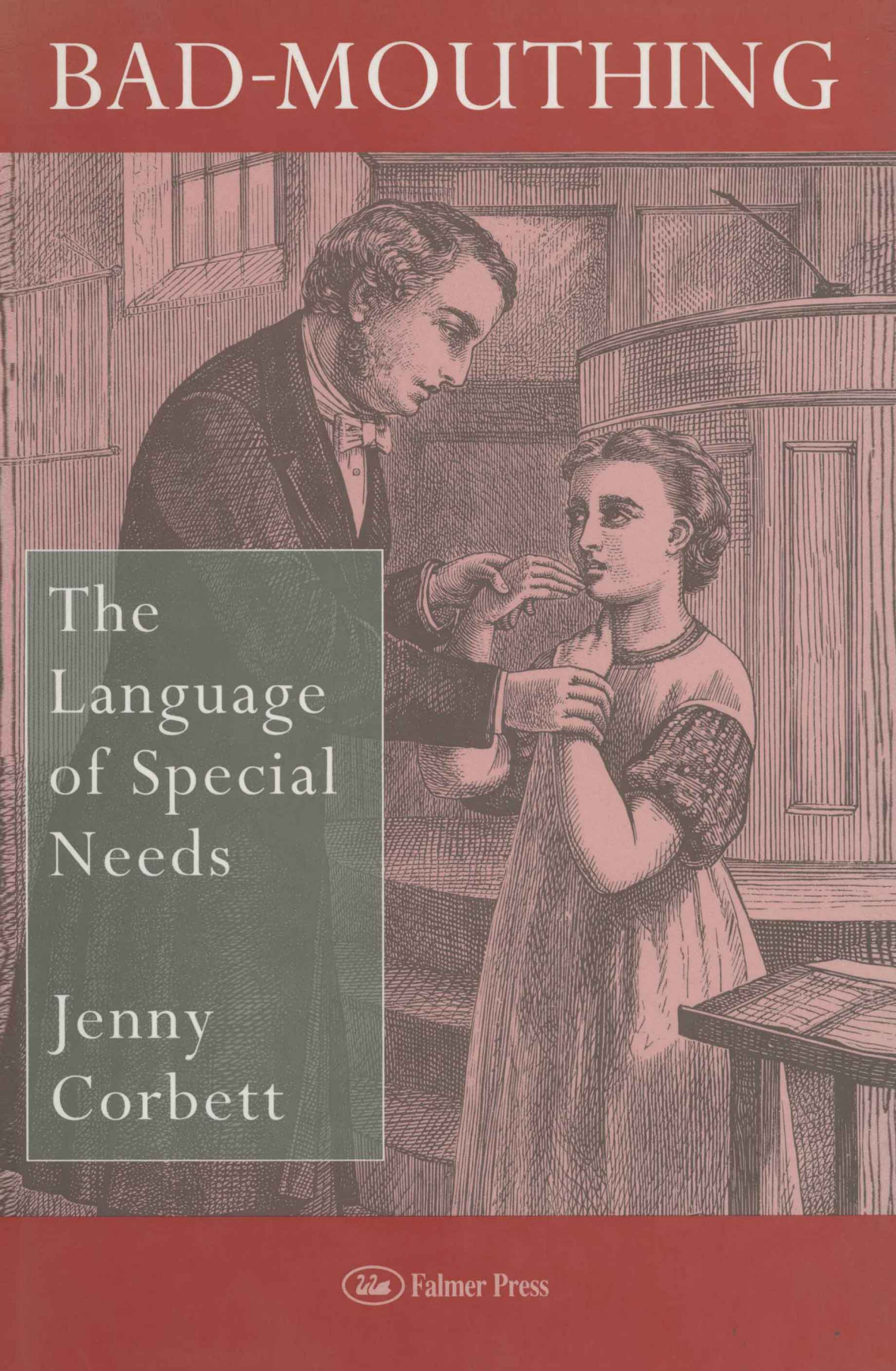


BAD-MOUTHING



The
Language
of Special
Needs

Jenny
Corbett

Bad-mouthing: The Language of Special Needs

Jenny Corbett



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To Sue,
with love

Bad-mouthing: The Language of Special Needs



TEACHING THE DUMB TO SPEAK

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Preface

Delicate words exhausted through over-use.
Bawdy words made temperate by repetition.
Enchanting and enchanted words wand broken.
Words of the spirit forced into the flesh.
Words of the flesh unlovely in a white gown.
Slang in a sling shot hurled and hurled and hurled.
That is the legacy of the dead.

Jeanette Winterson
1994, *Art and Lies*, p. 65

Foreword

This book is about language and, in turn, the manipulation, the power strategies, the cruelty, the defensiveness, the blind alleys down which we are in danger of sending ourselves as we grapple with relentless changes. It is called *Bad-mouthing* the means by which the dominant discourse is maintained by the established elite no matter the current fashion whether it be eighteenth century paternalism or late twentieth century political correctness. One of the principal methods of Bad-mouthing is by labelling people, bracketing them into defined sectors to enhance our significance.

This is not a comforting book to read tucked up in bed with a glass of malt whisky or a cup of camomile tea. This is a disturbing book, an honest book, a book that will alter perceptions and practice. Writing in a refreshingly direct language and style, Jenny Corbett challenges our interpretation of the word 'special' and demands that we recognize that sentimentality, arrogance and fear are rooted in society's suppression of disabled people. We are urged to compare Warnock with the new voices of disabled theorists; to appreciate the conflict between the medical model and disability culture; to listen, see, touch, feel and harken to the metaphors now being used by disabled people as we take command of our lives.

During the twentieth century we have witnessed the successive liberation paths of women, black peoples, and gays and lesbians. Disabled people have been left behind, and amongst disabled people mental health system survivors and people with special needs (who embrace all cultures, classes, races and disabilities) are the most oppressed — often denied the most basic civil rights. Disabled activists and artists, often the same individuals, are articulating powerful messages: demanding access in the very widest sense, civil liberties, and the right to control their own lives.

