

E. Hem responds:

It is easy to agree that we should avoid terms that may appear «highly stigmatising and discriminatory». But should we follow the example set by our American colleagues and replace «obese» by «obesity», or write «persons with morbid obesity» instead of «morbidly obese persons»? We asked The Language Council of Norway and received an answer from Dag F. Simonson, Senior Adviser.

Assessment by The Language Council of Norway

The Language Council of Norway frequently receives questions regarding so-called sensitive words, and we have formulated our views in the document *Sensitive ord* [*Sensitive words*] (1). We believe that it is very important to consider the recipient when choosing words – to reflect and show common sense – and we encourage everybody to do so. On the other hand, one should not attempt to blacklist certain words and expressions and try to ban their use. Language users must have freedom to choose between words that reflect different styles and have different connotations, and the way in which a specific word is used may often be seen as more offensive than the word in itself.

As regards your question, we are gratified to see that your journal is concerned with having a positive and inclusive tone in relation to its readers, while maintaining a high standard in terms of language

as well as content. However, we do not wish to make any recommendation with regard to exchanging «obese» with «obesity» or changing from describing «morbidly obese people» to using «persons with morbid obesity», and our reasoning is as follows.

We are aware that some people claim that there is a decisive difference between using the expression «morbidly obese people» and using «people with morbid obesity». According to them, an adjectival expression («morbidly obese») brands a person as *only* morbidly obese («the whole truth»), while a prepositional expression («with morbid obesity») does not have this impact. Such a hypothesis has a poor basis in general syntax and semantics. The choice between an adjective and a prepositional phrase is mainly about the opportunity to vary the phrasing and construction of sentences when writing or speaking.

Words are not only bearers of meaning in the narrow sense («denotation») but also of shades of meaning («connotation»), as has been pointed out in *Sensitive ord* (1). Certain designations are clearly derogatory, perhaps because they are intended to be, such as «pisshead» or «porker», while opinions may differ with regard to others, such as «alcoholic» and «obese». This should not be taken to extremes. We believe that assuming that a word such as «disabled» might have a discriminatory, stigmatising or offensive effect will be far removed from the language

sense of most people, and we also permit ourselves to doubt that most disabled people would perceive it as such.

We also have difficulty in envisaging that «morbidly overweight» and «with morbid overweight» or «obese» and «with obesity» would be able to maintain any distinctively different connotations in common usage over time. And moreover, it is possible to express oneself neutrally, supportively or negatively stigmatising irrespective of any choice of adjectives or prepositional phrases if one is out to achieve one or the other.

In our opinion, these examples provide ample illustration of the difficulties involved in attempts to formulate principles for non-stigmatising language use with the aid of general categories and grammatical principles.

Conclusion

We are prepared to follow the advice given by The Language Council of Norway, but we would like to hear our readers' opinions.

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References

1. Språkrådet. Sensitive ord. www.sprakradet.no/sprakhjelp/Skriverad/Sensitive_ord [11.6.2015].