

SAY IT WITH RESPECT

A Journalists' Guide to Reporting on Indigenous & Minoritized Languages, Language Endangerment, and Language Revitalization



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Endangered
Languages
Project

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Background and Purpose

This guide is a resource for journalists writing on the topics of Indigenous and minoritized¹ languages, language endangerment, and language revitalization. This guide is written from the point of view of Indigenous Peoples and allies.

We appreciate the growing attention that the media is giving to these issues, which are often overlooked by the general public and policymakers. Unfortunately, these issues can be covered in ways that can harm the well-being, aspirations, and rights of Indigenous and minoritized peoples rather than supporting the work of language revitalization and self-determination. Whether by using fatalistic terminology, or perpetuating savior mentalities, well-intentioned journalists can contribute to ongoing, harmful narratives.

It is for this reason that the authors have compiled this simple guide for journalists interested in this topic. This guide incorporates the voices, knowledge, and experiences of Indigenous and minoritized language community members and scholars, as well as non-Indigenous linguists and scholars. We hope this will be useful to you as you develop stories about these issues.

In our work in the field of language revitalization, we operate from a baseline of respect. Respect for community, respect for protocols, and respect for the importance of relationship-building are core values that direct our work. This is why we have used the concept of “respect” as the foundation for this Journalists’ Guide, which has three main sections: red flags (disrespectful language and framings), yellow flags (language and framings to use with caution and care), and green flags (respectful language and framings). For each term/framing, we provide a short explanation of why we’re making that recommendation, and then – if applicable – we offer a suggested alternative.

1. Different terms are used and preferred to describe languages and contexts around the world; please see glossary for definitions.

***“The rigorous, detailed use of language
is paramount to fair coverage of
Indigenous people...”***



– Native American Journalists Association²

Getting Started

When writing about Indigenous and minoritized languages, language endangerment, and revitalization efforts, it is important to consider the overall narrative that is being communicated throughout a story. It can be easy to fall into a deficit narrative that sounds like: “This ancient language with only five speakers who have few resources are trying to save their dying language and need help.” This type of narrative emphasizes the negatives, constructing Indigenous language communities as dependent and requiring help from outsiders. It downplays or erases the amazing successes coming from community-directed action around language work, successes that should be understood as all the more remarkable when viewed within the contexts of language suppression or marginalization they have faced – sometimes over many generations.

For this reason, **we recommend focusing on an asset-based narrative.**

DEFICIT



- Emphasizes what individuals/families **lack**
- Oriented in the **past**
- Narratives of **victimization/trauma**
- **Surviving** is the goal
- Invokes **pity/sympathy**
- Constructs individuals/families as **recipients of help**
- Contributes to sense of **alienation**

ASSET







- Emphasizes what individuals/families **bring**
- Oriented in the **present and future**
- Narratives of **agency/empowerment**
- **Thriving** is the goal
- Cultivates **pride/aspiration**
- Constructs individuals/families as **willing and able to help others**
- Contributes to sense of **belonging**



(Adapted from Shapiro & Macdonald, 2017; Shapiro, 2022)


Red, Yellow & Green Flags


Red Flags: Disrespectful Language and Framings



 DISRESPECTFUL	WHY?	INSTEAD 
<p>Using words like: dying, death, extinct</p>	<p>This is fatalistic, inaccurate, sensationalist, and harmful to the communities who use (or are working to reclaim) a given language.</p> <p>Writing about the struggles of marginalized language communities is made stronger when it includes an emphasis on the root cause(s) of the issue. Communities did not just “lose” their languages or “stop speaking” them. In nearly every case there has been language suppression or cultural genocide from dominant socio-political groups. Framing these situations with words like “dying” implies that language destruction is natural, inevitable, and permanent (all of which are untrue).</p>	<p>Rather than “dying” consider “threatened.” When talking about the challenges facing a language, be specific. A language’s speakers may be “under pressure to use other languages,” “facing challenges to using their language,” etc. Specify, as much as possible, what these challenges are and if you can pinpoint a more specific agent.</p> <p>Frame the story in terms of solutions, and focus on the work being done to address the problem, using words/phrases like: “revitalizing,” “reclaiming,” or “promoting.”</p>



