes resistance to language change by the dominant majoritarian community or culture as mere 'political correctness'. For persons with disabilities, this may mean the imposition of terms derived from an ableist perspective.

Auslander and Gold (1999) allege that the terminology used to address persons with disabilities may 'both reflect and influence attitudes towards them.' Overall, there appears to be tension between the terminology proposed by the Disability rights movement versus the language choice of the press. Talking about the US, Haller, Dorries and Rahn (2006) affirm that examining the language choices within media offers insights into whether positive changes in disability-awareness in society is reflected in the media. While this may be relevant by extension to Sri Lanka, it may also be that media

representation informs societal perceptions and transforms attitudes in a bidirectional manner. Therefore, disability terminology can influence both self-perception in persons with disabilities as well as wider societal perceptions about disability (Haller et al., 2006).

In the main, the discussion on terminology within disability studies falls into two arguably broad arguably oppositional categories: person-first terminology and identity-first or disability or impairment-first terminology. The first refers to highlighting the 'person' prior to the 'disability', with the latter considered secondary to personhood. Person-first terminology positions the person prior to the disability. This includes terms such as persons with disability, persons with disabilities, or persons with psychosocial disability. The latter purports to embrace the disability as central to the person's lived experience and, therefore, their identity in contrast to person-first terms, identity-first or disability-first terminology positions the disability prior to the person in a phrase. Advocates of Deaf culture have claimed identity-first language, arguing for the centrality of the 'deafness' to their lived experience or personhood. With the reclaiming by the Disability rights movement of terms hitherto historically deemed negative, terms such as Deaf/deaf, disabled, gimp, crip/cripple, and autistic, terms have been adopted to promote positive connotations.

Representation of disability in media has been an issue of contention that has been studied by different disciplines. In an era where media is seen as an important instigator in molding peoples' beliefs and ideologies, its contribution to "shaping the wide public opinions and perceptions about persons living with disability" remains undeniable (Lidubwi, 2017). The easy access to media that people enjoy today due to the rapid erasure of geographical, linguistic, and technical constraints that made such opportunities scarce in the past has made its influence pervasive in our everyday lives.

A close examination of the media representations of disability highlights that such portrayals tend to oscillate between extreme stereotypes that have been hackneyed over time. On the one hand, Haller and Ralph (2001) tap into the representation of persons with disabilities as expendable and inconsequential by taking up the controversial issue of physician-assisted suicides and its framing in news media. On the other hand, persons with disabilities are sometimes portrayed as inspirations for the able-bodied, wherein their lives and achievements are sometimes blown out of proportion to set the spotlight on the person's disability. Both these extremes, to which the media often resorts, are detrimental as they may misrepresent persons with disabilities, forcing them to subscribe to an ideology that is created for them by able-bodied hegemony.

Research problem and objectives
Given the power of words and representation in the press to challenge or perpetuate perceptions of disability through the use of language and accuracy and sensitivity of portrayal, a critical review of the local press coverage would be useful. It may shed light on prevalent societal perceptions and attitudes towards disability and insights into the influence (or lack thereof) of the local disability rights movement.

Research question
What are the word choices within selected newspaper articles, and how are persons with disabilities presented?

Objective
To explore selected local newspaper articles in Sinhala, Tamil, and English featuring or referencing disability to discern trends in using terms, word choices, and conditions or representation of persons with disabilities.

Methodology

In this paper, we define 'terms' as words, phrases, terminology, or the choice of words used to address persons with disabilities. The word 'conditions' refers to how people with disabilities are portrayed or represented within newspaper articles, including connotations of their situations and circumstances. The online editions of local newspapers, particularly those by the Associated Press of Sri Lanka, were reviewed with a view to critically analyze disability representation and language choice.

Reflexivity

In the group of authors of this paper, three identify persons with disabilities who are academics and activists working at the ground level. The other authors identify as allies of the disability rights movement, with first-language speakers of Sinhala, Tamil, and English. The researchers also represent the Sinhala, Muslim, and Tamil communities, which are geographically located in four parts of the country.

