The Making of the Disabled Identity:
A Linguistic Analysis of Marginalisation

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Introduction

     This paper is based on my belief that people who acquire
impairments, whether it be through sudden injury or accident
or the gradual encroachment of chronic illness, are faced with
identity crises or 'biographical disruptions' (Bury 1982)
which are directly linked to the social construction of
disability as an inferior status. It has been common within
disability studies to argue that the social model must exclude
the consideration of personal experience because its very
purpose has been to distinguish between the individual
biological condition of "impairment" and the socially imposed
condition of "disability" (Oliver 1996: Barnes 1998). There
can be no doubt that it has been a vital step in the
development of a political consciousness to recognise that
disability 'is something imposed on top of our impairments by
the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full
participation in society' (UPIAS 1978: 14). However, there are
a growing number of theorists and activists who argue that it
is wrong for the social model to neglect personal experience.
They argue conversely that the deep inner suffering that
results from oppression is not an individual response to
personal tragedy but is as much a social problem as lack of
access to public spaces, discrimination in the workplace and
denial of the resources necessary for independent living
(Corker 1998; Morris 1991; Thomas 1999a, 1999b). In keeping
with these arguments, it is my intention to extend the social
model to include an analysis of the "disabled identity", an
identity which stems, I believe, from the negative status
imposed upon people when they become impaired.
     Prior to becoming disabled, certain privileges and
statuses are taken for granted. Much in the same way that
"whiteness" is an invisible insignia of the norm,
"ablebodiedness" is also an unquestioned, unremarked upon
state which only becomes notable in its absence. To become
disabled is to be relegated to a marginalised status in
society and brings into high relief for the disabled person
the advantages accorded those who inhabit the unacknowledged
"centre". To become disabled is to lose access to these
privileges and, in so doing, to begin to be defined in very
different ways. These processes are subtle such that the

recruitment of disabled subjects into inferior subject
positions derives from the creation of identities which seem
natural and very much the responsibility of the individual
psyche. Although the loss of one's comparatively privileged
subject position may be very sudden and momentous according to
the particular nature of the accident, illness or injury, the
overall summoning to a new level of identification is a
gradual process whereby the doubts from within, the stares and
snubs from without, and the lack of access to previously
available social locations and resources erode one's prior
claim to social acceptability.

This change in status from ablebodied to disabled can be
seen to result in a state of 'internalised oppression', that
is, the 'feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, worthlessness and
inferiority which frequently accompany the onset of
impairment' (Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare 1999: 178).
According to the medical model, these feelings are part of an
individual psychological reaction to loss and personal tragedy
and can only be remedied through the disabled person learning
to cope. However, when viewed from the perspective of the
social model, internalised oppression can be seen to result
from the imposition of a marginalised identity.

Mason (1999) points out that 'internalised oppression is
not the cause of our mistreatment, it is the result of our
mistreatment. It would not exist without the real external
oppression that forms the social climate in which we exist'
(Mason as quoted in Marks 1999: 25). The recognition that the
identity loss which accompanies disability is not a personal
crisis, but rather the result of social forces which benefit
from the construction of disability as an inferior status, is
the first step in devising an appropriate remedy. For the
solution to this loss lies not in learning to "cope" with it,
but through challenging it at its roots by recognising that
the possession of an inferior identity is both contingent and
expedient and need not be that way at all.

To better understand how identity can be claimed to be a
social construction it is helpful to draw on Foucault's (1983)
concept of subjecthood, a term he uses interchangeably with
identity. He states that '[t]here are two meanings of the word
subject... subject to someone else by control and dependence,
and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-
knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which
subjugates and makes subject to' (212). Foucault refers to
this twofold signification as assujetissiment, a French word
which has no English equivalent and has been translated
variously as 'subjectivation' (Butler 1997a: 11),
'subjectification' (Minson 1985: 44), and 'subjectivisation'
(Connolly 1998: 155). I choose "subjectification" as it is a
word already in existence which means 'the action of making or
being made subjective' (OED) which seems to suit very well
Foucault's statement: 'I will call assujetissiment the
procedure by which one obtains the constitution of a subject,
or more precisely, of a subjectivity which is of course only
one of the given possibilities of organisation of our self-

consciousness' (Foucault 1988a: 253).

'Of all the ways of becoming "other" in our society, disability is the only one that can happen to anyone, in an instant, transforming that person's life and identity forever' (King 1993: 75). It is therefore a unique site of subjectification, one which can exemplify with great clarity and intensity the ways in which identity as a process of labeling, differentiation and social positioning joins the personal to the political, the subjective to that which subjugates. Hughes (2000) describes the construction of disability as a process of 'invalidation', an 'othering process that has both produced and "spoilt" disability as an identity' (558). He goes on to argue:

> Validity is at the heart of the process of othering. It is the question posed by it and cultural meanings about what constitutes 'the natural' - conceived as the inescapably true - is the ground upon which validity is assessed. To be or become invalid is to be defined as flawed or in deficit in terms of the unforgiving tribunal nature and necessity, normality and abnormality over which medical science presides (ibid.).

Disability, thus, can bring into high relief the creation of identities fundamental to Foucault's (1980a) basic premise that 'the individual is not a pre-given entity which is seized on by the exercise of power. The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of relations of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces' (32).

Therefore, as Minson explicates in keeping with Foucault, '[s]ubjectivities are constituted by, and rendered instrumental to, a particular form of power through the medium of the knowledges or technical savoir fair 'immanent' to that form of power' (Minson 1995: 45).

I will be taking this argument one step further by asserting that the interaction between knowledge and power which constitutes our identities, whether they be positive or negative, is mediated by language, that, indeed, because language is built on the process of "othering" it constitutes a naming process which defines identity through difference. Our words are very powerful tools of representation which are accorded even more potency when they are taken for granted as transparent symbols of "reality". I believe that the "loosening of the ties to our identities" (Simon 1995: 109) which is the objective of Foucault's genealogical approach can only be fully realised through the development of a clear understanding of the fundamental role that language plays in naming what is "normal" and what is "other'.

What's in a Name?

The idea that the subject is created in the process of naming is central to the work of Althusser (1971) who coined the term 'interpellation' to describe how the practice of

subjectification is facilitated by locating the subject in language (146). 'Ideology... "recruits" subjects among the individuals... or "transforms" the individuals... by the very mechanism I have called interpellations or "hailing'"' (ibid.). He goes on to explain:

> Interpellation... can be imagined along the lines of the most common place everyday police (or other hailing: ' Hey, you there! '...). The hailed individual will turn around. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognised that the hail was "really" addressed to him, and that "it was really him who was hailed" (and not someone else) (163).