In a culture where powerful vested interests have forged careers, wealth and reputations 'caring' for disabled people, this activism is a threat to entrenched influence and paternalism. The great and the good, the medical professionals, the media personalities, and the do-gooders

will not easily relinquish their power base. They will go to great lengths using combinations of sophistry and crudity in attempts to subvert the inevitable transfer of power.

Language is power, Jenny Corbett reminds us. Utilizing a well chosen eclectic series of example texts, we are introduced to a variety of voices from the disabled community. The questions she poses on these texts are judiciously selected, and both teacher and student will enjoy grappling with exciting new ways of looking at language and as a consequence new ways of looking at life.

Poetry and music are particularly effective means of enabling new voices to emerge from centuries of oppression. There are several poems quoted in *Bad-mouthing*. I particularly liked those by Char March, Willard J Masden, and Paulette Ng, which are effective in evoking the spiritual power of language now used in education, advocacy and political campaigning.

Johnny Crescendo, a celebrated activist, singer and poet, writes and sings about the **white coats** who prescribe and monitor, about the **charity personalities** and how we must **piss on pity**, and ironically tells the world why **disabled people aren't allowed to say fuck**. Thousands of disabled people, in Britain and abroad, are inspired by his words; by the language that is changing their lives now.

Society labels me **Writer, Poet, Director, Adviser**; accurate descriptions, conferring status and respect, acceptable to the worlds of literature and charities. My own labels are Survivor and Crip; terms used by fellow disabled people and mental health system survivors.

I am privileged to be asked to write this Foreword and this has arisen, I venture to guess, from my willingness to accept both sets of labels. It wasn't always so. Fifteen years ago I was labelled **Engineer** and **Commercial Director**, a corporation man concealing years of psychiatric experiences and unaware of the physical disability yet to come. I have made major changes. I have learnt to welcome changes, changes that are grist to the mill of the soul. I welcome this book which will be of value to the academic, the student, the teacher, the legislator and, not least, to the general public.