Search strategy

An online search through Google was undertaken to identify online editions of local newspapers using the search terms *'disability'*, *'disabled'*, *'disabilities'*, *'special needs'*, *'differently abled'*, *'handicap'*, *'handicapped'*, *'cripple'*, *'crippled'*, *'slow learner'*, *'deaf'*, *'deafness'*, *'blind'*, *low vision*, *'impairment'* for English. Equivalent terms of *'abhaditha'* (disabled), *'abbagaatha'* (crippled), *'golu'* (dumb), *'bihiri'* (deaf), *'mandabuddika'* (mental retardation), *'mandamaanasika'* (feeble-minded) for Sinhala and *'mutakku'* (disable), *'maatruthiranaali'* (differently-abled), *'manaalutham'* (mentally retarded), *'oomai'* (dumb), *'kurudu'* (blind) and *'sevipulanattra'* (with hearing difficulty) for Tamil were used as search terms. Any local online newspaper articles from 1ˢᵗ January 2010 to 4ᵗʰ December 2023 were included, which included the newspapers Daily News, The Mirror, The Island, The Sunday Times, The Daily Financial Times (FT), Lankadeepa, Divaina, Janaralla, Mawbima, Dinamina, Aniddha and Thinakaran. The entire story was used in the analysis, with an article using more than one term to refer to persons with disabilities on occasion.

Data analysis

Using the key principles of the framework by Braun and Clarke (2006), 32 newspaper articles directly pertaining to disability or referencing persons with disabilities were critically reviewed to identify emerging themes connected to terms used or language choice and the nature of representation. The six-phase guide recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used for data familiarization, initial code generation, looking for and subsequently reviewing themes, and then defining the emergent themes leading to the write-up. The close reading of the texts led to the development of semantic themes with a latent level analysis thereafter to interpret and explain the themes through the lens of terminology, models of disability, and critical disability theory (Shildrick, 2012).

Theoretical underpinnings

The charity/tragedy, medical, and social models of disability informed the reading of texts. The charity/tragedy model views people with disabilities as victims of circumstance, deserving of pity (Goodley, 2010). Popularized by missionaries during the colonial era, it is associated with religious beliefs around disability, suggesting care and guardianship. It influences concepts of social welfare and is the basis for institutions like homes for children and adults with disabilities, leading to a culture of learned helplessness and dependence. It leads to people with disabilities being viewed as 'lesser humans', lowering self-esteem and discouraging participation in political action and social change (Shakespeare, 2006). Advertisements and campaigns using notions of pity are used to raise funds, with people with disabilities seen as 'charitable cases' and not as productive employees.

As per the medical model, disability results from an individual person's physical or mental impairments or limitations. It is a biologically deterministic/essentialist understanding of disability. Linked to a *personal tragedy theory* of disability, it suggests that people with disabilities need to be 'fixed' or normalized (Goodley, 2010). In contrast, the Social Model views disability as a consequence of environmental, social, cultural, and attitudinal barriers that prevent people with impairments from fully participating in society (Barnes, 2000; Goodley, 2010; Shakespeare, 2006). The core assumption is of an Impairment – Disability divide. Impairment is the mental-physical status of a person, which is deemed independent of the external barriers he/she/they face (disability) (Barnes, 2000). The Disabled People's International (DPI) defines *disability* as "the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical or social barriers." Disability is not viewed as an individual deficiency (lack/ something missing) but rather a limiting situation arising from external barriers (Goodley, 2010).

Critical disability theory offers a framework to analyze disability, foregrounding disability and confronting ableist notions ubiquitous in society (Hosking, 2008). Underlying ableism is the assumption that impairment/ disability is inherently negative, bad, or 'wrong' and should be mitigated, cured, or eliminated if possible, resulting in normalization (Campbell, 2009).

Results & Discussion
Terms
The researchers acknowledge that the current study is limited by the number of newspaper articles reviewed, and therefore, the findings are emerging trends that need to be interpreted with caution. The trend analysis of terminology use showed i) articles using person-first terminology, ii) articles using identity-first terminology, and iii) articles using a mix of both person-first and disability-first terminology. The scope of the disability-related terms used in the newspapers reviewed is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Disability-related terms in the reviewed newspapers

Terms	Newspaper & Year	Number of articles
English		
1. the disabled	Daily FT-10 May 2021, Daily News-7 Dec 2019, Daily News-19 Feb 2018, Daily News-2 Apr 2016, The Sunday Times-28 Sept 2014	5
2. disabled	Daily News-13 Aug 2018	2
3. disability	Daily FT-10 May 2021, Daily News-7 Dec 2019, Daily News-13 Aug 2018, Daily News-19 Feb 2018, The Sunday Times-28 Sept 2014, The Daily Mirror-5 Dec 2014, The Sunday Times-25 April	8