The recognition implicit in the concept of interpellation demonstrates the power of the name, the label. It connects our sense of self with society's definition. 'Thus, our occupation of a subject-position, such as that of a patriotic [or disabled] citizen, is not a matter simply of conscious personal choice but of our having been recruited into that position through recognition of it within a system of representation, and of making an investment in it' (Woodward 1997: 43).

The concept of interpellation is helpful, not only because it paves the way for an understanding of the creation of the subject through language, but because it points to the internalisation of oppressive language which is fundamental to the creation of the disabled identity. The language we use and the labels we identify with become so taken for granted that we eventually feel that we actually, inherently are what we have been named. Therefore, to create the possibility for challenging this deeply embedded subjugation, it is necessary, I believe, to historicise the process of identification through language and, in so doing, to unseat its hegemonic hold.

There are many social theorists who argue for the connection between language and identity (Danziger 1997; Haber 1994; Hall 1997) and a growing number who are beginning to include this link in their analysis of the disabled identity (Corker 1998, 1999, 2000; Hedlund 2000; Linton 1998; Marks 1999). Indeed, the view that identity is created through language has a long history, beginning with Baldwin (1897), Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934), founders of the sociological field of symbolic interaction, who based their theories on the premise that 'the self is primarily a social construction crafted through linguistic exchanges (i.e., symbolic interactions) with others' (Harter 1999: 677).

I propose that my particular contribution to the sociological study of language and identity in relation to disability will be to combine Saussurean linguistics with Foucault's understanding of discourse to explore the ways in which language functions to stigmatise and to devise ways of challenging it.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) founded his linguistic theories on three main premises, each of which are relevant to the development of a better understanding of the creation of the disabled subject through language. He argued that language is socially constructed, that the symbols we use to create meaning are arbitrary, and, most importantly for our purposes, that we can only understand the meaning of these symbols through contrasting them with what they are not. When Saussure argues that 'language is not a function of the speaking subject' (quoted in Derrida 2000: 91), he is stating the basic principle of semiotics which is that language is predetermined in its possibilities by the structure, already in place, by which a particular culture governs its realm of linguistic signification.

He refers to this structure as la langue which Hall (1997) describes as 'the underlying rule-governed structure of language...the language system' (34). Alternately, there exists la parole which is the individual speech act which express itself through this system. Hedley (1999) refers to langue and parole as 'the two different modes in which language exists for us simultaneously: as a system of already encoded meanings and as ongoing open-ended meaning-making activity' (102).

This concept of the system of language and the speaking subject is analogous to Foucault's (1972) explication of the two forms of subjectification, i.e., subjection and subjectivity. Being 'subject to someone else by control and dependence' can be said to rely on the existence of la langue, a socially governed system of linguistic possibilities, while being 'tied to [one's] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' is similarly related to the individual speech act, la parole (212).

In his earlier work, Foucault (1970) argued that these two realms of language and, thereby, subjecthood, are connected by simple discourse which transmits politically accepted definitions. When he states that 'between these two regions [language and parole], so distant from one another, lies a domain which, even though its role is mainly an intermediary one, is nonetheless fundamental' (xx) I believe that he refers to the space where subjectification takes place, between the set of discourses which over arch our political rationalities and the location of our inner thoughts, guided by our apparent "freedom of choice".

A semiotic perspective is also useful to the analysis of subjectification through language because it demonstrates that meaning is not transparent, that is, that the language we use to describe things does not mirror reality. Saussure (1959) expresses it thus: 'a linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image' (166). According to this argument, words are arbitrary, they have no inherent connection to the thing they describe. It is the meaning behind the words, the concepts they bring to mind when they are spoken, that gives them their power.

This is why it is so difficult to resist oppressive

identifications through using "politically correct" language,
for, if the concepts behind the words remain unchanged, then
the new words end up being just as negative in their
connotations. Saussure points to this phenomenon when he draws
an analogy between language and a chess game, a unit of
language and a chess piece:

> Suppose that during a game this piece gets lost or
> destroyed. Can it be replaced? Of course it can. Not only
> by some other knight, but even by an object of quite a
> different shape, which can be counted as a knight,
> provided it is assigned the same value as the missing
> piece (Saussure 1983: 153-4).

Thus, if new, "politically correct" language begins to
take on the meaning of the word it replaces, then the game
remains unchanged. For language to liberate, new meanings must
emerge, be represented. To stay with the chess analogy, the
word must be capable of making new "moves".

Saussure uses the terms "sign", "signifier" and
"signified" to denote the relationship between the "referent"
(the thing itself), the word used to describe it and the
concept this word is intended to relay. A sign is the
combination of a word (the signifier) with a concept (the
signified). Therefore signs contain meanings which go well
beyond the material reality of the referent. Bradac (2000)
follows on from this by describing the political connotations
this kind of meaning formation makes feasible.

> A sign links expression to thought, so an interesting
> possibility is that by influencing expression, one can
> influence, or ultimately control, thought. Also, by
> encouraging particular signifier-signified associations
> and discouraging others, groups can gain or maintain
> power by channeling thoughts in a power-enhancing
> direction. If the slogan "war is good" is used often
> enough, a sign may come to exist that is constituted by
> the signifier "war" and the signified [good] (500).

I believe that it is this kind of relationship between
the signifier, "disability" (and all the other words and
phrases which are used to describe impairment), and the very
negative concept which is signified, which creates a less than
salubrious identity for disabled people. When someone is named
"disabled", they are not being accorded with a tag which
simply describes a physical or material condition, they are
being ascribed a set of oppressive associations which stem
from the hypostatisation of an abstract concept.

Finally, and most importantly, Saussure (1959) based his
linguistic theories on the premise that 'in language there are
only differences' (117). This fits together closely with the
aforementioned stipulation that the symbols we use as
signifiers are arbitrary, that they have no inherent
relationship with the thing being described. Because of this,

a word can only begin to have meaning when it is contrasted with what it is not.

From this comes the practice of defining what is "normal" against that which is "other" through the construction of binary oppositions. I believe that it is this diametric construction of identities, the good against the bad, the strong against the weak, the desirable against the undesirable, which is fundamental to the oppression of people who fall outside the prescriptions of the norm. For it is because the politically desirable identity can only be defined in relation to its antithesis, and that this formulation negates any differences that may conceivably exist between these two extremes, that subjectification is such a win or lose affair. Thus, when Saussure (1983) argues that '[t]he mechanism of a language turns entirely on identities and differences' (151) he is accurately observing a system of identification which has no room for the recognition of all the greys which exist between "white" and "black".

