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Discussing the new brief guide to disability theory and terminology in the ancient world

by Alexandra Morris and Debby Sneed, interviewed by Cressida Ryan

Alexandra Morris and Debby Sneed have put together an extremely useful brief guide to disability theory and terminology in the ancient world. As a way to discuss this, we have put together a series of questions and answers, introducing the guide, the topic, the authors and the authors' work.

Question 1: What motivated you to put this guide together?

This guide arose out of a mutual sense of frustration over the language sometimes seen in scholarship on disability in the ancient world. We were both concerned that in some instances certain terminology might be seen as the standards for the field, when they are in fact recognised by the disability community as slurs and are harmful to today's disability community. We were also concerned, and heard in feedback from others in this process, that the usage of offensive and inappropriate terminology actually prevents some people from engaging with the scholarship and potentially bars newcomers to the field of disability in ancient world studies. Finally, we also heard from others that they were afraid of using inappropriate terminology, so we hoped that through the creation of this guide we could help demystify terminology for those outside of the disability community as well. We actively engaged with an international disability community for this guide so that what we communicated was broadly representative of the perspectives of disabled students and scholars in ancient world studies.

Question 2: There's a real sense of community in your post, including an awareness of the subjectivity of some aspects of what you discuss. This might make it feel like an impossible minefield for an outsider. You've encouraged people to take the lead from those with disabilities in how to use language in a modern context, but how might we encourage people not to feel overwhelmed or overly constrained by trying to do the right thing when they can't do that?

This question strikes us as odd. What, in this context, does it mean to be prevented from doing "the right thing"? We have encouraged people to use our guide as a start, and then if they need additional guidance, to do basic research, something that we are trained to do in our fields of study. Sometimes we might not have the most updated information, but it is unacceptable, given the resources available online and in libraries, not to put in the basic work necessary to avoid harmful and problematic language. Disabled people live with the social consequences of discrimination and an ableist society every day, and they often have to put in unrecognised labour to navigate in such a society, and it is not too much to ask nondisabled people to make sure their work is not offensive.

That being said, even thinking about and questioning the terminology used is a step in the right direction. It is important to make a good faith attempt to find the right language and, even more importantly, to be willing to actively listen when someone informs you that you have made a mistake and commit to do better next time. You will not be an expert in this from the start, but if you are open to engaging in these conversations and listening, mistakes are easily forgiven.

Question 3: You've both clearly very engaged with this topic, but could you give an example of where you've found it hard to find the best way to handle the expression of disability in ancient sources?

I'm not sure if this counts exactly, but in [Alexandra's] PhD thesis, one of my sections is on dwarfism, and linguistically we know the ancient Egyptians distinguished between those with dwarfism, and those African groups who are naturally genetically shorter. The Bayaka, Efé, and Twa are some of these groups who have been described in the past by mainly white European and American Egyptologists and anthropologists, as pygmies, which is now considered to be offensive. It took me a bit to figure out how to reference this linguistic difference, and I'm still not entirely sure that I handled it well enough (there may be yet more revisions to that section).

In [Debby's] dissertation, I used language that I now recognize as inappropriate or even offensive. At that point, I had been so limited within my little academic silo that I hadn't discussed my research with anyone outside of my dissertation committee. It wasn't until I began engaging directly with disabled people through social media that I became more aware, as both a person and a scholar, of the importance of the language that we use. I started following disability activists, academics, and advocates and eventually got connected with disabled colleagues studying disability in antiquity, and it greatly expanded my understanding not just of the language that I use, but also of my actual work. I can say now, without a doubt, that I have seen significant improvement in my analyses and interpretations based on the conversations I have had with my disabled colleagues. Using the right language is just one part of our overall project, but it’s an important one.

Question 4: What would be an example of a small change someone might be encouraged to make as a result of engaging with this guide?

A small change that might be encouraged from engaging with this guide, is for people, especially those in a teaching or supervisory capacity, to be more conscious of the terms they use and how they frame disability in their classes and discussions with students and other colleagues. Don’t frame discussions as if everyone in the room is nondisabled. Just because no one is openly identifying as being disabled, that doesn’t mean you don’t know anyone or have anyone in your departments or classes who is. There are a variety of social and structural reasons for why people feel they can’t self-identify openly as disabled, or have it recognised formally through a university’s disability services or human resources office.

Question 5: What would be the best place for someone to go to find out more about this area?

Both CripAntiquity and Asterion Hub, which are both disability advocacy groups for people in ancient world studies, are good places to start, as are the other authors and organisations listed under resources at the end of the guide. The Enabled Archaeology Foundation is also a good place to look for making archaeology more accessible. We also recommend besides our own work, check out the work of others like Kyle Lewis Jordan (University College London), Mason J. Schrader (Texas Tech University), and Hannah Vogel (Macquarie University), among others.

Question 6: There’s a relationship between the language of disability and other categories where things are sensitive and world views have changed significantly since the ancient world. Do you have any thoughts on how people might apply your guidelines to other topics, such as race or gender?

I think we can apply the same conscientiousness and approach that we apply to disability to other topics such as race and gender. Listen to living communities about what preferred terminology is, and if they tell you not to use something, or that it’s outdated or offensive, listen and don’t use it.

7. One of your recommendation is to avoid using disability-related adjectives as nouns. So, for example, the son of Croesus (Herodotus 1.34) was non-speaking (κωφός); he was not “a mute” or “a deaf-mute.”

I teach the New Testament, and this is exactly how people ARE described, with adjectives as nouns and disabilities as defining features, e.g. Luke 14: 13ἀλλ᾽ ὅταν δοχὴν ποιῇς, κάλει πτωχούς, ἀναπείρους, χωλούς, τυφλούς and 14:21 Ἔξελθε ταχέως εἰς τὰς πλατείας καὶ ῥύμας τῆς πόλεως καὶ τοὺς πτωχοὺς καὶ ἀναπείρους καὶ τυφλοὺς καὶ χωλοὺς εἰσάγαγε ὧδε. Would your advice hold here as well, or is that being anachronistic in the way we handle scriptural attitudes towards disability?

Neither of us is an expert in New Testament scholarship, but it seems that what’s important is the sentiment behind what is being described, rather than the exact language itself. In English, our adjectives do not necessarily include things like gender and number, so you often have to specify the nouns that adjectives are modifying. Except in certain contexts, we actually tend to bristle when certain adjectives are used substantively, like when people refer to women as “females.” In ancient Greek, however, adjectives are regularly used substantively. The adjective χωλούς in Luke 14:13, for example, does mean “limping,” but its masculine and plural aspects give you a sense of the noun it modifies. So, in ancient Greek, the noun itself is not lost in the way it might be in English.

As long as the sentiment actually expressed in the original language is conveyed, in a way that respects both the original context of the text and the modern context of the reader, then it can be acceptable to translate adjectives substantively into English. When discussing the text, however, it’s often unnecessary to retain that: you may wish to translate a word as “the blind,” but when you refer to it in your own argument, you may choose instead to discuss “blind people.”