

Affirming Writing: Indigenous Communities

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- This handout aims to be a tool for TAs and instructors who want to teach students how to write about languages spoken by indigenous communities in an affirming way.
- This handout presents sample texts about languages spoken by indigenous communities or about indigenous communities themselves that are not written in an affirming way. The problems of each text are discussed and some alternatives to improve the text are suggested.

Sample 1

- The first sample is an excerpt from an article titled “10 weird languages exist today”. The article is taken from *Optilingo*, an English-written blog that contains articles on several topics about second language learning.
- The article lists ten languages that have features which are either not present or are uncommon for English and other Indo-European languages. The excerpt presented below is about Pirahã, a language spoken in the Amazonas state in Brazil:

Spoken by the Pirahã people in Brazil, this regional language has no words for colors or numbers. This may be difficult or impossible to imagine for us. Luckily, Pirahã has alternatives. Instead of specific colors like “red” and “purple,” they describe it as shades, “light” and “dark.” When they discuss numbers and amounts, they identify objects as either “many” or a “few.” - It may seem like a challenging concept for outsiders, but for those who speak the language, they’re able to communicate clearly without difficulty. Pirahã is also less complicated than other weird languages. It only has between ten and twelve sounds. Sometimes people resort to communication through humming and whistling to make it even more simplistic. (Optilingo n/d)

Problems with Sample 1:

- The text claims some linguistic properties (like the lack of adjectives as a grammatical category or the preference for quantifiers over numerals) are “Difficult or impossible to imagine” or “challenging for outsiders”, assuming that other languages (in this case, English) are easier to learn or have features that are easier to imagine or conceive.
- Saying that despite having certain properties, speakers of the language “[are] able to communicate clearly without difficulty” makes a wrong association between the presence or lack of some linguistic features to the possibility of them causing a communication barrier.

- It considers a language to be “weird” if it has or lacks certain linguistic features. It does not consider, however, the possibility that those features can be common cross-linguistically even if they are not present in Indo-European languages. **Alternative:** “weird language” can be substituted for “a language with a feature/property X that is not common cross-linguistically”.
- Uses words that reflect the writer’s personal opinion/feeling about the topic but does not add any relevant content to the text and can be derogatory. For instance, the author wrote “Luckily, Pirahã has alternatives” as if the characteristics of Pirahã under discussion were problematic. Another example is the use of the word “simplistic” when referring to the short vowel and consonant inventory of the language, when it can be better described simply as a “short sound inventory”.

Sample 2

- The second sample is taken from the abstract of an article titled “The Indo-Europeanist Model of Sound Change and Genetic Affinity, and Change in Exotic Languages”.

Though, in European language families, sound change is for the most part governed by rules that can be precisely formulated, several exotic groups (as, for instance, the Arantic family of Australia and the Papuan Kate group examined here) appear to behave differently. At least, this conclusion must be drawn from the sound shapes of semantically comparable items in each of the groups. The languages of each group differ etymologically to a greater extent than do interrelated European languages, whereas the etymologically related items (the cognates) display very few regular sound correspondences. [...] (Boretzky 1984).

Problems with Sample 2:

- The title and the text exoticize languages not spoken in Europe, communities considered isolated from the European point of view, and languages that have features that are not common in languages spoken in Europe or languages that have been documented/studied more. **Alternative:** Take out “exotic groups/languages”. Refer to the specific languages in question: “languages from the Arantic family of Australia” and “the Papuan Kate group”.
- It assumes languages spoken in Europe have properties that can be described and accounted for easily, as opposed to non-European languages. **Alternative:** *Sound change of X has been well described/accounted for in a series of languages spoken in Europe through rule A and B. The same phenomenon does not seem to occur in the same way in languages from the Arantic family the Papuan Kate group or cannot be accounted for by the same rules.*

Sample 3:

- The third sample is from the Preface to the book *Otomí de San Andrés Cuexcontitlán, Estado de México*.

The IIISEO had the goal to integrate indigenous people to the country's modern life, providing them with technical and humanistic education that was adequate to the necessities of diverse regions. To spread this education throughout the state, they trained personnel at different levels [...] (Garza, Lastra and Ruiz de Bravo 1989 p. 7. Translation is Virgilio's).*

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Problems with sample 4:

- Its perspective is that indigenous communities must be integrated to the life of people living in the cities or that activities done in rural communities have to change according to what is considered "modern" in urban areas. **Alternative:** *Provide the opportunity for people living in indigenous communities to have access to education that is focused on the necessities of their region.*

Sample 4:

- The fourth example are the names of two courses offered in the Linguistics program at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa, Ciudad de México, Mexico. The names are taken from the course list:

2255376 *Description and Analysis of an Indigenous Language I*

2255377 *Description and Analysis of an Indigenous Language II*

(UAM-Iztapalapa. División de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades (n/d), p. 3)

Problems with sample 4:

- "Indigenous Language" is too general in this context because the language (and language family) that is studied is different every academic year.
- It focuses on the fact that it is not a class about Spanish grammar, instead of focusing on the particular methodology that is taught (Fieldwork). **Alternative:** The courses can be renamed "Fieldwork I and II" or "Field Methods I and II".

Other terminology that is not precise:

- "indigenous language speaker". **Alternative** → specify the language in question: "Pirahã speaker", just as you would do with other languages like "English speaker".
- "an indigenous language spoken in Central America" **Alternative** → specify the language or family in question: "a Arantic language spoken in Australia".

General suggestions:

- Remember the term “indigenous” does not refer to a language or group of languages and is not informative of their linguistic features or characteristics. It has meaning only within and geographical and historical context.
- A good practice when writing about an indigenous community or the language they speak specify the name of the community, the name of the language and the language family, just as you would do if you were writing about other community or language (e.g. English).
- It is always important to do research or to ask a member of the community that is working with you/that you are writing about how they refer to their people, culture and language. Sometimes, the term “indigenous” or names that are used by other people/cultures to refer to a particular community or language are not well received by the community itself and, in some cases, can be derogatory.

References

- Boretzky, N. (1984) “The Indo-Europeanist Model of Sound Change and Genetic Affinity, and Change in Exotic Languages”. *Diachronica*, 1(1), p. 1-51.
- Garza, B., Lastra, Y., and Ruiz de Bravo, G. (1989) “Preface”. In *Otomí de San Andrés Cuexcontitlán, Estado de México*. México: El Colegio de México (pp. 7-9)
- Optilingo Blog (n/d). “10 weird languages exist today”. Retrieved from <https://www.optilingo.com/blog/general/10-weird-languages-exist-today/>
- UAM-Iztapalapa. División de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades (n/d). *Plan de Estudios de la Licenciatura en Lingüística*. Retrieved from <http://www.csh-iztapalapa.uam.mx/licenciaturas/linguistica/>