# Identity First Language: Why Some People Prefer It
By: Monica van Schaik

Have you ever thought about whether you identify as a disabled person or as a person with a disability? Perhaps you prefer the term NEURODIVERGENT (neurology or neurological development different from typical development). Perhaps, you don't relate to any of these words. Although this might seem like a MINOR difference, to some people it is packed with MEANING and has been referred to as LINGUISTIC ETIQUETTE ("polite" use of language).

Spell: DISABLED          Spell: MEANING
What kind of language are we talking about today? IDENTITY FIRST
What term refers to someone with neurological development different from typical development. NEURODIVERGENT
The "polite" use of language one uses for others can be referred to as _____. LINGUISTIC ETIQUETTE

PERSON-FIRST language is the practice of naming the person before a DIAGNOSIS. Person-first language seeks to recognize the INHERENT and EQUAL value of every individual. In the past 20 YEARS however, person-first language has been CRITIQUED by the disabled SELF-ADVOCATES. These advocates have been arguing for the use of IDENTITY-FIRST language instead.

Spell: YEARS          Spell: PERSON-FIRST
Person-first language argues that a person should be named before what? DIAGNOSIS
Who has been critiquing person-first language in the past 20 years? DISABLED SELF-ADVOCATES
What are some disabled self-advocates arguing should replace person-first language? IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE
Person-first language seeks to recognize the _____ and _____ value of every individual. INHERENT; EQUAL

JIM SINCLAIR, an autistic self-advocate, was the FIRST person to write about identity-first language in, *Why I Dislike "Person-First" Language* 1999. He gave three reasons for using identity-first language. First, that person-first language implies that a PERSON can be SEPARATE from their BRAIN, Sinclair argued that this is not possible.

The way our brains work IMPACTS everything we experience, learn, and understand from the moment that we are born. For this reason, he thought that DISABILITY is an ESSENTIAL part of who someone is.

Spell:  DISABILITY          SEPARATE          IMPACT
Who was the first person to talk about identity first language? JIM SINCLAIR

In what year did Sinclair write about identity first language. 1999
How long ago was that?  2020-1999 = 21 years ago
Jim said that a _____ cannot be separated from their _____.
PERSON; BRAIN
Jim thought that disability is _____ to who someone is. ESSENTIAL
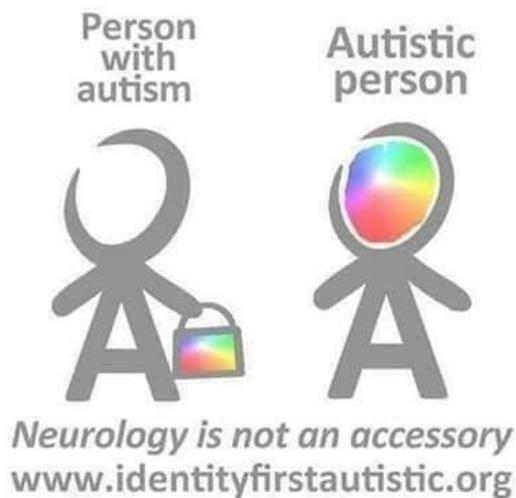What is one thing Sinclair believed someone's brain impacts?
EXPERIENCE; LEARNING; UNDERSTANDING
Name another autistic self-advocate.
Point to the image of Jim Sinclair to the right.

Person with autism

Autistic person

Neurology is not an accessory
www.identityfirstautistic.org

Second, Sinclair discussed how we describe important parts of who someone is as ADJECTIVES. For example, someone might say *I am a Black woman*. They wouldn't say *I am a person with WOMANNESS and BLACKNESS*. These characteristics are described as adjectives because they are important parts of who someone is and what has SHAPED them. Sinclair argued that autism goes deeper than CULTURE because it impacts how a person RELATES to themselves, their bodies, and society at large. For this reason, Sinclair argued that using AUTISM as an adjective to describe himself was important.

Spell:  SHAPED          AUTISM     WOMAN
We use what type of word to describe important parts of ourselves? ADJECTIVES
Sinclair said that for him autism went deeper than what? CULTURE
Name another important adjective that someone might use to describe themselves.
I said that we wouldn't describe someone with _____.
WOMANNESS; BLACKNESS
Look at the meme that says, "Neurology is not an accessory" and point to the colorful brain.

