



---

# How to Build Language Justice

Antena Aire

## **WHAT MIGHT WE HEAR, SEE, FEEL, EXPERIENCE IN A WORLD WITH LANGUAGE JUSTICE?**

We would be in a world with room for multiple languages to operate at all levels of society: from the kitchen table to the community meeting to the art museum to the City Council or even the legislature. A world where a vast range of languages could coexist. A world where social structures would not be based on the dominance of one language over all others. A world where there is recognition of the ways language is intertwined with harms, with healing, and with transformation. A world where interpreting and translation, language acquisition and language preservation are cherished and valued as critical tools for opening communication.

When people are able to communicate together across language difference about our experiences, our thoughts, and our visions, all kinds of possibilities can ignite, and ideas can take shape that might not have been imaginable without that cross-language conversation.

## **WHAT DOES LANGUAGE DOMINANCE LOOK LIKE?**

A meeting is held to bring together arts practitioners and arts administrators to infuse post-Trump-election resistance movements with arts and culture. The meeting is advertised in English and the entire event is held in English. There is no interpreting provided or outreach to communities that prefer to communicate in other languages.

\*

A storytelling event geared to tell immigrant stories looking to reach a wide range of communities occurs entirely in English, with interpreters available for people who prefer to listen to the content in Spanish. Any ideas or questions shared in another language take twice as long to express and require an interruption of the conversation, because they need to be interpreted consecutively.

\*

In many school districts, bilingual education initiatives do not teach students to read and write in languages other than English, effectively reducing their literacy in those languages to speaking only.

\*

In 2008, the Mississippi Department of Human Services took away the newborn daughter of Cirila Baltazar Cruz, a Chatino speaking immigrant from Oaxaca, demanding that “Ms. Baltazar Cruz learn English before she could reunify with her daughter.” Baltazar Cruz was not provided with an interpreter during the investigation and was only reunified with her daughter after receiving legal assistance from the Southern Poverty Law Center.\*\*

\*

Despite laws to the contrary, many landlords transmit crucial information, including lease updates, to their tenants in English only, regardless of whether those tenants are comfortable reading and understanding English.

\*

During a pandemic when millions are losing their jobs, in California, unemployment claims must be completed in Spanish or English. At least 220 other languages are regularly spoken in California households, and nearly 50% of residents speak a language other than English at home.\*\*

\*

New York City healthcare workers report that COVID-19 patients with limited English proficiency are left “alone, confused and without the appropriate care.” A Brooklyn nurse said it takes too long to get an interpreter so, “we’re not going to call unless we need consent or they die.”\*\*

\*

Of the more than 300 indigenous languages once spoken in the land we now refer to as the United States, approximately 175 are actively used today. That number is estimated to drop to roughly 20 in the next three decades, without robust revitalization efforts and allocated funding from governments and foundations.

## LINGUIICISM

These, alongside so many other realities, are all examples of linguicism. Linguicism is a system of oppression based on language that results in structural advantages for dominant language—English, in the case of the U.S.—speakers and disadvantages for those who use non-dominant languages. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, a Finnish scholar whose work focuses on linguicism and language rights, defines linguicism as “(i)deologies, structures and practices which ... reproduce an unequal division of power and resources ... between groups which are defined on the basis of language.”\*\*

Linguicism marks some languages as “official” or “professional” or “important” and others as less so. Linguicism results in poorer education, economic, and health situations for people whose primary language is not the dominant language. It’s important to remember that a language that is non-dominant in one context (Spanish in many U.S. contexts, for instance) can be dominant in other contexts (Spanish in Latin America, for instance, in relation to Indigenous languages).

Linguicism means being cut off from learning our ancestral languages—the ones we can still access—or experiencing significant barriers when we attempt to reconnect. Eradication of indigenous languages as described above is part of colonial processes, and language revitalization is one important way to counter it.

Linguicism—and the ways it intersects with internalized racism and impulses toward assimilation—means many of us raised in immigrant families were not taught the languages of our families and cultures, so we would not be marked as “other” or “foreign.”

Linguicism means that we don't see languages other than the dominant language represented "from the front of the room" at all kinds of events, from schools to organizing spaces to conferences to museums.

As some of the examples above painfully illustrate, linguicism is intertwined with trauma in the ways that many other "isms" are. Linguicism is closely related to racism, classism, audism, and ableism and is also a unique phenomenon, important to understand for the ways it seeps into our world view and everyday practices.

### **SO HOW DO WE DISMANTLE LINGUICISM, AND WHAT IS LANGUAGE JUSTICE ANYWAY?**

Though cross-language work is as old as humankind, language justice as a framework was born over twenty years ago in the mountains of Appalachia at the Highlander Research and Education Center as organizers and language justice advocates like Roberto Tijerina and Alice Johnson attempted to create a set of practices that would allow historical Black and white populations to organize with more recently-arrived immigrants from Latin America in the Deep South.

