

Advancing Language for Racial Equity and Inclusion

An Equity Fluent
Leadership Playbook

Deeper Dive



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.

The playbook, including this Deeper Dive addendum, was authored by Genevieve Smith, Alicia Sheares, Ishita Rustagi, and Julia Nee with support from Kellie McElhaney. It benefited from feedback and review by various individuals including Sachin Bhattiprolu (Berkeley Haas) and other leaders and practitioners across industry. Several of the resources / tools benefited from invaluable feedback of folks including Anna Gasparyan (Berkeley Haas), Antoni Lewa (Berkeley Haas), Chris Domina (IDEO), Cindy Tang (Berkeley Haas), Clemi Collett (University of Oxford), Gasper Begus (UC Berkeley), Jennifer Wells (Berkeley Haas EGAL), Marco Lindsey (Berkeley Haas), Ornella Tchoumie (UC Berkeley), Ruby Gao (Berkeley Haas), Seren Pendleton-Knoll (Center for Responsible Business at UC Berkeley), and Wendy Ake (Othering and Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley).

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.

Contents

Introduction	1
Background	2
A. Language & Power	3
B. Race & Anti-Blackness	7
Advancing Language for Racial Equity & Inclusion	13
A. General Challenges & Strategies	14
Call to Action	23



Introduction

This “Deeper Dive” addendum to our [“Advancing Language for Racial Equity & Inclusion: An Equity Fluent Leadership Playbook”](#) provides an overview of anti-Black racism, particularly as it relates to language. We provide a background on language and power, as well as racism and anti-blackness, with a focus on the United States (US). We focus on the US given its history of anti-Black racism and pervasive issues today, while also delving into the European origins of racism and slavery. Anti-Black racism is not a unique American phenomenon and we provide examples of its manifestation in other countries. We then illustrate ways that racism and anti-blackness are embedded in and perpetuated through language, as well as ways to advance equity and inclusion through language. We end with strategies and tools to advance language that promotes racial equity and inclusion.

We focus on race, but include an intersectional lens and highlight how these language practices also apply to identities such as gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity and indigeneity.

This “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. It is particularly relevant for current or future CDOs and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) professionals. For top-line information, see the “To the point” playbook on the [playbook site](#).

Background



A. Language & power

Language can be a bridge across differences or a tool that is misused to create and maintain divisions. There are important linkages between language, racism, and anti-blackness.

To understand these linkages, it's necessary to understand that language is powerful. Knowing a particular language variety or way of speaking can give one power.¹ It allows people to access resources — cultural, economic and political. For example, a speaker of “Standard” American English might have more access to opportunities to advance and grow their network.² At the same time, speakers of African American English (see Box 3) may be excluded from those privileges. Language is also powerful because it impacts how people think. For example, repeating words can create and/or reinforce harmful stereotypes. Lastly, how we understand



the world and communicate informs the actions we take.³ We may use language to persuade people to do or believe things, or to form social connections and networks.⁴

BOX 1. PRIMER ON LANGUAGE - PART A. WHAT IS 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. There are over 7,000 languages used throughout the world,⁵ including over 300 signed languages.⁶ Both spoken and signed languages:

- Have grammatical structure and patterns that are fully formed and capable of expressing complex meaning.⁷
- Show variation. People with differences in race, age, gender, socioeconomic status, and/or geography may speak or sign differently. Variation can also depend on the situation (such as whether the conversation is personal or business-related).⁸
- Are learned naturally and spontaneously by children. Children pick up the meanings of words and the grammatical patterns used to put them together.
- Can inform written language. Unlike spoken language, written language isn't learned automatically by children; it must be taught. Written language is derived from spoken/signed languages.

Human languages aren't fixed: new statements can be made and understood by others. This sets natural human language apart from morse code (where each symbol has a fixed meaning) and programming languages that don't allow for ambiguity.

Myth: Languages and dialects are two clear, distinct things.

Truth: What is considered a dialect or language is more political than linguistic.

Every language has different varieties. If speakers of two language varieties can understand one another, those two varieties are often considered to be dialects; if they can't understand one another, they might be called languages. This isn't always the case. For example, many varieties of Chinese cannot be understood by all speakers of other varieties of Chinese. But China is one nation, so leaders prefer to refer to these varieties as dialects rather than languages to emphasize similarities over differences. On the other hand, Serbo-Croatian was considered an official language of Yugoslavia. But when Yugoslavia broke up into seven states, Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian were recognized as independent languages of their respective nations, even though speakers of all three can understand one another.⁹ This emphasizes a separation and difference.

Myth: Only some people have accents.

Truth: Everyone has an accent. When differences between language varieties are mainly in the way words are pronounced, that is often called an accent. But people often forget or ignore that even the "standard" variety of a language is still an accent.

Myth: Labelling a language variety a dialect or accent is harmless.

Truth: Referring to a language variety as a dialect or labelling certain pronunciations as accents can have derogatory connotations. For example, "Standard" American English is often assumed to be the default when talking about English. African American English is frequently labelled as a dialect. This erroneously suggests that African American English is "non-standard" or lesser. Linguistically, both are two equally valid varieties of English. Calling one a dialect but not the other is not linguistically accurate. The term dialect has also been used in the process of colonization to label and devalue Indigenous languages.¹⁰

Myth: Varieties of English that differ from "Standard" English are forms of English with "mistakes".¹¹

Truth: There is no "right" or "wrong" variety of English from a linguistic perspective. Grammars — patterns of language use that speakers follow — differ across varieties of English. For example, double negatives are used in some varieties of English, such as African American English, as in "He didn't see nothing" or the working-class British accent of Pink Floyd's lyric, "We don't need no education."¹² 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,¹³ it is seen as perfectly logical.

Myth: Requiring use of a particular language variety in the workplace sets everyone on a level playing field.

Truth: Choosing to use a "standard" language variety privileges those who speak that variety. If we hold one variety above others, it allows for inequity, as individuals who grew up with the "standard" language at home will face fewer

language barriers than those who did not. Allowing for a multiplicity of language varieties can be a difficult policy to implement, but we invite leaders to think about how an emphasis on reciprocal communication — in which each team member does their best to both speak effectively and to listen actively — can allow for greater linguistic diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Key things to understand about language

Language and reality are mutually reinforcing. Language serves as a tool to describe what we see around us. It can also influence how we feel or think. If we use language which has discriminatory categories or descriptions, we may be encouraged to think of the world in those discriminatory terms. Fortunately, we can also use language to drive a more equitable social reality.¹⁴ Take the term “illegal alien” versus “undocumented immigrant”. The first brands a person as “illegal” (a word often used to describe an action), while implying the individual is not a person, but something else — an “alien”. This problematic term reflects unjust and harmful views towards immigrants, while also dehumanizing them.¹⁵ Using harmful terms repeatedly can normalize them and hide how they negatively impact our reality. To create a more equitable society, addressing language is important — but not sufficient. We must also address injustice in society. Otherwise, new terms or words will pop up that reflect those injustices and continue the cycle of language and reality reinforcing each other.

