

Advancing Language for Racial Equity and Inclusion

An Equity Fluent
Leadership Playbook

To the Point



Berkeley
Haas

The Center for Equity, Gender and Leadership at the Haas School of Business (University of California, Berkeley) is dedicated to educating equity fluent leaders to ignite and accelerate change. Equity fluent leaders intentionally use their power to drive positive change and build an inclusive and equitable world. Equity Fluent Leadership (EFL) is an ongoing journey. EFL Playbooks deliver strategies and tools for business leaders to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The Playbooks serve as a bridge between academia and industry, highlighting and translating research into practitioner-oriented strategies.

This Playbook was authored by Genevieve Smith, Alicia Sheares, Ishita Rustagi, and Julia Nee with support from Kellie McElhaney. The playbook and resources benefited from feedback, prototyping, and review by various practitioners and leaders in the industry. (see Appendix 2).

We respectfully acknowledge that this work has been developed at UC Berkeley, which sits on unceded Ohlone land.



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What is this playbook?

This playbook outlines how anti-Black racism manifests in language and lays out good practices for individuals and organizations to use language in ways that advance racial equity and inclusion.

Who is this playbook for?

You are a current — or future — CEO, Chief Diversity Officer (CDO), People or HR Leader, board member, department head, program manager... No matter where you fall in your organizational chart, you see yourself as a leader who is eager to accelerate racial equity and inclusion in your organization and business more broadly.

Why use it?

Language impacts people and workplaces every day. Language can make people feel like they belong, or be used to discriminate and advance divisiveness and inequity. Simply put, language matters.

How to use this playbook?

This “To the point” Playbook outlines top-line information on language, power and race, followed by good language practices and tools to advance racial equity and inclusion.

The “Deeper Dive” addendum is for those interested in learning more about the intersections of language, power, race, and anti-Black racism; and for those seeking more nuanced understandings of challenges and opportunities to advance language for racial equity and inclusion. The “Deeper Dive” may be particularly relevant for CDOs and DEI professionals.

The playbook and all associated tools and resources, can be found on the [playbook site](#).

How was this playbook developed?

The Playbook was developed through a systematic review of the literature across various disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and more. The tools and resources were prototyped and iterated with businesses and business leaders, as well as UC Berkeley students, staff and faculty.

Road Map



Language Matters

FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Language impacts people's wellbeing.
- Language can instill harmful stereotypes and biases.
- Languages can signal exclusion or inclusion.

FOR ORGANIZATIONS

- Language can alienate minoritized employees, impact mental health, and erode sense of belonging and psychological safety.
- This can result in higher stress, lower productivity and higher turnover.
- Linguistic discrimination impacts who gets hired and who advances at work resulting in reduced employee diversity with impacts for lower innovation.

Leaders have an important role to play in advancing equitable and inclusive language — through their own communications and through making sure it is institutionalized in their organization.



Key Understandings

- Race is a human invention created to classify groups of people based on characteristics like skin color, physical features and ancestry.
- Anti-Black racism is present and reinforced in the ways we use language.
- What we say matters. Words and phrases people use can harm or be discriminatory to individuals or groups (intentionally or not).
- How we communicate matters. The ways that we combine words and phrases into sentences and conversations impacts what is communicated.
- Patterns of language use matter. Repeating the same words or phrases to describe certain groups over time can solidify stereotypes.
- There is no human language variety that is "better" than others from a linguistic perspective, but English (and particular varieties) has been granted more status and power globally.
- The same issues in human language are replicated in artificial intelligence (AI) tools that learn from and use human language data.
- Individuals and organizations have the opportunity to advance racial equity and inclusion in language.
- Addressing language is important, but not sufficient.



Good Language Practices

INDIVIDUALS - REFINE YOUR LANGUAGE TO BE INCLUSIVE...

1. Be precise.
2. Replace harmful terms that have racist histories or connotations with more neutral language that conveys the same message.
3. Listen to how people describe themselves and honor their identity.
4. Update specific language practices that can reinforce stereotypes. Avoid using unnecessary modifiers (e.g., "female engineers" but not "male engineers"). Be precise by highlighting the humanity of groups using phrases like "Black

people” not “the Blacks.”

5. Be mindful of patterns in how you tell stories — including replacing passive language with active language and use present tenses to describe ongoing actions.
6. Examine the expectations you have for how people should talk.
7. Recognize that communication is a two-way street and work on your own communications skills.
8. Keep learning!

ORGANIZATIONS - INSTITUTIONALIZE INCLUSION...