As originally developed at Highlander and expanded now by many interpreters, organizers, collectives, and organizations all over the U.S. and beyond, language justice includes the right everyone has to communicate, to understand, and to be understood in our language(s). It entails a commitment to facilitating equitable communication across languages in spaces where no language will dominate over any other. Language justice is based in respect for the language rights of all people, including people whose languages have been exiled, disappeared, stolen or made invisible through processes of colonial violence. Language justice is a political foundation, a conceptual framework, and a set of tools and practices we can use in organizing and art-making, in our civic life, our interpersonal relationships, our learning spaces, and our imagining and embodying of the world we wish to inhabit.

Language impacts us on a multiplicity of levels. It is a phenomenon that is both intimate and exterior, both familial and cultural, deeply connected to our most private thoughts and on display in all manner of public contexts. We dream in language, we sing in language, we think in language. It is language that makes our lullabies, our stories, our jokes. We use language to name our food, our hometowns, our family members, our friends, ourselves. Language is personal, visceral, and powerful; it is tied to our lands, to our bodies, to our relationships, and to our knowledge. Every time we speak or sign in our particular accents and dialects, syntax and rhythms, cadences and inflections, we identify ourselves and bring social history and personal experience with us. When we come together to dialogue, it is important that we are able to express ourselves in the language that most fully conveys the depth and nuance of our hopes and ideas, our frustrations and questions. And it is important that we feel respected as communicators not just for what we have to say, but also how we say it. For these reasons, strategies for bridging the divides of language are essential to any endeavor that truly seeks to be inclusive of people from different cultures, different backgrounds, and different perspectives.

### **WHAT MIGHT WE HEAR, SEE, FEEL, EXPERIENCE IN A WORLD WITH LANGUAGE JUSTICE?**

More than two dozen working-class families live in a Los Angeles building without rent control. Some have been in the building for more than 30 years, building multiple generations of their

families there. As in many neighborhoods across our cities, rampant gentrification tempts landlords with the promise of a different, more lucrative sort of tenant. The landlord piles on rent increase after rent increase in an effort to achieve turnover in his building: eviction by rent increase. The tenants decide to organize to try to stay in their homes. Some speak only Cantonese; some speak only English; some speak only Mandarin; some speak only Spanish. Some speak two of these languages but none of the tenants speaks all of them. They begin holding weekly meetings, organizing actions, sending out press releases.

\*

Houstonians from many shades and backgrounds—particularly African-Americans, Mexican Americans, and more recent immigrants from Central America—exchange stories of survival and disaster response after Hurricane Harvey in a Spanish-English experimental theater production; they trade stories back and forth with ease, though they do not all share the same language.

\*

During a pandemic when access to accurate information is a life and death matter, CIELO (Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo), an indigenous women-led organization, created videos with Covid-19 prevention information in more than ten Indigenous languages, and compiled resources about Covid-19 in dozens of Indigenous languages and their many variants.

\*

In 2017 an Oakland high school teacher overheard Spanish speaking students laughing when they heard their classmates speak Mam or Arabic. Starting in the 2018-19 school year, students spend time in class each day teaching other students a little bit of their home languages. Students have become more confident speaking their languages at school and have built friendships with people from different cultural backgrounds.

\*

An immigrant rights rapid response training builds skills among neighbors around responding to ICE presence in their neighborhood, instructing people in their rights and devising mutual aid resources. Some neighbors communicate in Korean; others in Spanish; others in English. Everyone participates, receiving the same information and skills-building strategies. The group is able to talk together about the kinds of response networks that feel most relevant for their particular neighborhood.

\*

In each of these examples—and so many more we have experienced, alongside our compañerxs in our sister collectives Antena Houston and Antena Los Ángeles!—everyone is able to communicate with each other in real time though they do not share a common language, with equal access to all relevant information, using the tools provided by live interpreters, text

translation, interpreting equipment, and thoughtful advance planning. The underlying message is that everyone has something valuable to contribute, that all languages matter equally, and that our full participation in the spaces we inhabit is enriched by our capacity to communicate in the language(s) in which we feel most comfortable.

There are crucially important things being expressed in all languages, by people very different from ourselves, whose contexts and experiences and perspectives are distinct from anything we might have encountered previously. Language justice allows us all to communicate across difference, without erasing difference, but rather embracing and nurturing it. Undoing language dominance is a constant effort, and in that effort language justice is our lifelong passion. We still encounter linguicism and its impacts every day. At the same time, we know language to be a powerful tool for re-dreaming the world and reimagining relationships. We will conjure another world into existence, and that world will flourish in multiple languages.

### **LANGUAGE JUSTICE IS A PROCESS, NOT A DESTINATION**

Language justice is not about reaching some perfect state of equitable communication where language dominance no longer exists: it's an evolving process, not a fixed destination. There are many strategies and tools that can support the creation of equitable communication, but there's rarely one right way to create welcoming spaces where everyone feels comfortable participating.