*Those with power inform what words, phrases, and patterns are primarily used and seen as legitimate.*¹⁶ When words, phrases and patterns are used by institutions — such as law, media, politics, etc. — they are legitimized, even if they are harmful. For example, “Illegal alien” has been used in the law, and former President Trump used it five times in the 2020 State of the Union address.¹⁷ These contexts legitimize and reinforce the term. At the same time, movements to remove it from the law are growing.¹⁸

Language is a gatekeeper. People in power can deem some ways of speaking as “appropriate” and others as “inappropriate”. Individuals who have greater access to “appropriate” ways of communicating are given more advantages and opportunities. Defining what language variety is appropriate for a certain situation is not neutral.¹⁹ For example, “Standard” English is often used as a baseline in the professional world. This privileges speakers from White, middle-class backgrounds who grew up learning and speaking “Standard” English in school and at home. English is not the only example. German, French, Mandarin, and other languages have “standard” varieties that afford similar privileges to those who speak them.

Language standardization can reproduce inequality. Advocates of standard language policies explain that access to the particular language (such as “Standard” American English in the US) allows for greater social mobility. But data suggests otherwise. Language standardization feeds into a narrative of progress that is covertly racist.²⁰ Progress towards language standardization results in the marginalization and erasure of people who speak non-dominant language varieties. The power and prestige given to different language varieties is not inherent. Rather, humans assign one variety as the “standard” and give it more prestige. In this way, language — like race — is a social construct and can be used as a tool to reproduce inequality.²¹

BOX 3. AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

There are similarities between the varieties of English used by Black English speakers throughout the US. We use African American English to describe 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."²² African American English includes a number of features shared with Southern Englishes, as well as some features that likely trace back to languages of West Africa and to varieties of English that were spoken by indentured servants and other settlers during colonization.²³ Just as with speakers of any other language variety, there is not one homogeneous "African American English" but rather a set of language varieties that may differ from region to region and speaker to speaker.

In other parts of the world, Black people speak a diversity of language varieties which can be called Black languages. Black languages include African languages, pidgins and creoles, and other language varieties.²⁴

When we use language, we communicate more than just the literal meaning of our words. In listening to others, we often quickly and unconsciously infer things like the speaker's

gender, race, socioeconomic status, and region of origin. A common way this happens is through indexicality (see box 4).

BOX 4. UNDERSTANDING INDEXICALITY

*Indexicality*²⁵ arises when two things are repeatedly used in relation to one another. Through this association one comes to indicate the other. For example, through repeated exposure to the co-occurrence of smoke and fire, smoke becomes an index that suggests the presence of fire. Similarly, features of language can become indexes that suggest information about the speaker. For example, particular words ("hella") can index the place where the speaker is from ("the Bay Area"). Indexes can indicate various social identities, like race, gender, socioeconomic status, and region. Use of African American English, for example, indexes blackness. Certain words may be used more often by one social group or another, and may come to index that group.

Understanding indexicality helps us understand how language can be used as a proxy for protected social categories like race. Indexes can subtly indicate race without stating it explicitly, allowing for prejudice and bias (conscious and unconscious) to remain unchecked. For example, penalizing African American English, which indexes race, has not been seen as a form of illegal discrimination by many courts, allowing companies to in effect discriminate on the basis of race through language.²⁶

B. Race & anti-blackness

The linkage between race and slavery

Race is a social construct — something created and defined by humans. Differences related to language, ethnicity, and nationality have always existed. However, race emerged as a socially significant category independent of other factors during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade (1502-1853) as a way to designate “White” people as superior and justify slavery.²⁷ The Trans-Atlantic slave trade involved the transportation of enslaved African people by European settler-colonials to serve as cheap sources of labor. In this period, an estimated 12.5 million Africans were forcibly moved from Africa to the Caribbean, the United States, and the Americas.²⁸

Slavery itself was common throughout world history, but the Trans-Atlantic slave trade introduced new components. Prior to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, people often became enslaved when they were captured at war, needed to pay off a debt, or punished after committing a crime.²⁹ The Trans-Atlantic slave trade marked the first time slavery was dependent on racial classification. Africans became enslaved for the entirety of their lives. For a majority of enslaved Africans, there were few (if any) routes to earn their freedom. Also, one’s status as an enslaved person became hereditary. Even after the elimination of the global slave trade, millions of children were born into slavery, allowing the domestic slave trade to proliferate.³⁰

European settler-colonials created racial categories on the basis of ancestry. Western Europeans designated themselves as “White” and believed they were superior to people of other races. People of African ancestry were categorized as “Black” and defined as inferior to Whites.³¹ Racial groups became defined vis-a-vis one another. Individuals defined as



White were systematically placed in a superior position to people designated as Black. Within these racial categories, certain groups were defined as “less desirable Whites” such as Polish and Irish people. In the US, this also included Jewish people and Italians. There is some debate that these groups were once considered non-White and became White over successive generations. Yet, what remains indisputable is that those who were legally defined as White and included within the White racial category had greater access to rights and economic, social, and political resources, over those categorized as non-White.

The biological and cultural arguments used to rationalize white supremacy

White Europeans relied on biological and cultural arguments to say that Black people were inferior to White people, and to rationalize white supremacy.³²

Biological arguments were informed by prominent eugenicist scholars who used “scientific evidence” to support claims that Black people were biologically inferior to White people, who were deemed more evolved and intelligent humans. This “scientific evidence” included, for example: Black people having smaller skull and brain sizes, being related to monkeys, and having large black lice.³³ European scientists were also fixated on Black people’s genitalia, wrongly assuming that Black women had distinct and enlarged sexual organs relative to White women. This assumption was then used to support claims that Black women had “freak” and savage bodies meant to be mocked and gawked at.³⁴

These “scientific”, biological arguments are now known as “scientific” racism. “Scientific” racism operates under the false and dangerous assumptions that Black people are inherently lesser biologically and biology is fixed so that there is nothing Black people could do to advance. Over the course of history, “scientific” racism has inspired violence and exploitation of Black people and other groups deemed racially inferior.

