DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

THE MORAL CASE AGAINST EUPHEMISM

Banning words won't make the world more just.

BY GEORGE PACKER

The Sierra Club's Equity Language Guide encourages 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 ("Legislators are blind to climate change"), are insulting to the disabled. The guide also rejects the disabled in favor of people living with disabilities, for the same reason that enslaved person has generally replaced slave: to affirm, by the tenets of what's called "people-first language," that "everyone is first and foremost a person, not their disability or other identity."

The guide's purpose is not just to make sure that the Sierra Club avoids
obviously derogatory terms, such as welfare queen. It seeks
to cleanse language of any
trace of privilege, hierarchy, bias, or exclusion. In its zeal,
the Sierra Club has clear-cut a
whole national park of words. Urban, vibrant, hardworking,
and brown bag all crash to
earth for subtle racism. Y’all
supplant the patriarchal you
guys, and elevate voices replaces
empower, which used to be
uplifting but is now condescending. The poor is classist; battle and minefield disrespect
veterans; depressing appropriates a disability; migrant—no
explanation, it just has to go.

Equity-language guides are
proliferating among some of the country’s leading
institutions, particularly nonprofits.
The American Cancer Society
has one. So do the American
Heart Association, the
American Psychological
Association, the American Med-
cal Association, the National
Recreation and Park Association,
the Columbia University School of Professional
Studies, and the University of
Washington. The words these
guides recommend or reject
are sometimes exactly the
same, justified in nearly iden-
tical language. This is because
most of the guides draw on
the same sources from activist
organizations: A Progressive’s
Style Guide, the Racial Equity
Tools glossary, and a couple of
others. The guides also cite one
another. The total number of
people behind this project of
linguistic purification is rela-
tively small, but their power is
potentially immense. The new
language might not stick in
broad swaths of American soci-
ety, but it already influences
highly educated precincts,
spreading from the authorities
that establish it and the
organizations that adopt it to
mainstream publications, such
as this one.

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 written by obscure
“experts” who purport to
speak for vaguely defined
“communities,” remaining
unanswerable to a public that’s
being morally coerced. A new
word wins an argument with-
out having to debate. When
the San Francisco Board of
Supervisors replaces felon
with justice-involved person,
it is making an ideological
claim—that there is something
illegitimate about laws,
courts, and prisons. If you
accept the change—as in,
certain contexts, you’ll surely
feel you must—then you also
acquiesce in the argument.

In a few cases, the gap
between equity language and
ordinary speech has produced
a populist backlash. When
Latina began to be used in
advanced milieus, a poll found
that a large majority of Latinos
and Hispanics continued
to go by the familiar terms and
hadn’t heard of the newly
coined, nearly unpronounce-
able one. Latina wobbled and
took a step back. The American
Cancer Society advises that Latina, along with
the equally gender-neutral Latine,
Latinx, and Latinx, “may or
may not be fully embraced by older generations and
may need additional explana-
tion.” Public criticism led
Stanford to abolish outright
its Elimination of Harmful
Language Initiative—not
for being ridiculous, but,
the university announced,
for being “broadly viewed as
counter to inclusivity.”

In general, though, equity
language invites no response,
and condemned words are
almost never redeemed. Once
a new rule takes hold—once
a day in history can no longer
be dark, or a waitress has to be
a server, or underserved
and vulnerable suddenly acquire
red warning labels—there’s
no going back. Continuing
to use a word that’s been declared
harmful is evidence of igno-
rance at best or, at worst,
determination to offend.

Like any prescribed usage,
equity language has a willed,
natural quality. The guides
use scientific-sounding
concepts to lend an impression
of objectivity to subjective
judgments: structural racial-
ization, diversity value pro-
position, arbitrary status hierarchies.
The concepts themselves
create status hierarchies—they
assert intellectual and moral
authority by piling abstract
nouns into unfamiliar shapes
that immediately let you know
you have work to do. Though
the guides recommend the use
of words that are available to
everyone (one suggests a sixth-
to-eighth-grade reading level),
their glossaries read like tech-
ical manuals, put together
by highly specialized teams of
insiders, whose purpose is to
warn off the uninitiated. This
language confers the power to
establish orthodoxy.

Mastering equity language
is a discipline that requires
effort and reflection, like learn-
ing a sacred foreign tongue—
ancient Hebrew or Sanskrit.
The Sierra Club urges its staff
to “take the space and time
you need to implement these
recommendations in your own
work thoughtfully.” “Some-
times, you will get it wrong or
forget and that’s OK,” the
National Recreation and Park
Association guide tells readers.
“Take a moment, acknowledge
it, and commit to doing better
next time.”