The goal is not to create an ideal universe of language justice in which all languages are given entirely equal space at an event; that's rarely (if ever) attainable and feeling daunted is no way to start to do the hard work of undoing linguicism. The goal, as we experience it, is to create the conditions for practicing language justice with as much attention and dedication as possible, and to encounter each situation as an opportunity to learn more and practice our skills more deeply.

Language justice is only as strong as the resources dedicated to it. Without experienced interpreters for a given language, there is no functional way for a person to speak that language at an event or meeting and be understood. Sometimes there is not enough equipment to accommodate more than two or three languages at a single event. However, when a commitment to language justice is clearly demonstrated, even when there are languages represented in the room that cannot be fully integrated into the conversation, the feeling in the room is one of openness, acceptance, and willingness to listen. Goodwill combined with good practice can go a long way to derail structures of privilege and language dominance, and construct a space that is truly welcoming to a variety of perspectives, expressed in a variety of ways.

*Interpretation and translation are tools of cross-language and cross-race work...  
They can be used to maintain the status quo of power and privilege between  
peoples or they can be used to transform race relationships and empower  
marginalized groups.*

—Alice Johnson

Conversation and learning rarely happen unless people can communicate with and understand each other. Yet the issue goes deeper than the mechanics of language, because the effects and reverberations of language extend far beyond a simple instrumental use of vocabulary and

grammatical constructions. Attention to language justice creates spaces where people are invited to bring their whole selves, and the whole range of their perspectives and experiences, into the room. It demonstrates a commitment to creating a space where no one language is dominant; rather, every language in the room is equally welcome, and all participants are respectfully committed to a process of open communication and transparency. The kind of work that goes into creating a multilingual space with equitable communication lays a foundation for everything that will happen in the context of the event, meeting, or discussion, and is the building block for movements based in mutual respect and a fundamental respect for each person's dignity and autonomy.

### **A QUICK NOTE ABOUT TERMINOLOGY**

Translation and interpreting are not the same thing! Interpreting is the spoken or signed transfer of information from one language to another. Translating is the transfer of a written text from one language to another. A person doing either interpreting or translation must have strong abilities in both languages, but these two arts involve very different skill sets—the first having to do primarily with memory, multi-tasking, speed and fluency of spoken or signed communication, and the second having to do primarily with reading, writing, and research skills. Many people confuse the terms “interpreting” and “translation,” but if you start to make the distinction accurately, you will make the interpreters and translators in your life very happy!

### **INTERPRETERS AND INTERPRETING EQUIPMENT**

There are two main kinds of interpreting, with a couple of different options for how to use them in combination.

**Consecutive Interpreting:** A person speaks and then pauses to allow for the interpreter to repeat what has been said in the other language. No equipment is needed. Time becomes a factor: everything takes twice as long, because it must be expressed twice, once in each language.

**Simultaneous Interpreting with equipment:** Using equipment (transmitter, microphone, receivers and earphones), a person speaks while the interpreter follows along simultaneously in another language. Everyone experiences the entire conversation in real time, with no interruption to the flow of conversation, and people are able to communicate with one another directly even if they don't share a common language.

Remote interpreting, either over the phone or via video conference, entails a shift in equipment and some revised practices, but the basic skills of interpreting remain the same no matter where a cross-language conversation takes place. Our local collectives and other folks who work within the U.S.-based language justice ecosystem have created many amazing resources around language justice and remote interpreting; there are links at the end to those resources.

Any of these techniques can be used in order to facilitate access for speakers of multiple languages, but no one technique in and of itself will create a functional multilingual space where a variety of languages is able to coexist on equal footing. Creating multilingual space entails

thinking about all kinds of things outside of interpreting or translation per se, from the setup of the space to the details of putting a program together.

## **A FEW SCENARIOS ON THE ROAD TO LANGUAGE JUSTICE**

*Multilingual Space: Combining bi-directional simultaneous interpreting with comprehensive document translation and multilingual facilitation, in order to integrate cross-race efforts in [multiple languages], shifting power away from traditionally dominant cultural norms...and intentionally using language to collectively build political analysis and cross-race allies among grassroots leaders.*

- Alice Johnson

Language dominance often goes unnoticed. Marginalization of non-dominant languages is so widespread and normalized in most cultural contexts that it's easy to see it as "just the way things are," rather than as part of the architecture of an experience, something open to critique and revision. Yet individuals who do not speak the dominant language continually experience their marginalization and exclusion on all kinds of micro- and macro- levels.

Let's look at a few cross-language scenarios. We will refer to English as the dominant language and Spanish as the non-dominant language, as this is the primary language combination we work with; many other languages could be substituted in either position, depending on the context. It's important to note, as well, that both English and Spanish are colonizing languages in the contexts where they dominate. And both can be used as tools for equitable communication and decolonial organizing.