It is through the dichotomous construction of language that those who are defined as Other become stigmatised. Peters (1999) makes the connection between stigma and discriminatory language and argues that 'people with disabilities experience invasion of their disability identity through the practices of labeling and hegemonic language usage detrimental to their images' (103).

I argue that the primary mechanism though which labeling is achieved is through the creation of stereotypical identities. In this way key words, such as "cripple", "disabled" or "handicapped", are attached to a set of images which, regardless of whether they describe the person in question, are assumed to do so because they are associated with disabled people in general. In semiotic terms, the signifier, "disabled," becomes attached to a range of significatory concepts (signifieds) such as weak, passive, dependent, unintelligent, worthless and problematic, so that when the word is spoken, a negative, even if partially subconscious, feeling is evoked.

Stigma as a form of negative stereotyping has a way of neutralising positive qualities and undermining the identity of stigmatised individuals This kind of social categorisation has also been described by one sociologist as a "discordance with personal attributes". Thus, many stigmatised people are not expected to be intelligent, attractive, or upper class (Coleman 1997: 221 -222).

It is this "discordance with personal attributes" which can be the most frightening factor in the experience of stigmatisation, because it creates an existential crisis which often can only be resolved by internalising the view of the oppressor.

Stereotypes are very powerful political tools in their concise and incisive ability to subjectify and, I would argue, both emanate from and contribute to the process of normalisation through the construction of binary oppositions. For the norm is also represented by a "stereotypical" image of

an active, independent, achievement oriented worker who is usually male, wealthy and heterosexual. The threat wielded by the negative stereotype can be a strong deterrent against bucking the system and those who, like disabled people, cannot avoid becoming Other become exemplary, through their stereotypical representation, of what not to be.

Stereotyping, in other words, is part of the maintenance of the social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the 'normal' and the 'deviant', the 'normal' and the 'pathological,' the 'acceptable' and the 'unacceptable', what 'belongs' and what does not or is 'Other', between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', Us and Them. It facilitates the 'binding' or bonding together of all of Us who are 'normal' into one 'imagined community'; and it sends into symbolic exile all of Them - ' the Others' - us who are in some way different - 'beyond the pale' (Hall 1997: 258).

This kind of understanding of language puts a new light on the children's rhyme: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." A name alone cannot hurt, but when backed up by such deeply oppressive images, it can wound beyond repair. As Hall (op.cit) argues '[s]tereotyping is a key element in [the] exercise of symbolic violence' (259).

Semantics, Discourses and Muted Voices.

It is certainly significant that single words express very strong ideas about what is desirable and undesirable in a particular culture. The words "disabled", "cripple", "spastic", "invalid", "weak" and "abnormal" evoke very intense, very negative images. However, it is the framework within which these words are embedded, the sentences, the discourses which inform their use and their possibilities, which bring us to the heart of the connection between language and power. The word "disability", for example, conjures up the images it does because it mediates between the recipient of the word and the larger discourse within which disability is framed. This discourse includes medical knowledge, media imagery, sociological discourse, the education syllabus and political programmes, to name just a few sites of knowledge creation and/or dissemination. Therefore we need to understand not only how language functions symbolically, but also how these symbols are tied, through discourse, to systems of power.

For Foucault, discourses are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak... Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own intervention' (Foucault 1972: 49). Discourses are ways of thinking which have been institutionalised through culturally approved apparatuses of power. Hall (1997) states that Foucault sees discourse as 'a group of statements which provide a language for talking about - a way of representing the knowledge about - a particular topic in a particular historical moment... Discourse is about

the production of knowledge through language. But... since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do - our conduct - all practices have a discursive aspect' (44).

Discourse and language cannot be easily separated for each plays a part in the operation of the other. However, for our present purposes, it is important to recognise that, while labels stigmatise, discourses silence. Discourse silences disabled people in many ways. It leaves them with no language with which to express themselves, it invalidates their narratives and, therefore, their subjective realities, and it renders them invisible. During an interview, when Foucault (1988b) was asked whether he had any intention of trying to rehabilitate the Other through raising the profile of subjugated language, he replied: 'How can the truth of the sick subject ever be told?' (29). Discourse, in creating the space for subject formation by marking the boundaries of exclusion, leaves us with a "silent majority" who have no way of telling their stories and articulating their subjecthood or lack of it.

> Censorship is never quite as perfect or as invisible as when each agent has nothing to say apart from what he is objectively authorised to say: in this case he does not even have to be his own censor because he is, in a way, censored once and for all, through the forms of perception and expression that he has internalised and which impose their form on all his expressions." (Bordieu 1991: 138).

An extreme example of how this 'thought control' is attained through language comes from George Orwell (1964), who, in his novel 1984, described a dystopian society, not so different from our own, which developed a new language called Newspeak to frame the prevailing discourse. In the appendix to 1984, entitled 'The principle of Newspeak', Orwell explains that 'the purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible' (231). This is what language does, according to the Sapir-Worf hypothesis: it not only delimits what can be said, it constrains what can be thought (Singh 1999: 24). Thus, the possibilities for how disabled people will be able to see themselves and their situations are defined by what Sapir refers to as 'the tyrannical hold that linguistic form has upon our orientation in the world' (as quoted in Muhlhausler and Harre 1990: 4).

Yet, even for those who can see beyond the dominant rationality to question their oppression, there is little opportunity for them to articulate their objections because these often make no sense within the framework which governs acceptable patterns of thought and speech.

People can question the ideologies of their culture, but it is often difficult. It can be a challenging intellectual

task, but it can also result in social stigma. People who question the dominant ideology often appear not to make sense; what they say won't sound logical to anyone who holds that ideology. In extreme cases, people who ask such questions may even appear mad. So while it is possible to question the dominant culture there is often a price to be paid for doing so (Jones and Wareing 1999: 34).

In discussing the effects of internalised oppression, Young (1990) argues that when people who are classed as Other attempt to voice any objections to their identification they are 'met with denial and powerful gestures of silencing, which can make oppressed people feel slightly crazy' (134). This assignment of the category of madness to anyone who attempts to speak outside of the dominant discourse is represented within Foucault's (1988c) definition of madness as 'forbidden speech' (179). For him, madness is not a valid category pertaining to "mental health." It is a punishment and a deterrent, a warning to those who might attempt to speak outside of acceptable discourse.