1. As an organization, get clear on your own terminology approaches (like capitalizing Black and White) and share it with employees.
2. Recognize that communication is a two-way street and provide training for all employees on communications skills.
3. Develop policies that promote linguistic diversity.
4. Share guidance and implement workplace training for employees on language to advance racial equity and inclusion.
5. Identify and adjust places in hiring, evaluation, and promotion where preference for “Standard” American English is used.
6. When using AI systems for HR (e.g., hiring and promotion), analyze how the AI tool can inadvertently exclude, penalize, and/or hold back Black people and people with other marginalized identities.

Where to go from here

1. Read this playbook and reflect. Ask yourself:
 - a. What are the 2-3 individual practices I want to work on this month? Circle them above.
 - b. What is 1 practice my organization can work on this month? Circle it above.
 - c. What is my language “to be” list? This is NOT a “to do” list. For example, avoid thinking of improving your language as a checklist of things to accomplish (e.g., memorize 30 terms on the harmful terms page and their alternatives). As the authors of this playbook, we constantly asked ourselves, how do we want to be when it comes to language? For us, our “to be” list included: be as precise and inclusive as possible, be respectful always, be empathetic in the face of difficult discussions, and be open to learning & having our minds changed. Write 2-3 “to be’s” here:

2. Share this with your team. Send it out ahead of a team retreat or team meeting to discuss together. Have team members do [this worksheet](#) beforehand and come ready to discuss.
3. Before writing external communications (announcements, presentations, articles, blogs, etc.), read and use the good language practices. Review communications for harmful terms using our [Terminology Guide](#).
4. Come back once a quarter to identify new practices to work on and reflect on / update your language “to be” list. It’s a journey!



Language Matters

On February 26, 2012, George Zimmerman fatally shot Trayvon Martin — an unarmed Black teenager. At his own trial, Zimmerman claimed that he shot Martin in self-defense.¹ However, Rachel Jeantel, who was on the phone with Martin at the time of the shooting, testified that Martin was fleeing Zimmerman — not approaching him. While Jeantel’s first-hand account of the moments leading to Martin’s death represents crucial evidence in the case against Zimmerman, her testimony was largely disregarded by the (mostly White) jurors. Jeantel spoke in African American English, which jurors reported was “hard to understand” and “not credible.”² In jury deliberations, Jeantel’s testimony was never once mentioned.³

Because of linguistic prejudice (prejudice against a person based on how they talk), Jeantel’s voice and experiences were ignored.⁴ In the same way that jurors disregarded Jeantel, landlords disfavor Black-sounding applicants⁵; companies inadvertently discriminate in hiring processes based on how people talk⁶; and healthcare workers become aggravated with African American English⁷ speakers who ask questions.⁸

While issues of systemic racism and anti-blackness have become focal points in national and international conversations, the effects of linguistic prejudice are rippling just under the surface. Despite the fact that all varieties of language are linguistically equal, some varieties (e.g., “Standard” American English) have been privileged over others (e.g., African American English). As illustrated through Jeantel’s story, the impacts of linguistic prejudices go far beyond words, creating and perpetuating striking — even life threatening — differences in people’s lives.

Beyond how we perceive the language used by others, the language we use ourselves has real-world impacts. Using language that is racially discriminatory, has racist origins / histories, or is imprecise can impact the wellbeing of individuals.⁹ Language can also instill and perpetuate harmful stereotypes and biases, as well as signal exclusion or inclusion.¹⁰

Language-related issues play out and can have negative impacts in the workplace.

Language that is racially discriminatory or imprecise can impact the mental health and wellbeing of employees. Discrimination resulting from use of African American English and other language varieties limits access to resources and opportunities for being hired and/or advancing in the workplace.¹¹ Whether intentional or not, these practices can alienate minoritized employees. It can also erode their sense of belonging and psychological safety in the workplace. This results in increased stress, lower productivity, and can lead to higher turnover.¹²

No doubt about it, language is powerful.

While it's important to be aware of the harm and injustice language can perpetuate, this playbook focuses **on how language can be used purposefully and intentionally as a tool to advance racial equity and inclusion, with practical solutions.**

In using and honoring language that supports equity and inclusion, we can reflect and respect each person's dignity. Meanwhile, by creating conditions that enable language for racial equity and inclusion, organizations can better support Black and other racially minoritized people to grow and thrive at work. Thereby, organizations can benefit from stronger conditions for innovation and collaboration.¹³ While this playbook focuses on race (particularly looking at the experiences of Black people in the United States), we also include examples related to ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and more.

Read on to continue your personal "equity fluent leadership" journey — one that contributes towards a more equitable, respectful and prosperous business world and society.



