Language justice

Language justice is a concept that emphasizes the right of all individuals to communicate in their preferred language and to have their language and cultural identities respected and valued. In the context of activism and translation/interpreting, language justice seeks to ensure that marginalized communities, including LGBTQ+ communities, have access to information and resources in their preferred languages and that their voices are heard and valued in multilingual spaces. This guide discusses how we can use language to affirm and celebrate each other's identities and promote language justice, while actively countering oppression that is sometimes embedded in language. Language is constantly evolving, so these are meant to serve as starting points for co-creation and not rules.

Access versus Justice

Language access means ensuring that all participants are able to contribute in a shared language that they can understand. Language justice goes further to creating an inclusive environment where people have the right to express themselves in the language they are most comfortable and can best express their feelings and ideas. A justice centered approach works to challenge the historic and systemic injustices that privileges some languages over others. For example, in Central Asia many people speak English and Russian. Not only are English and Russian many peoples second, third or fourth languages learned, but these languages proliferated because of colonial influences and history, often working to erase indigenous and local languages and culture. A language access approach might have resources available in those two languages but a language justice approach would work to allow for more language access for participants.

General guidelines

It is important to remember that language is constantly evolving, and we are all co-creating a more inclusive way to speak and to write. This guide is not a set of rules, but rather a starting point for us to think about how we use language. When you speak or interpret, use the best language you have now. It's okay to make mistakes! We encourage you to experiment and collaborate to make our language(s) more inclusive and respectful. We are on this journey together, as we learn from each other as we work toward better language accessibility, equity, and justice.

Here are some key guidelines to help us use language that creates safety, inclusion, and respect.

- **Use plain language:** Speak in a simple and clear manner to help everyone understand you better, especially when communicating across languages.
- **Be gender-inclusive:** Use gender-neutral language and be inclusive of all genders.

- **Be respectful of all:** Use language that affirms and celebrates all identities. Avoid language that privileges one group over others.
- **Be mindful of the context.** Consider the history of our language(s) you use and be aware of how language can be used to include or exclude others.

Use plain Language

Plain language helps makes your event more accessible and promotes language justice.

Use simple, clear language that is easy to understand. Avoid using jargon, technical terms, idiomatic expressions or regional expressions that may be unfamiliar to some people.

If you have to use a term or expression that may be unknown to your listeners, consider explaining or defining it.

Using plain language makes it easier for everyone to understand you. This includes people for whom the language you speak is not their primary language. This also makes the job of the interpreters easier and enables them to communicate your message into other languages more accurately.

Be gender inclusive

If in doubt, you can always ask—and even make a decision together as a group about the language you're going to use!

Use gender-neutral language

In languages without a grammatical gender (such as Georgian, Kyrgyz, or English) this means not using gendered language when talking about all people. For example:

- In English, this means using words like firefighter instead of "fireman" or "artificial" instead of "man-made". Generally, avoid words that center men and masculinities or communicate the assumption that a certain activity or profession is the province of men.
- In languages that don't have a grammatical gender, avoid adding the word "woman/lady" to nouns that have been traditionally associated with men. For example, in Turkish, avoid saying "bayan müdür" when referring to a manager who happens to be a woman.

In languages (such as Russian) that have grammatical genders and that have traditionally centered words in the masculine gender, there are several ways we can make language more gender neutral. For example:

- Change the phrase or sentence from singular to plural:
  - Человек способен на многое (мужской род). → Люди/мы способны на многое.
  - Получить доступ к этому ресурсу может любой. (мужской род) → Получить доступ к этому ресурсу могут все. ИЛИ Этот ресурс доступен всем.
- Use a conventional gender-neutral word:

    - Каждый может сделать свой выбор → Каждая персона может сделать свой выбор.
    - Просим всех участников пройти в зал → Просим всех пройти в зал.
- Use feminine word forms (феминитивы) with an asterisk or a “gender gap” underscore before the feminine ending. This tends to work better in writing:
    - Мы пригласили к участию активист_ок. (феминитив)
    - Руководство для пользователь*ниц. (феминитив)
- Use feminine word forms by default or use less conventional neutral words:
    - Специалистки / Специалиста пришло к заключению, что... (феминитив / неконвенциональный нейтралитив)
- Use feminine and masculine forms one after another. This tends to work better when speaking. Keep in mind, however, that this is not inclusive of all gender identities and can be seen to reinforce the gender binary:
    - Благодарим наших фасилитаток и фасилитаторов...

Non-binary language

Avoid using language that implies that gender/sex is binary (women or men). For example, say “all sexes” instead of “the two sexes”. Use “they” instead of “he or she” when referring to a person whose gender is unknown.