 DISRESPECTFUL	WHY?	INSTEAD 
<p>Using words like: “save/saving,” “rescuing” (a language)</p> <p>IF: The person doing the “saving” is from outside of the language community</p>	<p>Nobody outside of a language community, including linguists, NGOs and tech companies, are “saving” languages! Languages are sustained and reclaimed by their communities. Sometimes there is assistance from other people, but nobody is coming in from the outside and “saving” a language.</p>	<p>If there is an external person supporting community language revitalization efforts, use words like “supporting” or “assisting.”</p> <p>If an external entity, such as a tech company, is involved in language revitalization, consider the intent behind their actions. Some companies are seeking to profit by harvesting and selling language “data.” Ask questions regarding the company’s mandate and involvement within the language community.</p> <p>Be clear if an organization is doing language work without community support.</p> <p>If the entity themselves is describing themselves as “saving” a language, scare quotes are a valid option.</p>

 DISRESPECTFUL	WHY?	INSTEAD 
<p>Implying that a technology product can “save” a language</p>	<p>Technology is a supplemental tool that can be used to assist people in language revitalization. There is no technology product (i.e., “AI,” an app, a website, a piece of hardware such as “translation glasses/gloves,” etc.) that will “save” a language. Languages can be sustained and reclaimed by their communities.</p>	<p>Talk about the technology in the ways that it is working (or not working) to support and supplement the work that is being done by humans. What is the technology’s role in the context of the community?</p>

✘ DISRESPECTFUL	WHY?	INSTEAD 
<p>Using words like: ancient, archaic, primitive, age-old, or implying that a language is only useful in rural areas</p>	<p>“Ancient” and similar tropes imply that a language belongs in the past and is not fit for modern or urban usage. These tropes may also inappropriately exoticize or “mystify” languages. Indigenous and marginalized languages are just as much a part of the modern or urban world as any other. There are no languages that have not grown and changed over time.</p> <p>Be aware that framing specific peoples or their languages as “ancient” or “primitive” has been used as justification for oppression and genocide.</p>	<p>Since most languages have extensive histories, there is no need to frame a language as a particular age unless you are quoting a community member who intentionally chose to use these terms.</p> <p>Instead, focus on the important connections between the language, the community who uses it and the lands and places where it is spoken or signed. For example, “This language has been a key part of cultural identity for generations.”</p>

✘ DISRESPECTFUL	WHY?	INSTEAD 
<p>Using terms of aesthetic judgment about how a language sounds. For example: guttural, nasal, staccato, harsh, sharp, sing-song, melodic, strict, overly complex, aggressive, quiet, lilting, musical, etc.</p>	<p>Descriptors of a language’s sound features are often incorrect and can carry negative connotations. The aesthetic qualities of a language are subjective, and unrelated to its vitality/ endangerment.</p>	<p>Ask yourself what your intention is behind using these descriptive words. Consult with a community expert or linguist to find good ways to describe the language.</p> <p>If you want to let your reader know how a language sounds, talk with your contacts in the community about whether they’d like to share an audio/video clip of the language in your web piece. Be sure to discuss and follow proper protocols and permissions for sharing the language.</p>

 DISRESPECTFUL	WHY?	INSTEAD 
<p>Blaming language shift³ on things like globalization, modernization, the internet, business or trade</p>	<p>None of these abstractions are the root cause of language shift. In nearly every case, there has been language suppression from dominant socio-political groups, including colonization, residential/boarding schools, disconnection or forced removal from the land, and more. In many cases, dominant groups harness these abstract, generalized ideas to justify or mask active language suppression.</p>	<p>Investigate and name the specific context of the language that you are writing about. What are the socio-political factors that are driving these shifts? What are the power dynamics at play?</p> <p>If you are writing about the global phenomenon of language shift, acknowledge the factors causing it. Acknowledge the complexity of specific factors. Language shift often accompanies human suffering and violations of rights – you might choose to focus on this instead of abstractions.</p>

