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Conscious Language and the Power of Words

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radicalcopyeditor.com

Language is power, in ways more literal than most people think. When we speak, we exercise the power of language to transform reality.
Julia Penelope
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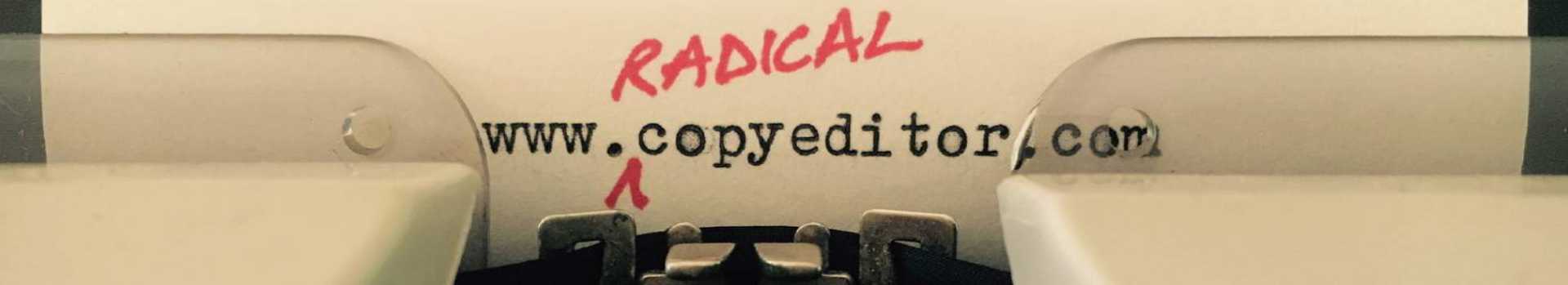
The purpose of standards

