Guidelines for Inclusive Language

Inclusive language acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities. These guidelines highlight ways in which linguists can both lead the way in proactively writing inclusively and avoid past pitfalls or habits that may unintentionally lead to marginalization, offense, misrepresentation, or the perpetuation of stereotypes. Stereotyping language is often not a matter of intention but of effect. These guidelines are based on decades of research, feedback from informed members of the Linguistic Society of America, and a review of similar documents from other organizations and government bodies.

The recommendations in these guidelines apply not only to academic writing and presentations in the strictest sense, but also to other forms of communication, such as narratives summarizing an individual's expertise or qualifications, letters of recommendation, statements of policy, advertisements for research or training opportunities, discourses in social media, and so on. These guidelines are necessarily concentrated on usage practices in English; of course, specific practices will differ from language to language, but the spirit of the guidelines should remain the same.

Statements perpetuating stereotypes and norms

Linguistic research is often focused on identity-based groups, defined in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, country of origin, etc. In referring to such groups, it is important to clarify what the research has actually found, rather than relying on generics, which can be misleading. For example, even statements that appear to convey 'positive' stereotypes (e.g., "Women are more polite than men", "Asians tend to score well on standardized tests"), but which oversimplify characteristics among those sharing the identity and overlook crucial differences, can evoke or reinforce existing stereotypes on the part of the reader. Precision in citing statistical findings can be helpful in this regard.

Similar issues arise for normative descriptions, both seemingly neutral descriptors such as *normally-developed* or *handicapped individuals* as well as labeling a particular variety or dialect of a language as the 'standard' form. Reference to norms may reinforce divisions and stereotypes. In some cases, normative status has been formally defined by government institutions, community norms, etc., and in such cases it is advisable to cite these. In the case of norms that seem to have no institutional basis (such as *standard term*, *standard dialect*, *typically developing*), including a caveat to this effect can be helpful.

In referring to groups characterized by a disability, be sensitive to community and/or author-specific preferences for terms such as *Deaf* vs. *hearing impaired*, *disabled* vs. *person with disabilities*, is *autistic* vs. *has autism* vs. *has been diagnosed with autism*, and other such expressions. Be aware of the significance of capitalization with terms such as *deaf* vs. *Deaf*, where the former refers to a physical characteristic and the latter represents membership in the Deaf culture and communities. Avoid seemingly euphemistic terms such as *differently abled*. It is useful in general to remember that generic statements about groups based on gender, ethnicity, disabilities, socio-economic status, or other similar types of information can take on a life of their own and are seldom interpreted narrowly as simple reports of statistical data, especially when these statements are made by individuals considered experts in their field.

Choice of examples and terminology

Terminology is constantly evolving. Examples of relatively recent changes that pertain to inclusivity and respect are the use of 'consultant' rather than 'informant' in descriptions of fieldwork, the use of current rather than outdated country names, and the use of language names that are preferred by speakers (e.g. Tohono O'odham, rather than Papago). In cases where there is a lack of consensus or change is still in progress, referring to variation and contextualizing the alternatives is helpful.

Linguists frequently use example sentences to illustrate linguistic phenomena. This is an opportunity to exercise best practices. Some types of language exemplification commonly used in the past may now be considered offensive or exclusionary, and/or may perpetuate stereotypes. Avoid systematically using linguistic examples which associate certain roles or professions with one gender in particular, which portray certain individuals as having stereotypical qualities, or which associate membership in a particular community or social group with personal characteristics. To illustrate, even a seemingly innocuous sentence such as "The boy kissed the girl" places the female as the object of the male's intentional actions. If used to the exclusion of examples with other types of participants in various grammatical roles, such sentences may be construed as perpetuating rigid or arbitrary gender roles.

In glossing forms from a language that does not explicitly mark masculine gender, use a form such as 3ps (third person singular) in place of a glossed gendered English pronoun such as he to avoid the introduction of gender-specificity. The use of 'gender-neutral' names such as Chris, Dana, Kim, Lee, and Pat can help avoid stereotyping either males or females.

In the linguistics literature, examples are sometimes created in an effort to inject humor or levity into prose that might otherwise be considered dry or complicated. Even where humor is intended, however, care should be taken to avoid constructing examples that are lewd or offensive, that perpetuate stereotypes, or that convey an implicit bias. Authors are encouraged to use cultural sensitivity and respect when constructing examples. Examples that are intended to be humorous or playful may be interpreted by future readers as belittling, especially when they are used to illustrate aspects of an understudied language, or one spoken in a developing nation or by speakers of relatively lower socio-economic status.

In many cases, a researcher needs to cite previously published linguistic examples that may not adhere to current best practices for inclusive, respectful treatment of a language or speaker. In such cases, it may be appropriate to use alternative examples that still illustrate the linguistic phenomenon in question, while directing the reader to the source of the original example in the literature. Alternatively, a historically contextualizing comment or footnote can sensitize the reader to changes in 'best practices' over time.

Reference to individuals

Linguists are frequently called on to write job announcements, letters of recommendation, narratives in support of candidates, etc. Here, too, it is best to follow practices that promote inclusivity.

It is, or should already be, standard practice to avoid the use of gender-specific terms (*man*, *woman*, etc.) or other such demographically-oriented terms that are not relevant to the position or qualifications. When presenting a generalization, use plural noun forms (e.g., *people*, *individuals*, *students*, etc.) or the plural pronoun they, rather than a masculine pronoun (e.g., *he*) or terms marked for masculine gender, such as *man*. While it used to be assumed that *he* was an appropriate gender-neutral default term, research shows that a masculine pronoun or terms marked for masculine gender, such as *man*, are overwhelmingly interpreted as male even when users intend them to be understood more generally. This applies to terms like *mankind* and *Congressman*, as well; gender-neutral terms such as *humanity* or *Member of Congress* are preferable. Similarly, adding gender-specific modifiers in some uses of profession or role terms invites the inference that the terms when unmodified only apply fully to those whose gender is not specified by the modifier. To avoid triggering such inferences, use, for example, *professor* rather than *female professor* or *nurse* rather than *male nurse*.

Whenever possible, when referencing individuals whose gender is not known, specified, relevant, or lies outside of traditional binaries, use appropriate alternative pronouns that do not specify or presuppose a particular gender (e.g., *s/he*, *one*, or the now-common and accepted singular gender-neutral *they*). The context, audience, and/or register may lead one of these alternatives to be preferred over the others.

In general, and when preferences are not known, use parallel forms for all referents. For example, do not in the same text or set of letters of recommendation cite male subjects by last name, but female subjects by first name. When referring to women and men with comparable titles, be consistent in the use of titles such as *Professor*, *Dr.*, etc. It is also important to be aware of the description of qualities and/or the use of certain adjectives that may reflect biases based on gender or other characteristics. In writing letters of recommendation for men and women, for example, attention to consistency can prevent unwittingly creating a pattern in which women are described as 'lovely' or 'nurturing' while similarly talented men are described as 'strong leaders'. Inclusive and respectful practices apply to citations as well. Whenever possible, follow the preferences demonstrated by the author being referenced. Some authors prefer to be referred to in a particular way (e.g., first name presented as an initial, middle initial used (or not), capitalization (or lack thereof) of certain letters, alphabetizing under certain parts of the surname, etc.) or to be referenced with certain pronouns (*he*, *she*, *they*), or titles.

Summary

We encourage all linguists to consider the possible reactions of their potential audience to their writing and, in so doing, to choose expository practices and content that is positive, inclusive, and respectful.

Initiated and developed by the Committee on the Status of Women in Linguistics (COSWL), with additional input from LSA committee chairs.

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