Personal Pronouns

When possible, find out what pronouns people use and use those pronouns. Do not assume pronouns based on a person's appearance or names.

In English, the pronoun “they” is commonly used as a gender-neutral pronoun, and in Russian it’s now more common to refer to a single person as “они”, and some non-binary and gender-diverse people use that pronoun too.

In Russian, "они/их” is becoming increasingly common. When in doubt, ask the people in the local LGBTQ+ community and explore resources online (some are listed in the Resources section below). Language is always evolving, and we can be part of the evolution!

Be respectful to all

Think critically about how you use your language to show respect to others and value and affirm their identities.

Names

The way we use names shows respect. If you are not sure what to call someone, please ask the person what name they use.

Don’t assume that the person’s legal name (the name on their official documents) is the name that they use. Deadnaming (деднейминг) is when someone refers to a trans or non-binary person by the name they were given at birth, rather than by the name they use. This can be hurtful and invalidating to the person’s identity. Using the person’s affirming name is an important way of valuing their identity.

Using people’s names accurately and learning to pronounce them correctly is an important way of acknowledging and valuing their identity.

If a name is unfamiliar to you and you are unsure how to pronounce it, you can ask for help. Many people will appreciate the effort you make in learning their name!

Refer to people by their name rather than by their role.

- For example, instead of saying “We would like to thank our interpreters”, consider saying, *“We want to thank Altynai and Tamar for their interpretation today”*.

Respectful language

We can use language to include everyone and to show respect. Consider the assumptions you make in your language of people of various ages, abilities, ethnic or cultural backgrounds, sexualities, gender identities, etc. Be willing to learn and be open to feedback from others.

Using people-centered language can be a helpful way of showing respect. For example, say:

- *people with disabilities*
- *люди/персоны с инвалидностью*

Various forms of oppression, including sexism, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, abelism, ageism, racism and xenophobia, can be deeply embedded within a language. Learn to recognize it.

Avoid assuming the gender of people when addressing a group and don't use gendered words to address people (for example, don’t say, “You’re doing great, ladies”, or “Hey guys!”).

Consider these common, but sexist phrases used to refer to women in Russian: “Прекрасный пол”, “Слабый пол”, “Наши милые дамы”.

Avoid common expressions and phrases that are ableist. For example, consider saying:

- *they are unaware of this (instead of “that's their blind spot”)*
- *that’s awful (instead of “that’s lame”)*
- *this is really shocking (instead of “this is crazy”)*
- *это меня повергло в шок (instead of “с ума сойти”)*

Use respectful language when talking about a specific age group. For example, say older adults (instead of “seniors”).

Educate yourself on how our language reflects racism and prejudice in our society and avoid using phrases with racist origins. Actively avoid using language that is derogatory or offensive to people who are racialized or belong to a certain ethnicity.

Avoid using language that assumes everyone is heterosexual and cisgender. For example, use *partner* (instead of “husband” or “wife”, “girlfriend” or “boyfriend”).

In some languages, the words commonly (and even officially!) used to describe some forms of sexual identity and expression may be stigmatizing and even offensive. Remember to use words that show respect and, if in doubt, ask people what they prefer.

Working with interpreters

To make the event more accessible across languages, use plain language, speak slowly and clearly, share resources with interpreters, and be mindful of the context. Encourage and welcome interpreters’ suggestions and feedback.

Your event may be interpreted into other languages in several ways:

- Simultaneous interpretation (interpreters speak at the same time as the speakers, using special equipment, with interpreters and participants speaking into microphones and wearing headphones);
- Consecutive interpretation (an interpreter usually stands in front of the audience; the speaker says a few sentences and makes a pause, during which the interpreter interprets);
- Whisper interpretation (similar to simultaneous, except the interpreter sits next to the participants requiring interpretation and whispers to them; headphones are not used).

Interpretation requires a lot of effort and skill. There are several ways in which the speakers and the participants can support the interpreters to make the event smooth and comfortable for all.

Here are some key principles:

- **Encourage and welcome interpreters’ suggestions and feedback** (both before and during the event). It’s helpful for interpreters to have a way to let the organizers or the speakers know that something is not working, the speaker is talking too fast, or that the interpreters need a break.
- **Use plain language and speak slowly and clearly.** This will help the interpreters communicate your message more clearly and will make the experience less stressful for them (and for the participants, who will be able to understand you better!).