A decade ago I published a poem entitled *Label Me*. Jenny Corbett has asked me to quote an extract which has particular resonances:

.....
I know I'm a hype target
realise I'm the clone
they need to feed
their insidious imagery

I won't be conned again
I'll never wear those faceless clothes.
Don't expect me to reveal
My own sensitive personality

I got this friend called Frank
who prints paper and assorted graffiti.
He made me a lovely T-shirt
It said . . .

I'm a drone — use me, screw me.

Bad-mouthing is an important contribution. It has already changed my perception.

Joe Bidder
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Introduction: Bad-mouthing

I have called this book 'Bad-mouthing' because it is about the use of language in relation to concepts of disability. We are in a period of history where, with increased political awareness in the use of language, we try now to reconstruct the terms we use and the imagery that is created.

The image on the cover has been selected specifically to convey the challenges we now face. It was used in an educational text of 1871 and was an illustration of what were then perceived as innovative practices. For us now, viewing the image with an awareness of the influence of disability politics, the picture demonstrates paternalism and oppression.

Its caption, 'Teaching the Dumb to Speak', is ripe for the most rigorous deconstruction. Special educational practice from the late 1800s to the present may be said to embody this sentiment. From a punitive emphasis upon oralism in the teaching of deaf students, to a meticulous approach to individual learning programmes, to a focus on advocacy and empowerment, special education can be seen over the last hundred years or so to have been concerned with 'teaching the dumb to speak' at both a literal and metaphorical level. That this is now couched in the language of 'empowerment' does not, for me anyway, negate its inherent paternalism and potential to oppress.

My particular interest in the language of special needs has developed over the last few years, during which time I have explored the ways in which new discourses have emerged to challenge those of enlightened modernity (Corbett, 1993); the political correctness of special language in the mid-1990s (Corbett, 1994a); and, the ways in which imagery is changing as proud labels displace the legacy of negativity (Corbett, 1994b). These are all complex issues, which need to be contextualized both politically and historically, requiring a level of analysis which moves beyond an investigation of surface semantics. In this book I shall develop the ideas I introduced in these initial explorations to build an analysis of where the language of special needs has emerged from, where it seems to be going at present and what is likely to become of it in the near future.

Looking at Language

The way in which words are used to define, portray and explain people and situations is an endless source of fascination to me. The power of language is overwhelming. It is used by politicians and the media to create emotional responses. None of us are immune to the force of verbal imagery.

'Special Needs' is a term which has become a short-hand for 'Special Educational Needs', as defined within the Warnock Report (DES, 1978). The inclusion of the word 'educational' tends to be used as a justification for distinguishing some 'needs' as 'special'. It is argued that the 'specialness' is purely educational and not generalized into the broader community.

Whilst there has been considerable theorizing on the psychological and sociological aspects of special education (e.g., Mittler, 1974; Tomlinson, 1982) as well as a recognition of the influence of policies (Fulcher, 1989) and politics (Barton, 1988), there has not yet been a concerted attempt to analyse the way in which language is used to create images and codes. In his cumulative examinations of conceptualizing 'integration', Booth (e.g., 1981, 1987, 1988, 1992) has prepared the way for such an analysis to develop. This general lack of interest may be because semantics seem peripheral to special education: the focus has been rather on individual case studies, teaching programmes, legislation and practice. Indeed, as the changes brought about by the 1988 Education Act influence special education, there has been an increasing tendency to examine curricular issues, assessment methods and the fine details of responding to equality initiatives (e.g., Ainscow and Florek, 1989; Wolfendale, 1993; Claire, Maybin and Swann, 1993).