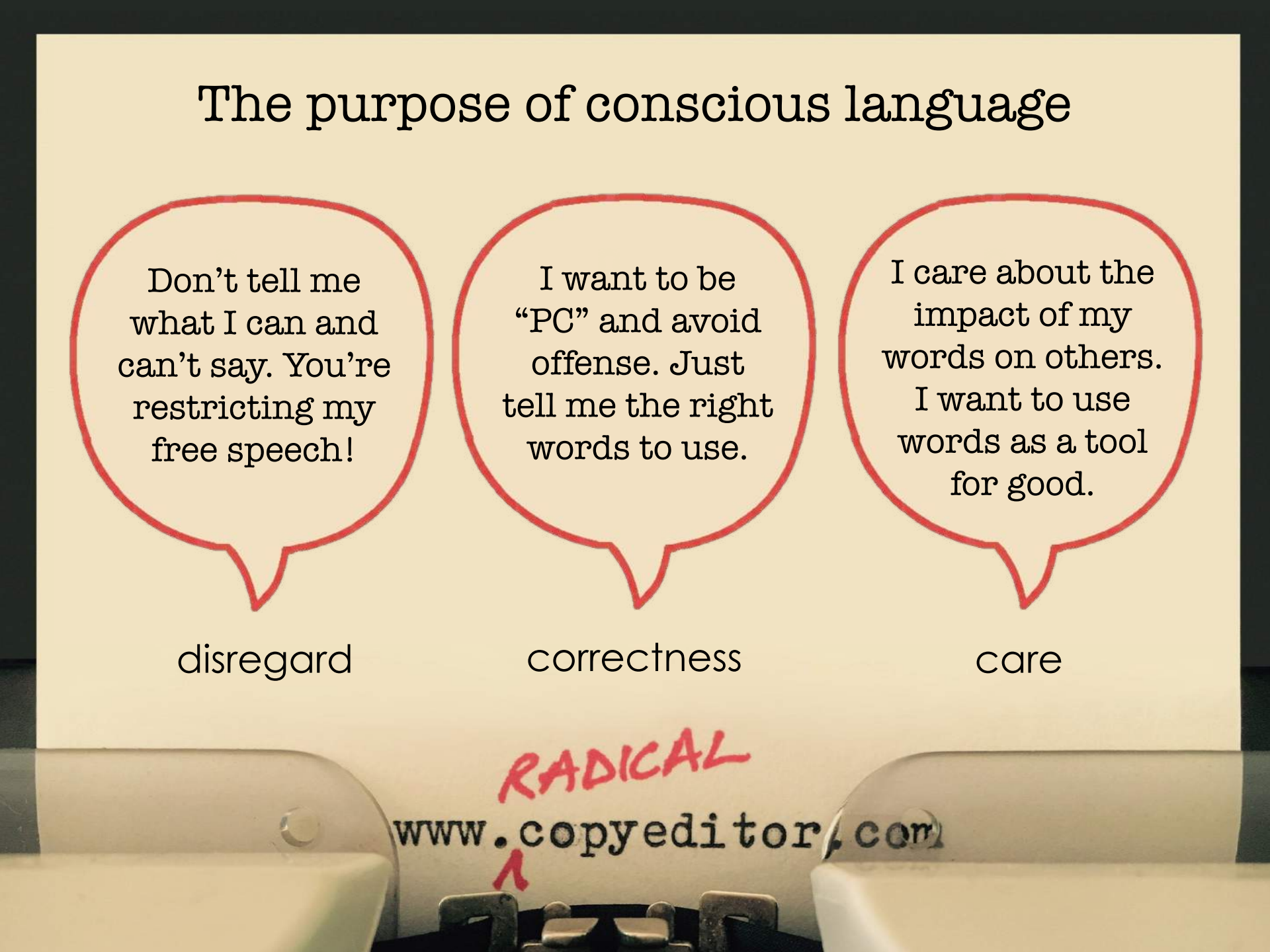
disregard

correctness

care

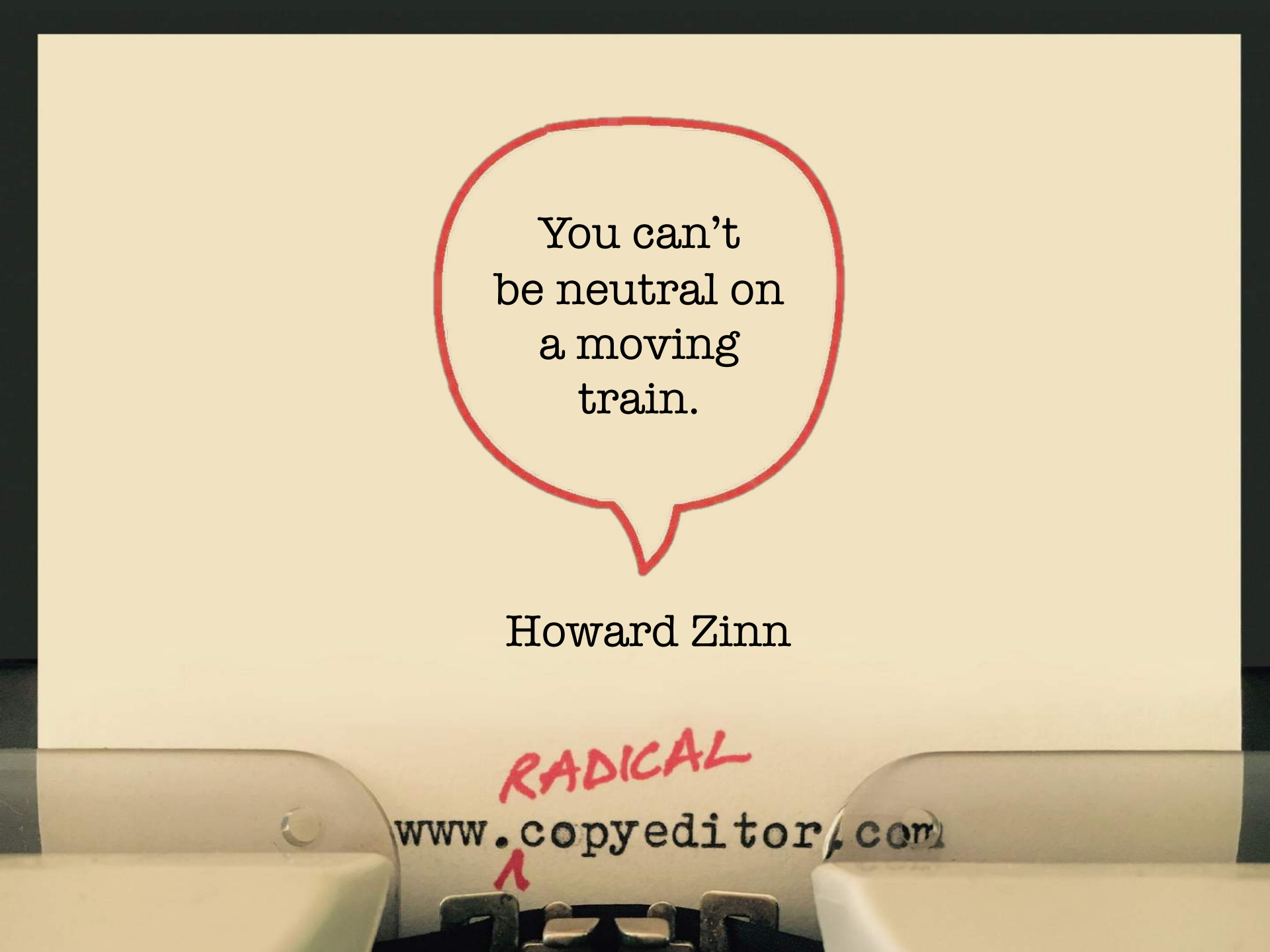


The purpose of conscious language



The spectrum of language

- **Violent**: actively communicates hate, disgust, intolerance
- **Coded**: consciously or unconsciously communicates prejudice, disdain, or judgment in covert ways
- **Unquestioned**: everyday language with subtle cues regarding who and what is valuable, normal
- **Minimizing**: well-intentioned language that unconsciously maintains oppressive norms and supports the status quo
- **Liberatory**: affirms all life; communicates compassion, love, and nonviolence; imbues subjects with agency