	2010, Daily News-11 Feb 2010	
4. disabled persons	Daily FT-10 May 2021, Daily News-7 Dec 2019, Daily News-19 Feb 2018, Daily News-11 Feb 2010	4
5. disabled people	Daily News-6 Nov 2023, Daily FT-10 May 2021, The Daily Mirror-5 Dec 2014, Daily News-11 Feb 2010	4
6. disable people	Daily News-19 Feb 2018	1
7. disabled students	Daily News-19 Feb 2018, Daily News-11 Feb 2010, Daily News-18 Dec 2010	3
8. disabled children	Daily Mirror-5 Dec 2014, Daily News-18 Dec 2010	2
9. disabled youth	The Daily Mirror-14 Aug 2018	1
10. the disabled soldier	Daily News-15 Feb 2019	1
11. disabled soldiers	Daily News-7 Nov 2016, Daily News-15 Feb 2019	2
12. disabled employees	Daily News-11 Feb 2010	1
13. disabled individuals	The Daily Mirror-14 Aug 2018	1
14. prospective disabled job seekers	Daily News-11 Feb 2010	1
15. disabled visitors	Daily News-11 Feb 2010	1
16. the disabled community	Daily News-11 Feb 2010	1
17. persons with disabilities	Daily News-6 Nov 2023, Daily News-7 Dec 2019, Daily News-2 Apr 2016, Daily FT-10 May 2021	4
18. persons with disability	Daily News-6 Nov 2023, Daily FT-10 May 2021, The Sunday Times-28 Sept 2014	3
19. a person with disability	Daily News-7 Dec 2019	1

20. people with disabilities	Daily FT-10 May 2021, Daily News-7 Dec 2019, Daily News-19 Feb 2018, The Daily Mirror-5 Dec 2014, Daily News-11 Feb 2010	5
21. individuals with disabilities	Daily News-7 Dec 2019	2
22. those with disabilities	Daily News-6 Nov. 2023	1
23. disabled and disadvantaged people	Daily News-19 Feb 2018	1
24. children with disabilities	Daily FT-10 May 2021, Daily News-2 Apr 2016, Daily News-18 Dec 2010	3
25. students with disabilities	The Sunday Times-30 May 2021, Daily News-19 Feb 2018, Daily News-18 Dec 2010	3
26. deaf	The Daily Mirror-5 Dec 2014	1
27. deaf and blind	The Daily Mirror-5 Dec 2014	1
28. deaf and blind person	The Daily Mirror-5 Dec 2014	1
29. deaf, dumb and blind (quote)	Colombo Telegraph, 2015	1
30. Deaf and Disabled cricket	Daily News-4 Dec 2018	1
31. disabled sports	Daily News-4 Dec 2018	1
32. disabled and deaf athletes	Daily News-4 Dec 2018	1
33. deaf cricketers	Daily News-4 Dec 2018	1
34. people with hearing disabilities	Daily News-13 Aug 2018	1
35. the impaired people	Daily News-11 Feb 2010	1
36. person with an impairment	Daily News-7 Dec 2019	1
37. persons with physical and mental impairment	Daily News-7 Dec 2019	1
38. physical disability	The Sunday Times-25 April 2010	1

39. visually impaired children	Daily News-11 Feb 2010	1
40. the visually impaired	Daily News-11 Feb 2010	1
41. visually impaired employees	Daily News-11 Feb 2010	1
42. visually impaired individuals	Daily News-11 Feb 2010	1
43. visually impaired persons	Daily News-11 Feb 2010	1
44. visually impaired person	Daily News-11 Feb 2010	1
45. visually handicapped people	The Daily Mirror-5 Dec 2014	1
46. hearing impaired children	Daily News-18 Dec 2010	1
47. mobility-impaired residents	Daily News-13 Aug 2018	1
48. differently-abled	Daily News-4 Dec 2018, The Sunday Times, 2015, The Daily Mirror-5 Dec 2014, Daily News-11 Feb 2010	4
49. differently-abled individuals	Daily News-4 Dec 2018	2
50. differently-abled people	Daily Mirror-5 Dec 2014	1
51. differently-abled soldiers	Daily News-7 Nov 2016	1
52. differently-abled student	The Sunday Times-30 May 2021	1
53. differently-abled glamping	Daily News-4 Dec 2018	1
54. the disabled population	Daily News-7 Dec 2019	1
55. employees who possessed disabilities	Daily News-7 Dec 2019	1
56. the handicapped	The Sunday Times-28 Sept 2014	1
57. visually handicapped people	The Daily Mirror, 2014	1
58. physical or mental handicap	The Daily Mirror, 2014	1
59. restricted ability	The Sunday Times, 2015	1
60. suffering from autism and cerebral palsy	Daily Mirror-5 Dec 2014	1
61. children with special needs	Daily Mirror-5 Dec 2014	1

