

Kathryn Allan 

Inclusive

Inclusive is an important term in modern times, central in governmental and institutional discourse on a range of issues, in educational settings, and in discussions about language policy. In its earlier meanings, some of which continue in use, **inclusive** marks the boundaries of what is and is not in a set, but it has also become a keyword in relation to social equality agendas, indicating a removal of real and perceived boundaries. Being **inclusive** in the latter sense can have specific entailments and require an individual or group to address the physical obstacles that might prevent particular groups of people from participating in particular activities; in other contexts, though, **inclusive** is much vaguer, a generally positive description that aligns the speaker with a set of values that are not always clearly defined.

Inclusive is borrowed into English from Latin and is attested in writing from the early fifteenth century (*OED*¹); the related verb *include* has a dual etymology from French and Latin and is borrowed around the same time, and the antonym *exclusive* is first attested slightly later. **inclusive** appears to be used first as an adverb which postmodifies phrases referring to periods of time or to locations, for example, in expressions like ‘January to June inclusive’; this kind of use is still common, although less likely to refer to anything other than time. From the mid-sixteenth century it is also used as an adjective, both in the general meaning ‘that is included’, which is relatively short-lived, but more often in the sense ‘that includes’, which survives into the present day. The related noun **inclusion** is attested from around the same time as the adverb; both **inclusiveness** and **inclusivity** are derived from **inclusive** within English, in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries respectively.

Changes in the meanings of **inclusive** over its history relate to what it can modify, that is, what can be described as **inclusive**, and its object, that is, what can be *included*. Some senses involve concrete objects, for example, the obsolete *OED* sense 3 ‘That encloses or surrounds something’, which applies specifically to entities such as walls and fires which can create a physical boundary. Shakespeare’s *Richard III* plays with this sense in referring to a crown as ‘The inclusive verge, Of

golden mettall that must round my browe' (1597 W. Shakespeare *Richard III* iv. i. 58, quoted in *OED*). Less restricted are uses which refer to a range of concrete and (more often) abstract entities: Arnold Bennett's 1909 book. *Literary taste: how to form it* uses **inclusive** of a particular type of collection, meaning 'including all of many elements of something', in his statement that 'Every Englishman..ought to own a comprehensive and inclusive library of English literature' (1909 A. Bennett *Lit. Taste* 87, quoted at *OED* sense 4a). A related meaning refers to prices which **include** everything, often the costs of holidays or meals, and **all-inclusive** is also used frequently in this sense. Similarly, *OED* sense 5 'That includes, contains, or incorporates something as part of a group, category etc' is used to describe a diverse range of subjects, from words with meanings which cover several referents, to areas of land on which particular towns are sited. In this meaning **inclusive** is often followed by *of* and a phrase specifying what is *included*, for example, in Fuller's assertion that 'Philology..is..inclusive of all human liberal Studies' (a1661 T. Fuller *Hist. Worthies Eng.* (1662) i. 26, quoted at *OED* 5b).

However, perhaps the most significant change in the semantic development of **inclusive** and its nominal forms is the emergence in the twentieth century of a narrowed use with an exclusively human object, *OED* sense 7a 'Not excluding any person on the grounds of race, gender, religion, age, disability, etc.; encouraging or accommodating participation from all sections of society'. *OED* gives a first attestation for this sense from 1928, in an issue of *The Rotarian*, the magazine of Rotary International:

It [Rotary] wishes to establish new contacts that are more inclusive. It doesn't wish lawyers hobnobbing with lawyers; it wishes lawyers fellowshiping with lumbermen, bankers with bakers, priests with publishers. (1928 *Rotarian* Jan. 52/2, quoted in *OED*)

This fits well with the second part of the *OED* definition, but it does not represent the kind of use that becomes more typical in later English, where the group or groups that are included have historically been marginalized in some way. A 1940 quotation from the *Journal of Bible and Religion* refers to early Christianity as a 'racially inclusive movement', and this perhaps foreshadows the emergence of **inclusive Christianity**, which welcomes individuals regardless of the faith tradition in which they were born, and **inclusivism**, which rejects the idea of

a single true religion. A later example from *The Crisis*, the civil rights magazine founded by W.E.B. Du Bois, also focuses on race:

Mr. [Lyndon B.] Johnson's Great Society is to be an inclusive society from which no American is barred solely because of his race, colour, religion or national origin. (1965 *Crisis* Feb. 74, quoted in *OED*).