Key



Understandings

These ten key understandings provide an overview of race, racism, and their linkages to various “layers” of language and linguistic structure. We explore the importance of the words and phrases we use and the way we organize those words and phrases. We then dive into how patterns of language use over time and how privileging some language varieties results in power inequalities.

Race is a human invention created to classify groups of people based on characteristics like skin color, physical features and ancestry.

White Europeans constructed race as a socially significant category to create a hierarchical system that designated “White” people as superior to “Black” people in order to justify slavery during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Anti-Black racism — a belief system in which one group (White people) understands itself to be superior to other groups (Black people) — has become embedded in society and continues to deeply affect people’s lives. In the US, Black communities are more likely to be surveilled than White communities¹⁴; Black people continue to face consequences of redlining¹⁵ that prevented Black people from buying homes¹⁶; hiring managers prioritize White-sounding names over Black-sounding names¹⁷; and more.

Anti-Black racism is present and reinforced in the ways we use language.

Language and reality are mutually reinforcing, meaning our language reflects the world around us and influences how we think and what we do. If we use language which has discriminatory descriptions, we are encouraged to think of the world in those discriminatory terms. For example: the term “illegal alien” brands a person as “illegal”, while implying the individual is not a person, but something else — an “alien”. This term reflects and reinforces unjust and harmful views towards immigrants, while also dehumanizing them.

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Fortunately, we can make simple word choice changes that support a more equitable reality.

What we say matters.

Words and phrases people use can harm or be discriminatory to individuals or groups (intentionally or not). Words like “master” carry hurtful histories linked to slavery and are not innocuous — even if used in contexts where they are not referring to people. They evoke painful, offensive connotations for some, negatively impacting their psychological well-being.¹⁹ Given the mutually reinforcing links between language and reality, we find that such terms also perpetuate harmful, racist stereotypes and ideologies in society.²⁰

For example: The term “master bedroom” is often used to refer to the largest bedroom in a home. While it is not used in purposefully derogatory or discriminatory ways today, it evokes the historical trauma of slavery.

How we communicate matters.

The ways that we combine words and phrases into sentences and conversations impacts what is communicated. For example, passive language and personification of institutions can obscure who is doing or responsible for a certain action. In cases where an individual or organization has committed a racist action, passive language subtly hides the people responsible. The phrase, “Enslaved people were brought to the United States”, for example, omits mentioning “White settler-colonials” who brought enslaved people to the US.

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Patterns of language use matter.

When we repeat the same words or phrases to describe certain groups over time, those words and phrases can become associated with those groups. They then solidify stereotypes and perceptions about that group.

For example: Descriptions of Black women (often by White authors) in written texts feature stereotypes of Black women as “angry.” While there is no empirical evidence supporting this stereotype, it is erroneously reinforced in texts.

There is no human language variety that is “better” than others from a linguistic perspective,²¹

but English (and particular varieties of English) has been granted more status and power globally. By speaking English — and particularly “Standard” American English in the US — the speaker can have more access to opportunities to advance and grow their network, which translates to more power. Speakers of African American English (see Box 1) are often excluded from those privileges²² and can feel pressure to code-switch (see Box 2). It doesn’t have to be this way — societies all over the world thrive and communicate effectively with diverse language and grammar.

For example: double negatives are used in some varieties of English, such as African American English, as in “He didn’t see nothing”.²³ Double negatives — or negative concord — are often inaccurately seen as “errors”. This is the result of bias against speakers of varieties that use them, like African American English. In other languages, like Italian and Polish, double negatives are required, and in countries like Italy and Poland where the majority language uses double negatives,²⁴ it is seen as perfectly logical.

BOX 1. WHAT ARE "STANDARD" AMERICAN ENGLISH ("S"AE) AND AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH (AAE)?

African American English includes the language varieties used by many Black Americans. AAE has been systematically devalued as a result of racism and white supremacy, despite the empirical fact that AAE is linguistically equal to other language varieties including "Standard" American English. "Standard" American English is a variety of English often used in media, politics, and education in the United States. It is based largely on the English used by middle-class White men. See more on the definitions of these terms and why we chose to use these terms in the Appendix.

BOX 2. WHAT IS CODE-SWITCHING?

We all modify the way that we speak depending on the context. For some, this includes using different language varieties in different situations. For example, many speakers of AAE code-switch²⁵ and use "S"AE in more formal settings because they may be treated negatively for using AAE, even though there is nothing inherently better or more "appropriate" about using "S"AE. This pressure to conform and use "S"AE creates greater employee stress and decreased morale.²⁶ Rather than seeing communication as the two-way street that it is, pressuring minoritized speakers to code-switch into "S"AE places the burden fully on those speakers while allowing dominant language speakers to avoid putting in an equal effort.