“Scientific” racism theories have been debunked as junk or pseudo science. These theories use genetics to erroneously explain racial differences, failing to recognize that race is a social construct. They ignore that humans share 99.9% of their DNA, and that differences in skin color and hair texture are only a tiny portion of the human genome.³⁵ There are much greater differences within populations than

between populations or races³⁶ and individual genetic traits “are inherited independently”, not as a group.³⁷ This junk science also ignores how structural and historical racism impacts people over time (e.g., Black Americans do suffer more from asthma than White Americans, but this is due to structural racism leading to disparities in healthcare and heightened environmental exposures like air pollution and poor home quality³⁸).

Unfortunately, “scientific” racism is not as much a relic of the past as people may think. “Scientific” arguments have been used in crimes against humanity, such as in the rise of Hitler and the killing of 12 million Jewish, disabled, and LGBTQ people. Dylann Roof used a similar ideology when he killed nine Black churchgoers in 2015³⁹. Dylann believed Black people had lower IQs, lacked impulse control, and had higher levels of testosterone than White people, which he argued made Black people predisposed to violent behavior. “Scientific” racism is openly embraced by white supremacists, who associate their racial identity with racial purity and claim “whiteness” as superior.⁴⁰ “Scientific” racism is also seen in mainstream organizations and institutions. For example, it wasn’t until mid-2021 that the US National Football League (NFL), pledged to stop the use of “race-norming”, which erroneously assumes Black patients start with worse cognitive function than White patients and made it harder for Black players to qualify for payouts related to concussions and brain injuries.⁴¹

Like “scientific” racism arguments, cultural racism arguments also hinge on the false belief that some racial or ethnic groups are inferior to White people. However, cultural arguments assume that groups designated as racially inferior could advance and become “civilized” over time, particularly by assimilating into the dominant White culture. During colonization, Europeans set up their own schools and religious institutions as a way for the colonized to adopt European language and culture.⁴² Indigenous children were forcibly taken from their homes and sent to boarding schools where they were

prohibited from speaking their languages and performing cultural practices. The hope was to have them abandon their traditions, with the overt goal to “Kill the Indian and save the Man.”⁴³ US officials ultimately sought to eliminate Indigenous populations so that their land could be seized and redistributed to White settlers.⁴⁴

Even today, there remains a sense that assimilating into the dominant White culture equals “progress” (particularly for immigrants and Indigenous people). But this notion is cultural racism in disguise. As assimilation can help people integrate into White, middle-class American society, it makes Whiteness something to aspire to.⁴⁵ It comes at a heavy cost: losing aspects of one’s identity including cultural traditions, languages, culinary practices, and more.

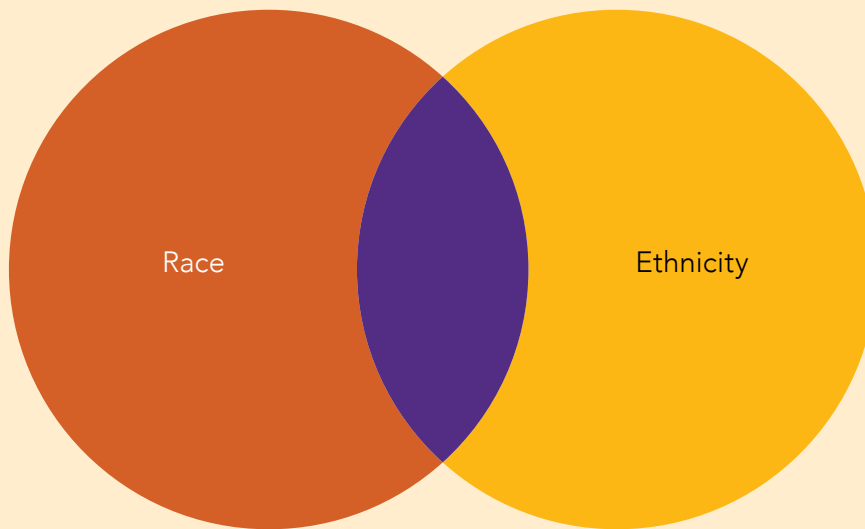
Cultural racism arguments are not unique to North America. In the early 20th century, political leaders in Brazil, were concerned that the sizable Black population meant that Brazil would be viewed globally as a backwards and inferior country. Leaders rationalized that by lightening the population, Brazil would be seen as a civilized nation. To achieve this, Brazilian leaders aggressively encouraged European immigration. They hoped these immigrants would intermix with Black and Indigenous populations

so that over time, the Black population would become White.⁴⁶

Race has been given social significance — even though it has no inherent meaning, is not based on biology or culture, and there are no distinct measurable differences between people of different racial categories. This is not to say that physical differences between people don’t exist. Rather, the categories we use to identify physical differences do not map neatly onto racial categories. For example: skin color is often used to sort people into different racial categories. However, skin color as a proxy for race becomes more complicated when we consider that some people, like Steph Curry, have “light” skin and are racially categorized as Black. However, others might have “dark” skin but not have access to membership in the Black racial category, as is the case with Mindy Kaling. It’s important to recognize that while phenotypical differences are associated with race, they do not solely determine one’s race. Furthermore, one’s racial classification can vary throughout their life and across geographies. However, whether or not someone is racialized, or perceived as Black, has tangible consequences for their life outcomes, including their ability to access resources, find and maintain employment, access education, buy a home, generate wealth, and maintain upward mobility over successive generations.



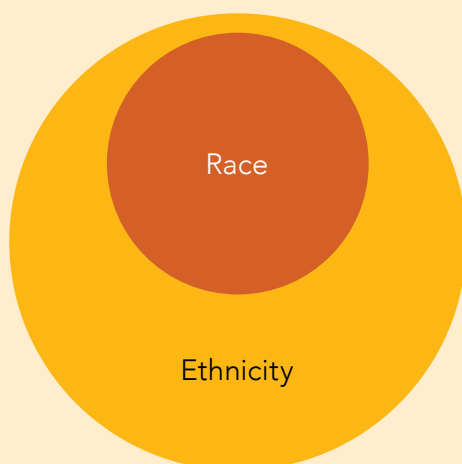
BOX 4. RACE VS. ETHNICITY



Race and ethnicity are often thought to be distinct yet overlapping terms. There are key differences:

- Racial classification (or assigning a person to membership in a racial group) is often imposed, while ethnic categorization often emerges from the group itself.
- Race is frequently associated with power, such as when an advantaged group subordinates another group to reinforce their privileged status. On the other hand, ethnicity is associated with common origin, ancestry or heritage.⁴⁷

Race and ethnicity share some similarities, such as being based on physicality like facial features, skin color, and hair type. Some groups, such as Latinxs, can be considered both a race and ethnic group.⁴⁸



Others argue that race falls within ethnicity. According to this argument, ethnicity is about belonging to a group based on a shared culture and ancestry. Race is a form of differentiation, similar to language, religion, and nationality.⁴⁹ In this conceptualization, ethnicity is an umbrella term, and race, language, and religion are forms of ethnicity that fit under it.