Discourse also produces standard narratives outside of which it is impossible to construct a "logical" or socially acceptable story of one's life. In keeping with our grounding in liberal philosophy, we see ourselves as unified beings whose lives form a cohesive whole and that we achieve this sense of cohesion by building personal narratives. A standard neoliberal narrative "template" is based on the belief that our society is a "level playing field" and that everyone has the same chances to succeed. Adversity is met with a strong will to triumph and those who "suffer" from "personal tragedy" will often serve as examples to the rest of society in their ability to succeed in life. This kind of narrative excludes stories which acknowledge social oppression and it also dismisses those which are not based on neoliberal qualities such as independence, autonomy, a priority for ritualised work behaviour, fitness, attractiveness and wealth, and, therefore leave people who have become disabled without a legitimate alternative narrative.

Corker and French (1999) argue that disabled people are severely disadvantaged by the fact that personal narratives are 'confined to or hidden within certain media' and that this 'colludes with a culture of "silence" which is part of disability oppression' (10).

Arguably, the worst of all the ways one can be silenced is to be ignored altogether, to be rendered invisible. 'Indeed, one can be interpellated, put in place, given a place through silence, through not being addressed, and this becomes painfully clear when we find ourselves preferring the occasion of being derogated to the one of not being addressed at all' (Butler 1997b: 27). Chittister (1995) quotes Lord Chesterfield to make the point that "invisibility" represents the worst fate imaginable.

> For my own part, I would rather be in company with a dead person than with an absent [read "disinterested"] one;

for if the dead person gives me no pleasure, at least
they show me no contempt; whereas the absent, silently
indeed but very plainly, tell me that they do not think
me worth their attention (10).

Witkin (1998) writes of the extreme kind of invisibility
which is experienced by those with 'severe or multiple
disabilities' who 'do not participate in the mainstream of
community life' (294). Yet, even more insidious in some ways
because of its subtlety is the invisibility which accompanies
being identified as disabled ahead of anything else, of being
patronised, ignored, devalued, and rejected, and of not being
heard no matter how hard one tries to be understood.
    Foucault (1980b) discusses this kind of silencing in
relation to 'subjugated knowledges' (82). In using this term,
Foucault refers to both the histories which have been
concealed 'within the body of functionalist and systematising
theory and which criticism [has] been able to reveal' (ibid.)
and a 'set of knowledges which have been disqualified as
inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive
knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the
required level of cognition or scientificity' (ibid.) by which
he means the silenced voices of the 'psychiatric patient, the
ill person... the delinquent, etc.' (ibid.).
    I argue that it is within both kinds of subjugated
knowledge that the potential for providing a voice resides.
Foucault's geneaology, in revealing alternative histories
challenges the discourses which have claimed to represent the
"truth" and therefore makes other discourses and "truths"
possible, and in consequence, allows for other ways of saying
things. This project needs to be merged, however, with the
raising of the voices of the actual people who have been
living in silence. For, at the same time that these voices
need new language, and, therefore, new discourse to provide
the means with which to speak, new discourses cannot be formed
without drawing from the voices which have been suppressed.

Rehabilitating the Disabled Identity: Finding a Voice.
    The only form of "rehabilitation" currently available for
the disabled identity is based on the medical model and
focuses on the modification of the psychological state of the
individual, a form of rehabilitation that McNamee (1996)
refers to in all seriousness as 'identity adjustment' (145).
It is my contention that it is not the individual person but
rather our society which needs rehabilitating.
    I choose to use the term "rehabilitation" here precisely
because it is problematic. For, as long as disabled people are
relegated the responsibility for fixing their ailing self-
esteems, for learning to "cope" with their oppression, and for
fulfilling the expectations designated by the norm, they will
continue to be burdened by socially sanctioned stigma. I argue
that it is the concept of "rehabilitation" in its current form
which is largely responsible for creating the disabled
identity because it relies on placing the responsibility for

change on the individual when the problem is in fact a social one. This is why we need to question the words and phrases which are used to describe disability, to unearth the concepts which inform the meaning that they carry, and to attempt to reshape them in more realistic ways if there is to be any hope of "enabling" the disabled identity.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, language is constructed with the purpose of representing and perpetuating certain systems of meaning and it is from within these conceptual structures or discourses that the disabled person has been molded. Therefore, I argue, in line with Kristeva (1986), that our greatest chance for being able to reform the cultural landscape from which the concept of disability has been carved lies within the theoretical project of 'reshaping the status of meaning within social exchanges' (32).

This linguistic reform can be approached on a variety of levels: that of the individual word, label or symbol; at the semantic level; or at the level of discourse. I believe that each of these approaches are vital for the elevation of the social status and the subjective liberation of disabled people, but only in combination because each comprise an essential layer in the overall system of meaning creation. In philosophical terms, each factor is necessary but not sufficient for the development of positive identifications.

The simplest form of resistance which has been developed to address language which "disables" is that which is based on what I would refer to as an elementary semiotic approach and focuses on challenging negative labels. Put simply, this approach is based on the notion that certain words used to describe disability have taken on derogatory connotations and therefore need to be replaced with terms which evoke a more positive image.

Words such as 'freak, gimp, spastic, spaz, cripple, cretin, handicapped, monster, mongoloid, invalid, idiot, retard, defective, dumb, mute,' are extremely negative labels which should be resisted at all costs (Russell 1998: 14). The problem, however, with simply replacing them with more politically correct terms, like "disabled", "impaired", "developmentally delayed", "intellectually disabled", and "hearing impaired",[1] is that the assignment of new labels does not address the oppressive concepts which gave these words their negative connotations in the first place. As Barnes (1992) points out, 'there's nothing inherently wrong with these words..."cripple," "spastic," and "idiot"...it is simply that their meaning has been substantially devalued by societal perceptions of disabled people'. And, unfortunately, the result of the elementary semiotic approach has been that the new words developed to describe impairments and the people who bear them have quickly become tainted with the associations carried by the old ones.

Moreover, Marks (1999) argues that, not only has the well meaning introduction of new terminology proven to be largely ineffectual as a strategy for resistance, it sometimes actually serves to mask some of the more deeply oppressive

realities that frame disabled people's lives. She discusses
how the adoption of terms such as "special needs" for the
resources required by disabled people to function
independently, and "self-advocate" for people who have
intellectual impairments can conceal the very real problems
faced by disabled people by suggesting that they are enjoying
equity in society. But, whether politically correct language
derives from well meaning attempts to reverse discrimination
or from those who wish to conceal oppressive ideologies, the
important thing to recognise here is that an elementary
semiotic approach is doomed to failure because the
introduction of simple labels on their own cannot dismantle
deeply rooted discrimination.