62. born with disabilities population	Daily News-7 Dec 2019	1
63. war-affected women with disabilities	Daily News-13 Aug 2018	1
64. child disability	Daily FT-10 May 2021	1
65. a blind man	The Sunday Times-28 Sept 2014	1
66. blind	Daily Mirror-5 Dec 2014	1
67. learning disability	The Daily Mirror-5 Dec 2014	1
68. crippling	Daily Mirror-14 Aug 2018	1
69. invalid student	The Sunday Times-25 April 2010	1
70. deformities	The Sunday Times-30 May 2021	1
Sinhala		
1. kanaa (one-eyed person) කණා	Janarala-31 May 2015	1
2. koraa (lame) කොරා	Janarala-31 May 2015	1
3. aes nopenene pudgalayaku (blind person) ඇස් නොපෙනෙන පුද්ගලයකු	Janarala-31 May 2015	1
4. depaa vikal wu ayeku (one with crippled feet) දෙපා විකල් වූ අයකු/ crippled legs person	Janarala-31 May 2015	1
5. shareerabadayakin pelena (physical disability person/one inflicted with a physical disability) ශරීරාබාධයකින් පෙළෙන	Janarala-31 May 2015	1
6. abaadhe aththeki (person with a disability) ආබාධ ඇත්තෙකි	Janarala-31 May 2015	1

7. abaditha janathaawa (disabled community) ආබාධිත ජ්‍රජාව	Mawbima-01 Apr 2021	1
8. abadhe sahitha thanaththan (persons with disabilities) ආබාධ සහිත පුද්ගලයන්	Mawbima-01 Apr 2021	1
9. abaditha viyevesayakeyan (disabled entrepreneurs) ආබාධිත වියවසායකයින්	Mawbima-01 Apr 2021	1
10. abaditha yay sithana pudgalayan (those thought to be disabled) ආබාධිත යැයි සිතන පුද්ගලයන්	Mawbima-01 Apr 2021	1
11. abadithayan sitine pawul (families with disables) ආබාධිතයන් සහිත පවුල්	Mawbima-01 Apr 2021	1
12. potte (blind) පොට්ට	Lanka News, 2015	1
13. aabaditha sebalun (disabled soldiers) ආබාධිත සෙබළුන්	Lankadeepa-08 Aug 2015	1
14. shravenabaditha (hearing impaired) ශ්‍රවනබාධිත	Mawbima-5 Dec 2022	1
15. drushyabaditha (visually impaired) දෘෂ්‍යබාධිත	Mawbima-5 Dec 2022	1
16. kathanabaditha (speech impaired) කතනාබාධිත	Mawbima-5 Dec 2022	1
17. avideeme apahasutha aethi (walking difficulties) ඇවිදීමේ අපහසුත ඇති	Mawbima-5 Dec 2022	1
18. aabadha sahitha pudgalayan (persons with disabilities) ආබාධ සහිත පුද්ගලයන්	Mawbima-5 Dec 2022	1
19. visheeshe avashyatha aethi daruwan (children with special needs) විශේෂ අවශ්‍යතා ඇති දරුවන්	Dinamina-20 Feb 2020, Lankadeepa-26 Mar 2019	2