*Scenario with no interpreting and language dominance firmly intact:* You are attending a community meeting or event. Everyone assumes that the meeting will be in English and that everyone speaks English. There is no interpreter, as no one has thought about the possibility that other languages might be present in the room. The burden is on you or anyone else with limited English to tell organizers about your "need." When advised, the organizer suggests finding a bilingual friend or family member to "translate." This "translator" is often left working alone for long stretches of time and ends up needing to summarize what is being said. People with limited English don't have access to everything that's being said; they find themselves unable to participate comfortably in conversation.

*Scenario with limited interpreting and language dominance firmly intact:* You are attending a community meeting or event. The meeting is entirely in English, but a bilingual person with little or no experience interpreting is designated to sit in a corner and whisper-interpret. As there is no interpreting equipment, Spanish speakers are told to gather in that corner so you can be near the interpreter. This method both physically and psychologically isolates and marginalizes limited English speakers and puts the interpreter in the uncomfortable position of having to do extremely challenging work without adequate tools or skills.

*Scenario with interpreting used to foster language dominance:* You are attending a community meeting. You walk into the room and are told: "If you don't speak English, please check out



interpreting equipment.” The presentations and conversation are conducted in English with interpreting into Spanish; this is called *one-way* or *unidirectional interpreting*. Only the Spanish speakers are using the equipment, so if any of them wants to ask a question or make a comment, they must interrupt the proceedings to have the interpreter switch into consecutive mode, to interpret their remarks line by line to the entire gathering. This method creates a scenario where not speaking English becomes an “interruption” that impedes the flow of conversation and reinforces the idea that the really important things are being said in English; often Spanish speakers prefer not to speak, rather than interrupting to have the interpreter switch into consecutive mode.

*Scenario with interpreting used to foster equitable cross-language communication:* You are attending a community meeting. You walk into the room and are told: “Both English and Spanish will be actively used in this meeting. If you aren’t bilingual in Spanish and English, please get some interpreting equipment.” The presentations and conversation happen in a mix of Spanish and English, and anyone who does not comfortably understand both languages uses interpreting equipment, so they can understand and participate in everything that’s going on at all times. This method is also called *two-way* or *bidirectional interpreting*.

In the first three scenarios, English dominance is assumed, and a lack of skills in English is seen as a “problem” or “handicap” that re-marginalizes a person who does not use the dominant language. In the final scenario, neither English nor Spanish is privileged, and both are considered of equal value. Those who don’t use or understand both are able to participate fully through interpreting equipment and skilled interpreters. There is no interruption to the flow of communication; presentations, questions/answers, and conversations can take place in real time dynamic exchanges. An additional advantage of this last scenario is that it can give monolingual speakers of dominant languages a chance to engage constructively with ideas around language dominance, and any sense of entitlement they may have.

## **NUTS AND BOLTS OF BUILDING A MULTILINGUAL SPACE WITH EQUITABLE COMMUNICATION**

A multilingual space organized around equitable communication is a group setting that is intentionally structured to incorporate two or more languages, and therefore cultures, in all aspects of the group process. These aspects include, but are not limited to:

- \* the language participants choose to use in the group
- \* languages used by the facilitators and/or presenters
- \* production of written materials in all languages, including articles, handouts, notes, and visual materials like slides or flipcharts
- \* inclusion of cultural references and customs from each cultural group in the room

You might be thinking this all sounds great—but complicated! How in the world might you achieve a multilingual space? With a little thoughtful advance planning, and awareness of language justice resources in your own community, it’s actually fairly straightforward.

*Prior to the meeting or event:*

- \* **Plan ahead of time** with people who have experience building equitable cross-language communication. Work to identify these individuals in your own community and **build a relationship** with them. Language justice is a movement, and we need to be connected to each other.
- \* Make a commitment to **allocate resources** for providing skilled interpreters. While there is no set pay scale for interpreters, and many of us work on a sliding scale that includes pro bono or solidarity work, it is important to value our work and to respect the years of training and experience that it takes to become a capable interpreter.
- \* Note: **bilingual people need training and experience** to become skilled interpreters! While it is true that you cannot be a strong interpreter without being bilingual, simply being bilingual does not automatically make a person an interpreter. Many bilingual and bicultural individuals are put in the position of interpreter before they are ready, either as children or in settings where they may be the only bilingual person. Before anyone interprets, they need to learn about the techniques and strategies that help interpreters do good work. In instances where skilled, experienced interpreters are not available for an event, a potential solution is to offer interpreter training for any bilingual people who will be providing interpretation at the event. There are numerous educators and curricula available for this kind of skills-building work.
- \* Locate **interpreting equipment or the appropriate tech for remote interpreting**. Begin to develop a list of people in your local community who have equipment and are willing to lend or rent it out. Professional interpreters or interpreting agencies often make their equipment available for rental, but it tends to be inaccessible to those on a limited budget. It's likely that social justice interpreters or language justice workers locally will have access to equipment, or will know organizations that might be willing to lend or rent their equipment at reasonable prices. Our collectives, like many language justice organizers around the U.S., use the very economical Smartbug, which has multiple channels (up to 9 simultaneously), easily replaceable receivers, and excellent sound quality. Other language justice workers have recommended more expensive equipment like Williams Sound or Sennhauser, which also provide great quality and increased durability.
- \* Allocate ample **time and resources for translation of all materials** prior to the event—flyers and publicity materials, PowerPoint slides, handouts, training materials—absolutely any written texts that will accompany a meeting or event. Often, this means preparing documents ahead of time, weeks in advance. Hiring skilled translators is a crucial part of this effort. Ideally you'll develop relationships with translators in your community, so the lines of communication will be open when translators have questions about particular terms or ideas in the texts they are translating. Planning ahead is key; most translators charge more for quick turnaround and often it takes a few back-and-forth exchanges to get all the details right in a translated document.