And the reason for this is explained by Saussure himself
in his chess analogy, mentioned earlier. The swapping of a
rook for a piece of a different shape does not change anything
if this new piece operates like a rook. It is the rules of the
game which much change for the new piece to be capable of new
moves.

What is also wrong with many of the new words which have
been developed to describe disabled people is that they have
not been chosen by disabled people themselves and are not seen
by them to reflect their identities or political desires.
Words such as "physically challenged," "able disabled,"
"handicapable," "special people/children," "differently
abled," and "people with differing abilities" are all attempts
to raise the status of disabled people by providing more
positive sounding labels but they have been rejected by
disabled people as undesirable.

Linton (1998) refers to these kinds of terms as 'nice
words.' 'They are rarely used by disabled activists and
scholars (except with palpable irony). Although they may be
considered well-meaning attempts to inflate the value of
people with disabilities, they convey the boosterism and do-
gooder mentality endemic to the paternalistic agencies that
control many disabled people's lives' (Linton 1998: 14).
Gilson, Tusler and Gill (1997) speak out even more strongly
against the use of such terms as they believe that 'these
euphemisms have the effect of depoliticising our own
terminology and devaluing our own view of ourselves as
disabled people' (9).

Disabled people who are working for change, both
activists and scholars, have attempted to address linguistic
discrimination on a deeper level. Labeling is not the only
kind of linguistic process adversely affecting the status of
disabled people: other parts of language also inflict negative
connotations in more subtle ways. Medical definitions which
ascribe disabled people the labels of "patients" and "cases"
also lead to descriptors such as "afflicted by," "suffering
from," "stricken with," and "a victim of", which infer
weakness, lack of agency, martyrdom and individual
responsibility. Also detrimental to the image of disabled
people is the use of adjectives as nouns, as in "the deaf,"
"the blind," "the mentally retarded," "the handicapped," "the

disabled," "the developmentally disabled" and "the chronically ill".

All of these adjectives used as abstract nouns contribute to the process of stigmatization by reinforcing the tendency to "see" persons with disabilities only in terms of those disabilities. These labels rivet attention on what is usually the most visible or apparent characteristic of the person. They obscure all other characteristics behind that one and swallow up the social identity of the individual within that restrictive category (Dajani 2001: 198-199).

The same problems apply to the habit of referring to people in terms of their illness or disability. To refer to someone as a paraplegic, an epileptic or an arthritic is not so different from calling them a cripple as it paints the disability as the primary label of identification, in effect 'engulfing a person's social identity' (ibid.). Barnes (1992) points out that '[w]here it is absolutely necessary to refer to an individual's impairment it is better to say "has epilepsy" or "has arthritis"'. Overall, to attempt to change these discriminatory practices of representation goes beyond the swapping of labels and requires addressing the formation of meaning through semantic structure so that it is possible to dismantle the concepts behind the labels.

The development of the social model of disability has been an attempt to link the challenging of labels with the formation of new discourse which resists the dominant, largely medical, discourse. The aim of the linguistic challenge launched by disability activists through the social model has been to resist both the oppressive concepts attached to existing terminology and the masking of the very real problems faced by those who are disabled implicit in euphemisms. The attempt to achieve this has been worked for by ensuring that 'the terms which have been unquestioningly used come to be critically scrutinised by those so labelled, and are either rejected or "owned" but radically redefined (Thomas 1999b: 13).

The new definitions of "disability" and "impairment" which are emblematic of the social model make a powerful political statement, but it has been argued that these words are used in so many contexts that it is difficult to cement their subversive possibilities (Corker 1998; Hillyer 1993) and also that the distinction between disability and impairment relies on an essentialist claim (Corker 1999; Patterson and Hughes 1997, 2000). Yet, these arguments do not sound a death knell for the utility of the social model. They simply point to the need to recognise the dynamic nature of language and the complex, ongoing requirements of linguistic change.

This is why I advocate a poststructural perspective informed by semiotics because it allows us to acknowledge that, because meaning is constructed through language, texts and discourses, it is fluid and multiplicitious and it is in the slippage of meaning within and between words that the potential for resistance lies.

Corker (1998), a disability theorist who has adopted a

linguistic approach to challenge the inadequacies of the
social model, concurs with this view and states:

> [p]oststructuralism deals specifically with language and
> discourse and, as such, is bound up with issues of
> meaning, representation and identity. Its main premise is
> that meaning can never be fixed because human discourse
> is constantly evolving and therefore continually engaged
> in creating new meanings' (224).

Being liberated from essentialist views means that it is
possible to change just about anything about ourselves and our
situations because nothing is fixed or foundational. As
Foucault (1991) argues in relation to genealogical analysis,
this kind of approach allows us to 'separate out from the
contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of
no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think'
(45-46).
    What I suggest is that, from this point onwards,
disability theory builds from the insights which underpin the
social model by forming a deeper engagement with semiotics and
discourse analysis. To be able to effectively devise new ways
of speaking, new ways of being understood and identified, I
believe it is necessary to first understand how language
operates, and I contend that this can only be achieved by
returning to the fundamentals of Saussure's linguistic
theories. If we always keep in mind that signs are arbitrary
and that they have been developed within an overall system of
language or langue, then we have the key to understanding the
social construction of identities and the potential for
challenging them.
    It is necessary to move beyond Saussure quite quickly,
however, because his interest in developing these principles
was to demonstrate that there is a solid, stable structure of
language, la langue, which predetermines and therefore
delimits our choices of individual speech, la parole. The idea
that speakers could become agents in creating new speech was
antithetical to Saussure's need for fixity, but paradoxically,
his principles pave the way for a deeper understanding of just
how individual speakers can and do create new language.
    It is Merleau Ponty (1964a) who was to draw from the
foundations of Saussurean linguistics the possibility for what
he refers to as 'truly expressive speech' (46). He concurs
with Saussure that there exists 'a sedimented language that
tends to consolidate, formalise, and regulate established
meaning' but unlike Saussure he sees speech as a form 'which
desires to break out of these limiting circumstances' (Koukal
2000: 602). Thus he argues that, although it is necessary that
language be stable enough a system to guarantee relatively
fixed meanings that can be understood over time, '[it] must
nevertheless remain open to the initiatives of the subject"
(Merleau Ponty 1964b: 87). Pivotal to his recipe for "truly
expressive speech" is the premise that new speech does not
exist outside of the existing language structure, it lies

within it, silently waiting to be brought to life.

> A language sometimes remains a long time pregnant with
> transformations which are to come... since those which
> fall into disuse continue to lead a diminished life in
> the language and since the place of those which are to
> replace them is sometimes already marked out - even if
> only in the form of a gap, a need, or a tendency
> (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 41).