Here an **inclusive society** means one in which those of all races and ethnicities have equal rights and opportunities. Later uses of this phrase are often intended to broaden out the groups included, such as the United Nations' policy document 'Vision for an Inclusive Society', which explicitly refers to 'differences of race, gender, class, generation, and geography'². In the 1970s, the movement for **inclusive education** in the United States had another minority group in mind and was specifically aimed to include those with disabilities and learning difficulties in mainstream schools. The verb **inclusivize**, which was consciously coined in the last decade by the UNESCO Chair in Inclusive Physical Education, Sport, Fitness and Recreation, has a similar focus, referring to a sports initiative to 'increase accessibility for people with disabilities and other marginalized groups'³.

The association of the word **inclusive** with social equality may also have been strengthened by language activism campaigns from the 1970s onwards, which established the expression **inclusive language**. The Corpus of Historical American English⁴ shows that by the 1990s this is overwhelmingly the most frequent collocation for **inclusive**, although it has since been overtaken, and now **inclusive** is more likely to modify other nouns including *growth*, *environment*, *workplace*, *government*, *culture* and *community* (according to the News on the Web corpus⁵). Originally the **inclusive language** movement was concerned with eliminating gender bias 'either by explicit reference to both sexes or by omission of inessential gender-specific terms' (*OED*) and *OED* notes that the term was 'introduced in relation to the revision of the Bible and other Christian texts'. Again, though, more recent definitions in the **inclusive language guides** which many organizations publish for their staff tend to be broader in their scope, and to move beyond gender-neutral language. In a forthcoming book chapter, Beth Malory notes that despite predominantly negative attitudes towards prescriptivism among descriptive and variationist linguists, language guides are sometimes written with their participation⁶, since many 'take an active role in politically responsive prescriptivism under the rubric of socially responsible "language reform"'⁷. This tension between

negative attitudes towards prescriptivism and much more positive views of **inclusive language** can also be seen in wider society: aspiring to being **inclusive** is much more generally acceptable than attempting to be *politically correct*, although not all speakers make this distinction. A 2019 headline in the UK website *Mail Online* equates the two expressions, reporting that ‘Microsoft launches new ‘inclusive’ AI tool that will recommend ways to make your writing more politically correct’⁸. The use of inverted commas or scare quotes around **inclusive** here gives a clear indication of the scepticism with which **inclusion** agendas are viewed by the right-wing media, which often equates concerns about **inclusiveness** with liberal *woke* ideology. On the other hand, an article published on an eLearning website with different ideological views argues that ‘Inclusive language is *not* the same as being politically correct. Political correctness is focused on **not offending** whereas inclusive language is focused on **honouring** people’s identities’⁹.

The antonymous expression **exclusive language** is much less frequent than **inclusive language**, and it seems likely that this is because of the way **exclusive** has shifted away from **inclusive** semantically in their evaluative meanings. In senses relating to containment or measurement, for example, when followed by the preposition *of* (e.g. *inclusive/exclusive of VAT*), **inclusive** and **exclusive** are still precise antonyms, but in other contexts they are no longer symmetrical. In the sense defined by *OED* as ‘Disposed to resist the admission of outsiders to membership or to intimacy of association’, **exclusive** has negative connotations when Hazlitt uses it in an 1822 letter criticizing ‘The same exclusive and narrow-minded spirit [as that of Dissenters]’. However, in more recent use, it is much more likely to be positive, so that an *exclusive hotel* or an *exclusive club* is desirable because it is not open to all.