For the purposes of this playbook, we conceptualize race as a socially constructed category that emerged during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Race is fundamentally about power differentials between racial groups that advantage some while marginalizing others.

What is racism?

Racism is a form of discrimination based on a group's belief that it is superior to other groups, which is used as justification to dominate others. There are three important components:

1. One racial group defines itself as superior to other racial groups;
2. The group that defines itself as superior has the power (or cultural, symbolic, economic, and political resources) to implement racist actions; and
3. These racist actions benefit the group designated as superior while simultaneously disadvantaging the group(s) designated as inferior.⁵⁰

Racism can occur at the individual, organizational, or structural level. At the individual level, racism takes the form of individually held beliefs that one group is biologically or culturally superior to another group.⁵¹ It can manifest in ways that are covert and implicit. Racism is not about intent or relationships. Someone can benefit from and participate in a racist system — or commit a racist action — even if they have not outwardly demonstrated racism in the past, even if they have relationships with people of color, and even unintentionally.

At the organizational level, racism can be perpetuated through policies and norms that on the surface appear race-neutral, but in effect disadvantage workers of color.⁵² Workplaces may institute professional policies that dictate what workers can wear or how they can style their hair (e.g., “kept” and “tidy” hair). While such policies don't explicitly mention race, they have a disproportionate impact on workers of color.⁵³

Organizational racism can also manifest itself through language. “Standard” or “academic” American English — based on the speech and writing of White, middle-class Americans — became institutionalized in the 1970s as a way to distinguish forms of language that should be used within the classroom.⁵⁴ Subsequently, White linguistic cultural norms were validated and privileged in relation to, and at the expense of, Black linguistic cultural norms. As a result, African American English speakers were policed, silenced, and corrected by teachers. Consequently, African American English speakers may internalize the anti-Black message that their linguistic practices are deficient and wrong.⁵⁵

At the structural level, racism is baked into the economic, social, and political foundation of the United States,⁵⁶ making it ubiquitous and inescapable. In the criminal justice system, Black communities are more likely to be surveilled than White communities,⁵⁷ and police officers are more likely to charge Black people with crimes than White people.⁵⁸ In homeownership, decades of redlining have prevented Black people from buying homes, particularly in higher socio-economic status neighborhoods.⁵⁹ These inequities carry through to the labor market. Hiring managers prioritize White sounding names⁶⁰ over Black sounding names and prefer White candidates with a criminal record compared to Black workers without one.⁶¹ Structural racism devalues Black people within society. This makes it difficult for them to access goods and services that could be used to generate wealth; send their kids to the school of their choice; find well paying, secure, and safe employment; and access other routes towards upward mobility.

BOX 5. WHAT IS ANTI-BLACK RACISM?

Anti-Black racism (or anti-blackness) is the belief that Black people and Black communities are a threat to society.⁶² As per this belief, the bodies of Black people are identified as brutish and dangerous.⁶³ As such, they must be subdued through social control. Throughout history, White people as a collective have used various strategies — from lynchings in slavery, to dictating where Black people could eat, live, and work

BOX 5. WHAT IS ANTI-BLACK RACISM? (CONTD.)

during Jim Crow — to control Black communities. And even though explicitly racist language has been removed from legislation, structural disparities still exist. Black communities are over-policed to facilitate social control.⁶⁴ The ideology that Black people are deviant, inferior, and dangerous continues to this day, which profoundly shapes Black people's life outcomes.

Anti-Black racism is not a uniquely American phenomena; it has global reach. In the early 20th century, Canada referred to immigrants as “Black Demons” and sought to limit Black immigration, or “Black Peril.”⁶⁵ In Brazil, leaders encouraged immigration so that the Black population would become White over time, as mentioned earlier. In addition, Black Brazilians have less income, wealth, educational attainment, and media representation than people designated as White. A Black racial identity in Brazil is often so stigmatized that even people with African ancestry reject membership into a Black racial category and embrace a brown or mixed racial identity instead.⁶⁶ Anti-Black racism and white supremacy are interconnected. Globally, whiteness is something to aspire to, while blackness is denigrated and something to be avoided.

Despite experiencing centuries of systemic racism and extreme hardship, Black people have always fought back and expressed agency. Enslaved people exhibited numerous instances of agency, such as working slower, not completing tasks, poisoning the food of those who enslaved them, running away, and even taking their own lives (particularly common during the Middle Passage).⁶⁷ In other cases, enslaved people, like Harriett Tubman, worked to free themselves and others through the Underground Railroad. Other individuals, like Nat Turner, organized large scale revolts and rebellions. Enslaved people also engaged in revolutionary acts of joy. Even though they could not get legally married, they organized their own weddings where they would jump over a broom to signify the legitimacy of their unions.⁶⁸ Enslaved Africans expressed their strong desire for freedom through memoirs, song, dance, and martial arts. Today, Black people frequently organize their communities, run for public office, and organize marches and protests to bring attention to the ways in which systemic racism continues to impact their lives. Stacey Abrams, Helen Butler, Nsé Ufot, Deborah Scott, and Tamieka Atkins — all Black women — have led efforts over the past decade to fight voter suppression

and register Black and brown Georgian voters.

The same resistance and resilience is shared by many Indigenous peoples. Despite sustained efforts to eliminate Indigenous peoples by settler-colonial groups in power, Indigenous groups continue to exist and thrive. It is important to resist dominant narratives of disappearance that describe Indigenous peoples, cultures, and practices, as being part of the past. That is, we should exercise caution in describing Indigenous groups who “lived” in an area or “practiced” certain traditions. Indigenous people continue to live and practice their traditions throughout the colonized world, and affect important changes such as contributing key votes in the 2020 presidential election.⁶⁹ In cases where a smaller number of Indigenous people are living in an area or engaging in a practice than before, we should use active language to describe how that change occurred; for example, “Settler-colonials forcefully relocated Indigenous people” rather than “Indigenous people were relocated.” Moreover, it is important to use language that resists over-emphasizing loss and under-representing resilience, as it can easily feed into a false narrative that Indigenous peoples are inevitably headed towards disappearance, when this is not the case.