I argue that it is within these "gaps" that the silenced
voices of those who bear the mark of the Other can find the
words and phrases to express the concepts which already frame
their lives.[2] Just because the words are yet to be found does
not mean that the experiences, the feelings, and the
subjugated knowledges which mark out their oppression are any
less real. It is merely an indication that the dominant
discourse, the sedimented langue, is retaining its hegemony.

Merleau Ponty (1964a) refers to these gaps as 'the
threads of silence that speech is mixed together with' and
argues that it is by uncovering these spaces between existing
words that we can find ways of expressing the formerly
inexpressible (46).[3] He advocates the use of imagery, metaphor
in particular, to overcome the limitations of existing
language and refers to this kind of innovation as 'shaking the
linguistic or narrative apparatus in order to tear a new sound
from it' (ibid.). Koukal (2000) describes Merleau Ponty's
proposed use of metaphor in the creation of linguistic
innovation:

> Metaphors invest one object with the emotional or
> imaginative qualities of another object in order to
> disrupt the sedimented meaning of instituted language so
> that the first object can be seen a new way... Metaphor
> is only one of the many tropes employed to achieve an
> evocative turn on the meaning of commonplace words. What
> all tropes have in common is an ability to "surprise" us,
> to "jolt" us, to "shake us up"... in a way that allows a
> new meaning to tumble from language (611,612).

It will be my intention throughout the remainder of this
paper to demonstrate how metaphor can be and, in some cases
has already been, used to redefine the disabled identity in
ways which promise to loosen its ties to oppressive concepts.
Added to metaphor, I argue, are other techniques for drawing
from the "gaps" and "threads of silence" new ways of speaking
about disability and those who are defined within its
precincts, these being the processes of "subversion" and
"slippage" which also utilise language's fluid and polysemic
nature to bring forth alternative narratives, subaltern
voices, subjugated knowledges.

Linguistically, one of the important things to recognise
in relation to "gaps" is that '[t]he absence of a sign can be
a sign' (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 44). Within hegemonic discourse

there are many concepts which are taken for granted, identities which remain unnamed and thus exist within "linguistic gaps," because they are considered to be part of the norm. As opposed to gender which represents two possible positions, male and female, disability, like race, exists in a dichotomy where the opposing category is not named. People do not consider "whiteness" or "ablebodiedness" or "heterosexuality" as part of their identities, while being "black", "disabled" or "homosexual" can figure largely for those identified as such. Swain and Cameron (1999) refer to existing methods of testing people's views about themselves to reveal this absence of identification with qualities comprising the norm.

> In the non-verbal descriptions of self such as in the 20 Statements Tests in which people write down 20 different statements about themselves in answer to the question "Who am I?", many people refer to their gender; few would describe themselves as non-disabled (or able-bodied). Non-disabled is presumed unless otherwise stated (68).

The absence of a signifier for the norm exists, I believe, because the signified (the concept) is hidden within neoliberal discourse which takes for granted the privileged position. Thus, within the gaps between what is sayable lies an oppressive concept which grants one group dominance over another.

To address this absence of qualification, disability rights activists and theorists have created new metaphors which express what was previously taken for granted. The terms "nondisabled", "ablebodied" and "ablebodiedness" are used to describe the position or condition of those who have previously not been defined. Linton (1998) discusses how effective this kind of metaphor is.

> The use of non-disabled is strategic: to centre disability... This action is similar to the strategy of marking and articulating "whiteness". The assumed position in scholarship has always been the male, white, non-disabled scholar; it is the default category. As recent scholarship has shown, these positions are not only presumptively hegemonic because they are the assumed universal stance, as well as the presumed neutral or objective stance, but also under theorised. The non-disabled stance, like the white stance, is veiled. "White cannot be said quite out loud, or it loses its crucial position as a precondition of vision and becomes the object of scrutiny" (Haraway 1989). Therefore, centering the disabled position and labeling its opposite non-disabled focuses attention on both the structure of knowledge and the structure of society (13-14).

In this way, from Merleau Ponty's "threads of silence" are drawn new ways of looking at the world, new ways of

defining the structure of dissonance which makes disabled people feel like lesser human beings. The gaps in language, the silence of the Other, are already filled with the sense of something "not quite right" and it is by allowing for its articulation that the opportunity for change is given breath. As Patterson and Hughes (1997) say so forcefully, the use of the term nondisabled allows us 'to reverse the stigma of "otherness" and throw it back at the oppressor' (333).

I have attempted to draw upon metaphor, or what Ricoeur (1978) refers to as 'semantic innovation' (98), in developing the expression "disabled identity" to frame the concept of oppression which I believe is responsible for the low status and damaged self-esteem which characteristically accompanies serious, ongoing impairment and illness. I believe that the bringing together of the words "disabled" and "identity", as contentious as they both are individually, extends the recognition inherent in the social model that disability is socially invoked by forcing us to focus on internalised oppression as similarly constructed.

The notion that identity can be "disabled" emphasises the fact that disablism entails more than the exclusion of disabled people from employment and public spaces, but that it also involves the denial of a desirable identity. My intention is to challenge the belief, constructed within medical discourse, that people who feel denigrated and worthless when they become incapacitated are merely displaying symptoms of poor adjustment to adverse personal circumstances. I wish to demonstrate, conversely, that this subjugated identity is socially imposed. This new linking of words to suggest a concept which has formerly been given little credence, if it has been given any at all, involves 'a semantic event that takes place at the point where several semantic fields intersect', which is Ricoeur's (1978) definition for metaphor (99). As such, reframing disability in terms of the "disabled identity" provides a building block in the gradual development of new meanings. It is bound to be superseded by more evolved metaphors as disability theory progresses, but I see it as a stepping stone toward a recognition of why disabled people have to suffer from the additional hardship of internalised oppression.

The development of the notion that being disabled is socially imposed in the same way that being a woman or being black is, has led to the development of new terms to describe this form of oppression, "disablism" and "ableism". Ableism is probably the more accurate descriptor for the kind of oppression experienced by disabled people because it is built from the generic term in the same way that "sexism" and "racism" are, but both are in use and either will suffice at this stage to get the message across. Linton (1998) points out that we are more clear about what can be construed as sexist and racist language than what is "ableist", but that this is probably due to the fact that 'the nature of the oppression of disabled people is not yet as widely understood' (9). This is where the semiotic study of disability can be of vital

significance because it can reveal the very sources from which subjugation originates. A great deal can be learned from the study and application of metaphors because, as Kliebard (1992) argues, a metaphor is more than just an 'ornament to speech and writing irrelevant to the task of clarifying and conveying meaning', it is a 'fundamental vehicle of human thought' (206).