People's perceptions of other languages can be biased.

In many cases, an accent may not interfere with understanding, but it may be perceived in a negatively biased way.

For example: a study of individuals with French- versus Japanese-accented English showed that those with French accents were seen in a more favorable light than those with Japanese accents, even in cases where speakers with Japanese accents were actually easier to comprehend than speakers with French accents.²⁷

The same issues in human language are replicated in artificial intelligence (AI) tools that learn from and use human language data.

AI tools that learn from and use human language are all around us and increasing in impact

on all of our lives. Chances are you have already interacted with one today — whether a chatbot, automated assistant, translation tool, hate speech detector or something else.

For example: A study analyzing five widely-used speech recognition tools found that they misunderstood words spoken by Black people nearly twice as often as they misunderstood words spoken by White users.²⁸ This mismatch in performance can be traced back to underrepresentation of African American English in the language datasets these AI systems learn from. With such technologies becoming increasingly ubiquitous across industries — ranging from voice recognition systems in cars to healthcare support in hospitals — the poor performance for Black users can result in disproportionate access to resources, health and safety detriments, and more.²⁹

Learn more about language-related issues in AI tools using machine learning (ML) and strategies to advance equity and inclusion in our [Responsible Language in AI & ML Guide](#).

Individuals and organizations have the opportunity to advance racial equity and inclusion in language.

See the good practices below and put them into action.

Addressing language is important, but not sufficient.

Because language and reality are mutually reinforcing, we also need to acknowledge and address racial inequity and injustice in our societies perpetuated beyond language.



Actionable Practices to Advance Racial Equity & Inclusion



There are good language practices to advance racial equity and inclusion for individuals and organizations. Some practices are easier to implement and can be done quickly. Others take time and require more resources. Have patience with yourself and others. If you make mistakes, learn from them to improve for next time.

Individuals

Refine your language to be inclusive

1

Be Precise

In general, it is important to be precise to ensure effective communication. It is especially important when talking about identities. Avoid using terms like “non-White” when discussing particular racial groups (e.g., Black people), since they treat the group in power as the default (“White”) and define other groups only in contrast (“non-White”). Similarly, replace terms like “minority” with terms that acknowledge the power dynamics at play — such as “minoritized” or “marginalized”. Avoid using umbrella terms like “underrepresented minority” and as is possible, explicitly outline the identities you are referring to. Remember that terms like Black, African American, and people of color (POC) are not interchangeable. “Diverse” can be used to describe a group of people with different experiences and backgrounds, but is not a precise way to describe an individual.

See more about these examples as well as other common questions around precise language and information to consciously choose an approach in the [FAQ tab of our Terminology Guide spreadsheet](#).

Sometimes words and phrases can be used to subtly convey racial meanings to particular groups. These are called “dog whistles”. Dog whistles allow people to express harmful ideas while avoiding negative repercussions that could come with directly attacking those groups. Be precise around what you are trying to say. For example, “inner city” has been used as a dog whistle to refer to Black communities, often in contexts where policies overtly targeting Black communities would be seen as racist. Instead of using a covert dog whistle, specify precisely the demographic being referenced (e.g. name the neighborhood, reference a level of income, or name a racial group).

2

Replace harmful terms that have racist histories or connotations with more neutral language that conveys the same message.

See harmful terms and alternatives in [the harmful terms and alternatives tab of our Terminology Guide](#).

Even if the history of a term is unknown, if others feel harmed by its use, use a more inclusive term whenever possible. When in doubt, avoid figures of speech. It might take practice to change your language habits, but using inclusive words and language is a way to be kind and respectful to others.

3

Listen to how people describe themselves and honor their identity.

See the [FAQ tab of our Terminology Guide](#) for more background on definitions of racial terms like "Black", "African American", etc.

Privately encourage others to share how they self-identify if they are open to telling you, while understanding that it might not always be comfortable or safe for people to share this information (e.g., disclosing non-cisgender identities may be dangerous in places where these identities are discriminated against or even criminalized). When people share the terms they use, honor their identity and use the terms they suggest (whether they are racial terms like Black or African American or pronouns like they/them/their or she/her/hers). If you are unsure of what term to use, reconsider whether it's needed, and if it is, ask for guidance.

4

Update specific language practices that can reinforce stereotypes.

Acknowledge the use of modifiers and ask yourself if they are necessary or can be removed. Using additional modifiers such as “Black engineer” or “woman entrepreneur” can reveal a speaker’s assumption that it is not typical for engineers to be Black or entrepreneurs to be women. If race or gender modifiers are deemed necessary, use them for White people and men too.