Advancing Language for Racial Equity & Inclusion



This section delves into how racial bias and discrimination manifest in language, and ways to advance racial equity and inclusion through language.

A. General Challenges & Strategies

Bias and discrimination can manifest in various ways through language. This includes (1) the words and phrases we use, (2) how we organize and structure our sentences, (3) how we carry out conversations and patterns of language over time; and (4) who gets power by being given opportunities to speak and be heard (See Figure 1). We identify certain **challenges** these levels present and identify **strategies to advance equity and inclusion**.

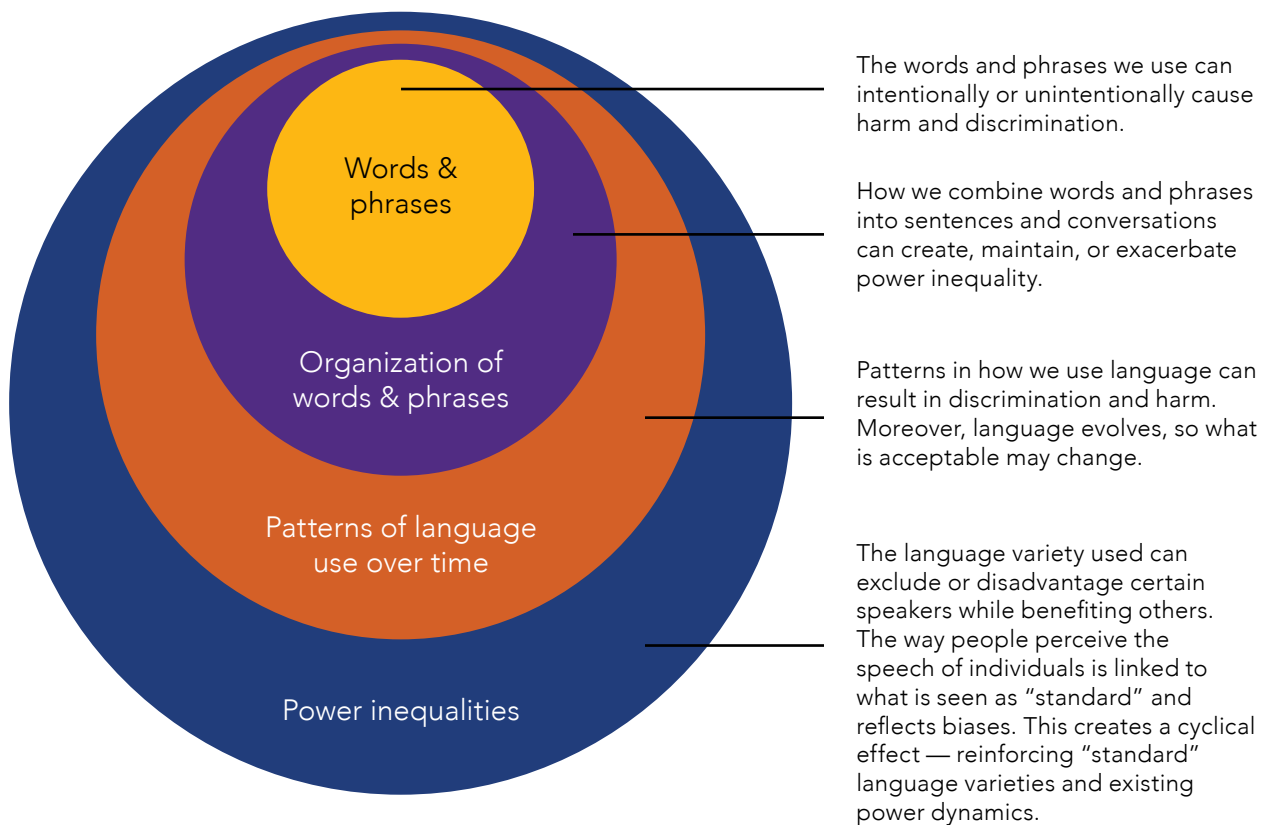
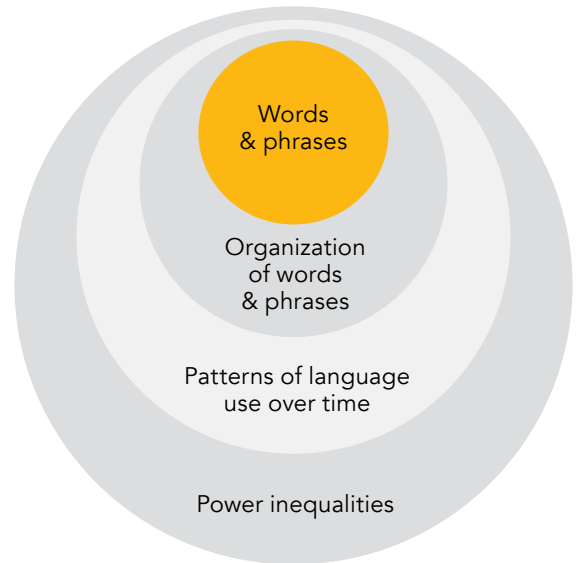


Figure 1. Four Levels of Bias in Language

Words & phrases: The words and phrases we use can intentionally or unintentionally cause harm and discrimination.



Challenge:

Certain words and phrases highlight problematic origins, histories, or connotations. These include terms like “master/slave” in programming and “hold down the fort”, which links to genocide of Native Americans in the US. While these terms may not all be used in purposefully derogatory or discriminatory ways today, they don’t exist in a vacuum. They evoke painful, offensive meanings for certain racial groups, negatively impacting their psychological well-being.⁷⁰

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

Learn about the history of the language you use and replace harmful language with more neutral language that conveys the same message. Reference [this tab of our Terminology Guide](#) for a list of words and phrases with harmful origins, histories, or connotations.

Challenge:

Metaphors which are applied to demographic groups can de-personalize individual members of those groups, or invoke comparisons with negative connotations. This is seen through metaphors that liken racial and ethnic groups to overtly negative phenomena like “dirt” or “vermin”.⁷¹ However, metaphors can perpetuate damaging comparisons through less overtly harmful comparisons as well. For instance: when immigration is compared to a “flood of immigrants,” or an “overcrowded boat,” the metaphors imply not just a “large mass” of people, but also “destructive, uncontrollable, unwanted, etc.”