The making of metaphors is a difficult process, however, and is often fraught with the problems outlined above in the section dealing with the elementary semiotic approach where new terms are often rejected due to their euphemistic nature or lack of effect. An intermediary phase is required where we work within the language that already exists by subverting it, disturbing it, giving old words new meanings, so that oppression is fought within existing logics while new language can undergo its halting burgeoning evolution.

When disability theorists and activists redefined the meaning of disability and disabled, they were effectively subverting the meanings that these words had inherited from medical discourse (Thomas 1999b: 13). A more strident example of subversion is present in the use of "cripple" and "crip" within the disability rights movement. Like the words "nigger" and "queer", cripple has been symbolic of oppression and, for similar reasons, activists from across these areas of identity politics have been 'taking the bigot's labels of "cripple", "nigger" and "queer" and turning them around to become badges of strength and solidarity' (Corbett 1997: 95). Thomson (1997) writes of Nancy Mairs and her decision to take on the appellation "cripple" because it forces people to 'acknowledge the particularity of her body' (25). People . . . wince at the word "cripple"', Mairs contends. Even though she retains what has been a derogatory term, she insists on determining its significance herself:

> Perhaps I want them to wince. l want them to see me as a tough customer, one to whom the fates/gods/viruses have not been kind, but who can face the brutal truth of her existence squarely. As a cripple, I swagger (ibid.).

Claiming ownership over a word which was previously used in derogatory ways and investing it with new, more positive meanings leads not only to a new show of strength to those outside the liberatory discourse, it protects the individuals so named from being hurt any longer by the negative connotations that may still be inherent in other people's use of the term. This kind of subversion can therefore function to heal identities at the same time as attempting to re-educate society and revitalise language.

To fully understand the process of subversion, it is necessary to understand what is meant by the performativity of oppressive language. The term "performative" was originally coined by Austin (1962: 6-7) to describe words which perform an action by way of their utterance and has been used extensively by theorists such as Bourdieu, Derrida and Butler to demonstrate how subjects are formed through the ceaseless

repetition of their identification through language and the performance of their identities.

According to Butler (1990; 1992) identities, such as gender and sexual identities, are created through performative repetition. However, Butler also believes that these identities can be subverted through reiterative practices which demonstrate that they are not real, but are only ever performances. Thus she sees the performance of "drag", which imitates gender, as a parody of a parody as there was nothing real or essential to copy. The same applies to sexuality, race and disability as it is in their reiteration that their construction becomes evident. Thus, taking on the title of "queer" or "cripple" reverses their oppressive identifications at the same time as it plays them out, owns them, disturbs them.

Within queer politics, indeed, within the very signification that is "queer," we read a re-signifying practice in which the desanctioning power of the name "queer" is reversed to sanction a contestation of the terms of sexual legitimacy. Paradoxically, but also with great promise, the subject who is "queered" into public discourse through homophobic interpellations of various kinds takes up or cites that very term as the discursive basis for an opposition. This kind of citation will emerge as theatrical to the extent that it mimes and renders hyperbolic the discursive convention that it also reverses (Butler 1993: 232).

The same applies to the subversion of "cripple" as it also provides a theatrical challenge to its former meanings. According to Uprety (1997), those who have been forced to exist on the margins of society are in a unique position to subvert language and culture because of their 'hybrid identities' formed on the edge, both inside and outside the dominant culture. 'From their vantage point of "double vision," those with hybrid identities can perceive they have an understanding of multiple cultures, and they can use that understanding to create new forms of thought, new ways of aesthetic and political expression' (Uprety 1997: 369).

A particular group of disabled people who have defined themselves by subverting language are those who have rejected the term "deaf", a term which represents the idea of hearing loss or impairment, and replaced it with "Deaf" with a capital D, which describes those who, as users of sign language in preference to the spoken word, are part of a linguistic minority. This involves such an extreme subversion of the original concept of deafness that it has resulted in the creation of a whole new culture, "Deaf culture".

This reconceptualisation of what it means to be a person who uses sign language fits in well with Hall's (1997) definition of culture. 'To belong to a culture is to belong to roughly the same conceptual and linguistic universe, to know how concepts and ideas translate into different languages, and how language can be interpreted to refer to or reference the world. To share these things is to see the world from within the same conceptual map and to make sense of it through the

same language systems' (22). Thus, within language exists the power to represent a whole new conceptual universe.

Corker (1998) points out that "deaf" became associated not only with hearing loss or impairment but was 'broadened to refer to any person who, regardless of whether they could hear or not, ignored, refused to listen or to comply to something or someone, and likewise, dumb became equated with stupidity' (225). The use of Deaf therefore subverts the original derogatory form of the word and, like the subversions of "disabled" and "cripple", functions to foster what is now referred to as "disability pride" (Corker 1999: 203; Gill 1997: 45-46; Gilson, Tusler and Gill 1997: 16).

To be able to 'shake the chain of language' (Merleau Ponty 1964: 46) by drawing from 'the threads of silence' or 'gaps' new ways of saying things, either by building new metaphors or subverting existing terminology, it is vital to grasp the semiotic concept of "slippage". Perhaps Saussure's greatest legacy was his recognition that words are arbitrary and hence bear no essential connection to the meanings they express. In other words, the signifier and the signified are not linked by any natural or inevitable relationship. The only way that words take on any meaning at all is through their difference from other terms and this results in 'a constant sliding of meaning in all interpretation' because, in language, nothing can be fixed (Hall 1997: 33).

This concept of slippage comes from Derrida's (2000 [1972]) development of the idea of diffTrance, the neologism with which he captures the two meanings of the French verb, diffTrer - to differ and to defer (87). By drawing on the idea of diffTrance, Derrida extends Saussure's premise that words can only be defined in contrast to what they are not by demonstrating that this definition through difference or dissimilarity leads to a constant state of deferral of meaning. 'The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. We take or give signs. The signal. The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence' (ibid.).

This concept of slippage or deferral is useful to our linguistic excursion in two ways. It can help to explain how the words we have used to describe physical impairment have come to take on derogatory meanings and it can provide the theoretical basis for challenging language through metaphor and subversion. Consider, for example, the term "handicap" and the reasons for its rejection from the lexicon of disability theory. Why was "disability" chosen to be subverted rather than "handicap"? I suggest that this was because the word "handicap" was too tainted from the "traces" of it former usage. Stiker (1999) touches on this view in his exploration of the replacement of infirmitT with handicap in France.

