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Glossary Definition- Dumb

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Most youth in America may not even finch at the use of the word “dumb”. “Wow that was so dumb, I can’t believe I forgot my keys!” could be an excerpt from any young adult conversation. “Dumb” is used as a synonym for a mistake or a silly slip, seemly very benign in meaning. Movies like “Dumb and Dumber” and “Dumbo” are classics for our culture. However the original definition of the word “dumb” is far from foolish and stupid. Since context is so important to relative definition, how does American culture affect the definition of words? Specifically insensitive words, like “dumb” that are generally associated with disability.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “dumb” as the “Destitute of the faculty of speech” (OED). The etymology of the word in this context is Old and new German and English. In fact nearly all of the official European definitions are medical in nature. A definition mentioned in the OED was lacking a quality or property relating to disease, a synonym suggested was even as literal as a fever (“dumb” adj. 8). In a nutshell majority are refined to mean a deaf or mute person with no association of being foolish or stupid. However there is the exception, an entry from America. There is a connection between origin and meaning of the word “dumb”. The US officially added “dumb”, *n*, to mean a foolish or stupid person (OED). Formally creating multiple meanings for the word “dumb” in the US, to be a mute person or to be stupid person. This secondary meaning is also seen in American academic journals. As the American Scholar journal states, “Readers, I learned, are not as ‘dumb’ the writer thinks; they must be given room to play their role…” (COCA). Clearly location affects the prime meaning of the word “dumb”. Actually in New York “dumb” can even be used as slang to mean extremely or crazy (Urban dictionary.) America has a wide range of definitions for “dumb”.

When a culture defines one word to mean two completely unrelated things, sensitivities will arise, and in this case, especially for the deaf and mute community. It is logical to understand why it would be offensive for a deaf person to be called “dumb” because of the alterative meaning of the word. Lacking speech is not associated with being foolish or stupid. Because of the conflicting definitions, people will have to deal with rising sensitivities. If America is open to accepting new adaptations of a word, the culture also should be accepting to alleviate its developed offensive connotations. One-way for the population to be aware of newly arose connotations is to stay up to date with politically correct phrases. A politically correct phrase is standardized vocabulary to stay clear of words that could discriminate social groups (The Free Dictionary). For example the Word Federation of the Deaf has officially declared it not ok to use “dumb” to describe mute people (wfdeaf). If “dumb” is to be used so casually in America to mean stupid, as seen in mainstream movies like Mean Girls, “God, Karen you are so dumb” the population should be even more sensitive to the fact that “dumb” in the medical sense is an archaic definition. As the North Carolina hearing loss association potently states, “today, anyone using the word ‘dumb’ in such context [to mean mute] is .... well ... ‘dumb’”.

A words origin is important to its definition, but its not only location that is important in the feelings of a word, it also includes the surrounding culture. As Gloria Naylor states “Words themselves are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power” (Naylor 1). Naylor experienced a twist in the meaning of the word Nigger from her household context to a public classroom setting. Nigger no longer was an endearing or admirable term; rather it was an unspoken, nasty word. This change in sentiment towards the word was due to the change in her environment (Naylor 2). As mentioned in the previous paragraph we live in an open culture that should have to deal with the implications of that. For example, expanding the definition of words gather new sentiments in that word’s use. So like with the word “dumb”, knowing the politically correct terms is important to avoid the use of offensive sentiments. However even though people may have the ‘duty’ to adhere to the terms of an open culture, the general American population action to stop the use of offensive terms is low. The paper started with an example of this, the frequent use of the word “dumb” in young adult conversations. The younger generation is one part of the general trend of low activism against offensive terms in America, but for now what is surprising is the lack of effort in the professional world. For example in the web published news article “Blind, Deaf, Dumb, but often Raped” uses the word dumb to mean unable to speak. It states, “Since their daughter is blind, dumb and deaf, she… can neither see, talk nor hear and suffers from mental illness.” The article can be seen by anyone with internet access and therefore a huge audience, including those who take sensitivity to that type of language. Hopefully in the future if one were to publish something to the masses they would consider the language used more carefully. If it is a case where the author is just unaware of the politically correct term, then hopefully those reading this can pass on the lesson to lessen unnecessary offenses. In the end have a culture that are not only aware of the politically correct terms, but one that pushes the use of them.

In the American context, “dumb” has vast meanings and therefore the use of the word can be offensive to some. “Dumb’s” frequent use to mean stupid has created sensitivities in the mute community to be referred to as “dumb”. This is all due to the surrounding culture and sentiment of the word “dumb” in America. As this quote from Naylor summarizes, “dialogue achieves its power in the dynamics of a fleeting moment of sight, sound, smell, and touch”. We give dumb the power to be offensive, but we also have the power to use alternative words. Now educated empowered audience you can define what is disability.

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