You can't
be neutral on
a moving
train.
Howard Zinn
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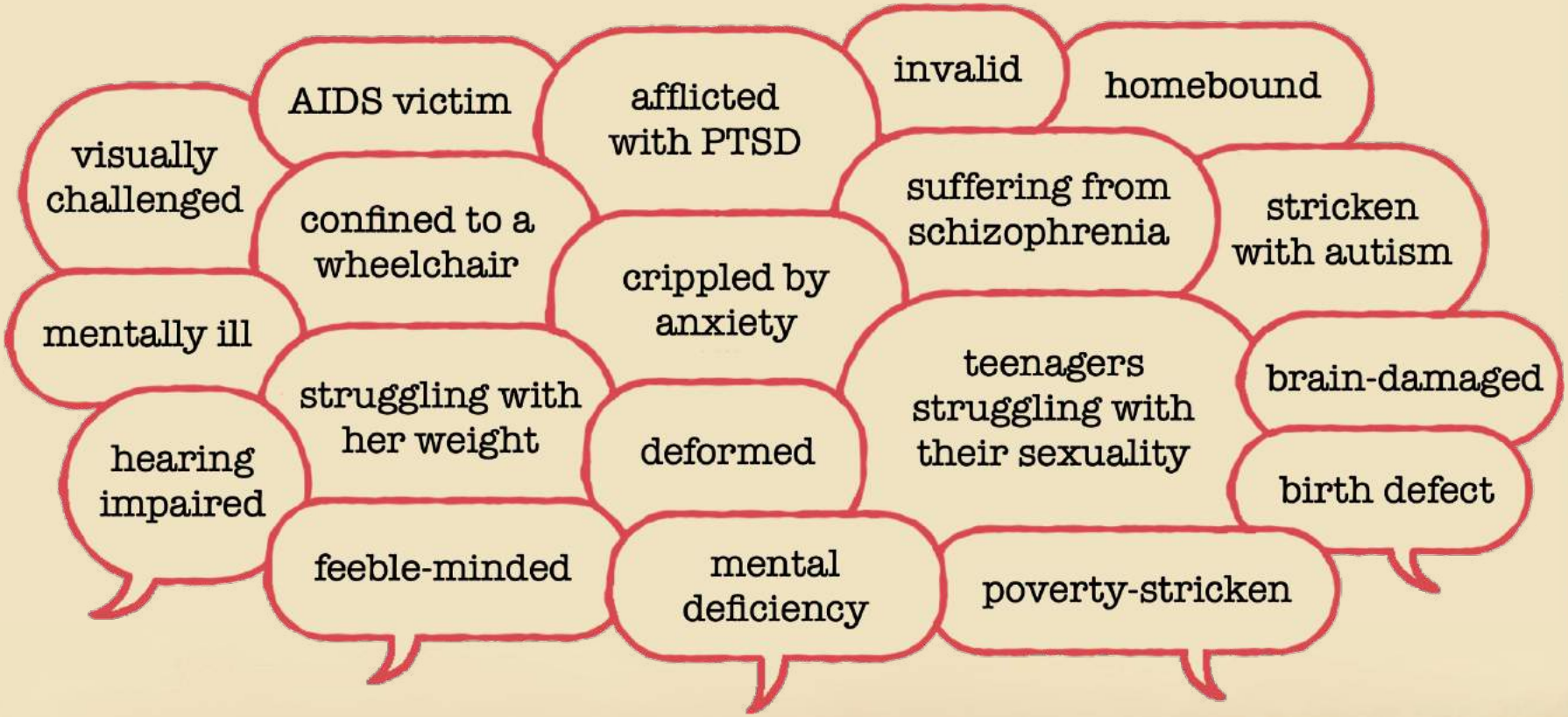
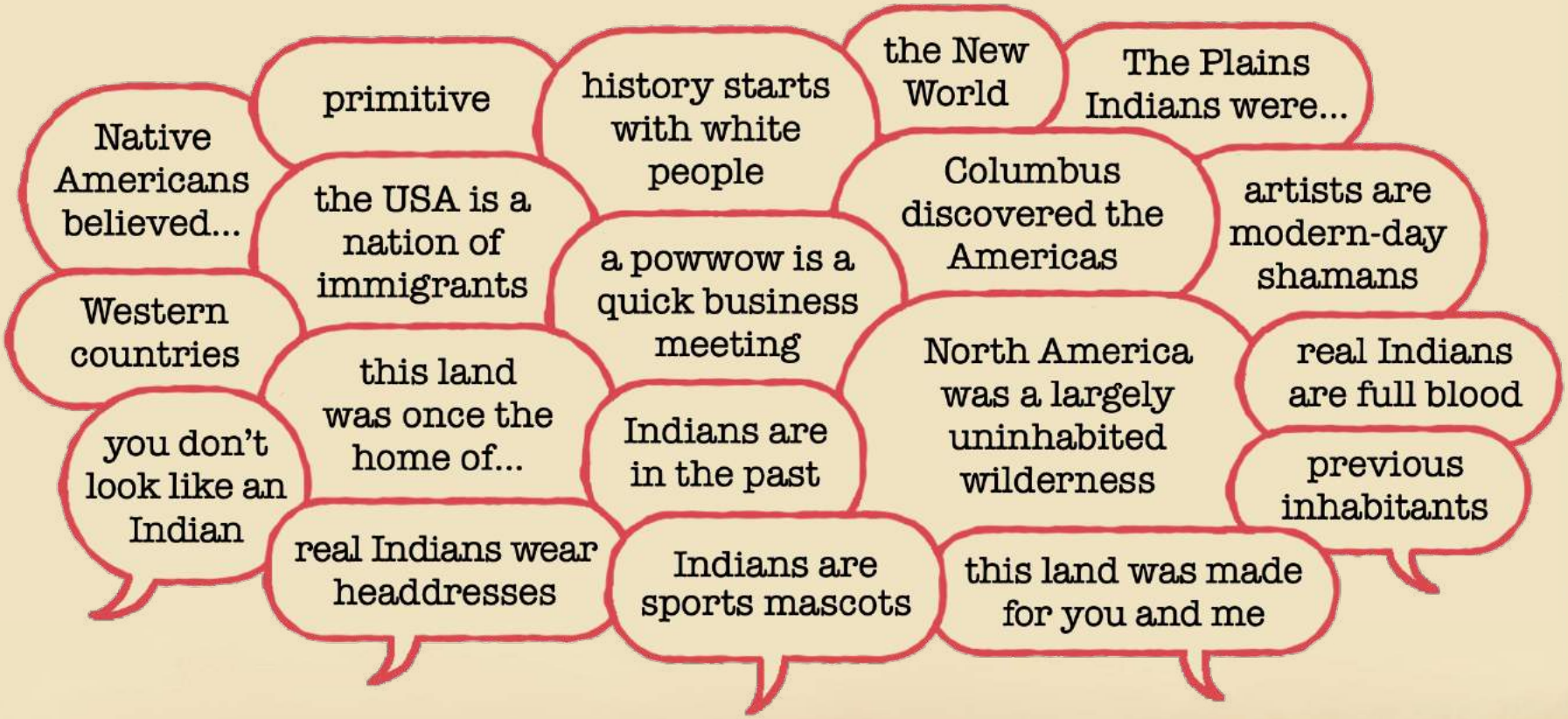
The power of language to dehumanize