Avoid using demographic categories as nouns (e.g., “the Mexicans” or “the Blacks”). Instead, use demographic categories as adjectives and be as accurate and precise as you can (E.g., “the Mexican participants in this project”, or “Black people in the US”). Using demographic categories as nouns, especially when paired with the definite article “the,” homogenizes the demographic group, suggesting that its members think and act in the same way, and can be used in harmful contexts to invoke stereotypes associated with the group in question. Using demographic categories as adjectives along with a word referencing the group’s humanity (e.g. “Mexican people,” “Black folks”) is more inclusive.

5

Be mindful of patterns in how you tell stories.

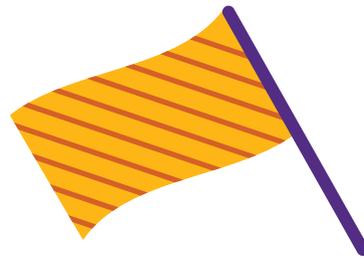
Consider replacing passive language with active language. Instead of using passive language that can obscure the entity / person responsible for an action (e.g. “Black employees were discriminated against”) use active language (e.g., “Leadership discriminated against Black employees”). Similarly, use active language to acknowledge contributions from team members (e.g. “Maria completed the report.” vs. “the report was completed”).

Use present tenses to describe ongoing actions and discrimination. For example, when talking about Indigenous groups (such as during land acknowledgments) be aware that Indigenous people continue to thrive and have not been erased. The sentence “Ohlone people lived in the Bay Area” may be true, but it is misleading because they *still* live in the Bay Area. Resist framing things from a deficit perspective that over-emphasizes loss and under-emphasizes resilience. Instead of focusing on loss of cultural practices, consider how much has been maintained despite efforts by settler-colonials to interrupt traditions.

6

Examine the expectations you have for how people should talk.

If someone is speaking a different language variety than you speak, are you actually having trouble understanding what they are saying? Are you interpreting someone as unprofessional or less articulate based on how they talk? Think about whether you hold colleagues from other social groups to the same standard. Question the assumptions that underlie those ideas — are they based on biases? Remember that no language or language variety is “better” than others linguistically. Do the work to recognize your own unconscious biases and how they come up in the ways people talk.



7

Recognize that communication is a two-way street and work on your own communications skills.

Approach linguistic differences with open-mindedness and a desire to understand the other person. Speakers of dominant language varieties — like “Standard” American English — can work on their communication skills rather than placing the sole burden on speakers of minoritized language varieties — like African American English. Listeners can learn to adapt their language when communicating with speakers of other language varieties.³⁰ Avoiding culturally-specific idioms and adjusting the cadence of speaking can help diverse listeners understand their message.³¹ They can also practice active listening (through tools like [this “Active Listening” exercise](#) by UC Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center).

Keep learning! It is a journey and an opportunity for growth.

Learn about the histories of the words and terms you use, and follow current language debates to stay up to date. Terminology changes with time as cultures change, as do expectations around writing mechanics. For example, while it was once uncommon to capitalize the term 'Black' in reference to a racial group, it is now commonplace to do so.

Some language terms and mechanics don't have clear answers (e.g., whether to capitalize "White"). Learn about these debates and consciously choose an approach. Mistakes are part of learning; remember to also be kind to yourself and focus on growing through mistakes.

See frequently asked questions about language — including some common debates and information to consciously choose an approach — in the [FAQ tab of our Terminology Guide](#). Stay updated on key DEI terms to use, ones to avoid, and a primer on pronouns through EGAL's Equity Fluent Leadership Glossary.

BOX 3.

Language is constantly changing. For example, Shakespeare and Chaucer used singular "they" in their writing. Later it became uncommon to do so. Recently, it is again becoming common practice, and many organizations have updated their guidelines to include the use of singular "they". Another way language often changes is through borrowing — taking words from other language varieties - particularly when new technologies (like karaoke and anime) are developed by people who speak a different language variety (Japanese).

When words are taken from marginalized groups by dominant groups, borrowing can become appropriation. Appropriation happens when a dominant group takes an element from a marginalized group and uses it to their own benefit while simultaneously devaluing members of the marginalized group that use the same element. For example, White people often adopt phrases that were coined by speakers of AAE — such as "what up" and "props" — in order to portray themselves as "cool." But when Black speakers use the same phrases, they are often judged as "uneducated" or "unprofessional".^{32 33 34}

Context matters. Whether or not a term is being borrowed or appropriated is context specific. Language is dynamic, so it can be difficult or impossible to determine if a term is appropriative without considering the context in which it's being used. In seeking to be more inclusive, the key is not to memorize a set of rules but to focus on impact: If you can say a term and benefit from it (e.g., come off as "cool") but someone else from the community where that term originated from uses the term and may be harmed from doing so (e.g., judged as "uneducated"), then use an alternate term.