 DISRESPECTFUL	WHY?	INSTEAD 
<p>Referring to Indigenous languages located within a nation-state using the possessive</p> <p>e.g. “Australia’s Indigenous languages,” “our First Nations languages” [if author is not First Nations and is instead referring to Canadians]</p>	<p>This framing continues the colonization of Indigenous people and their languages. Languages, especially Indigenous and minoritized languages, do not belong to a state, and especially not a state which has actively attempted to suppress or eliminate them. And in almost all cases, the languages of a given place pre-date the formation of the modern state by centuries or millennia. Indigenous languages belong to their communities, not to nation-states.</p>	<p>If you’d like to refer in general to languages of a geographic area or state, specify that you’re talking about location, not possession - e.g. “Indigenous languages in Canada,” “languages in the Philippines,” etc.</p>



3. Language shift³ is a term used to describe when people switch from using one language to another. It’s a more neutral way of describing language loss, which is a term disliked by some communities for its implication that the language was somehow misplaced, rather than actively taken away from people.

✗ DISRESPECTFUL	WHY?	INSTEAD ✓
<p>Uncritically invoking the myth that speaking/ signing an Indigenous, minoritized, or marginalized language will hurt speakers' chances of learning the dominant language(s) of their region</p>	<p>Most of the global population speak more than one language. The idea that speaking/signing more than one language somehow makes you worse at speaking/signing other languages can be used to suppress or discourage learning of Indigenous and minoritized languages. It's also false and disproven by decades of research on multilingualism.</p>	<p>If this is a common belief in the community you are describing, report on people's perceptions and compare it to real studies on multilingualism. Otherwise, do not spread this myth.</p>

✗ DISRESPECTFUL	WHY?	INSTEAD ✓
<p>Using words like: broken language, bad, poor, improper, or inarticulate, when referring to how people speak a dominant language in a non-standardized way</p> <p>OR: referring to languages, especially non-standardized or non-dominant varieties of a language, this way</p>	<p>From a linguistic perspective, there is no such thing as "broken" language. What's considered "proper" or "good" language is a social construct, not a linguistic one: it is always closely related to power structures, and which groups of people have power, status, and wealth.</p>	<p>If you are discussing non-dominant languages or varieties, include acknowledgment of the existence and validity of multiple language varieties. If there is social stigma against a specific language or way of speaking, make that clear.</p>

✗ DISRESPECTFUL	WHY?	INSTEAD	✓
<p>Defaulting to the dominant language (i.e., English) when spelling names of people, places, or languages</p>	<p>Centering a dominant language by defaulting to that spelling or naming convention exacerbates the power dynamics that cause language shift. Respecting the preferred names and spellings of languages and communities ensures accurate representation of the language being discussed, and avoids further erasure, silencing, or exclusion of the relevant language community in the media.</p>	<p>Ask members of the language community what spellings, names, and terminology they prefer, or should be prioritized, for their language(s). Use the spelling that is preferred by the community or person you're talking about. There are tools available such as Indigenous language keyboards that can make it easier to use the preferred spellings and characters.</p> <p>If the name or spelling is not commonly known by the audience, consider including the common name in parentheses, if this is acceptable to the community.</p>	

✗ DISRESPECTFUL	WHY?	INSTEAD	✓
<p>Invoking the myth that languages are genetically inherited</p>	<p>Language is a social practice, and does NOT map onto biological genes. DNA is not an indicator of or associated with language.</p>	<p>Make it clear that language and biology are not related.</p>	

 DISRESPECTFUL	WHY?	INSTEAD 
<p>Discussing language and language revitalization as if they are disembodied from the lives, practices and experiences of the people who use that language</p>	<p>Throughout the history of linguistics and related social sciences, the Western academy has engaged in extractive practices of presenting languages (or sentences, words, sounds, etc.) in a sterile, decontextualized way, as “data” rather than human practice, and as divorced from human communities. This makes language communities, especially Indigenous Peoples, invisible.</p> <p>Indigenous and minoritized languages are deeply embedded in the lives, experiences, and collective histories of the people in those language communities, and it is dehumanizing to remove people from their experience of language.</p>	<p>Whenever there is a discussion of language, it should include discussion of the people who use it. Acknowledge language as a social practice!</p> <p>For example, rather than saying, “Indigenous languages are dying out and taking ecological knowledge with them” (as if the languages are isolated entities with no relation to people), consider saying “Indigenous communities are facing the destruction of their languages and ecological knowledge.”</p>