20. upath abadhe (disability from birth) උපත් ආබාධ	Dinamina-20 Feb 2020,	1
21. abadhithayan (disables) ආබාධිතයන්	Irida maderate-13 Mar 2022	1
22. pasugaami abbagaatha manasikathweyakini (with a backward and crippled mentality) පසුගාමී අබ්බගාත මානසිකත්වයකිනි	Aniddha-4 Dec 2023	1
23 andayin (those blind) අන්ධයන්	Dinamina-1 Feb 2016	1
24. abbagaatha (crippled) අබ්බගාත වූවන්	Dinamina-1 Feb 2016	1
Tamil		
1. kuraipaadu (autism/autism spectrum disorder) ஆட்டிசம் குறைபாடு	Thinakaran-21 March 2022, 2023, Thinakaran-9 Oct 2023	2
2. visheshe (special) விசேஷ/ விசேட	Thinakaran-24 August 2023	1
3. maatruthiranaali (differently able) மாற்றுத்திறனாளி	Thinakaran-9 Oct 2023, Thinakaran-12 Sept. 2023, Thinakaran-3 Mar 2022	3
4. peachu kuraipadu (speech impairment) பேச்சு குறைபாடு	Thinakaran-9 Oct. 2023	1
5. ula nalam (mental health) உளநலம்	Thinakaran-11 Oct. 2023	1
6. iyalaamaiyudaiyor (person with disabilities) இயலாமையுடையோர்	Thinakaran-3 Mar 2022	1

In spite of the relatively small number of newspaper article reviews a wide range of words were found to be used, amounting to 70 terms in English, 24 in Sinhala, and 6 in Tamil. This lack of consistent words may be reflective of a limited awareness of changes to terminology with reference to disability

among journalists and, by extension, amongst the general public. It may speak to inadequate connections and collaboration between the press and Disabled Persons' Organizations (DPOs) or the paucity of disability representation among the local press that could arguably result in a coherent lexicon of disability-inclusive terminology. In the study by Haller and colleagues (2006), changes in terminology from 1990 to 2000, from the elimination of pejorative terms to language preferred by the US Disability rights movement, were said to reflect the 'inroads' made by the movement to inform news media. Additionally, the authors argue that the positive change in word choice in the press is due to the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 and its framing of disability.

The language coverage included person-first terminology, with a trend towards using a range of terms. This included persons with disability/disabilities, people/children/students with disabilities, and people with hearing disabilities. Although the lack of consensus in the terminology may suggest a lack of disability rights awareness, the use of some person-first language may mean that there is some indication of the influence of the disability rights movement.

There were also many examples commensurate with the current discourse on identity-first discourse, with or without intentionality. The language choices akin to identity-first terms included Deaf, disabled persons, disabled soldiers/children/students. While using person-first terminology of persons with disabilities in the title of a very recent article in the Daily News (2023) on the issuing of separate identity cards, a subsequent reference to 'those with disabilities' created a sense of 'othering.' While arguably unintentional, the reference to 'those' and 'them' appears to imply a difference rather than inclusion.

Most English newspaper articles reviewed illustrated a lack of consistency in language use and, by extension, coherent positionality. Instead, the same article used person-first terms together with identity-first language or person-first words with the collective term or collective noun 'the disabled,' 'the disabled community', 'the impaired people', and 'the disabled population.' This was observed in many of the English articles. For example, a recent Daily News article from November 2023 on an initiative to create equitable access to voting for persons with disabilities included the term 'persons with disabilities' in the title, and 'those with disabilities, and identity-first term 'disabled people' in the body of the article. In another article by a different news organization, the Daily Financial Times of May 2021, even within an article interviewing personnel from a disability-rights organization in a question-answer format, a plethora of terms reflecting the two broad schools of thought of person-first and identity-first could be observed. Apart from the terms 'persons with disability', 'persons with disabilities', 'people with disabilities', and 'children with disabilities', was the term 'disabled people' as well as the collective noun 'the disabled'. While the latter appeared in an organization's name, which is understandable, it was also used as a collective term to refer to a particular community.

Though observed to a lesser extent, the Sinhala press articles showed evidence of a mismatch in terminology, using a variety of words in oppositional theoretical positions to one another. For instance, in an article in the weekly Janaraala newspaper, the word choice included six words that were mostly derogatory to invoke humor, with a term equivalent to 'person with a disability' and 'a person who can't see' used together with terms directly referencing an impairment in language considered impolite and unacceptable such as 'kanaa' or 'deaf' 'koraa' or 'crippled' (two slang terms that have not been reclaimed by the disability rights movement).