Organizations

Institutionalize inclusion

1

As an organization get clear on your terminology approaches and share it with employees.

In this playbook, we made terminology choices. This includes capitalizing Black and White (except when referring to white supremacy), and not capitalizing brown. It also includes using “African American English” and using the term “Black people” instead of “African American”. These were conscious choices with our reasoning laid out in Appendix 3. You may also want to add particular terms for employees to know and be aligned on, as well as language guidelines (e.g., when to use “diverse”). Organizations can get clear on their own terminology choices and language approaches. It’s important to reflect on this annually as language evolves and you may want to add new terms. Remember that Equity Fluent Leadership is a journey!

This terminology can be shared with employees starting when they are onboarded. You may also incorporate [this worksheet](#) into onboarding training around language.

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2

Recognize that communication is a two-way street and provide training for all employees on communications skills.

Both speakers and listeners can work to improve communication. Encourage speakers of dominant language varieties - like “Standard” American English — to work on their communication skills rather than placing the sole burden on speakers of minoritized language varieties — like African American English. Instead of only encouraging speakers to change their accents, also encourage listeners to improve their familiarity with different accents and language varieties.

- Training should emphasize approaching linguistic differences with open-mindedness and a desire to understand the other person.
- Training for employees can focus on active listening (through tools like [this exercise](#) by UC Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center) and communicative styles. Understanding a diversity of communicative styles can help individuals notice the different signals that people may use, for example, to indicate that they are ready to talk or are feeling uncomfortable. These might include making or breaking eye contact, using gestures or facial expressions, or speaking up directly.

3

Develop policies that promote linguistic diversity, like explicitly encouraging multilingualism in the workplace and avoiding an “English-only” mentality.

Even where communication in English is required, remember that accents don't necessarily affect communication in a negative way.³⁵ Be open to working with speakers from a variety of different language backgrounds — this can ease hiring by opening up the candidate pool and can facilitate communication with clients sharing similar language backgrounds with multilingual employees.³⁶ Legally in the US, employees have the right to speak languages other than English in most work situations.³⁷



4

Share guidance and implement workplace training for employees on language to advance racial equity and inclusion.

Use and share our [Guide for having difficult discussions about race & identity](#). Sometimes difficult discussions about race also come up when developing products at organizations. In those cases, use our [Guide for having difficult discussions about race during product development](#).

Training can include how to have difficult conversations about race. These trainings can encourage employees to build humility and recognize that building their “equity fluent” skills is a journey.

For organizations developing products that use artificial intelligence (e.g., chatbots, automated hiring tools, etc.), use our case study to practice identifying issues related to language and how to move past them as a team.

[Case Study: Racial bias in an AI finance tool](#)

5

Identify and adjust places in hiring, evaluation, and promotion where preference for “Standard” American English is used.

Adapt these preferences to recognize that it is not just the speaker’s job to make themselves understood, but also the responsibility of the listener to hear the speaker fairly. Consider placing checks in these systems to remind people of ways that bias can manifest. For example, if performance reviews suggest that African American English is inappropriate in the workplace, or if feedback contains an overuse of gendered words, be sure to explain to those involved why that is problematic. You can point people to this document to learn more about alternative ways of thinking and talking about language.

6

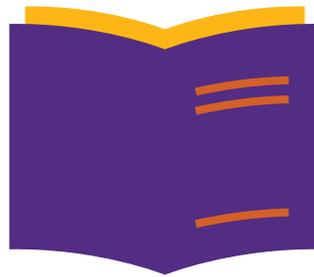
When using AI systems for HR, analyze how the AI tool might exclude or penalize, Black people and other marginalized identities.

These AI systems often learn from and use human language.

For more strategies to advance equity and inclusion in AI systems that learn from and use human language, see our [Responsible Language in AI & ML Guide](#).

Additional Leadership Opportunities

- ★ Explore tools to help employees critically reflect on language they use and suggest alternatives for problematic language (E.g., [Allybot](#), the inclusive language addon for Slack). These tools can be expanded to not just include words and phrases, but also learn from our [Terminology Guide](#) to flag problematic organization of words / phrases, as well as patterns of language.
- ★ Create incentive mechanisms to reward those that use equitable and inclusive language. Consider updating metrics in performance review processes and having people reflect on ways they are supporting an inclusive workplace, such as through learning about and advancing inclusive language practices. This can help drive accountability across all levels of the organization.



