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Research Paper

Now you see it, now you don't: A discourse view of disability and multidisciplinary



Ici, on le voit, ici, on ne le voit pas : une vue discursive du handicap et de la multidisciplinarité

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ABSTRACT

Disability is increasingly salient as a word and increasingly heterogeneous as a category. Multiple interest groups and professions define disability in different ways, making it impossible to achieve a unitary theoretical definition or singular model-explanation of disability as a phenomenon. It is in the interest both of disability scholars and disabled people to acknowledge the multiple understandings of disability, and to appropriate ways of thinking and talking about disability that are often seen as antithetical to a progressive understanding of disability. This particularly applies to medical language, which may be used to deepen our understanding of disability without the traditionally attendant problem of medicalization. Such a project requires a deeper engagement with the particularities of medical language, but also with chronic illness, which is sometimes dichotomized from impairment on spurious grounds. Disability studies should acknowledge the utility of medical language as a tool for people with chronic illnesses as well as impairments to conceptualize their embodied experience, and strive for ways to situate medical language within a sociopolitically progressive understanding of chronic illness, impairment, and disability.

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R É S U M É

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« Handicap », comme mot, est de plus en plus saillant, et comme catégorie, est de plus en plus hétérogène. Des groupes d'intérêt multiples et des professions définissent le handicap de différentes manières, de sorte qu'il est impossible d'obtenir une définition théorique unique ou un seul modèle d'explication du handicap comme phénomène. Il est dans l'intérêt à la fois des chercheurs du handicap et des personnes handicapées de reconnaître cette compréhension multiple du handicap et de s'approprier des manières de penser et de parler du handicap, qui peuvent souvent être considérées comme antinomiques à une compréhension progressiste du handicap. Cela est particulièrement vrai pour le langage médical, qui peut être mobilisé pour approfondir notre analyse du handicap sans que celle-ci soit associée au traditionnel problème de la médicalisation. Un tel projet requiert un engagement étroit avec les particularités du langage médical, mais aussi avec la maladie chronique, qui est parfois dissociée de la déficience, sur des bases fallacieuses. Les recherches sur le handicap devraient reconnaître l'utilité du langage médical comme outil permettant aux personnes atteintes d'une maladie chronique ou de déficiences, de conceptualiser leur expérience incarnée. Elles devraient s'interroger sur les manières de situer le langage médical dans une compréhension socio-politique progressiste, de la maladie chronique, de la déficience et du handicap.

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1. Introduction

Looking at the world around us, from restroom doors to parking spaces to building entrances, there is little doubt that symbolic representations of disability are increasingly common. What is less obvious is what we should make of this fact. In this paper, which was originally given as a keynote at the ALTER conference in Stockholm in the summer of 2016, I consider some implications of the proliferation of disability as a concept and a symbolic entity. I do so with the aid of discourse analysis, a methodological approach (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2008; Wodak, 2001) that has become increasingly germane to disability studies since the turn of the century – as a general approach (French & Corker, 1999), but specifically, too, in literary and cultural disability studies (Snyder & Mitchell, 2000) and Foucauldian studies of disability and governmentality (Tremain, 2005).

Discourse analysis is itself a multidisciplinary project; it adds complexity. Work in the field over the last decade engages with political science, social psychology, corpus linguistics, and history, to name just a few bordering disciplines (Baker et al., 2008; Fairclough, 2015; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). To avoid the charge of needless complexity, let me therefore argue that discourse analysis joined with disability studies is simply about closely examining the meaning that some people, institutions, and organizations attach to the word disability and its attendant concepts and symbols.

Over the last few years, there has been an exponential increase in discourse-oriented studies of disability – of heavily mediated phenomena like the Paralympic Games, but also of mundane representational practices in fields such as health and education. My own contributions to the intersecting fields of disability and discourse analysis (particularly Grue, 2015) reflect this concern with the symbolically striking as well as the bureaucratically embedded. I am interested both in how disability becomes a multiform concept – what is usually termed *polysemic* in linguistic, i.e. having multiple distinct meanings – and in how those meanings can structure conflicts in the disability field. A particularly salient example of this is the role of medical knowledge in disability discourse; the “medical meaning” of disability is notoriously hard to reconcile with the “social meaning” of disability, a

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