- \* Translation efforts are strengthened if there is a commitment to translating **documents originally written in both languages**; translating only materials from a dominant to a non-dominant language risks sending a message that only things written in dominant languages might be of value. Making sure all materials are translated sends the message that everyone is entitled to access the same information
- \* Note: **bilingual people need training and experience** to become skilled translators! All too often, written translation is done from dominant into non-dominant languages by machines, or by any person available who has some access to a non-dominant language, regardless of whether that person has any experience whatsoever with translation. This leads to translations that read poorly or that are entirely unreadable. If you prefer to work with a bilingual person who is already a part of your organization or community yet does not have translation experience, invest in education or mentorship for that person so they can learn some tricks of the trade.
- \* Create **strategies for doing outreach and publicity** in communities that communicate in the languages represented at the event. Well-translated texts are especially crucial to this effort. Without good, solid outreach, it's likely that you'll arrive to your event and there will be only a few people, if any, who do not speak the dominant language.
- \* As you are planning the event, make sure that **presenters and facilitators will communicate in all languages represented** at the event—not just the dominant language. We recommend beginning the event with a presentation that is not in the dominant language, so that everyone present (perhaps especially the dominant-language speakers) will immediately receive the message that this event is truly multilingual. As much as possible, all languages should be used from the front of the room throughout the event.
- \* Create a space that **welcomes bilingual or multilingual folks to use the non-dominant language** during the event. Often bilingual people are used to defaulting to the dominant language. This is partially because communicating in a non-dominant language is often misread as a sign of inferiority or inability. Part of language justice work is the creation of a space where bilingual people can feel equally free to use both languages. This experience can be transformative for everyone—for bilingual people, who will have the chance to inhabit their right to communicate in a non-dominant language without that choice being seen as evidence of a deficiency, and for non-bilingual people, who will have the opportunity to experience their bilingual comrades thinking and communicating as their full selves.

*Specific plans for interpreting prior to the meeting or event:*

- \* If the interpreters will not be using their own equipment, make sure they have a chance to **familiarize themselves with the equipment** prior to the beginning of the event.
- \* Make sure there is an **organized system for handing out equipment and retrieving it** at the end of the event. Usually, interpreting equipment is numbered so it's easily

identifiable. As you are handing it out to people, make a list with the number of the item being checked out next to the person's name and cell phone number (or the number of a friend who is also at the event), so you can find any errant equipment after the event. We discourage asking for ID; no one should have to "show their papers" to attend your event.

- \* **Interpreters work with a partner** for jobs longer than 30-45 minutes. Experienced, skilled interpreters are rarely willing to work alone, and should never be expected to do so. Interpreters work with partners so that we can provide the most accurate, excellent interpretation at all times. We usually switch interpreters approximately every 20 minutes. The person who is not interpreting still has important language justice work to do: helping participants who might need new batteries in their receivers or who need help figuring out how to use the equipment, looking up specialized terms for the person who is interpreting, and helping to make sure that speakers remain aware that they need to speak slowly and clearly so that the interpreter can understand them.
- \* Will your event have break-out groups? If so, keep in mind that you'll need **at least one interpreter for each break-out group**. A common strategy is to have break-out groups divided by language, but this can have the effect of isolating language groups and preventing the flow of ideas and experiences from one to another. If break-out sessions will be longer than about an hour, you'll need to provide two interpreters for each session. Break-out sessions can be a great chance for interpreters-in-training to get more experience in a lower-pressure setting.
- \* **Provide interpreters a copy of the agenda and all written materials** to be used during the workshop at least 48 hours in advance, in both/all languages.
- \* **Put the interpreters in touch with the facilitators/presenters** so they can go over best practices for working with interpreters.
- \* Provide the interpreters with **a copy of any previously written texts** presenters will read, at least 48 hours in advance.
- \* Provide the interpreters with **a copy of any slide presentation(s)** at least 48 hours in advance, in both/all languages.
- \* Let the interpreters know at least two weeks in advance **if any presenter plans to share songs, video, poems or other literary texts**, so they can locate a previously translated version of the piece, or create a translation (if there is budget for that process). Otherwise, let presenters know that these materials won't be interpreted.

*During the meeting or event:*

- \* Arrange the space so as to facilitate language justice. This means that **anyone can sit anywhere they please**, regardless of language.