The power of language to pathologize



The power of language to invisibilize



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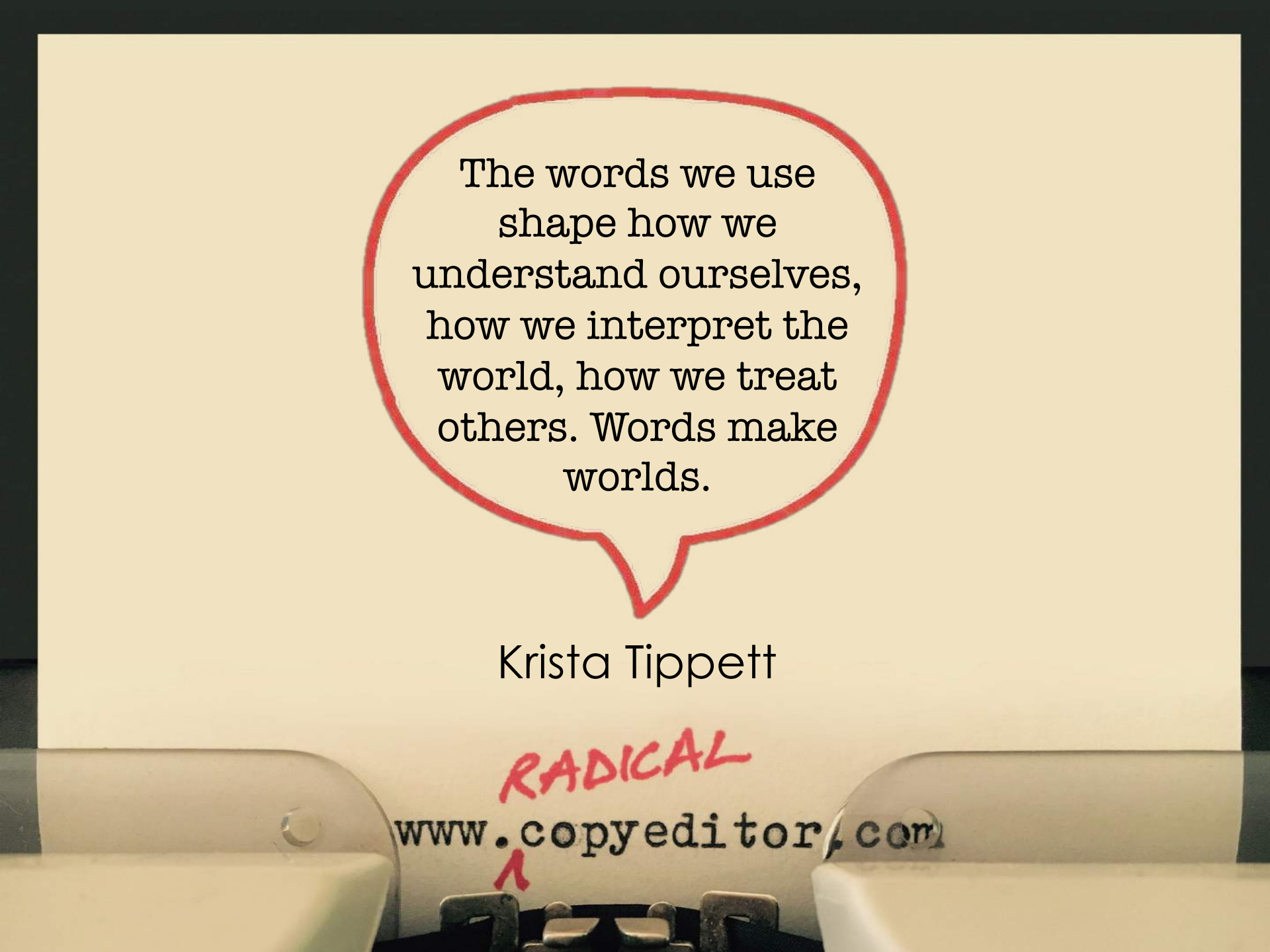
The words we use shape how we understand ourselves, how we interpret the world, how we treat others. Words make worlds.
Krista Tippett
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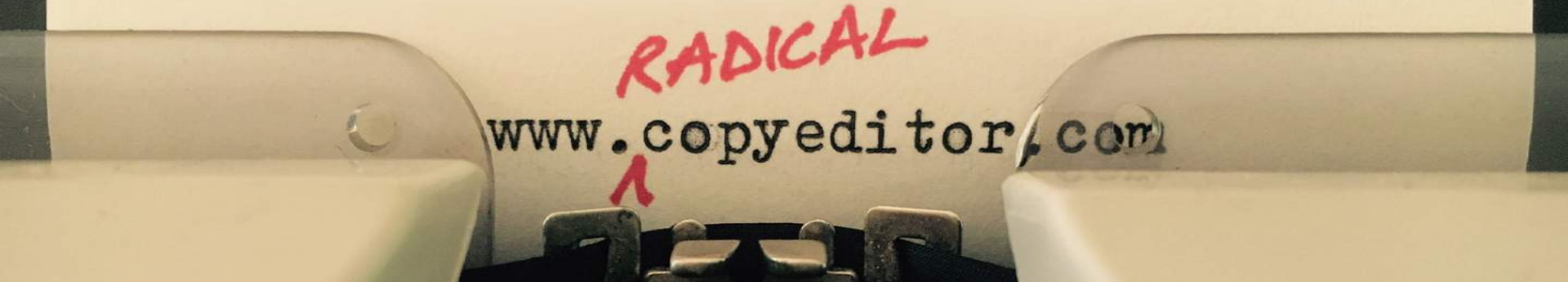
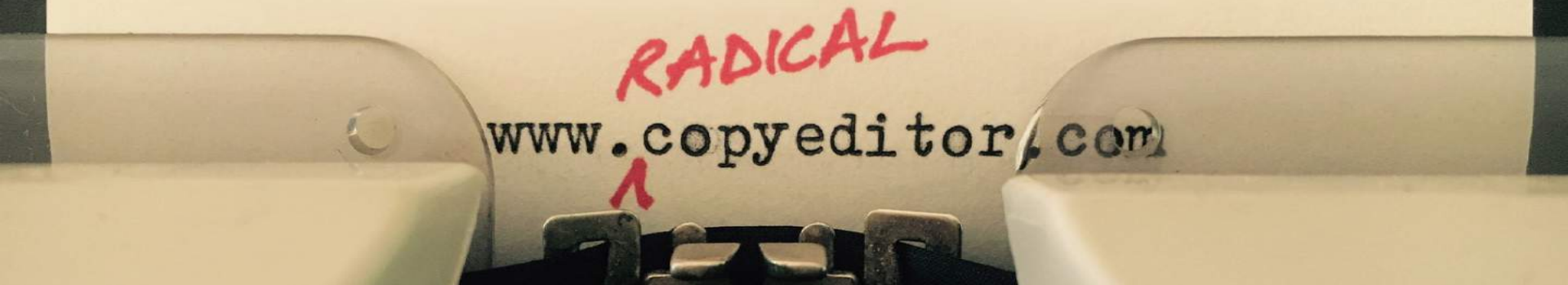
Countering harmful language