In a single jump we have passed from a game of chance, the luck of the draw, and thus from a kind of natural

fatality to a possible regulation, a will to master
circumstance. A slight displacement of vocabulary and we
have two different worlds in opposition: the world of
disability, of insurmountable incapacity, and the world
of handicap, of affliction compensated for... This image
of horse racing corresponds exactly to that of the
handicapped person who has to catch up, rejoin the normal
and normalized group, be one of them. The horse racing
application of the word is the right one. Handicap as a
designation of disadvantage, illness, amputation, loss is
secondary in comparison to handicap signifying
competition, rivalry, participation in a trial (146).

What Stiker is actually referring to when he speaks of
'displacement' is the slippage that occurs when handicap is
transformed from its horse racing connotations into a new
metaphor for describing disability. In its deferral from one
meaning to another it changes signification 'without erasing
the trace of its other meanings' (Hall 1990: 228). This is
true of all words. In their fluidity and plurality they remain
slippery and hard to pin down. According to Hall (1997), they
always say 'something in excess of what we intend to say' and
retain a fragility in which 'other meanings overshadow the
statement or the text, where other associations are awakened
to life, giving what we say a different twist' (33).
    This lack of fixity is also the key to language change.
Indeed, slippage is a primary device for both locating and
negotiating the gaps in language. It is because meanings do
not remain stable that it is possible to bridge the gaps and
the silences with significations which have the potential to
transcend existing realms of expression.
    For example, in my use of the metaphor, "disabled
identity", I am relying on the polysemic nature of both these
words. Firstly, by using "disabled" I not only draw on the
social model's perspective that to be disabled is to be
oppressed by a society which undervalues and does not
accommodate for people who have impairments, I also make use
of its former traces which suggest denigration and
vulnerability because the experience of internalised
oppression includes these impositions.
    Secondly, it is the slippery nature of "identity" that is
precisely the concept I want to suggest, for, while the idea
of a fixed identity has been central to the construction of
the Other, it is the postmodern notion of the fluid,
pluralistic self which offers the possibility for choosing
other ways of being. And through playing with language it has
been my intention to demonstrate that the disabled identity
has been constituted as such precisely because the dominant
identity, the norm, can only achieve its shape through
contrasting itself with what it is not. In other words, it is
because of slippage that identity must define itself in
relation to the Other.
    For identity is a will-o-the-wisp, essentially nothing on
its own. As Redman (2000) argues, 'identities take their

definition only from that which they are not, implying, for example, that the identity of the supposedly 'civilised European' is constructed in relation to a range of 'different' others: the 'barbaric' African, the 'exotic' oriental and so on.

Disturbingly, this forces us to think of these differential identities as inherently unstable. From the perspective of diffTrance, the identity of the 'civilised' European is constantly haunted by the liminal presence of the 'black' and 'oriental' others against which it defines itself and into which it continually threatens to collapse' (Redman 2000: 12). But, as with the fluidity of language offering us a multitude of ways to redefine our position, the instability of identity provides the potential for challenging it at its roots. This is why disability is feared and frowned upon by Thomson's (1997) 'normates'. 'People who have an impairment can act as a reminder of our own frailty, our own susceptibility to morbidity and mortality' (Watson 1998: 147). And any attempt by disability activists to challenge, through language, the authenticity of the border between normality and alterity threatens to dissolve all the claims which shore up normality in the first place.

Contesting oppressive language can be fraught with difficulty, however. Not only are there problems inherent in the transferral of negative traces from one word to another, but the dominant ideology bears a deep resistance to change. Griffiths (1995) argues that the normative group will fight tooth and nail to retain its position and that this is why politically correct language has often been referred to so scathingly and turned into a joke.

Foucault (1985) acknowledges this resistance to change in his use of the ancient Greek parrhesia to describe the kind of 'free speech' with which is necessary to defy the norm. Foucault considers parrhesiests to be those who are in a position 'less powerful than the one with whom he or she speaks. The parrhesia comes from "below", as it were, and is directed towards "above"'. The act of parrhesia is critical in nature and incurs risk or danger on the individual who is attempting to speak new truths.

In his later work Foucault (1988d) developed the notion that it is possible to develop ways of formulating our own subjectivities through stripping away universal "truths" and replacing them with our own personal truths, truths built on our recognition of how we would like to define ourselves outside of hegemonic discourse (15).

For Foucault, parrhesia provides the means with which to reach this goal and it is in keeping with this understanding of 'free speaking' that I adopt the concept of parrhesia to encapsulate the processes of metaphor, subversion and slippage described above. For, it is only by being critical of what they are asked to take for granted and by being willing to risk the condescension, disbelief and harsh judgments of those who collude with the system as it stands that disabled people can attempt to redefine their positions and their identities.

It is not that parrhesia will unearth a real "truth" which has been concealed by power, it is that it allows for the formulation of alternative truths, the means for articulating the subjugated knowledges that have formerly been denied a voice.

The struggle to devise new ways of articulating identity through parrhesia will only be effective, however, if it manages 'to enter into mainstream society and to struggle with hegemonic discourses which mark the domains of its social reproduction' (Corker 2000: 447). As I have attempted to outline throughout this paper, the formation of meaning through language operates simultaneously at the level of semiotics, semantics and discourse and it will only be through working for changes at each of these levels that linguistic innovation and, accordingly, the resignification of marginalised identities can be achieved. This is where fields of critique such as feminism, postcolonialism, queer theory, poststructuralism and disability studies are vital to the creation of 'counter technologies [which] include those who have re-authored theories of gender, race, sexuality in ways which resist hegemonic discourses' (Corker and French 1999: 8). I believe that the most powerful way to sum up the fact that our subjugation and our chances to resist it are tied up in the discourses which define us comes from Foucault.

> Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (Foucault 1980c: 100).

It is thus within language and discourse that the potential to unshackle the disabled identity lies.

Notes

1. Thorick, Roberts and Battistone (2001) object to the term "hearing impaired", pointing out that ' we do not label a Black person "white impaired," and we would not call a man a "female-impaired" person' (191).

2. I am extremely indebted to Rebecca Caines, my colleague and friend, who introduced me to the postmodern perspective and the possibility for resistance through gaps and silences. Our endless conversations in relation to the radical postmodern view which structures her work has allowed me a deeper understanding of the issues involved than I could ever have gained through struggling alone with such difficult texts.

3. For the rich understanding I now have of the beauty and power of metaphor I also have Rebecca Caines to thank. Her work and her life is based on a clear recognition that we need to develop metaphor to "express the inexpressible".

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