- \* Make sure there is a **visible and easily accessible place for interpreting equipment near the entrance** to the room. This is important so that everyone sees the equipment and immediately gets the message that multiple languages will be used during the event.
- \* Post designated people near the interpreting equipment to welcome attendees, to explain the languages that will be used during the event, and to **invite everyone who does not communicate in all the languages in the room to take equipment**. (Note: there is no need to ask people what languages they use or force the equipment on them; it is up to each person to do whatever feels best to them.)
- \* Leave five minutes or so for the interpreters to offer a **language justice announcement at the beginning of an event** to explain how interpreting will work and the roles everyone can play in creating a multilingual space. During this time, provide a volunteer to help hand out interpreting equipment.
- \* Be aware of how you can **help the interpreters create and maintain a multilingual space**. Please be mindful to: 1) Suggest that all participants not comfortable in the languages actively being used wear the interpreting equipment 2) Remind presenters/facilitators who are not conversant in both/all languages actively being used to wear the interpreting equipment throughout the event. We recommend keeping the earpiece on and just lowering the volume on the receiver until a participant with whom they don't share a language begins to speak. 3) Remind presenters and participants to speak slowly and clearly when presenting, asking questions or making remarks. 4) Be aware of the signs the interpreters might be making to ask the speaker to speak more slowly or more loudly.
- \* **Leave time at the end of the event for returning equipment**, and make sure the final speaker reminds people to return their equipment. Also, help the interpreters or designate volunteers to help collect all the interpreting equipment!

*After the meeting or event:*

- \* **Evaluate** how things went. Talk with your interpreters to see how they felt. Talk with people who used the equipment during the meeting to get their impressions of the experience. Often participants have questions or important feedback about the process. This can also be a good chance to talk with people about why language justice is important.
- \* **Include language justice in your internal debrief conversations**. Did everyone present participate as fully as possible? What worked well in terms of cross-language communication? What could have been improved?
- \* **Celebrate** your accomplishment! Creating language justice is not always easy. When things go well, remember to celebrate.

## **A WORLD WITH LANGUAGE JUSTICE IS POSSIBLE**

Now that we've outlined some of the nuts and bolts strategies of building multilingual space, let's return to our vision that seemed unimaginable—but in fact is crucially important for us to imagine, and to work toward: a world with language justice.

It would be a world with room for multiple languages to operate at all levels of society: from the kitchen table to the community meeting to the art museum to the City Council or even the legislature. A world where a vast range of languages could coexist. A world where social structures would not be based on the dominance of one language over all others. A world where children do not have to choose between the language of their families and the language of the society around them. A world where there is no shame around communicating in a non-dominant language. A world where interpreting and translation are cherished and valued as critical tools for opening communication. A world where those tools are available to everyone regardless of economic power. A world with language justice is a world where not just many languages, but also many cultures can coexist. And there can only be language justice if racial injustice and colonial domination truly become things of the past.

In this world, training would be available for young people interested in interpreting, translation and language work more generally. In this world, no one would die in hospitals because of a lack of medical interpreters. Bilingual or multilingual people would feel free to speak whatever language they choose. Knowing the dominant language would not mean being forced to speak in that language in all public settings. Speaking non-dominant languages in public would not be evidence of inferiority or inability; rather, it would be a right of all people, and, at every turn, multilingualism would be celebrated, not suppressed. Eventually, the dominant language would cease to dominate.

We think the world could benefit from more languages and less war. More difference and less homogeneity. No more killing people and ecosystems; no more killing languages.

Our vision dreams beyond nations. So we imagine a hemisphere—Turtle Island, as some Indigenous peoples call it—with no borders and no national languages. We see the end of the nation state as vital to the creation of a world of autonomous communities making their own decisions about resources and language. We have a vision of a hemisphere where all languages and communication among them are supported with resources. A hemisphere that values its indigenous cultures and languages by working against their extinction and acknowledging their centrality. A hemisphere that values its immigrant cultures and languages and works for the inclusion of all languages at every level of society.

This grand vision might seem lofty and impossible. Yet in fact, language justice work is about manifesting this powerful and joyous vision today, in small and significant ways, to create the world that we want to experience. If we don't create the world as we want to live it, then it won't exist for us to inhabit. By no means do we have all the answers, but we have some ideas.

## **INTO THE FUTURE! ONGOING WAYS TO SUPPORT LANGUAGE JUSTICE**

Now that you know what language justice is and how it works, we hope you are as excited as we are to build it! There are many things you can do to actively support the creation of multilingual spaces.