- Work to be aware of coded, unquestioned, and minimizing language, avoid it, and subvert it
- Constantly question the norms and values that are baked into language, and use language that reflects liberatory values
- Look to authors, scholars, and activists from communities targeted by oppression and follow their lead



Appropriate specificity

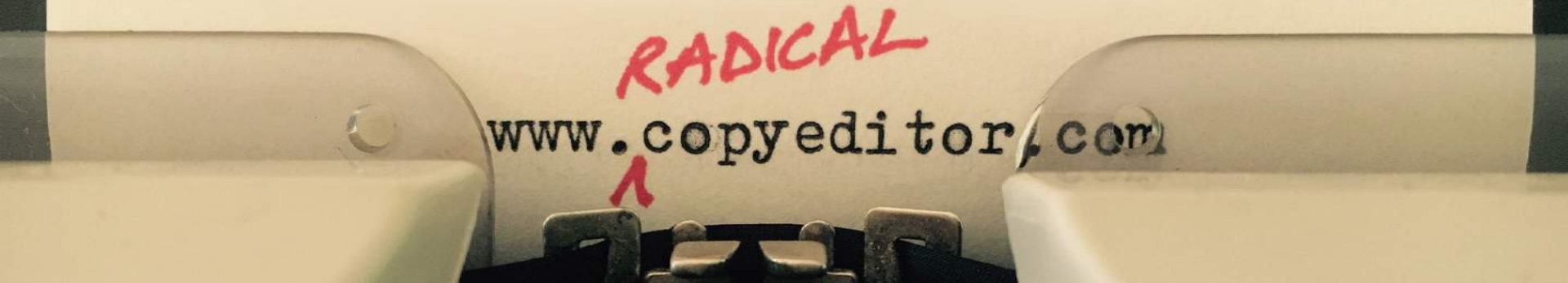
- Broad language is often used in stereotyping ways; using more specific language is a key way to counter this.
  - Latino, Hispanic vs. Puerto Rican, Guatemalan, Peruvian
  - Africa vs. Morocco, Nigeria, West Africa
  - Native Americans vs. Coast Salish peoples, Lummi Nation
  - LGBTQ vs. same-sex relationships, trans/nonbinary
  - People of color vs. Black Americans
  - People with disabilities vs. wheelchair users, neurodivergent people, blind and/or deaf students



Mindfulness around euphemisms

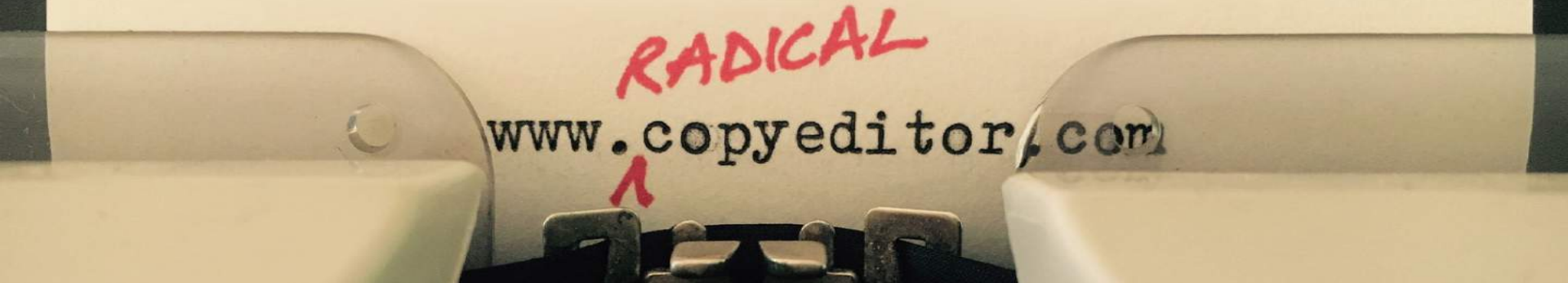
- "diverse," "minorities," "urban," "inner-city"
- "differently abled," "special needs," "handi-capable," "physically challenged"
- "disadvantaged," "at risk," "under-privileged," "under-represented"
- "discovery," "arrival"
- "racially charged"

- people of color, Black, low-income
- disabled, disabilities, autistic, neurodivergent
- systemically oppressed, historically excluded, marginalized
- invasion, colonization
- racist, racism



