



# NOT WRONG BUT DIFFERENT

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hard time recognising nonverbal cues like facial expressions, but I've become somewhat of an expert at identifying the wide-eyes and pierced lips often accompanying silence and an awkward side glance that I can recognise it almost as easily as I recognise factual inaccuracies.

It's not just the media sensationalism, or the misinformation spread across social platforms that

person affected by autism'—affected—as if being autistic is akin to a tragedy. And while it might seem like a bit of a stretch to equate one word to the pathologising of a neurotype, we've seen a rise in eugenics searching for an autism 'cure' to prevent future generations from inheriting it.

Words matter—a lot. Language has the ability to revolutionise, influence, create, and destroy. The words we use have meaning, and that meaning echoes into our politics, our economy, our internalisation of beliefs... When we continue to use language that oppresses marginalised groups, we are directly contributing to their oppression.

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What is it about the word autistic that seems to scare so many people? The word carries enough weight that parents refuse to vaccinate their children, and certain countries deny immigration rights to autistic people. But the most vexing of all has got to be the look of dumbfounded pity on a person's face when they hear me say: "I'm autistic".

The irony is that autists have a

contribute to the lack of understanding; when you google the meaning of autistic, the dictionary defines it as: 'a

In 1998, Judy Singer coined the term 'neurodiversity', and the Neurodiversity Movement began. Singer proposed that

autism, along with other brain functions that deviate from the norm, like ADHD and dyslexia, were not wrong but different; she worked to promote acceptance as opposed to viewing these divergences as something to be feared or fixed. Since the start of her advocacy, we have seen a 787 percent increase in autism prevalence, and that's not to say that more people are being born autistic, but that the understanding of autism has led to more people recognising it in themselves and others.

The Neurodiversity

Movement has helped shift the language on autism, thus shifting the understanding and perceptions. It has had an unprecedented impact on how autism is recognised, diagnosed, and perceived in society. In fact, in 2013, the American Psychiatric Association made the decision to forgo autistic subtypes and consider autism a spectrum, one that includes a range of neurodevelopmental differences. But even with this critical step forward, we still have a long way to go; autism is still feared, disabilities are still thought of as tragic, and ableist slurs like the R word

still find their way into everyday conversations, further enforcing harmful stereotypes.

Ableism will likely never be abolished entirely, but that doesn't mean we should sit back and let it happen. If the past two decades have taught us anything, it's that language is power; change your language, and you change the narrative.

Shannon is an autistic writer who works for an online technology publication. In her spare time, she advocates for neurodivergence and disability rights.