

Imply vs. infer

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I had a truly inspirational English teacher in the Xth standard - only it was called Fifth Form then. This was an English gentleman called Mortimer who had come on some sort of exchange programme (possibly organised by the BBC). He really opened our eyes to so many wonderful things. For instance, I would never have known, but for him, of a wonderful English Pronouncing Dictionary by Daniel Jones. He taught us the English language breathed and lived, and dispelled many common misconceptions in the understanding of the language. For instance, as to how many 'l's there were in the word fulfil - 'hear the symmetry of the spelling: f-u-l-f-i-l'; the difference between *continuously* and *continually*; or the distinction between *imply* and *infer* - whose manifestations, in the context of the issues treated in this column, will be the subject of today's piece.

The fact that I go around in a wheel-chair implies that there is some reason why I need to use this form of motion. It does not imply that I fell down and broke a leg; if you concluded that, you would be guilty of making an incorrect and unjustified inference from the facts presented to you. This kind of making uncalled-for inferences by insensitive people is one of the leading causes of a majority of the woes of people who happen to be different in some way. Here are instances of what I mean.

Consider this scenario: Someone is quite ill. Doctors keep coming in periodically and then walk away stern-faced. The patient is lying in bed with eyes closed and maybe even a tube inserted through his nose. The overall scene is not a very happy one, and implies that the patient is not very well. However it does **not** imply that he is unconscious or incapable of hearing what is being said in the room. Yet how many times have you not seen people inferring such an unwarranted conclusion and talking mournfully in hearing distance of the patient as if he is already dead?

Often, when schoolteachers/governesses get annoyed with a student/child, and want to give their ward a piece of their mind, they want to make sure that each of their unpalatable words is heard and understood. And when the child does not keep making eye contact with the person giving a piece of her/his mind, that does **not** imply that the ward is not interested or is 'disobeying' the senior person. There is a telling piece in a book written by an autistic woman as she explains that making eye contact is something autistic people have

a very hard time doing, and how she feared her governess who used to demand 'Look at me when I talk to you'.

Then there is the video I saw on youtube about an autistic girl, who had not spoken a word till she was in her teens, who through a fortuitous set of circumstances discovered she could communicate with people by typing things out on a computer. And she talks about how everybody inferred, wrongly, from her not speaking, that she could not understand what was being said about her in her presence, and laments her frustration at not being able to tell people to shut up and to be more sensitive.

Or take the case of Christy Brown who had cerebral palsy and was considered mentally disabled. In his autobiography *My Left Foot* (also a film), he relates in detail that profound moment when, at age five, he inexplicably grabbed a piece of chalk from his sisters hand with his left foot and, with great difficulty traced the letter A on a piece of slate. For the first time, his family knew for sure that his intellect was intact. For the first time, he could start to communicate with them. His mother taught him to write using a typewriter with his toes. He went on to write a number of books and poetry, winning many prizes.

(Incidentally, the entire previous paragraph is reproduced almost verbatim from a heartwarming collection of short blurbs on *45 Disabled People who Made a Difference* which, along with many equally inspirational pieces can be found in the wonderful website maintained by a Dr.Satendra Singh, called <http://infiniteability.yolasite.com>)

Finally, just to show that we Indians do not have the copyright on insensitivity, let me conclude with a classic instance when I was the victim of wrong inferences being drawn. I have a condition known as multiple sclerosis. Two of the ways this manifests itself are a noticeable instability and an occasional slurring of speech, both of which tend to get exaggerated when I am tired. This incident occurred many years ago when my condition had not yet affected my mobility to the extent of using a wheel-chair or even a cane. I was going to take an international flight leaving Chennai around 2 or 3 am - which meant I had had a full day in the office before coming to the airport, then going through long lines during immigration. So much so, that by the time Lufthansa Airlines announced the boarding call for its flight to Frankfurt, I was exhausted. I may be wrong about the destination. Only the fact that it was a Lufthansa flight is indelibly etched in my memory. This is because by the time I got to the point of entering the craft, my weary limbs caused me to stumble into the plane. When the German stewardess asked me for my seat number,

the combination of my instability, my bloodshot eyes and my slurred response of 34 E was sufficient for the fraülein to add 1 and 1 and come up with 3 and infer that I was drunk. She went on to inform me that although she would be well within her rights to not allow me to enter the plane, it was only on account of her kindness that she did not; and of course she would certainly not allow me to be served any alcoholic beverage on board! It is an indication of my level of exhaustion at the time that I quietly went to my seat without caring to pick up the thrown gauntlet - as I would have 9 times out of 10!