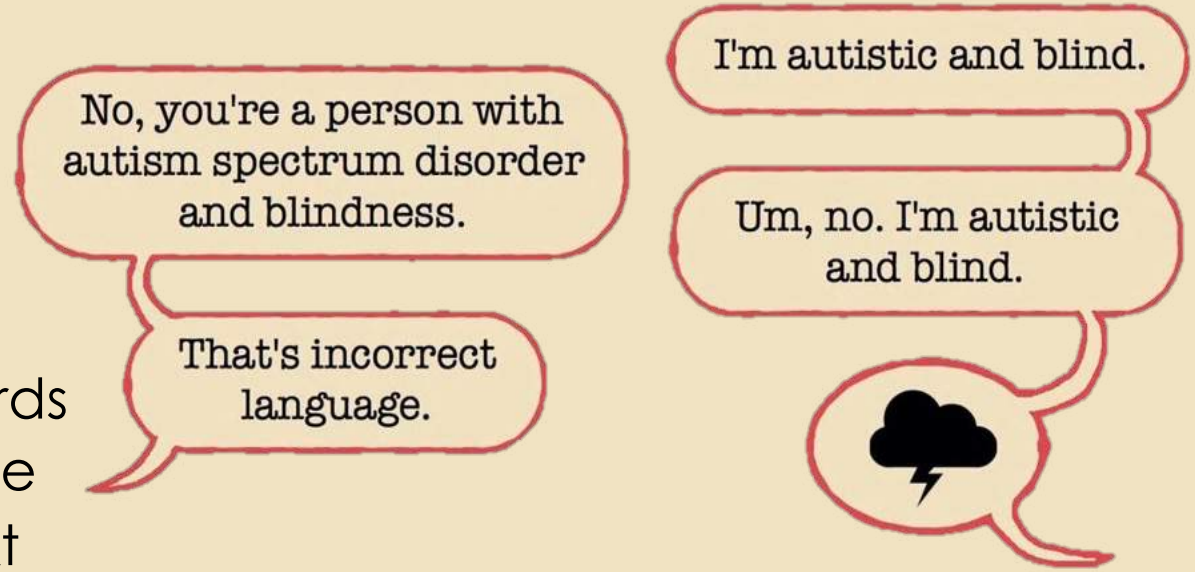
Humanizing language

- Avoid using adjectives as nouns
  - X "Blacks" "transgenders" "paraplegics" "the disabled"
  - X "the poor" "the deaf" "the homeless" "the elderly"
- Avoid equating people with a condition or label
  - X "schizophrenics" "addict" "felon" "high-school dropout"
- Avoid negative, stigmatizing, and pathologizing language
  - X "victims" "suffering from" "stricken with" "afflicted with"
  - X "struggling with" "mentally ill" "confined to a wheelchair"

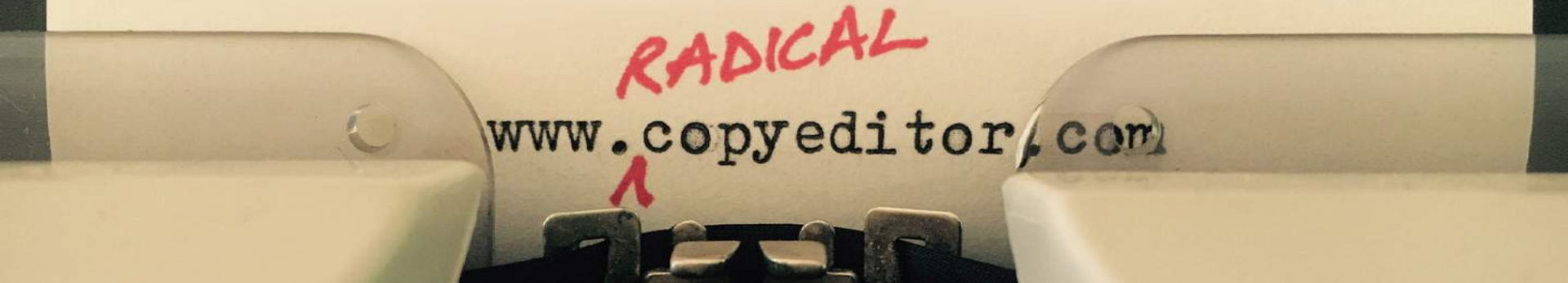


Respecting self-identity language

- Never "correct" the language people use for themselves
- Accept that words change with time and with context

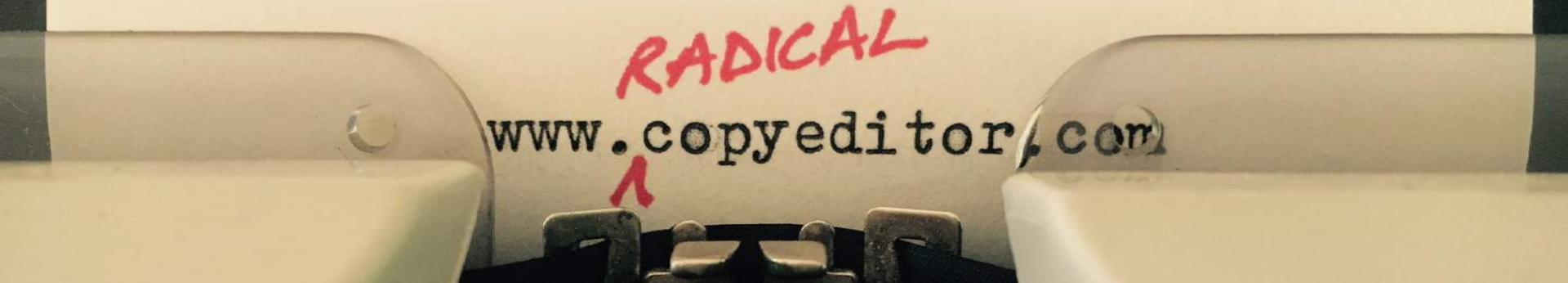


- Find out what language groups and organizations led by the people being written about use, and follow their lead



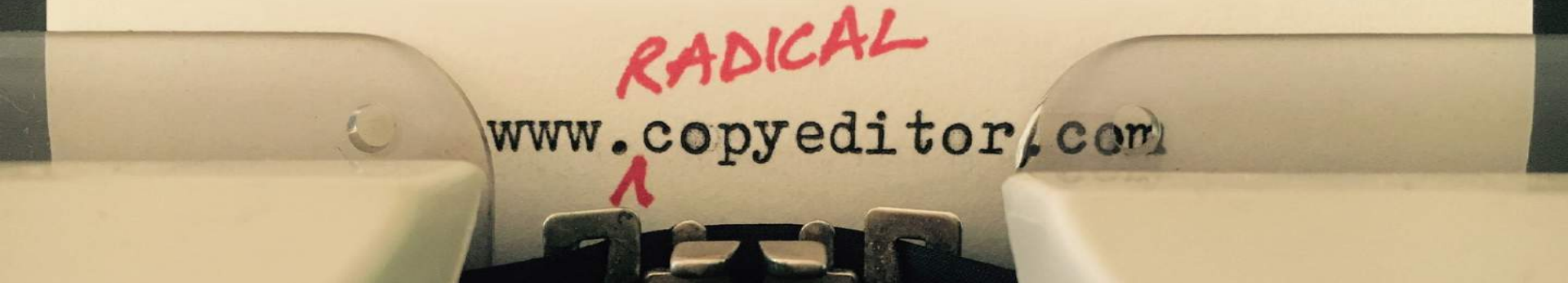
Nuance and context in identity language

- invert, homosexual, gay, queer, SOGI, LGBT, LGBTQ+
- Hispanic, Latino, Latina/o, Latin@, Latinx, Latine
- Negro, African American, African descent, African diaspora, coloured, Black
- people of color, Black and Brown, BIPOC, BAME, people of the global majority
- fat, Mad, crip, deaf and hard of hearing vs Deaf
- disability rights vs. disability justice