- **Share resources with the interpreters ahead of time.** This can include presentation slides, your speaking points, or links to online resources. Providing reference materials to interpreters ahead of time will help them prepare to better understand the topic and look up any specialized terms.
- **Help the interpreters clearly see you,** your slides, and any props that you use. A lot of communication is non-verbal!
- **Remember to use the microphone** and speak in an even tone of voice. Check with the interpreters and/or the technical support staff to make sure that you're not too close and not too far from the microphone. Be careful not to hit any objects against the microphone and make sure it doesn't rub against your clothes or hair (the sound is amplified through interpreters' headphones).
- **Plan for breakout rooms and other activities.** Make sure to account for the event being interpreted. For example, if you are breaking into several groups, do you have enough interpreters? (Remember that interpreters work in shifts and need breaks). Will the interpreters be able to hear you and the participants? Will the participants be able to hear the interpreters? Do the interpreters know what the activity is about?
- **If showing videos, use subtitles for translation.** It is extremely difficult to interpret videos simultaneously (the sound would need to be fed into the interpreters' headphones, and usually the speed of speech in videos is much faster than in everyday life, making it hard for interpreters to keep up). Using subtitles or asking the interpreters to interpret a verbal summary after the video is shown are some practical solutions.

Interpreting names into other languages:

- When an event is interpreted into other languages, interpreters may find it difficult to hear and correctly interpret people's names, especially if the speaker is speaking quickly and the interpreters are not familiar with everyone in the audience.
- **Speakers:** Try to pronounce the person's name slowly and clearly so that the interpreter can hear it. You can also use gestures or look at the person (if they are in the audience) to help the interpreter understand who you are talking about. If you are referring to someone who is not in the room, explain who that person is (for example, "American author bell hooks", "our colleague Ariadne"). This will help both the audience and the interpreter understand you better.
- **Organizers:** Give the interpreters a list with participants' names (make sure to list affirming names, and, if possible, pronouns; it is also helpful to include individuals' roles, organizations, and any other information that may be relevant to the event).
- **Interpreters:** If you didn't quite catch the name, it can be okay to omit it. For example, you can say "One of our participants said earlier that…" or "Our organizers made sure to…". Remember, however, that using people's names shows respect, so when you have the chance, consult your list of participants' names or check with the participant to see if you got their name correctly. You can also ask the organizers to speak more slowly when naming participants or including other essential information.

Budget

Creating a multilingual environment means requires thoughtful budgeting and timeline. Think through what kind of supports will be necessary in the planning and on site for participants.

Planning

Virtual calls

- Simultaneous interpretation and video software with interpretation mode
- Closed captioning is another thing that can really support multilingual spaces

Communication

- Translation of documents and communication in all languages

On site

- Simultaneous, consecutive or whisper interpretation
- Headsets for seamless interpretation
- Enough interpreters for break outs and optional events after the ‘workday’
- Real time updates and text communication to participants

Support Interpreters

- Have interpreters kick off the meeting by letting participants know how they can access their preferred language, remind participants to speak slowly and use simple language.
- Interpretation is highly skilled work. Hiring professional interpreters and making sure you are respectful of their time and breaks is critical.
- Create a glossary of common terms to support them.
- Share materials in advance so interpreters know what to expect and can prepare.
- Adapt a language justice guide to support your team and interpreters (see example here)

Resources

Russian

- Список популярных местоимений — обширный словарь местоимений от Pronouns.page, в том числе и не распространенных широко.

- Словарь гендерно-нейтрального языка — Информация по нейтралитивам и феминитивам в русском языке: как их образовывать и как использовать в речи и на письме (с примерами).
- Гендерно-нейтральный язык в ООН — руководство с практическими примерами. Некоторые из них более приемлемы в официальной речи, но общие принципы вполне можно использовать в повседневной речи.
- Словарь “Таких дел” – какие слова лучше использовать, чтобы показать уважительное отношение к разным людям, а какие привычные слова лучше не говорить.
- Практическое руководство по деколонизации - статья “7 пунктов деколонизации” (первый из которых: Имя и наименование).
- Центральная или Средняя Азия? — статья казахстанского издания Masa Media

English

- Checklist for Plain Language — A quick reference for plain language writing.
- Pronouns.org — Explains the importance of personal pronouns, as well as gender-inclusive language.
- The GLAAD Media reference – A comprehensive guide to using fair, accurate, and inclusive language when talking about the LGBTQ+ community.
- The Conscious Style Guide – Has sections on ability + disability, age, appearance, ethnicity, race + nationality, gender, sex + sexuality, and a lot more.
- Bias-Free Language (APA Style) – A descriptive resource on how we can talk about all people with inclusivity and respect.
- Inclusive and Antiracist Writing Guide — Covers general principles of inclusive and antiracist writing with a focus on North America.
- CCHE Language Justice Toolkit — Provides guidance on creating multilingual spaces that value and respect the voices of all individuals and communities (available in English and Spanish).

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