- \* When you are in a space where multiple languages are present, stand up for language justice. Consider the space and think about how different languages are being used (or not used). Is one language dominating the conversation? Are folks who use non-dominant languages segregated in one area? Are bilingual or multilingual people defaulting to the dominant language constantly? Which non-spoken languages are present? Are any strategies being used to bridge language differences? If not, perhaps you could have a conversation after the event to encourage organizers to re-think their strategies. A friendly, helpful conversation can go a long way.
- \* Language justice work is long-term work! Keep bringing it up. Wherever you are. In museums, art spaces, community meetings, performances and more. Most of us now live in communities or work in organizations where multiple languages are used. How can you use some of the tools of language justice to further conversations and organizing work across language differences? Does your local neighborhood organization interpret meetings? Translate their written materials? Include facilitators or presenters who communicate in a non-dominant language? Start conversations wherever you go about the importance of language justice and the strategies available to build it.
- \* If you use more than one language fluently and you're interested in learning more about interpreting, make an effort to increase your knowledge and skills. There is a wealth of information available regarding numerous kinds of interpreting for different endeavors: medical, legal, diplomatic, governmental, social justice, etc. Make a commitment to learn about interpreting and seek out more information. Remember that no one is born with these skills; it takes hard work and patience, but the work is very important, and very rewarding.
- \* If you're already practicing interpreting and want to think more about language justice, commit to learning more about what it takes to create multilingual spaces. There are numerous educators and curricula available; see the end of this pamphlet for more info.

## **WANT TO TALK MORE? NEED SUPPORT BUILDING LANGUAGE JUSTICE?**

Antena Aire does language justice work nationally and internationally alongside our sister collectives Antena Houston and Antena Los Angeles, as part of a larger language justice ecosystem in the U.S. and beyond. We would love to be in touch to support you in building multilingual spaces or put you in touch with local groups doing that work in your area, and we want to know if you have questions about *How To Build Language Justice* or additions to this guide. Our email address is [antenaaire@gmail.com](mailto:antenaaire@gmail.com) and our website is [www.antenaantena.org](http://www.antenaantena.org).

## APPRECIATIONS

We would not have been able to develop our analysis and practice of language justice if it weren't for the amazing work of others who have experimented and innovated in this field. Specifically, we draw heavily on the work of a small but expanding network of social justice interpreters and organizers in the U.S. and in other countries, who are committed to language justice and to building multilingual spaces. Some of our most fundamental learning around language justice has occurred through conversations and shared work with Pancho Argüelles Paz y Puente, Andrea Arias, maría alexandra garcía and Telesh López (former members of what used to be Caracol Language Coop), Tony Macías, Alena Uliasz, Ada Volkmer, Nikki Marín Baena, Comal Collective, and Catalina Nieto, along with the foundational work of Alice Johnson and Roberto Tijerina, both of whom were instrumental in developing workshops, trainings, and practices around language justice in their work with the legendary Highlander Research and Education Center. Some of the examples of linguisticism at the beginning of this pamphlet originate in an activity from an interpreter training curriculum co-created by Antena Los Ángeles and California Rural Legal Assistance. Our work would be impossible without our compañerxs in the amazing local sister collectives of Antena Houston and Antena Los Ángeles. In Houston, that's Silvia Chicas, José Eduardo Sanchez, and Hannah Thalenberg. In LA, it's Angé, Betty Marín, Ana Paula Noguez Mercado, Katja Schatte, and Alexia Veytia-Rubio.

## \*\* RESOURCES

Quoted material in our examples of language dominance, in the order it appears, comes from:

- \* Andrapalliyal, Vinita. "The CPS Took My Baby Away: Threats to Immigrant Parental Rights and a Proposed Federal Solution." *Harvard Law and Policy Review*, vol. 7 p. 173: 2013.
- \* Hellerstein, Erica. "Non-English speakers struggle to file coronavirus unemployment claims." CalMatters, April 2, 2020.  
[https://calmatters.org/california-divide/2020/04/non-english-speakers-struggle-unemployment-applications/?fbclid=IwAR1rGyiKK9\\_Dbw8cVDwEQ4aC1aqJIUZvYrDqjWGQV\\_I-dFLrZ-GJ2LmnBKQ](https://calmatters.org/california-divide/2020/04/non-english-speakers-struggle-unemployment-applications/?fbclid=IwAR1rGyiKK9_Dbw8cVDwEQ4aC1aqJIUZvYrDqjWGQV_I-dFLrZ-GJ2LmnBKQ)
- \* Kaplan, Joshua. "Hospitals Have Left Many COVID-19 Patients Who Don't Speak English Alone, Confused and Without Proper Care." ProPublica, March 31, 2020.  
<https://www.propublica.org/article/hospitals-have-left-many-covid19-patients-who-dont-speak-english-alone-confused-and-without-proper-care>

Like us, our companions in the larger language justice ecosystem are committed to the open-source sharing of materials. We've borrowed freely from some of their language in creating this pamphlet, and encourage you, in turn, to use our language to further your own purposes.