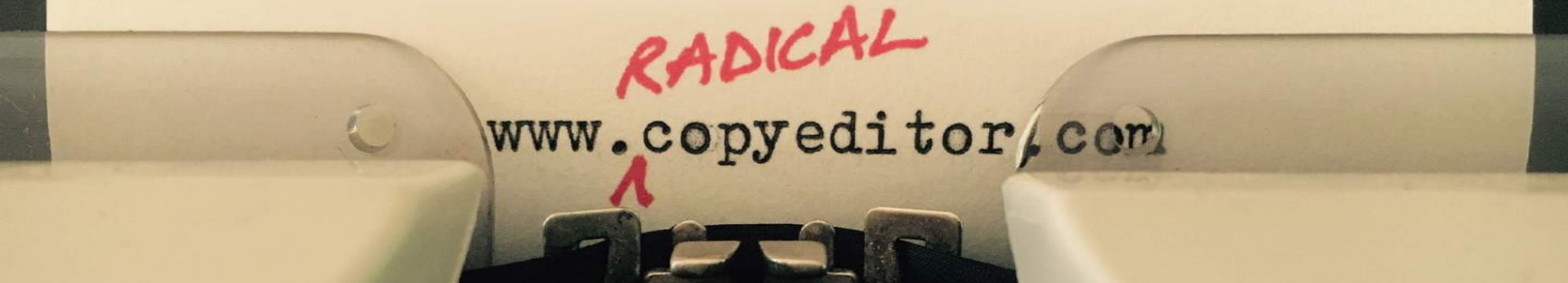
“Gender-inclusive” language

- Use neutral, non-sexist language
  - X “mankind” “fireman” “man the table” “Dr. Smith and Judy”
  - ✓ “humanity” “fire fighter” “staff the table” “Bob and Judy Smith”
- Avoid gender binary language
  - X “boys and girls” “both genders” “the opposite gender”
  - ✓ “young people” “all genders” “a different gender”
- Use singular “they”
  - ✓ As a personal pronoun for people who go by they/them
  - ✓ As a generic third-person singular pronoun (instead of “he/she”)



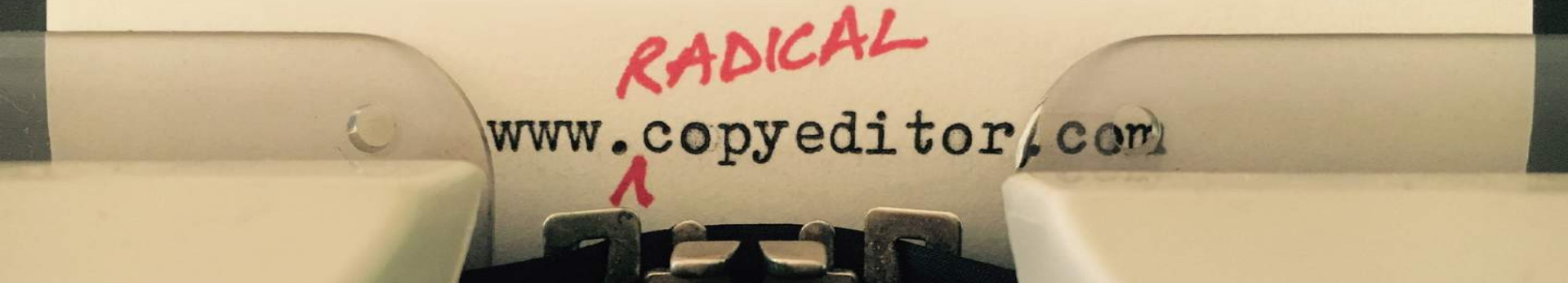
Mindfulness regarding metaphors

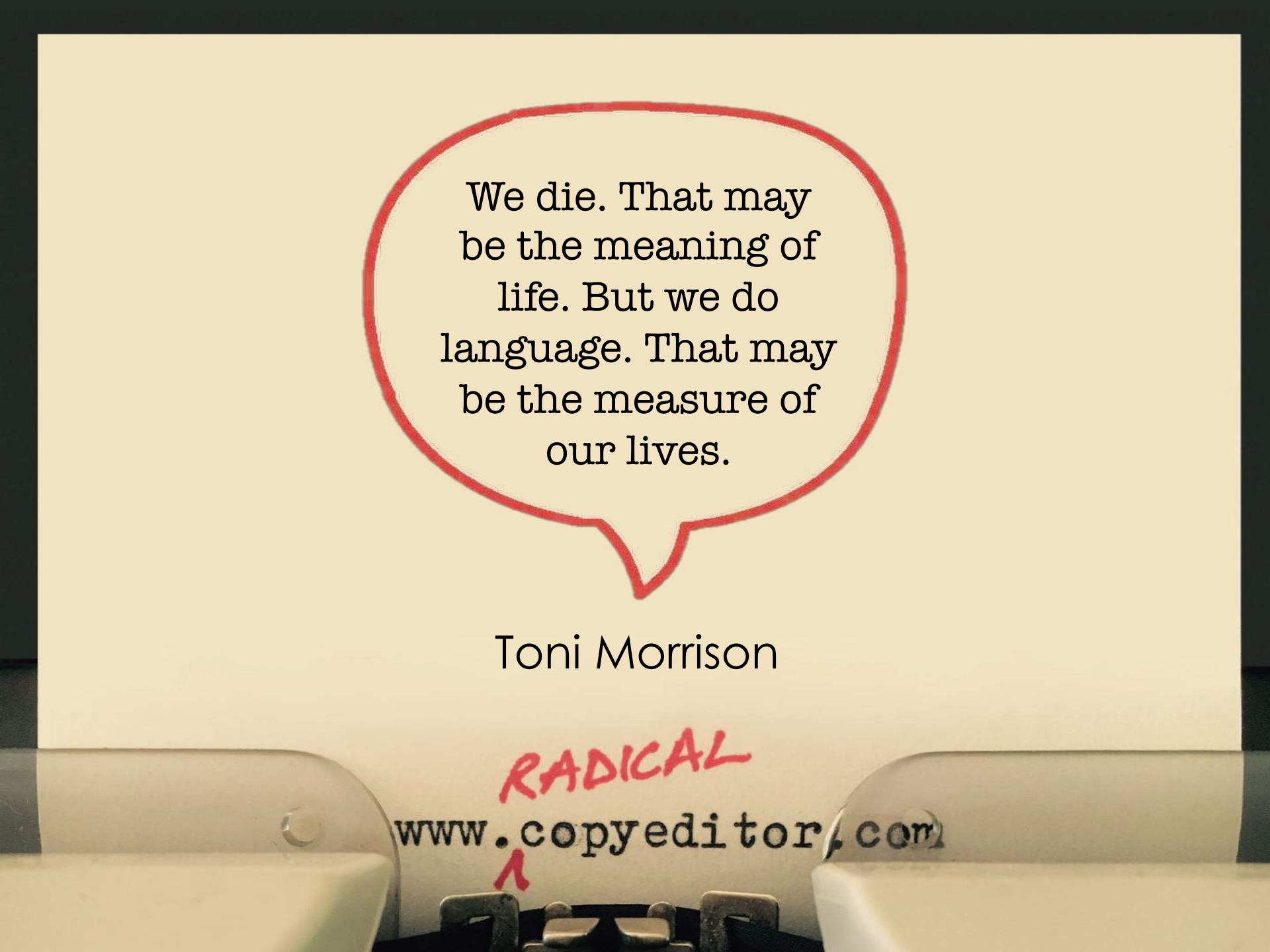
- Blackness/darkness universally used for negative concepts
  - "black-hearted" "kept in the dark" "dark forces" "blacklist"
  - "dark times" "black mark" "blackmail" "as black as sin"
- Whiteness/lightness universally used for positive concepts
  - "come into the light" "white as snow" "white collar"
  - "white lie" "illuminating" "unblemished" "white knight"
- Disability language universally used for negative concepts
  - "blind to the truth" "fell on deaf ears" "paralyzed with fear"
  - "the economy was crippled" "crazy" "insane" "OCD"