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

Avoid using harmful metaphors — think critically about unintended comparisons that metaphors can invoke. If you are unsure about the full impact of a metaphor, a good practice is to avoid using indirect language entirely, and describe groups / situations accurately and directly.

Challenge:

People have words they identify themselves with, but this is not always acknowledged or respected. For instance: Black and African American do not have the same meaning,

and people may prefer to be called Black vs. African American.⁷²

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

Listen to how people describe themselves. Ask people what terms they use. This is best done privately, as it can potentially harm people. Do not share this information with others unless you have permission. Honor the self-identification of individuals and communities by using the words they use to identify themselves. Remember that no group is homogeneous or monolithic; just because you have learned one person's preference you shouldn't assume others' preferences are the same. If you are unable to learn how people describe themselves or ask for their terms, it is good practice to stay up-to-date and recognize what different terms mean, and then make a conscious decision to use the most precise term. Reference [this tab of our Terminology Guide](#) for more information on navigating common questions related to what terms to use.

Challenge:

Imprecise language can distort reality. A term like "non-White" privileges whiteness as the default and homogenizes the experiences of the people pushed into the category of "non-White". Similarly, using a category like "something else" rather than a specific identity label (as CNN did while reporting voters as "White", "Black", "Latino", "Asian", or "something else" in the 2020 election exit polls in Alaska) contributes to continued erasure of minoritized groups, particularly Native Americans.⁷³

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

Use more precise and accurate language that does not take whiteness as the default.⁷⁴ Rather than reducing a diversity of groups into a homogenizing category like "non-White," be precise in naming the group or groups you are talking about and respect people's self-identifications.⁷⁵

Challenge:

Relatedly, "minority" and "underrepresented minority" can be problematic because they imply that the state of being a numerical minority is natural or a given, and emphasizes a status of "less than" the majority. It can also obscure the years of oppression, discrimination and power dynamics that have resulted in low representation of a group. Specific racial groups are not inherently "minorities," but have been categorized in this way by people in power. Sometimes the terms are even used inaccurately to describe groups that are not a numerical minority.

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

Use "minoritized" instead of "minority" to acknowledge how oppression, discrimination and power dynamics have impacted a group. For example, "racially minoritized" — instead of "racial minority" — reflects that race is a social construct and racism is carried out through actions. "Marginalized" can be used to describe individuals or groups whose contributions are undervalued or ignored as a result of power inequities. Both of these terms (minoritized and marginalized) are more accurate than passive terms like "underrepresented." Reference [this tab of our Terminology Guide](#) to see these arguments and guidelines, along with other common questions explored.

Challenge:

Words can reinforce societal stereotypes, expectations and norms. For example, male-gendered nouns like “chairman” or “fireman” normalize the perception that these positions are naturally or usually held by men.⁷⁶ Even while using gender-neutral terms for different roles (such as “doctor” or “engineer”), bias can enter the conversation, as people may assume a particular identity based on the role. Using additional modifiers, such as “female programmer” or “Black engineer,” however, can reveal a speaker’s assumption that it is not typical for programmers to be women or engineers to be Black people.

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

For gendered terms, replace “man” with “person” or use alternative wording (i.e. chair/chairperson, firefighter). Acknowledge the use of modifiers and ask yourself if they are necessary or can be removed. Explore the use of technological tools that provide guidance around inclusive language and alternatives to gendered / otherwise harmful terms. For example, [Allybot](#) is a Slackbot that can flag a wide range of non-inclusive terms in Slack messages and provide alternatives. For organizations, tools like [Textio](#) can perform a similar function for hiring and branding content.

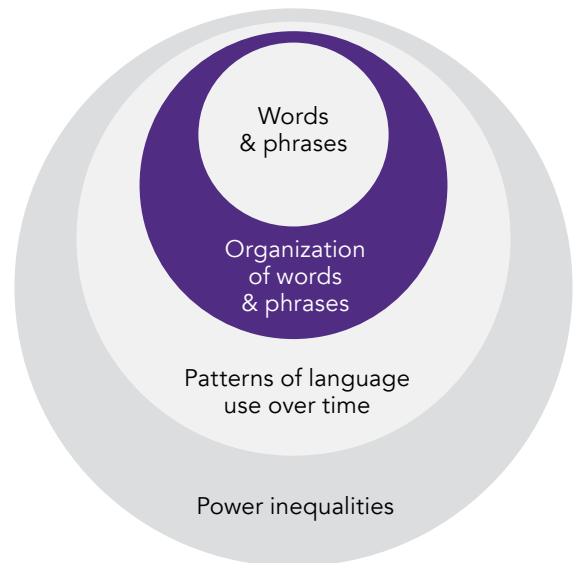
Challenge:

Sometimes language is used to covertly discriminate. While slurs (words used against someone of a certain race, gender, or other identity) are obviously problematic and harmful, others aren’t so obvious. “Dog whistles” are words, phrases, or symbols that may mean one thing to the general public, but something else to others. For example, “inner city” has been used to covertly talk about Black people without directly identifying anyone by race. Using a racial dog whistle like “inner city” allows people to express potentially harmful ideas while avoiding some of the negative repercussions that could come with directly attacking protected social categories. Using dog whistles allows for plausible deniability. When the use of a particular dog whistle becomes widespread, its covert meaning may become widely known. While this may make the term no longer useful for covert discrimination, it is unlikely to simply disappear. Instead, it is likely to be replaced by a new coded reference that serves the same purpose.⁷⁷

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

If you recognize a dog whistle being used, address it as soon as possible. Make it known that discriminatory words and actions are not appropriate. Of course, fully tackling this issue also requires addressing larger issues of prejudice and discrimination in society.

Organization of words & phrases: How we combine words and phrases into sentences and conversations can create, maintain, or exacerbate power inequality.



Challenge:

Passive language can obscure who is doing an action and put the focus instead on the person or thing who is affected by the action. When speaking about the enslavement of Africans, it is common for people to use passive voice (e.g., “Enslaved people were brought to the United States.”).⁷⁸ Language like this omits who brought enslaved people to the United States. It lets White settler-colonials and enslavers off the hook, while simultaneously obscuring the oppressive conditions enslaved people experienced. Passive language can also be used to subtly downplay contributions from team members. It is easier to recognize Juana’s contribution, for example, if it is phrased actively as, “Juana compiled the report ahead of the deadline” versus passively as “The report was compiled ahead of the deadline.”

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

Acknowledge who is responsible for an action by using active language rather than passive language.