Yellow Flags: Language and Framings to Use with Caution and Care

AVOID	WHY?	INSTEAD
<p>Uncritically using the terms “dialect,” “jargon,” “patois,” “creole,” “vernacular,” “pidgin”</p>	<p>“Dialect” is a specific linguistic term that is NOT just a more colorful term or synonym for “language.” It is often misused to denigrate specific languages, imply that they’re “less than a language,” or mark the people who use them as “lesser than” other groups of people whose speech is designated as a “language.” “Jargon,” “patois,” “creole,” and “pidgin” are also sometimes used in this way.</p>	<p>If you’re not sure whether something is technically a language or a dialect, use the more neutral term “variety” or “language variety.”</p> <p>If someone you’re interviewing uses these terms, consider how to represent their perspective and voice, while also finding ways to frame the story that don’t denigrate specific kinds of language. For example, “she speaks the Acadian variety of French.”</p>

AVOID	WHY?	INSTEAD
<p>Exoticizing languages with ideas like “this language has no word for [x],” “this language has 100 words for [x],” hyperfocus on unusual sounds, grammar, or features</p>	<p>Every language is unique! If a language does something or has a feature that doesn’t exist in English, that doesn’t make it weird or exotic. That is a normal aspect of all languages. As an example, many English words have been borrowed from other languages – by this logic, “English doesn’t have words” for a lot of things.</p>	<p>It’s great to highlight the specific cultural knowledge transmitted through language, if the community approves, and there are ways to do this through a non-exoticizing lens. Center the community who uses the language and what parts of the language they value or find interesting.</p> <p>Strive to highlight the diversity of languages, the ways they are all different from each other (rather than different from an imaginary “normal” kind of language), and the unique knowledge and features contained within each one.</p>

AVOID	WHY?	INSTEAD
<p>Uncritically using the word “endangered” without explaining what exactly is happening to the language</p>	<p>“Endangered” is a technical term in wide use, but it doesn’t capture all required context. Just as the BBC News style guide (2003 edition) encourages journalists to avoid passive constructions like “mistakes were made,” which “takes the life out of the action and distances it from any identifiable source,” we encourage journalists to avoid vague statements such as “this language has become endangered.” Where possible, name the sources and causes of a language’s current situation.</p>	<p>If you choose to include this term in your story, see if you can pinpoint a more specific agent. If a language is being suppressed, say so (and identify the agents/systems involved); if a language is being marginalized, say so (and identify the agents/systems involved); if a language is being excluded from a certain domain, say so (and identify the agents/systems involved).</p>

Green Flags: Respectful Language and Framings

RESPECTFUL	WHY?
<p>Centering perspectives from the people in the relevant language community</p>	<p>No one’s lived experience is as relevant to a story about language as the people who use or are working to reclaim a language.</p> <p>In particular, Indigenous Peoples and those who speak minoritized languages have habitually been excluded from media representation of their own communities.</p>

<i>RESPECTFUL</i>	<i>WHY?</i>
Respecting and upholding protocols around language and knowledge in the relevant community	There are usually long-standing ethical protocols and practices around the sharing of Indigenous language, culture, and knowledge. Not all knowledge and language is acceptable to share with the public. Upholding those protocols is not only an ethical choice, but it may serve to strengthen your relationships with people in that language community.

<i>RESPECTFUL</i>	<i>WHY?</i>
Including information about what the relevant community is doing regarding their languages	Language communities aren't helpless victims – resistance to language suppression is common and growing, as communities are increasingly reclaiming and revitalizing their languages. Focusing on these actions will strengthen the overall narrative, and is critical if one of the ethical goals guiding your reporting is to conduct yourself with respect.