Awareness of imperialism

- America, American vs. United States, U.S.
- international, foreign language vs. non-U.S., non-English
- Western vs. European, imperialist, individualistic, white
- Developing countries, Third World vs. non-industrialized countries, Global South
- Our culture… We learned in school that… We believe… vs. U.S. culture… Mainstream culture… Those of us who are white…




We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.
Toni Morrison
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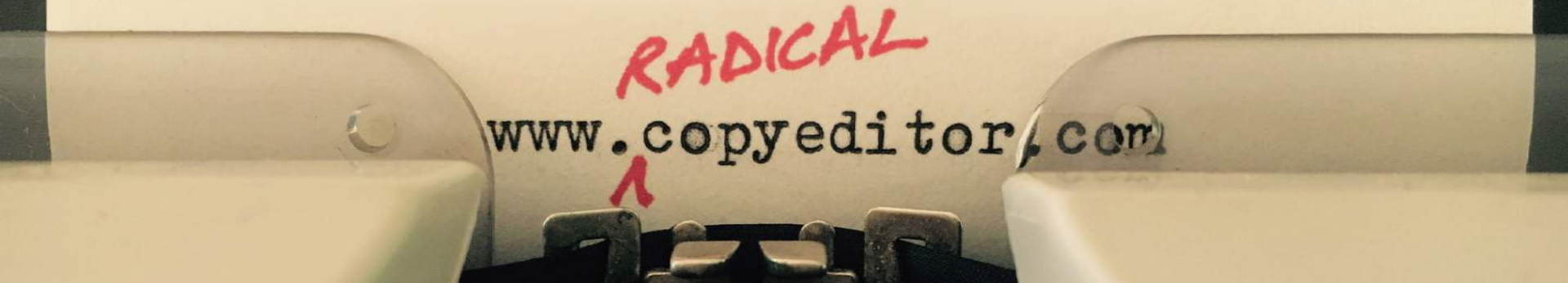
Questions for editors to consider

- Where are my own areas of discomfort or ignorance? What biases might I be bringing to my work, and how might I expand my worldview?
- How can I help authors improve without making edits that misrepresent their perspective?
- Where is my line in the sand when it comes to issues of inclusion/justice?
- How can I constantly center care over correctness?



Further resources

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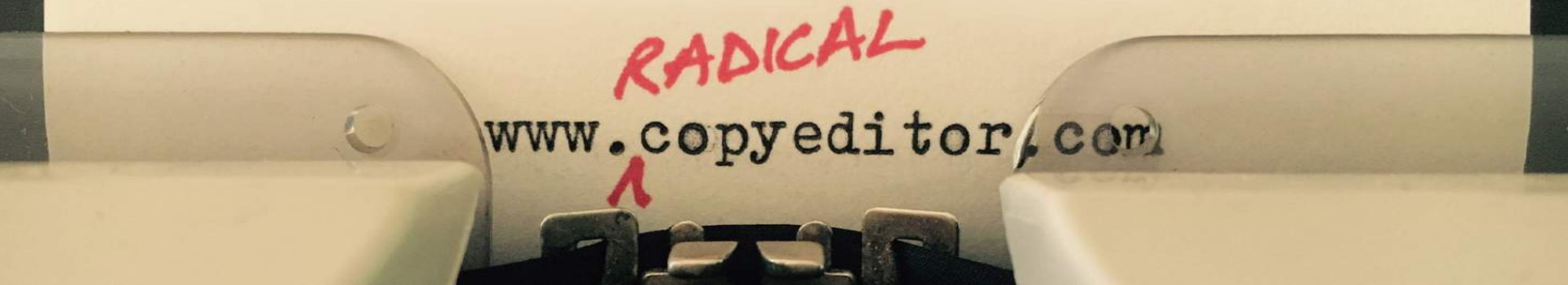
@ZrAlexKapitan

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  consciousstyleguide.com
- Rabbit with a Red Pen
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- The Diversity Style Guide
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- APA Style's online resources
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