Call to Action

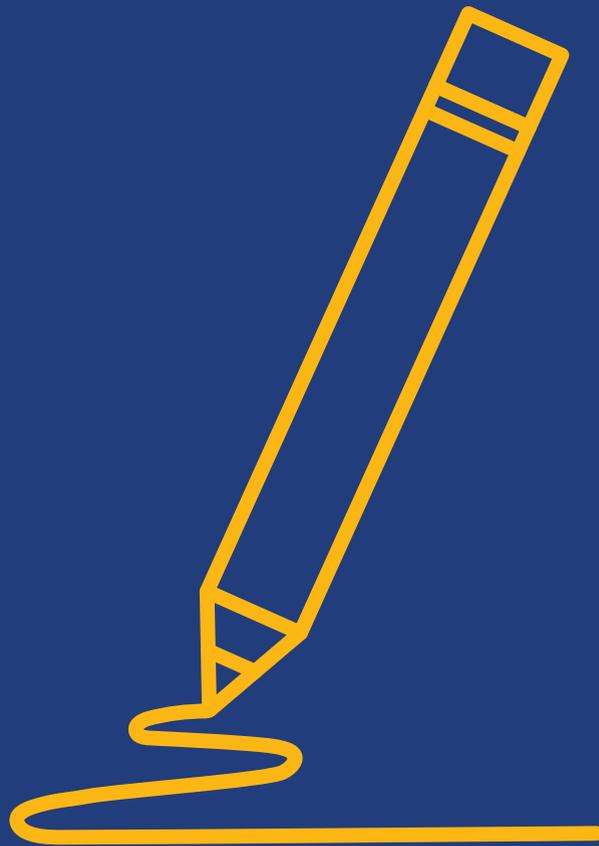
Advancing racial equity and inclusion through language is critical to enabling a more equitable workplace and a more just society. And, it is not sufficient.

Language and reality are mutually reinforcing. We must learn about and recognize the ways that racism and anti-blackness manifest around us. It is not enough to work on our language and say the right thing — we must also put in the work to walk the talk. This includes reflecting carefully on whose voices, languages, and values are being represented and heard. We must also work to eliminate the factors that make it so difficult for minoritized groups — and Black people in particular — to freely participate within society, including in our communities and organizations.

While some of the recommended good practices can be quickly and easily implemented (such as using a more inclusive term instead of a less inclusive term), others require more complicated systemic changes. Ultimately, creating a more inclusive environment will require a reimagining of business and restructuring of power that allows for more voices to be heard. This critical work requires time, effort, and — often — patience with ourselves and others. We are all on our “equity fluent leadership” journeys, reflecting, growing, and driving inclusive change. Together, we can create the changes necessary to promote racial equity and ultimately enable a more equitable business world and society.

Interested in going deeper to understand more about the intersections of language, power, race, and anti-Black racism? Or in understanding more about challenges and opportunities to advance language for racial equity and inclusion? See our [Deeper Dive](#).

Appendix & Endnotes



Appendix 1: Methodology

This Playbook and the Deeper Dive addendum are informed by a systematic literature review that sought to 1) understand the linkages between language and power, 2) explore the construction of race, anti-Black racism, and the connections to language, 3) interrogate the linkages between ML and NLP in relation to inequality within business contexts, and 4) identify equitable and inclusive language related to race and ethnicity. We searched academic journals (language / linguistics, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, ethnic studies) to inform these subjects. Beyond academic sources, we relied on other sources of literature including blogs, articles, reports, recordings, etc., and identified sources incorporating perspectives of Black community leaders related to language. We focused on the West, particularly the United States, in regards to anti-Black racism and the role of language. The literature review included parts of Europe and the Americas to highlight how anti-blackness is present in and impacts other regions. Future research can do a deeper dive to highlight regional histories, trends and manifestations of anti-Black racism alongside country case studies, as well as specific ways to advance language for equity and inclusion in these contexts. Finally, the search for sources was confined to the past 30 years (1990-2020), with the exception of seminal texts.

Appendix 2: Acknowledgments

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Appendix 3: Our Terminology

There are not always clear cut “right” and “wrong” answers to what words, phrases, or mechanics to use. In writing this brief, we made several conscious choices about terminology.

- **Capitalizing Black and White:** We capitalize “Black” when referencing Black people because it shows that race is not a natural category, but a socially constructed one.³⁸ Capitalizing Black also allows Black people to reclaim power in society,³⁹ and acknowledges that Black people have a shared culture and history. We chose to

capitalize “White” when referring to White people as a racial group to make explicit that White people are not “raceless” or the neutral race. White people as a collective are a powerful racial group, and the economic, social, cultural, and political power they wield in society and its implications must be accounted for. While we are capitalizing Black and White when referencing racial groups, we will be lowercasing the terms “white supremacy” to not give credence to this ideology.