Challenge:

Personification of institutions can transfer agency away from the person(s) responsible for an action. By assigning responsibility for actions to an institution(s), individuals may not be held accountable. For example, board members at Google were accused of failing to prevent sexual harassment at their company. The company was sued and ultimately agreed to pay \$310 million. In the media, this was reported as, “Google parent company Alphabet Inc. pledged \$310 million”⁷⁹ which erases the agency of the individuals in charge of the company and paints the payment in a positive light (“pledged”).

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

Don’t obscure or hide the action behind an institution. Be precise about who is responsible.

Challenge:

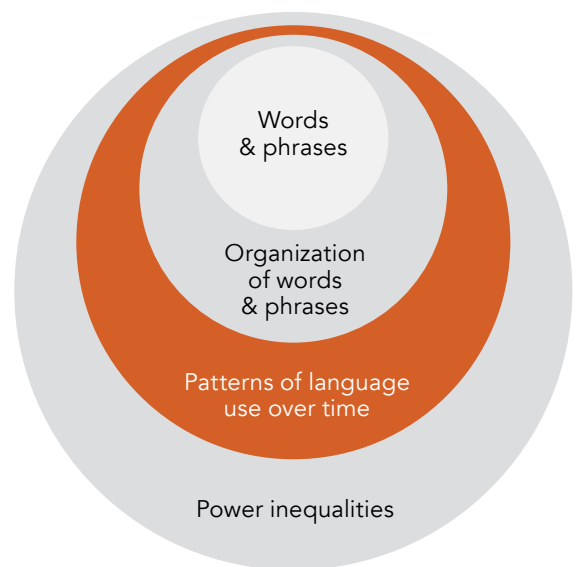
Definite phrases (i.e. phrases with “the” as in “the Mexicans” or “the Blacks”) can become associated with stereotypes about the group they describe and be used in purposefully

discriminatory ways. These nouns were originally adjectives (as in “Mexican citizens” or “Black Americans”). When used as a noun, they become homogenizing and may then become associated with stereotypes assigned to the group. Using nouns without the definite article (“the”) is slightly less homogenizing (e.g., “Mexicans”, “Blacks”), but may still be harmful, depending on the context.

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

Use categories as adjectives (i.e. Black people) and be as accurate and precise as you can. For example, instead of stating, “the Blacks responded...” or “Blacks responded...,” you can state the specific population involved, as in, “Black participants in the study responded...”

Patterns of language use over time: Patterns in how we use language can result in discrimination and harm. Moreover, language evolves, so what is acceptable may change.



Challenge:

Words or phrases used to describe certain groups over time can solidify stereotypes and perceptions about that group. For example, descriptions of Black women (often by White authors) found in written texts feature stereotypes of Black women as “angry.” While there is no empirical evidence supporting this stereotype,⁸⁰ it is erroneously reinforced in texts that are then used in natural language datasets. When natural language processing (NLP) tools learn from these datasets, they can produce outputs that reinforce or even exacerbate stereotypes. ([See more in our guide: Towards Responsible Language in AI & ML](#)).

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

Recognize unconscious biases that inform language used to talk about people or groups. Use language that is not harmful or advancing stereotypes.

Challenge:

Language is constantly in flux. Racial categories and labels attached to those categories have changed, particularly when we look at the experiences of Black people in the United States. Black people have been classified as Negro, Colored, African-American, and Black. Over time, some classifiers have been recognized as derogatory slurs. At the same time, Black people and other marginalized people have

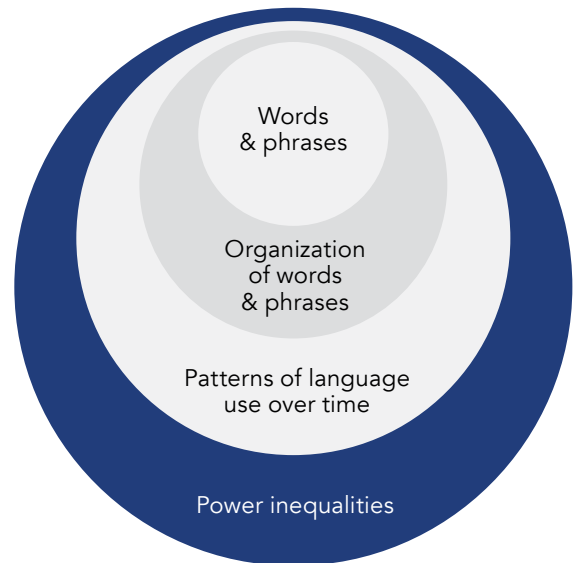
reclaimed slurs used against them, in a move to counter the violent, discriminatory connotations they originally had. What is seen as an appropriate moniker for racial groups evolves over time, and depends on the identity of the speakers using them.

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

Stay up-to-date and recognize what different terms mean. Reference [this tab of our Terminology Guide](#) for more information on navigating common questions related to what terms to use.

Power inequities:

The language variety used can exclude or disadvantage certain speakers while benefiting others. The way people perceive the speech of individuals is linked to what is seen as “standard” and reflects biases. This creates a cyclical effect – reinforcing “standard” language varieties and existing power dynamics.



Challenge:

The language variety used by those in power becomes associated with power. This can result in the perception that a certain language is inherently more powerful. There is no evidence that one language is better than another.⁸¹ Still, “Standard” English is often seen as the default language. In the US, “Standard” American English is associated with power. Those who do not speak “Standard” American English are often silenced, ignored, discriminated against, and perceived as less understandable, less articulate, or less intelligent.⁸² African American English is falsely seen as lesser than or unequal to “Standard” American English, resulting in discrimination against Black people who use African American English.⁸³

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

Develop policies that promote linguistic diversity and honor the fact that communication must flow both ways. Encourage speakers of dominant language varieties to work on their communication skills rather than placing the entire burden on speakers of minoritized language varieties, like African American English. Listening more actively to diverse ways of

speaking can also help build familiarity with those language varieties, which can in turn help with communication. After limited exposure to several different voices of English learners, for example, listeners showed improvements in their ability to understand individuals with accents that were different from their own, thus improving communication overall.^{84 85}

Challenge:

Even if everyone speaks in the same variety of “Standard” American English, White people — particularly men — enjoy extra privilege. For example, when students listened to identical audio lecture recordings, their evaluation of how understandable the speaker was varied depending on whether the same recording was paired with an image of an Asian speaker (less understandable) or a White speaker (more understandable).⁸⁶ In another case, researchers showed that teachers can be biased in whether or not they think their students speak English “correctly” or “incorrectly” based on the students’ race. For example, a high school English teacher described her Black students “underperforming” in her class. But when she reported their “errors,” they are phrases that are part of “Standard” American English, like, “He was” and “She was.” Despite the fact that the students were using “Standard” American English, the teacher heard “errors” in her Black students’ speech where there were none.⁸⁷ Oftentimes, this type of racial discrimination happens unknowingly through linguistic profiling (see Box 7).