Question Type Key
KNOWN – SEMI-OPEN – PRIOR KNOWLEDGE – MATH – OPEN - VAKT

Autistic is not a dirty word. It's my Identity not an 'add on'

TinaR2015©

MADE WITH FONT CANDY

Finally, Sinclair suggested that saying "person with autism," implies that autism is a BAD THING. In language, we only SEPARATE ourselves from negative things. Therefore, if we encourage people to separate themselves from their disability, we are sending the message that disability is so STIGMATIZING (mark with disgrace or disapproval) that we should be ASHAMED, hide and try to distance ourselves from it. Sinclair believed that disability is something that people can be PROUD of and that there is no need to distance from it. He also believed that by using identity-first language, he was challenging people to see disability as a POSITIVE characteristic.

Spell: STIGMA          ASHAMED          LANGUAGE
Sinclair thought that if we encourage people to distance themselves from disability, we are _____ disability. STIGMATIZING
Sinclair believed that disability is something people can be _____ of. PROUD
In language we distance ourselves from _____. NEGATIVE/BAD THINGS
Name one thing about yourself that you are proud of.
Name another group or community that is often stigmatized.
Read and point to the meme that highlights Sinclair's point about language's ability to stigmatize certain characteristics.
What do you think about this meme?

     Many AUTISTIC people support a shift towards identity-first language and AUTISM PRIDE. In fact, some people have started to use a capital A in Autistic to identify that autism is a SOCIALLY and CULTURALLY created group of people with whom they identify. This is similar to the DEAF community who refer to themselves with a capital D to spotlight that

Deafness is a cultural identity and not a disabled identity. In many POLLS that ask autistic people how they prefer to identify, the MAJORITY consistently state that they prefer identity-first language. For this reason, I-ASC's default way of referring to nonspeaking, minimally speaking, unreliably speaking, autistic, and neurodivergent people is with identity-first language.

Spell:       DEAF       MAJORITY       POLLS
What group of people are supporting a shift to identity first language? AUTISTIC
What is the second thing I mentioned that the autistic community is supporting? AUTISM PRIDE
What letter does the Deaf community capitalize to signify that this is a cultural identity? D
How does I-ASC default in talking about nonspeaking, minimally speaking, and unreliably speaking people? IDENTITY FIRST LANGUAGE
What is one of the ways that the category of autism is created that I mentioned? SOCIALLY; CULTURALLY
What is another thing that the disabled community consistently prefers in your opinion?

        Although I-ASC's default may be identity-first language, I-ASC also believes strongly in AGENCY (one's capacity to act or exert power) and AUTONOMY (self-governed, free) of nonspeaking people. Some people with motor differences and/or autism prefer person-first language. As a PROFESSIONAL and PUBLIC body, it is important to balance the MAJORITY (the greatest number) with INDIVIDUAL preferences in developing best practices. In line with this ETHIC, whenever possible, S2C Practitioners ask their students what their PREFERENCE is and make every EFFORT to use the linguistic etiquette that individual prefers. Anyone, but especially professionals, should not tell nonspeakers what to think or do; they should EMPOWER nonspeaking people's voices, support their MISSION (goal), and create opportunities for them to develop communication, agency, autonomy, and access as it aligns with their personal vision and goals.
Spell:  EMPOWER                AUTONOMY                MISSION
S2C Practitioners defer to the individual _____ of each of their clients. PREFERENCES

I-ASC needs to balance the opinions of the _____ with individual preferences. MAJORITY

I-ASC is a _____ and _____ organization. PROFESSIONAL; PUBLIC

What role should professionals assume? Empower; create opportunities; Support goals; support agency and autonomy

**Creative Writing:**

What adjectives do you like to use to describe yourself and why these identifiers are important to you.

Create a character description by using adjectives identifiers for your fictional character.

VAKT:

1. Choose a photo of yourself that you feel represents what is important to you.
2. Use a simple paint or photo editing program to place the identifiers onto your picture. Make sure to choose the color, font, size, and position of each.
3. What would you like to do with your image?

**If you would like to use your image for advocacy and share it on our social media, email it to info@i-asc.org



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