The liturgy changes with-
out public discussion, and
with a suddenness and fre-
quency that keep the novi-
tiate off-balance, forever try-
ing to catch up, and feeling
vaguely impious. A ban that
seemed ludicrous yesterday
will be unquestionable by
tomorrow. The guides them-
selves can’t always stay cur-
rent. People of color becomes
standard usage until the day it
is demoted, by the American
Heart Association and oth-
ers, for being too general. The
American Cancer Society pre-
fers marginalized to the more
“victimizing” underresourced
or underserved—but in the
National Recreation and Park
Association’s guide, marginal-
ized now acquires “negative
connotations when used in a
broad way. However, it may
be necessary and appropriate
in context. If you do use it,
avoid ‘the marginalized,’ and
don't use marginalized as an adjective." Historically marginalized is sometimes okay; marginalized people is not.

The most devoted student of the National Recreation and Park Association guide can't possibly know when and when not to say marginalized; the instructions seem designed to make users so anxious that they can barely speak. But this confused guidance is inevitable, because with repeated use, the taint of negative meaning rubs off on even the most anodyne language, until it has to be scrubbed clean. The erasures will continue indefinitely, because the thing itself—injustice—will always exist.

In the spirit of Strunk and White, the guides call for using specific rather than general terms, plain speech instead of euphemisms, active not passive voice. Yet they continually violate their own guidance, and the crusade to eliminate harmful language could hardly do otherwise. A division of the University of Southern California's School of Social Work has abandoned field, as in fieldwork (which could be associated with slavery or immigrant labor) in favor of the obscure Latinism practicum. The Sierra Club offers refuse to take action instead of paralyzed by fear, replacing a concrete image with a phrase that evokes no mental picture. It suggests the mushy protect our rights over the more active stand up for our rights. Which is more euphemistic, mentally ill or person living with a mental-health condition? Which is more vague, bully or risk-taker? What are diversity, equity, and inclusion but abstractions with uncertain meanings whose repetition creates an artificial consensus and muddies clear thought? When a university administrator refers to an individual student as "diverse," the word easier to say people with limited financial resources than the poor. The first rolls off your tongue without interruption, leaves no aftertaste.

Katherine Boo’s *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* is a nonfiction masterpiece that tells the story of Mumbai slum dwellers with the intimacy of a novel. The book was published in 2012, before the new language emerged:

The One Leg’s given name was Sita. She had fair skin, usually an asset, but the rust leg had smacked down her bride price. Her
Hindu parents had taken the single offer they got: poor, unattractive, hardworking, Muslim, old—"half-dead, but who else wanted her," as her mother had once said with a frown.

Translated into equity language, this passage might read:

Sita was a person living with a disability. Because she lived in a system that centered whiteness while producing inequities among racial and ethnic groups, her physical appearance conferred an unearned set of privileges and benefits, but her disability lowered her status to potential partners. Her parents, who were Hindu persons, accepted a marriage proposal from a member of a community with limited financial resources, a person whose physical appearance was defined as being different from the traits of the dominant group and resulted in his being set apart for unequal treatment, a person who was considered in the dominant discourse to be "hardworking," a Muslim person, an older person. In referring to him, Sita's mother used language that is considered harmful by representatives of historically marginalized communities.

Equity language fails at what it claims to do. This translation doesn't create more empathy for Sita and her struggles. Just the opposite—it alienates Sita from the reader, placing her at a great distance. A heavy fog of jargon rolls in and hides all that Boo's short burst of prose makes clear with true understanding, true empathy.

The battle against euphemism and cliché is longstanding 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. Because the effort is hard and the result unsparing, it isn't obvious that writing like Boo's has a future. Her book is too real for us. The very project of a white American journalist spending three years in an Indian slum to tell the story of families who live there could be considered a gross act of cultural exploitation. By the new rules, shelf upon shelf of great writing might go the way of blind and urban, Open Light in August or Invisible Man to any page and see how little would survive.

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. Avoiding slurs, calling attention to inadvertent insults, and speaking to people with dignity are essential things in any decent society. It's polite to address people as they request, and context always matters: A therapist is unlikely to use terms with a patient that she would with a colleague. But it isn't the job of writers to present people as they want to be presented; writers owe allegiance to their readers, and the truth.

The universal mission of equity language is a quest for salvation, not political reform than good—not because of their absurd bans on ordinary words like congresswoman and expat, or the self-torture they require of conscientious users, but 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. Obesity isn't any healthier for people with high weight. It's hard to know who is likely to be harmed by a phrase like native New Yorker or under fire, I doubt that even the writers of the guides are truly offended. But the people in Behind the Beautiful Forevers know they're poor; they can't afford to wrap themselves in soft sheets of euphemism. 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 inperceptible dialect, and only the most fluent insiders possess the power to say what is real. What I've described is not just a problem of the progressive left. The far right has a different vocabulary, but it, too, relies on authoritarian shibboleths to enforce orthodoxy. 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. A

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