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BA English Honours | Semester VI | ENG6EJ308

# Introduction to Disability Studies

Module 1: Disability and Language: Ableism, Stigma, and Person-First Rhetoric • Comprehensive Notes

# Chapter 1: The Rhetoric and Critical Concepts of Disability

Disability Studies emerged as an essential interdisciplinary field challenging the pathologizing medical monopoly over disabled bodies. Disability is not an individual medical defect requiring cure; it is a complex social, political, and cultural identity produced by discriminatory social environments and institutional ableism.

## 1.1 Dismantling Ableism and Deconstructing Stigma

**Ableism** is the systemic discrimination and prejudice against individuals with physical, sensory, or psychosocial impairments, grounded in the false assumption that typical able-bodied functioning is the sole natural, superior human condition. Sociologist Erving Goffman's classic study *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) demonstrates how society categorizes disabled individuals as possessors of "spoiled identities," deploying social distance and shame to maintain normative hierarchies.

## 1.2 Person-First versus Identity-First Linguistic Debates

Language shapes reality. Activists and scholars debate two primary linguistic frameworks:

- **Person-First Language (e.g., "Person with a disability"):** Endorsed by organizations like the National Institutes of Health (NIH), emphasizing the shared human personhood prior to any medical diagnosis.
- **Identity-First Language (e.g., "Disabled person", "Autistic person"):** Championed by many disability activists and autistic communities (such as Cara Liebowitz), who argue that disability is not an external burden carried by a person, but an integral, proud aspect of cultural and political identity, akin to queer or Black identity.

## 1.3 Stella Young: "I'm Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much"

Australian comedian and disability activist Stella Young's viral 2014 TED Talk coined the term **"Inspiration Porn"**—the objectification of disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people. Young critiques viral social media memes that portray disabled people performing ordinary activities (walking down the street, drawing with feet) alongside slogans like "Your only disability is a bad attitude," demonstrating that disabled people desire equal rights, ramps, and systemic employment, not condescending pity.

## Advanced Critical Theory, Hermeneutics & Literary Praxis

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## 1. Hermeneutic Paradigms and Textual Mechanics

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- **Structuralism and Semiotic Deconstruction:** The organization of signs, tropes, and syntactical structures establishes narrative authority while simultaneously revealing internal fissures. Binary oppositions embedded within the discourse—such as center versus margin, tradition versus modernity, and subjective interiority versus objective reality—are systematically problematized through textual slippages and ambiguous signifiers.
- **Postcolonial and Subaltern Interventions:** Interrogating power dynamics, linguistic hegemony, and epistemic violence within the literature demonstrates how marginalized voices negotiate, resist, or appropriate dominant canonical modes. The representation of colonial encounters, diaspora, and regional identity operates not merely as a passive backdrop but as an active agent reshaping literary genres.
- **Feminist, Queer, and Intersectional Critique:** Analyzing the construction of gender roles, patriarchal surveillance, and non-normative subjectivities provides crucial insights into how bodily experience, domesticity, and public agency are mediated across divergent historical moments and cultural landscapes.
- **Ecocritical and Spatial Dynamics:** Physical topographies, built environments, and non-human ecologies function as active participants in the narrative economy. Space is never neutral; rather, it reflects socio-economic stratification, environmental exploitation, and geopolitical borders that delineate belonging and exile.

## 2. Historiographical Context and Reception Theory

Every literary text and cultural artifact is firmly situated within specific historical material conditions. Understanding Module 1: Disability and Language: Ableism, Stigma, and Person-First Rhetoric requires examining how contemporaneous social movements, intellectual revolutions, and material shifts in print and digital publishing influenced textual production. Furthermore, Hans-Robert Jauss's concept of the "horizon of expectations" demonstrates that textual reception is never static; each successive generation of readers reinterprets these works through evolving ethical, philosophical, and cultural frameworks.

## 3. Comparative Aesthetic and Thematic Matrix

The following analytical matrix summarizes key comparative dimensions across traditional interpretive paradigms and modern critical frameworks relevant to Module 1:

| Critical Dimension | Traditional / Formalist Reading | Contemporary Critical Synthesis | Pedagogic & Interpretive Significance |
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| **Authorial Intent & Authority** | Privileges authorial biography, conscious artistic intention, and unified aesthetic harmony. | Applies Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author" and Foucault's "author function" to analyze cultural discourses. | Empowers reader-response hermeneutics and multi-vocal textual deconstruction. |
| **Narrative Architecture** | Linear progression, coherent plot teleology, and psychological realism. | Fragmentation, unreliable narration, polyphony, intertextuality, and non-linear temporalities. | Exposes the constructed nature of truth claims and socio-political narratives. |

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| **Media & Cultural Materialism** | Autonomous aesthetic object isolated from economic and technological modes of production. | Examines print capitalism, digital distribution, translation praxis, and multimodal adaptations. | Connects literary aesthetics to global production networks and digital media convergence. |

### 4. Pedagogical Synthesis and Scholarly Praxis

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