This inconsistency in language use may reflect a lack of cohesion of ideological position. A decline in the use of the term 'handicapped' has also been reported in The New York Times and Washington Post by 2000 compared to 1990, possibly due to the influence of the Americans with Disabilities Act (Haller et al., 2006). Thus, while there does not appear to be any discernible consensus on terminology used in

the local press, the seeming decline of derogatory terms may be due to the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, United Nations, 2006) in 2016 by the Sri Lankan government and a possible rise in reporting thereafter. It could be due to advocacy work by the disability rights movement and youth organizations committed to diversity and inclusion, like the Enable Lanka Foundation (n.d.) and the Wellassa Organization of Persons with Disabilities (2023). It may, however, simply be a reflection of the limited number of newspaper articles found and reviewed, requiring a larger study to consolidate this finding.

A trend appears to have emerged in the transition of word use from terms such as 'handicapped,' 'lame,' and 'deaf and dumb' (used together) in favor of the term 'differently abled' that has gained currency in the English press and an equivalent term in the Tamil press. This appears contradictory to the perceptions of the disability rights movement at large, which critiques the phrase as inadvertent ableist rhetoric (Andrews et al., 2022; Andrews et al., 2019), arguing that everyone is 'differently abled' in different contexts and 'being able' is not the standard. That said, disability-related news or articles from some South Asian or global South countries such as India (india.gov.in) and Bangladesh (Dhaka Tribune, March 2022) illustrate the use of the term 'differently abled.' This makes one question about who sets the political agenda for change. The use of differently abled may be a euphemism due to discomfort with using the term disabled, given the prevalent societal attitudes towards the word 'disability,' either real or imagined. The question that comes up is 'whose' discomfort it is if, in fact, the disability rights movement self-identifies with this term and/or wishes to reclaim it.

There was also a lack of coherent language use among persons with disabilities interviewed within the articles or seemingly informing the coverage. This is clear in an article in the Sunday Times in which a small group of people with disabilities vying for political representation at a forthcoming election had been interviewed, with the headline reading 'A group of professionals with 'Restricted Ability' contest Parliamentary Elections'. Similarly, in an article from the Sunday Times from 2014 reporting on an interview with the disability-rights activist Dr. Ajith Perera on the accessibility of public buildings, the headline is 'Sri Lanka still unfriendly towards the handicapped'. One school of thought is that the disability rights movement needs to take responsibility for the lack of a unified voice and for not offering adequate instruction on the significance of word use in media coverage (Haller et al., 2006). The counter-response is that the word 'disability' or 'disabled' already carries negative connotations (Linton, 1998), making dialogue challenging. This may be specifically relevant to the possible reluctance observed in the English press to use the term 'disability,' apparently suggestive of 'inability' due to prevalent societal stigma, which may be an explanation for the term 'differently abled' gaining traction. The preponderance of euphemistic terms coined to 'soften the blow,' as it were, by those who deem the word 'disabled' or 'disability' as suggesting a lack of or no ability, and therefore subordinate to persons without disabilities thought of as 'normal' or 'normative', requires closer inspection and introspection. The inherent negative connotations of the word 'disability' may reflect prevalent societal stigma and a valuing of 'able-bodiedness'. It may also speak to the dominance of karmic explanatory narratives of disability with disability suggestive of a consequence of past misdemeanors.

In the Sinhala and Tamil articles reviewed, 24 and 6 key terms were found to be used, respectively. It is important to note that in Sinhala and Tamil, premodified nouns are common with the syntactic rules disallowing the word for a person to be placed before the disability. The word choice preferred by the local Disability rights movement represented symbolically by the umbrella organization Disability Organizations Joint Front (DOJF) is 'persons with disabilities' in English and 'adaadha sahitha pudgaleyin' (ආබාධ සහිත පුද්ගලයින්) that translates to 'people with disabilities' and 'iyalamaiyudaiya nabargalin niruvanangalin ondrinaindha munnani' (இயலாமையுடைய நபர்களின்

நிறுவனங்களின் ஒன்றிணைந்த முன்னனி) in Tamil. The name of the organization itself is 'abaadhe sahitha pudhgala sangvidana eekabadda peramuna' in Sinhala with the emphasis of 'with', suggesting person-first connotations.