- \* Antena Los Angeles resources for facilitators and organizers building multilingual space and for interpreters working (on-site and remotely) within the language justice framework  
<http://antenalosangeles.org/resources/>
- \* Catalina Nieto's Language Justice Tips for Virtual Events  
[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LqsCavaFK5VTATcIv\\_Zl4gMXpo6yXPJg/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LqsCavaFK5VTATcIv_Zl4gMXpo6yXPJg/view?usp=sharing)
- \* *Interpretation and Translation: Power Tools for Sharing Power in Grassroots Leadership Development*, by Alice Johnson. PDF available at:  
[http://www.intergroupresources.com/rc/Interpretation\\_and\\_Translation.pdf](http://www.intergroupresources.com/rc/Interpretation_and_Translation.pdf)
- \* The Language Justice Circle of the Center for Participatory Change in Asheville, North Carolina, focuses on developing the capacity of interpreters, translators and language justice workers to create multilingual movement spaces, build analysis, and develop and deepen relationships. More info at: <https://www.cpcwnc.org/interpreter-training/>.
- \* The Language Justice Circle of the Center for Participatory Change also has a Youtube Channel with a super helpful Online Interpreter Training Course and Interpreter Skill-Building Videos: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHTYbNa89UUy87NYrDtzuPw>
- \* The Language of Justice | El lenguaje de la justicia, a multimedia oral history project celebrating language justice and multilingual spaces, curated by Allison Corbett.  
<https://langjust.com/>
- \* Se Ve Se Escucha (Seen and Heard) is a podcast by the Center for Participatory Change about language justice and what it means to be an interpreter, an organizer and bilingual in the U.S. South. Links for listening at: <https://www.seveseescucha.com/>
- \* *What Did They Say? A Social Change Interpreter Curriculum*, by Roberto Tijerina. PDF available at: <http://www.intergroupresources.com/rc/Highlander%20curric.pdf>

## COLOPHON

Antena Aire (originally Antena) is a language justice and language experimentation collaborative founded in 2010 by Jen Hofer and JD Pluecker, both of whom are writers, artists, literary translators, bookmakers and activist interpreters. We view our aesthetic practice as part and parcel of our language justice work. Antena Aire activates links between social justice work and artistic practice by exploring how critical views on language can help us to reimagine and rearticulate the worlds we inhabit.

*How To Build Language Justice* was written collaboratively by Antena Aire in a 1923 Sears & Roebuck kit barn on the estate of Edna St. Vincent Millay in Austerlitz, NY, in Summer 2013. Gratitude to Tony Macías and Roberto Tijerina for their attentive reading and astute comments and to the Millay Colony for the Arts for the space to articulate our ever-under-construction

ideas. The cover design for the Antena Aire pamphlet series is by Jorge Galván Flores. The Spanish translation of this updated version was created by Alexia Veytia-Rubio and Jen Hofer.

This pamphlet is a publication of Libros Antena Books. It was first distributed in 2014 as part of the installation Antena @ Blaffer at The Blaffer Museum at the University of Houston, curated by Amy Powell with Antena Aire.

When we originally published it, we intended this text as a guide for building multilingual spaces in any community, organization or movement. Since that time, our language justice practices have expanded exponentially, primarily in our work with Antena Aire's local sister collectives—Antena Houston and Antena Los Angeles—and the many community partners we're grateful to build multilingual space with in our daily lives. We've also deepened our understanding of ways to articulate the impacts of language oppression, as well as some of the key ethical concepts and practical strategies interpreters use to be able to most effectively support cross-language communication.

We decided to update *How To Build Language Justice* in 2020 to incorporate aspects of what we've learned in working with Antena Houston and Antena Los Angeles, borrowing some nuts-and-bolts language from the Antena Los Angeles Checklist for Building Multilingual Spaces, which is linked in the Resources section. In 2020, we find ourselves in a different world than we were in 2014, and surely by the time you read this, the world will have shifted many times again. You'll notice this guide is written for a time when we can organize, interpret, and interact in proximity to others in physical space. We hope such a time will come again; meanwhile, we have included a number of resources for equitable communication in remote gatherings in the Resources section.

Language justice and racial justice are knitted together inextricably. As our skill and flexibility with language justice practices have expanded over the years we've worked together, we've deepened and sharpened our critique of the language justice ecosystem we love intensely and have helped to create, in relation to the dominance of colonial-language interpreters (English < > Spanish primarily, in our experience and orbits) as well as the ways BIPOC interpreters have historically not been effectively welcomed into this work. If language justice is a framework where everyone is truly invited to show up as their full selves, the most urgent question for our movement right now, and for us specifically as white language justice activists, is how both our intentional, politicized presence and our intentional, politicized absence can contribute to uplifting the perspectives, presence and leadership of BIPOC language justice practitioners. We know there is more work to be done, and we know we are not the people to do that work in every instance and every context, just as we know we cannot abdicate the labor that belongs to us, the labor of undoing white supremacy and undermining white privilege in every way we know how and in the ways we cannot yet imagine and are working to conjure. We ask ourselves daily, concretely, creatively, spiritually: what are we willing to do to end white supremacy? What are we willing to give up? What are we willing to take on? Our evolving responses to those questions are our lifelong challenge, and are manifest in our approach to language justice.