<i>RESPECTFUL</i>	<i>WHY?</i>
Including specific, factual information about why and how a language (and language community) came to be in its current circumstances	Ask questions like: What political or social factors have shaped - and continue to shape - language use in this community? Were speakers punished for using the language at a specific time in history? Were they coerced or forced to shift to another language? What are common beliefs in the community about language? What shaped these beliefs?

RESPECTFUL**WHY?**

Using phrasing that recognizes and includes languages other than spoken ones (e.g., signed and whistled languages)

These kinds of languages are just as real as spoken ones, and many of them are currently facing language shift.

“Tongues,” “voices,” etc. can be poetic phrasings, but even for spoken languages, a great deal of communication happens in the hands, face, and body. Try referring to “languages” or “communication” when speaking of languages in general, and save phrasing about “voices” or “tongues” for when you’re talking about a specific spoken language (or group of spoken languages).

Glossary

Dialect	As a technical term within linguistics, a dialect is a variety of a language, usually defined by mutual intelligibility: that is, if speakers/signers of two different varieties can understand each other fairly well, those varieties are considered dialects of the same language. However, in common usage, the difference between a “dialect” and a “language” is often shaped by sociopolitical factors and relationships of power. “Dialect” is sometimes used to denigrate or erase languages and imply that they are not “real” or “valid” languages. “Dialect” is not a synonym for “language.”
Endangered language	An endangered language is a language that is at risk of not being used anymore. Languages usually become endangered because of pressures on the communities who speak/sign them. Endangered languages are not “doomed”; they can be revitalized by their communities. Endangerment is not a binary, but a spectrum: languages can experience different levels of endangerment at different moments, or in different communities or regions.
Indigenous language	An Indigenous language is a language used by and/or connected to an Indigenous People, whether or not it is currently being spoken, signed, or used. Indigenous languages cannot be separated from their Peoples’ identities, lands, ancestors, ways of knowing, and more. There are multiple ways to understand the meaning of the term “Indigenous,” both for Peoples and languages .

Language revitalization	Language revitalization is any effort taken to slow, stop, or reverse language shift. Language revitalization is a broad name for many kinds of activities to support the continued use and transmission of a language. These activities can be formal, like programs in schools, or informal, like gatherings of friends or family members to speak a language. In general, language revitalization is about helping people use a language, more often, in more parts of their life.
Language shift	Language shift is a process where a community stops using one or more of their languages, and starts using another language(s) instead. Language endangerment is a kind of language shift, when all people and communities who use a language begin to shift to using other languages.
Minoritized language	A minoritized language is a language that is marginalized, suppressed, stigmatized, or persecuted. There is a systematic power imbalance between minoritized languages and their users, and dominant or official languages and their users. A minoritized language may or may not be used by a numerical minority of people within a state or region. In some cases, a minoritized language may be spoken by a majority of a population, but restricted in its use and status, as in many colonial contexts. The term “minoritized” is especially widely used in European contexts.

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Bridget is a non-Indigenous linguist with a background in digital language mobilization. They work to support community-driven initiatives at the intersection of language revitalization and technology, and are deeply passionate about linguistic rights. They have been privileged to work with and learn from Indigenous language champions both locally and globally.

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The First Peoples' Cultural Council is a First Nations-run provincial Crown corporation with a mandate to support the revitalization of First Nations languages, arts, cultures and heritage in British Columbia, Canada. The organization provides funding and resources to communities, monitors the status of First Nations languages, develops policy recommendations for First Nations leadership and government and collaborates with organizations on numerous special projects that raise the profile of First Nations arts, languages and cultural heritage in B.C., Canada and around the world. For more information, visit: www.fpcc.ca



The Endangered Languages Project (ELP) is a nonprofit organization supporting the revitalization of Indigenous and endangered languages around the world. ELP brings people together across borders and boundaries to address the urgent issue of language endangerment. ELP's mission is to build networks, grow and mobilize capacity, conduct research, and share knowledge to sustain language diversity worldwide. By facilitating collaboration between language communities, and supporting global networks of language revitalization and documentation, ELP helps build a world where languages and their communities thrive.

To learn more, visit: www.endangeredlanguages.com

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