

The Moral Case Against Equity Language (abridged)

By George Packer, *The Atlantic*, March 2, 2023

The Sierra Club's *Equity Language Guide* discourages using the words *stand*, *Americans*, *blind*, and *crazy*. The first two fail at inclusion, because not everyone can stand and not everyone living in this country is a citizen. The third and fourth, even as figures of speech, are insulting to the disabled.

Equity-language guides are proliferating among some of the country's leading institutions, particularly nonprofits. The words these guides recommend or reject are sometimes exactly the same, justified in nearly identical language. This is because most of the guides draw on the same sources from activist organization. The total number of people behind this project of linguistic purification is relatively small, but their power is potentially immense.

Although the guides refer to language "evolving," these changes are a revolution from above. They haven't emerged organically from the shifting linguistic habits of large numbers of people. They are handed down in communiqués and remain unanswerable to a public that's being morally coerced. A new term wins an argument without having to debate. If you accept the change then you also acquiesce in the argument. Equity language invites no response, and condemned words are almost never redeemed. Continuing to use a word that's been declared harmful is evidence of ignorance at best or, at worst, a determination to offend.

Like any prescribed usage, equity language has a willed, unnatural quality. Mastering it is a discipline that requires effort and reflection. A ban that seemed ludicrous yesterday will be unquestionable by tomorrow. The guides themselves can't always stay current. The instructions seem designed to make users so anxious that they can barely speak.

The whole tendency of equity language is to blur the contours of hard, often unpleasant facts. This aversion to reality is its main appeal. Good writing will hurt, because it's bound to convey painful truths. The battle against euphemism and cliché is long-standing and, mostly, a losing one. What's new and perhaps more threatening about equity language is the special kind of pressure it brings to bear. The conformity it demands isn't just bureaucratic; it's moral. But assembling preapproved phrases from a handbook into sentences that sound like an algorithmic catechism has no moral value. Moral language comes from the struggle of an individual mind to absorb and convey the truth as faithfully as possible.

The rationale for equity-language guides is hard to fault. They seek a world without oppression and injustice. Because achieving this goal is beyond anyone's power, they turn to what can be controlled and try to purge language until it leaves no one out and can't harm those who already suffer.

This huge expense of energy to purify language reveals a weakened belief in more material forms of progress. If we don't know how to end racism, we can at least call it *structural*. Even by their own lights, the guides do more ill than good, because they make it impossible to face squarely the wrongs they want to right, which is the starting point for any change. Prison does not become a less brutal place by calling someone locked up in one *a person experiencing the criminal-justice system*. Equity language doesn't fool anyone who lives with real afflictions. It's meant to spare only the feelings of those who use it.

The project of the guides is utopian, but they're a symptom of deep pessimism. They belong to a fractured culture in which symbolic gestures are preferable to concrete actions, argument is no longer desirable, each viewpoint has its own impenetrable dialect, and only the most fluent insiders possess the power to say what is real.

It will be a sign of political renewal if Americans can say maddening things to one another in a common language that doesn't require any guide.