



# Language (r)evolution: gendered, gender-less, gender-neutral, gender-free

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Some time ago I made a small, informal investigation among my friends who work in the European youth field. They are trainers, researchers, consultants, counsellors and activists. I asked them a few questions that were supposed to prove how important language (written, spoken or sign) is in our work in the youth field. I would like to share three of those questions with you, and please, take a moment to reflect on them, following each question with "why?".

"Have you ever assumed who the participants in your group are?"  
 "Have you ever thought about who reads your articles or reports?"  
 "Have you ever taken for granted the person who answers the questions you prepare?"



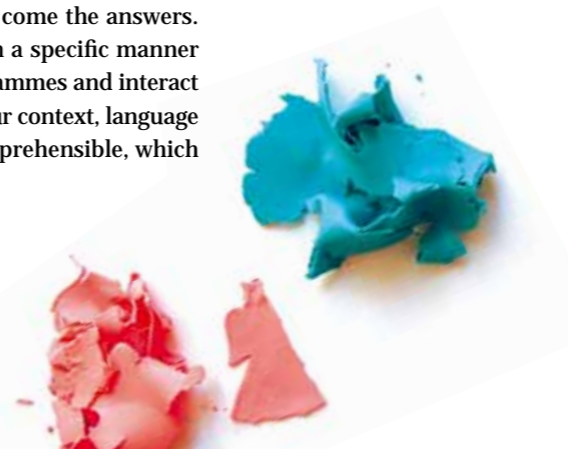
Ready? Good! In case you wonder why I asked you to do this exercise, here come the answers. I find it crucial because the fact that we assume, take for granted or think in a specific manner significantly influences the way we communicate, write, design training programmes and interact with others. In short, it has tremendous impact on our language. To put it in our context, language is very often a tool determining whether we are inclusive, accessible and comprehensible, which are some of the main goals of people involved in the youth field.



## That is why I believe that the youth field needs a language (r)evolution!

It has been quite a while since a debate regarding gender-neutral language was initiated. It has many different elements and it addresses a variety of issues. However, it is not only about making genderless and inclusive titles for different professions, such as "chairperson" instead of "chairman". If we looked at our languages a bit closer, we would realise that most of them are very gendered as they are based on the binary gender system that we live in. It means that they only recognise two genders: "male" and "female". Consequently, we communicate using this system and we might go through life without realising that. And everything would have been perfect, if it did not exclude all other people who may not fit the binary categorisations.

Now, one of the potential questions that some of you may have is: "How do I speak or write then?" We managed to advance our communication from using only the male form as the default one, so that nowadays we use "he/she" together to make sure everyone is included. I think we should take a step further! This is not as complicated as it may seem. It all depends on the situation that one is in. In writing, for instance, you can use three different pronouns (he/she/zie) when talking about people in general or people you do not know. The same strategy would be highly appreciated when addressing your readers, as you cannot know who reads your articles, and you do not exclude anyone. *Coyote* has already tried it out and it only added quality to the publication (*Coyote* No. 16, p. 44).





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During training programmes or speeches we also need to make sure that everyone is addressed and that we speak to everyone in the room. To make it a bit more tangible I will give you an example from an event I took part in. It was 2009, Budapest at the Forum on Human Rights Education organised by the Youth Department of the Council of Europe. As you can imagine there were quite a few opening speeches and people addressing the participants. Speech after speech after speech – one could say there was nothing unexpected about them. I was sitting there whispering to my colleague when, suddenly, I heard, “ladies, gentlemen and others”. I stopped gossiping to the person next to me, I raised my head and tried to figure out who was the person speaking to me and others who do not consider themselves as “men” or “women”. As it turned out it was Antonia Wulff, the chairperson of the Advisory Council on Youth at that time. As you can imagine, Antonia had my undivided attention during her speech. One may say: “Yes, great, but probably not everyone in the room understood it!” Probably this person is correct in saying that

there were many people who did not understand the reason behind using such an expression. However, what was and is the most important in such situations is that people who are addressed by such inclusive language understand and hear it. It makes an amazing impact and difference. I think it is time to start discussing it and start using it more. It’s high time for (r)evolution!

Reactions to it vary depending on the context, country, group, culture and so on. There are sometimes extremely different and opposing opinions to the proposed changes, from euphoric and positive reactions emphasising inclusion and the ability of everyone to participate, to negative opinions foreseeing the great fall of languages as we know them. The crucial element of the discussion on gender-neutral or gender-sensitive language is that it is not about getting rid of the two existing personal pronouns “he” and “she”, while it sometimes is misunderstood as such. It is about using one more, “zie”, in order to recognise gender diversity in our societies and to enhance participation and inclusion.



As trainers, youth workers, researchers and people who work with young people we need to realise that we do not only work with girls and boys, women and men. We work with young people who have a variety of identities, experiences and backgrounds. Our language can easily be gender-free so that it does not assume, does not label and does not exclude. It is so easy to speak about “partners” instead of “boyfriends” or “girlfriends”, or “parents” instead of “mothers” or “fathers”. We just need to be aware of it. Not only is such language inclusive of transgender persons, but also those who may live in different family structures than us, are in a different relationship than us or are of different gender identity than us. Everyone is different.

A person using a wheelchair. It is also about, for instance, our power points, amount and size of the text on each slide, colours and sounds. Making an activity accessible means also that everyone in a group is provided with proper meals, even if they are vegetarian or vegan. Accessibility is about paying attention that everyone in a group can take an active part in an activity. I believe that we, trainers, should actively discuss and challenge our competences and skills, and at the same time ask ourselves what we do to make our activities accessible for all. Language and gender awareness, discussed in this short article, are just two elements of many which are needed to make trainers even better and for young people to enjoy their activities even more.

To support this, one has to bring up what has been already discussed in *Coyote*, “gender is a key factor in the distribution of power, privileges and possibilities, which effects progress towards equality in societies.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the next step in reaching equality and inclusion is to make the gender discussion wider and not focus only on men and women, as they are not the only representatives of our societies.

### I think *Coyote* plays an important role here.

Can you imagine how amazing it would be, if *Coyote* started to use regularly gender-sensitive, gender-neutral and gender-inclusive language? It would be the first magazine on European level targeting such a wide audience using inclusive language! It could, then, even influence different institutions, as people would become more and more used to the idea of gender-neutral language! This would be definitely the true beginning of (r)evolution! Who’s in?

All this is also connected with accessibility in a broader understanding, which is not only about physical access to, for instance, a training space by

<sup>1</sup> Gülesin Nemutlu, “Woman-i-sing the convention...or gendering it” in *Coyote* No. 16, p. 45.