Why, then, should I wish to explore the language of special needs when it may appear to others to be a marginal issue? I feel that the language we use expresses our confidence, caution, commitment or doubt. It says what we feel now, even where it is a dissembling language. The very directness of it expresses tangible unease for many educators. 'Special needs' is becoming a most unacceptable term. Most prefer the words 'learning support'. However, these words apply specifically to the *provision*, not to the *people*. Teachers are unlikely to say, 'He has learning support', but use the term 'special needs' or 'learning difficulties'.

There is a genuine anxiety about the level of government and institutional commitment to 'special needs' where cuts have to be made and educational establishments are being measured on performance. Integration has been spoken of as a national goal since the 1981

Education Act, yet it remains patchy, insecure and emerges unsupported by policy frameworks. What seems to have happened to 'special needs' is that it tends to be viewed as a marginal issue, which is expendable in a crisis.

In order to more fully understand why some learners are marginalized and given an inferior status, it is important to explore the way in which language has been used. The language of 'special needs' has to be rigorously deconstructed to reveal the uncomfortable emotions within its imagery. What does 'special' mean? If we detach this word from its anchor in 'educational' we can see that 'special' does not mean especially good and valued unless we use a phrase like, 'you are a special person'. It is linked to 'needs' which implies dependency, inadequacy and unworthiness.

I think we have to recognize the dual elements of 'special needs' and the dangers that lie within both. Firstly, there is the sentimental language of 'special need' which is embodied in the imagery of protection, care, tenderness and love. I dislike and suspect sentimentality. I think it is a sham emotion and one which tends to mask cold, callous indifference. This language needs to be examined and revealed for the sugar-coated poison that it is. Secondly, and this is the mirror-image of such sentiment, there is hate. The language of 'special needs' has always been composed of words and images which foster fear, mistrust, loathing and hostility. 'Idiot', 'imbecile' and 'moron' are used as terms of abuse, just as 'nigger', 'queer' and 'spastic' are. I think it is essential to disengage 'special needs' from its 'educational' base and place it in a wider social and cultural context, in order to appreciate how pervasive and damaging these dual elements are.

If 'special needs' are words which require a wider interpretation than the merely 'educational', where are the boundaries to be drawn? The focus might be on international differences in the use of language, on a historical reflection, or on the politics of language. Although I shall include elements of all these dimensions, it is my intention to focus upon the influence of new discourses, personal narratives and the use of metaphor.

Mouthing Prejudice

We need to listen to what we say. Unless we consciously hear our own words, we are unable and unwilling to question what feelings are revealed beneath ill-considered mouthing.

Just as there has been a deliberate awareness, among those who aspire to politically correct language, of any words which connect 'black' with negativity, so the way in which we refer to people as 'idiot' or 'fool' needs to be understood as a reflection of social conditioning. When we say 'You idiot!', it is usually a spontaneous comment, often used with affection. We tend not to consider from where it derived nor why we continue to use this expression.

Whilst words such as 'idiot', 'cretin', 'moron', 'fool' and 'imbecile', were once the familiar, pseudo-scientific, professional language of doctors, they now remain as part of our colloquial speech. Once terms of categorization and medical definition, they are now blatant and crude terms of abuse. We need to recognize this and reflect upon it if we are to understand why an integrated society, let alone an integrated education system, is so difficult to achieve. Our social structure, in the Western world, thrives upon hierarchies. We measure our social success in relation to others in the hierarchy. The extent to which we are richer, more clever, better housed and higher in status is an indicator of our social standing, power and value. Without a pecking order, we would not feel good about our superiority to others lower down the hierarchy.

When do we habitually use words such as, 'You idiot!' or 'moron'? Is it when we feel angry that others have misunderstood our meanings? Have they been slow to grasp ideas we are trying to express? Was their behaviour inexplicable? Did they reveal weaknesses such as absent-mindedness, forgetfulness or confusion? Were they too nakedly human?

The other day I was watching monkeys in London Zoo playing behind bars whilst humans observed their behaviour. The baby monkey was absorbed in the game of pulling the adult monkey's faeces out of its anus and eating them. A mother with her own baby in a pushchair watched with disgust and said, 'Horrible child', immediately equating the infant monkey's behaviour with that of infant humans. It is disturbing for us, as human beings, to acknowledge our own animal natures, our vulnerabilities and basic instincts.