Race and other identities (such as gender) play a role in how people’s contributions in conversation are viewed by others, due to biases held by the listeners towards the speaker’s identity.⁸⁸ As illustrated in the example above with the teachers, implicit bias may lead listeners to consider a Black speaker’s language use as less proficient or less correct than linguistically identical speech from their White counterparts.⁸⁹ This also comes up related to gender and speaking time. In studies, women participate in group conversations between 20-30% of the time, but men perceive those women as talking “too much.”⁹⁰ In response to the Japan Olympic Committee Council discussing increasing the share of women members on sports organizations’ executive boards, Yoshiro Mori, head of the 2020 Olympics organizing committees, said the following in February 2021: “If we increase the number of female board members, we have to make sure their speaking time is restricted somewhat, they have difficulty finishing, which is annoying.”⁹¹

Qualitative studies have also shown that Black women face additional barriers to speaking and being heard in the workplace. For example, one theme that emerged among interviews with Black women in corporate leadership was that they were negatively affected by colleagues’ assumptions that Black men and Black women share a universal Black experience rather than unique experiences linked to race and gender. Black women reported that their perspectives were often ignored.⁹² More intersectional research is needed on how, for example, Black women, Black transgender women and non-binary Black people are treated in workplace conversations.

The pervasiveness of these biases calls into question how processes involving written or spoken communication — like employee evaluations — are carried out. This is especially true when evaluations rely on individuals’ impressions of their colleagues’ work — including their communication skills — given that our perceptions of others’ language is often implicitly biased.

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

Recognize that we all have biases that impact how we hear others and perceive their communication skills. Making unconscious bias conscious is the first step towards working against it. Think critically about how you describe others' behaviors and look for patterns that may be related to social biases. Use tools like [this list](#) of masculine and feminine words to see if your writing is overly gendered. When thinking or writing about how effective someone is at communicating, consider whether your impressions might be linked to your own personal cultural preferences or biases against other communicative styles.

Policies and practices of the organization are critical as well. Organizations can examine where bias linked to communication can come into play from recruitment through the employee lifecycle and develop strategies to counteract that bias. Organizations should also build in accountability structures for leadership and managers.

BOX 7. WHAT IS LINGUISTIC PROFILING AND HOW DOES IT RESULT IN DISCRIMINATION?

Linguistic profiling occurs when judgments are made about individuals based on their speech.⁹³ It happens very rapidly and often unconsciously. One study showed that 70% of speakers (who were not visible) were racially identified after only saying the word "hello".⁹⁴ In another study, listeners were asked to determine the race of a speaker from a 16-second sound clip. Listeners drew on assumptions that White speakers are more likely to be "proper, clearer, or better enunciated" or to sound like a newscaster.⁹⁵

Linguistic profiling is a subtle but pervasive form of discrimination.⁹⁶ While race is a protected category and racial discrimination is illegal in the US, linguistic profiling in the workplace has been ruled to be legal in many cases.⁹⁷ Language can be used to legally discriminate in processes including hiring and promotion.⁹⁸ Linguistic profiling makes minoritized language speakers feel intense pressure to change their ways of speaking to be heard. This may include trying to shape their accent or pronunciation so that it more closely matches the standard or engaging in code-switching.⁹⁹ This pressure to conform creates greater employee stress and decreased morale.¹⁰⁰

Challenge:

While all speakers of the same language variety may be able to say the same thing, listeners may react differently if it is said by different people. For example, a White man who speaks up to share a dissenting perspective or suggestion during a meeting may be perceived in a positive light as being "assertive", while a Black woman who does the same may be negatively judged as "aggressive" or "bossy".

Language to advance equity and inclusion:

Think critically about the expectations you have for how people should talk. Question the assumptions that underlie those ideas — are they based on biases? For example, if you think that a Black colleague's comment is "aggressive", question whether you would feel the same way if the comment had been made by a White colleague.

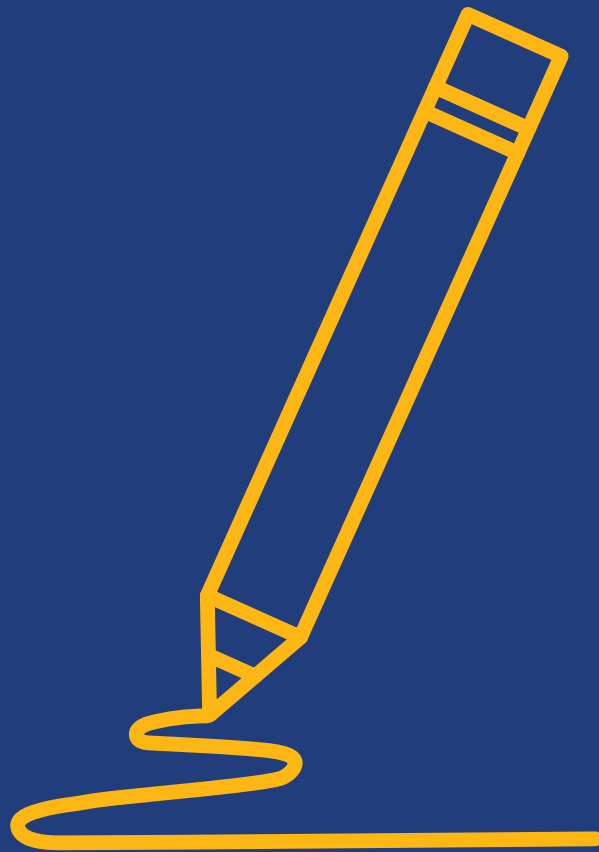
Call to Action

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. We must reflect 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 re-imagining 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.

Appendix & Endnotes



Appendix 1: Methodology

The Playbook and this 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: 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.¹⁰¹ Capitalizing Black also allows Black people to reclaim power in society,¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³ 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 Mainstream English.¹⁰⁴ 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 3: 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.”¹⁰⁵ 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)”,¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷ 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).^{108 109}

White supremacy: the “ideology and social/political/economic/other structures that create and support a racial hierarchy where whites are superior to nonwhites.”¹¹⁰

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