This broad agreement is corroborated by the official translation of the CRPD as 'aabadha sahitha pudhgalayange ayithi waasikam pilibandha sammuthiya' *(ආබාධ සහිත පුද්ගලයින්ගේ අයිතිවාසිකම් පිළිබඳ සම්මුතිය) using the word 'with' to denote a person-first perspective, and* 'iyalamaiyudan koodiya nabargalin urimaigal patriya maanaadu'*(**இயலாமையுடன் கூடிய நபர்களின் உரிமைகள் பற்றிய மாநாடு**) in Tamil. In Sinhala and Tamil, the word order dictates that only premodified nouns can exist. Person-first and identity-first terminology is differentiated with the word 'sahitha' meaning 'with'. Therefore, while* 'adaadha sahitha pudgaleyin' is considered person-first terminology, 'aadaadhitha pudgaleya' signifies identity-first.

Conditions or representation

Five themes emerged from the reading and reviewing of the chosen newspaper articles, as presented in Figure 1.
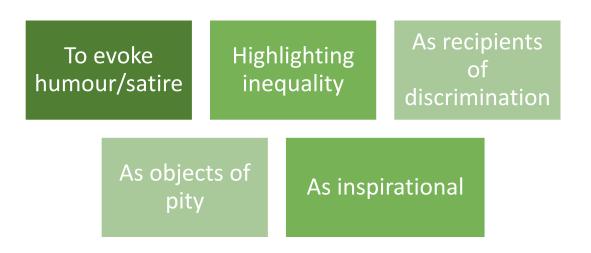

Figure 1: Conditions of representation of persons with disabilities

i) To evoke humor/satire

There is a tendency to make reference to disability terms when making light of an incident or person. This is usually an insult, with the words used to dismiss, dehumanize, or ridicule an individual. For example, in an article in the Janaraala newspaper discussing the Yahapala government with the headline 'kanaa and koraage yahapalana anduwe' (the Yahapalana government of the blind and the crippled or lame), the word choice included six words that were mostly derogator, aimed to invoke humor, while stating that they did not intend to be disrespectful to persons with disabilities. There is no certainty on the intentionality of the terms used. It is more likely a reflection of the normalization of these terms used in common parlance.

ii) Highlighting inequality

Inequality of access to all aspects of life is a dominant theme of discourse within global disability literature (Shandra, 2018; United Nations, n.d.). Most newspaper articles sampled were accounts of inequality, highlighting the need for more access and equality. Examples of this type of article were in the promotion of voting and political rights (Daily News, 2016, 2023), access to land ownership (Daily News, 2019), education (Daily News, 2010, 2016, 2021), leisure activities (Daily News, 2018, 2023) and employment (Daily News, 2010, 2016). The underlying argument is that persons with disabilities are not treated as equal citizens with the overt and covert denial of fundamental rights.

While articles reporting on positive initiatives are important, the paucity of detail on why such change is necessary, rooted in rights, equity, and equality, is seldom specified for the readership. The resultant account is of people without disabilities 'helping' or 'doing things' with limited acknowledgment of agency among persons with disabilities. For instance, one brief article reports on a sticker campaign in Kandy to reserve bus seats for people with disabilities to mark International Day of Persons with Disabilities. That said, the same content was presented from a rights perspective, quoting a person with disabilities in a parallel article in the Mawbima paper in 2022.

iii) As recipients of discrimination

The disability rights movement has historically and repeatedly purported that persons with disabilities are discriminated against, with blatant violations of fundamental rights, and as recipients of explicit discrimination (Fleischer & Zames, 2001; Vaughn, 2003). An article of mistreatment by neglect was exemplified in a Sinhala article in the Mawbima paper. It narrates the story of a group of women with physical disabilities visiting the local government office to hand over an invitation to an event. The lack of a lift and easy physical access within this government building in spite of legal regulations, disallowed direct contact with the government employees at the building, who, in turn, had refused to walk down the stairs to meet the women with disabilities. What is unclear is whether this incident demonstrates the interplay between the intersectional nature of oppression (Crenshaw, 2017), given that the group visiting were all women with disabilities. As Chatta (2018), reviewing a report on the lived experience of women with disabilities in post-war Sri Lankan in the North explained, 'Language exposes social prejudice, but also, the vernaculars surrounding disability reveal absence - where discussions have not yet happened, where rights are waiting to be acknowledged or applied'. It is speculative to suggest that a group of men with or without disabilities may have received a different, possibly more favorable response in the story above. This is worth exploring further to determine a possible influence of patriarchy on the discrimination of women with disabilities.