One of the most basic of instincts is fear. It eats into us and destroys our peace of mind. It acts as a warning for us of possible danger. We react instinctively by fight or flight. Among our most deep-seated fears is that of the unfamiliar. This is why we push down into our subconscious mind all those uncomfortable feelings we are not sure how to address. It is easier to block them out and pretend they are not there. This is also why there is so much fear about people who are different. They may be different from a conventional norm in their intellectual, physical, sexual or racial characteristics. Their very difference is a

provocation for it touches on those fears of that which is unfamiliar and deeply buried inside all of us. Their strangeness is our strangeness — visible rather than hidden.

It is not surprising that fear of difference breeds hostility. If we are competing in a social hierarchy which idealizes human strengths and conceptualizes an image of physical and intellectual perfection encapsulated in a stereotypical norm, then we want no reminders of human fragility or diversity, in ourselves or others. Indeed, it is useful to see some people as intrinsically inferior. This distinguishes us from them. We are one kind of human whilst they are another form altogether. If this detachment is carried further they become a form of human being no longer requiring compassion or dignity. Thus doctors were able to apply a detached judgment to the needs of 'morons' and 'idiots' if their intellectual status rendered them less than human. This level of detachment was taken to its ultimate extreme in the Nazi murders of people who were different racially, intellectually, physically and sexually. The images of human perfection being promoted by them were a demonstration of that desperate fear of the unfamiliar and adherence to a rigid concept of the desired norm.

I would not wish us all to become so anxious about our display of verbal political correctness that we never again permit ourselves to say 'You idiot!' After all, we often say it in relation to our own behaviour. It can be a way of laughing at our own human frailty. We expect ourselves to measure up well and become exasperated when we behave in ways which we feel make us look foolish. Perhaps it is important for us all to recognize that in some aspects of our lives, we are all 'idiots', 'morons', 'fools' and 'imbeciles' — in other words, we are all fragile human beings. We all make mistakes and behave in ways we later regret. When we chastise ourselves by saying, 'You idiot!' we need to be gentle to ourselves as well. If we can be sympathetic and understanding towards those elements of difference and variance from an unreal perfection inside us all, we can transfer this tolerance outside ourselves to others.

My hypothesis is that 'special needs' is the language of sentimentality and prejudice. I shall illustrate this through exploring the relationship between the dominant discourse and divergent discourses which reflect the language of oppression and a struggle for recognition. I want to demonstrate that the language of 'special needs' has to change and become subverted by those who have been oppressed by it. The dominant discourse can no longer retreat into the security of 'special *educational* needs', for education is inextricably linked to the wider community, to popular culture and the politics of difference.

Speaking to an Audience

My reasons for writing this book do not stem solely from a long-term interest in the use of language. They also involve my teaching and learning experience at the University of East London. In the last four years I have been teaching units on 'Special Needs in Education' alongside a new unit that I have developed with disabled colleagues, called 'Disability Culture'. From teaching these two units week by week, I have become increasingly interested in the complex relationship between the dominant discourse of special education and the dissenting discourses of disability politics.

In writing this book, I hope to challenge the students I teach and those in other institutions to examine and reflect upon the language they habitually use. I want them to make connections between the specifically 'educational' language of 'special needs', with its known perimeters, and the political and cultural discourses of disability activists opening up concepts of community and communication. If educators saw themselves as 'teaching the dumb to speak', do disabled activists see themselves as 'teaching the arrogant to listen'?

In this book, I want readers to closely examine the way in which words are used. I shall try not to get choked up with jargon as I do not feel that is helpful — I want to communicate as clearly as possible. As a stimulus to students and as an illustration of the use of special needs language each chapter will conclude with a brief example of the language that has been the focus for discussion and a series of questions which could be addressed in relation to it.