Inclusive forms a cluster with other words referring to social equality: an organization which succeeds in being **inclusive** is likely to have a **diverse** workforce who experience **equality** of opportunity and treatment. The issue of **inclusion** also relates to equal **access**, which means different things in different contexts, from enabling people with physical disabilities to work anywhere by providing appropriate facilities, to widening entitlement to health care, to ensuring that education is available to people regardless of background. In the United Kingdom, it is standard practice for institutions such as governments and universities to have **equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI)** units to oversee working practices and ensure that legal obligations relating to the Equality Act 2010 are met. **EDI** seems to become established as a phrase first in the United States, from around the 1980s, though the formulation **DEI** is more established in American English, with the middle initial

standing for *equity* rather than *equality*. **DEI** policies are closely associated with **diversity training**, which has become an important part of professional development in many organizations and an industry in itself. A 2023 piece on the website of the World Advertising Research Center (WARC) shows that **EDI/DEI** practices and policies have become marketable commodities, and an important part of branding, since organizations need to align themselves with the values of their customers and potential employees: ‘... if you’re considering CLV [customer lifetime value], then clearly there’s a lot more potential in younger consumers, who are more likely to support initiatives around diversity, inclusion and sustainability’¹⁰. At the same time, the article notes that **EDI/DEI** is a focus of tensions relating to the ideological ‘culture wars’ that have characterized recent political discourse in many countries, and initiatives are often targeted by right-wing politicians and activists.

Like many other words in this cluster, including **liberate** and **decolonize**, the positive connotations of **inclusive** and related words seem to lead to a bleaching of meaning in some uses. An **inclusive** workplace might be one in which specific physical or procedural adjustments have been made to accommodate the needs of particular groups, either for ethical or legal reasons, but in some contexts **inclusive** seems to be much vaguer, and more indicative of a broader ideology. The difficulty of making clear distinctions can be seen in a recent *Evening Standard* article, which reports a survey in which ‘One in five [Brits] ... said the social events at their own workplace are not inclusive enough’¹¹. This statement is not unpacked in the rest of the article, but it concludes by quoting the founder of an events business, Hugo Campbell, who refers to ‘workplace events that are truly captivating and inclusive, reflecting the value they place on their employees’. Here the pairing of **inclusive** with *captivating* suggests it is much closer semantically to *friendly*, *welcoming* or *engaging*.

Notes

- 1 *Oxford English Dictionary* online, [oed.com](https://www.oed.com).
- 2 DESA, ‘Vision for an Inclusive Society’ (2009). <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/compilation-brochure.pdf>, accessed October 2023.
- 3 UNESCO, ‘Our concepts’. <http://unescoittralee.com/about-us/our-concepts/>, accessed October 2023.
- 4 Corpus of Historical American. <https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/>, accessed October 2023.
- 5 News on the Web Corpus. <https://www.english-corpora.org/now/>, accessed October 2023.

- 6 Beth Malory, 'Workplace language guidelines as the frontier of anti-prejudicial prescriptivism'. In: Jane Setter, Sender Dovcin and Vijay Ramjattan (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2024).
- 7 Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling, *American English: Dialects and Variation*, 3rd ed. (Hoboken: Wiley, 2015).
- 8 Annie Palmer, 'Microsoft launches new 'inclusive' AI tool that will recommend ways to make your writing more politically correct', *Mail Online*, 10th May 2019. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-7011963/Microsoft-launches-AI-tool-recommend-ways-make-writing-politically-correct.html>, accessed October 2023.
- 9 Kaela Sosa, 'Say This, Not That: A Guide for Inclusive Language', The Diversity Movement website, 9th September 2020. <https://thediversitymovement.com/say-this-not-that-a-guide-for-inclusive-language/>, accessed October 2023.
- 10 Brian Carruthers, 'Get your culture war on: politicians and people demand radically different approaches from brands', WARC website, 24th August 2023. <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/opinion/get-your-culture-war-on-politicians-and-people-demand-radically-different-approaches-from-brands/en-gb/6318>, accessed October 2023.
- 11 Daniel O'Boyle, 'One in three Brits avoid work social events because they're 'boring' and a 'waste of time', *The Standard*, 12th July 2023. <https://www.standard.co.uk/business/britons-avoid-work-social-events-boring-drinks-pub-coworkers-drinks-together-survey-b1093925.html>, accessed October 2023.

Author Biography

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