- **Not capitalizing brown:** While we are capitalizing Black and White when referencing racial groups, we will not be capitalizing “brown” as it does not reference a cohesive racial group with a common experience.
- **“Standard” American English and African American English:** We chose to label the variety of English that is commonly promoted in places like business, media, and education as “Standard” American English. “Standard” American English is based on the language used by those in power and is not objectively better than any other language variety. For this reason we put “Standard” in quotes. This variety is also referred to as *White dominant language*. We use the term African American English to refer to the language varieties used by Black descendants of enslaved people in the US. Black Americans speak a diversity of language varieties, but these varieties do share some traits, including how they are often unjustly treated by those in power. We use *African American English* rather than *Black English* or *Black language* to highlight our focus on varieties spoken by the descendants of enslaved people rather than varieties spoken by more recent Black immigrants to the US.
- **Language variety:** Instead of referring to languages, dialects, and accents separately we refer to “language variety”. All languages, dialects, and accents are equally capable of expressing complex thoughts, and none is inherently better than another. We use “language variety” as a way to highlight the equality of all human languages — both spoken and signed.
- **Black people:** We chose to use this term instead of African American because not all Black people, including those who live in the United States, are citizens. By using Black people, we emphasize the diversity of the Black population, while recognizing that systemic racism shapes the life chances of people designated as Black. In cases where we reference research that used “African American”, we kept that terminology.

Appendix 4: Glossary of key terms

African American: African American is a term generally applied to people who are descendants of enslaved people. African refers to the ancestral origins of members of this group, while American refers to their citizenship in the country.

African American English: The language varieties used by many Black Americans, though others may use terms including “African American Language,” “Black English,” “African American Vernacular English,” or “Ebonics.”⁴⁰ This variety of English is not more or less correct, expressive, or appropriate than any other variety. It has been systematically devalued as a result of racism and white supremacy, despite the empirical fact that it is linguistically equal to other language varieties including “Standard” American English.

Black American: Black American refers to American citizens who are racially categorized as Black, but who are the descendants of immigrants who were not enslaved.

Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC): BIPOC is a variation on the umbrella term “people of color (POC)”, which refers to anyone who isn’t White. BIPOC specifically refers to Black and Indigenous groups to acknowledge that not all people of color face the same injustices — Black and Indigenous people are severely impacted by systemic racial injustices.

Black language: The diversity of language varieties that Black people speak globally. Black languages include African languages, pidgins and creoles, and other language varieties.

Black people: Black people refers to those who are racially categorized as Black, regardless of their citizenship status and their family’s particular migration history. This term highlights that people racially categorized as Black have a common experience, while also acknowledging the heterogeneity of the Black population.

Language: Language is a code used for communication. It includes spoken and signed languages, which are equal in their complexity and ability to communicate meaning. Both spoken and signed languages have grammatical structure and patterns that are fully formed and capable of expressing complex meaning.⁴¹ Spoken and signed languages are learned naturally by children through exposure to language in their environments. All languages also show variation based on a variety of factors including context, age, race, gender, and region of origin. Languages are different from more fixed codes, such as computer languages or Morse code, in that meanings are not entirely predetermined; instead, people can use language to express themselves creatively and ambiguously.

Language variety: Language variety is a cover term used to describe all languages, dialects, and accents. Because the distinction between a language and a dialect or accent is arbitrary (see box 2), we use “language variety” as a neutral term to describe any linguistic system.

Person/people of color (POC): POC is an umbrella term used to collectively refer to multiple racial groups — it includes anyone who isn’t White.

Racism: A belief system in which one group believes itself to be superior to other groups, and uses this as justification to dominate others.

Racism (anti-Black): A belief system in which one group (White people) understands itself to be superior to other groups (Black people). Anti-Black racism includes the belief that Black people and Black communities are a threat to society. Also called anti-blackness.

Settler-colonials: Individuals (usually of European descent) who have dispossessed Indigenous peoples through permanent settlement on Indigenous lands. Settler-colonialism is a system of oppression through which Indigenous peoples are systematically repressed through mechanisms including land theft, forced assimilation, and prohibition of cultural and linguistic practices.

“Standard” American English: A variety of English that is often used in media, politics, and education in the United States. It is based largely on the English used by middle-class White men. This variety of English is not more or less correct, expressive, or appropriate than any other variety; however, it has been accorded special status because of its association with people in power (who have historically tended to be White men).

white supremacy: the “ideology and social / political / economic / other structures that create and support a racial hierarchy where whites are superior to nonwhites.”⁴²

Endnotes

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