iv) As objects of pity

Way back in the 1990s, Johnny Crescendo decried the ubiquitous nature of pity, declaring "piss on pity!' as a rallying call in protest at the portrayal of persons with disabilities (Welsh, 2018). As the British disability-rights activist Barbara Lisicki reportedly explained on the BBC, "If you make a disabled person an object of charity, you are not going to see them as your equal" (Rose, 2023). A theme that reverberated through the narratives of some newspaper articles was requests for support for children or adults with disabilities. These 'appeals for donations' were often accompanied by clear and sometimes graphic images of the child or adult in question. The Daily Mirror, in 2022, ran an 'Appeal for Donations' with a picture of a young boy in a wheelchair needing financial assistance to undergo hip and knee surgery together with details of a bank account number. This type of newspaper article in all three languages has become commonplace, with diverse levels of sensitivity observed in the portrayal of the

children or adults concerned and the presentation of facts. One could argue that while assistance is needed, and is an urgent need in the current economic crisis, the open appeals and pictorial representation covertly reinforce deeply-held ideas of dependence, offering examples of people with disabilities as 'charity cases,' a rather unfortunate turn of phrase used widely in general conversation.

v) As inspirational

At times reflecting low expectations of people with disabilities who are portrayed as surmounting challenges when engaging in everyday activities, some local newspaper accounts presented people with disabilities as 'objects of inspiration.' In an editorial chronicling the achievements of persons with disabilities known overseas, such as Beethovan, Helen Keller, and Nicholas James Nick Vujicic, the 'message' offered for International Day of People with Disabilities was the 'hope' that 'this week dedicated to the disabled people will inspire them to realize that the very source of their weakness could turn out to be their source of greatest strength. If they have faith and hope, nothing is impossible (The Daily News, 2014). The above is reminiscent of Stella Young's insightful TED Talk on the societal objectification of persons with disabilities as objects of inspiration (Young, 2014) in her famous declaration, "I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much." Although the article references internationally famous people who have made a significant contribution to the world, the message is that any persons with disabilities could reach these heights with 'hope' on their side.

That said, there were a few short articles in Tamil celebrating significant achievements of children with disabilities within the backdrop of limited and/or unequal access to education and sport. There is an example of a young girl with autism (autism karaipaadu or 'autism disorder') who completed a 29 km sea swim (Thinakaran, 21.03.2022), which in itself can be argued to be similar to other children, with or without disabilities, who participate in such races. However, another article on a young boy with autism (autism karaipaadu) and speech impairment (peachu kuraipadu) who swam a similar race reportedly set a new record, which is commendable (Thinakaran, 9.10.2023). On the same lines of celebration, yet another brief article highlights the advanced level examination results of three A passes in the commerce stream of a student described as a differently abled (maatruthiranaali) wheelchair user. Arguably, given unequal access in Sri Lanka to education within an extremely competitive academic sphere, the results are commendable.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The findings leave one with the question of whose political agenda for change is presented through the terms and portrayal of persons with disabilities in newspaper articles. If the local disability rights movement identifies as 'disabled', while there is a question about consensus on this within the movement, the will of the community needs to be considered and honored. What appears to be clear is that the media insistence on using euphemistic terms even when persons with disabilities being interviewed are self-identifying as 'disabled' signals a deep-rooted discomfort with terms connected to 'disability.' While the overt intentionality is to use kind and respectful language, it covertly appears to mirror the charity model of disability as persons with disability are pitied and seen as 'able' in a 'different way' through an ableist perspective. This strongly suggests the need for the media to reflect on its own positionality and for the disability rights movement to address the discomfort with disability terminology and raise awareness of the fundamental right to self-identification. The press needs to be better informed on the current acceptable terminology and positionality within the disability rights movement. This can be achieved by strengthening local legislation on disability rights with terminology signaling equality and dignity. It is hoped that, in turn, this will bolster the local disability rights movement to champion transformation, with the legislation becoming a change advocate. Closer

collaboration and a movement of recruiting persons with disabilities into journalism may encourage more organically positive changes to occur, both in language choices and representation.

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