



Why Language Justice?

By Tomas German-Palacios

Language justice: “an evolving framework based on the notion of respecting every individual’s fundamental language rights—to be able to communicate, understand, and be understood in the language they prefer and in which they feel most articulate and powerful.”¹

What Does Language Justice Mean for Organizations?

Language justice is about building and sustaining multilingual spaces in our organizations so that everyone’s voice can be heard, both as an individual and as part of a diversity of communities and cultures.

Why Does Language Justice Matter?

Language justice offers a vision of society that honors language and culture as fundamental human rights, and which does not settle for providing more people with access to the status quo, but rather alters institutions to provide space for full democratic participation. When we ground our work in the values and practices of language justice, we bring our messages and work to more people, and we bring more people into our work. Language justice helps us build power by opening doors to new members, leaders, and forms of leadership. When we as organization members, community leaders, organizers, and allies can express ourselves in the language in which we feel most articulate and powerful, we can communicate with greater precision, and we can relate to one another in deeper, more equitable ways. When we make room for multiple languages and voices, we all benefit from a diversity of experiences, perspectives, and wisdom.

Background

Valuing language justice means recognizing the social and political dimensions of language and language access, while working to dismantle language barriers, having equitable power dynamics, and building strong communities for social and racial justice. Ultimately this creates strong, diverse and aligned communities in which change and challenges are overcome in a collaborative manner.

¹ Payton C, Lee J, Noguez Mercado AP, Uliasz A. Language justice during COVID-19 [Web log]. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/young_lawyers/projects/disaster-legal-services/language-justice-during-covid-19/. Accessed March 29, 2022.

Language justice is rooted in a history of resistance by communities and peoples whose voices and cultures have been suppressed for generations. Language justice is an alternative to that historical pattern of disenfranchisement and oppression. It affirms the fundamental rights of individuals and communities to language, culture, self expression, and equal participation.

Outreach

When we're working in multilingual communities it's important to invest in translating flyers, invitations, marketing materials, etc. Outreach can become in-reach, by sharing information and communicating with others in their primary language (the language of their hearts) we are showing respect.

Personnel Leadership Development

Translating internal organizational documents as well as organizing and policy materials and educational resources opens the door for a whole new level of participation for staff, volunteers or contractors whose first language is not English. Increased and enhanced participation allows for diverse people and perspectives to engage in decision making conversations, analysis and strategy discussions with a different level of power. Leadership is about empowerment of the person, the collective and the community. Working in multilingual settings requires translation as a tool for empowerment.