Scuola Normale Superiore
Guide to the use of expansive language

Poi mi sono accorto che la diversità è un concetto e non un'entità fisica, e in quanto concetto ha tre caratteristiche: è formata da parole, è modificabile e contribuisce a dare forma alla realtà.

I then realised that diversity is a concept and not a physical entity, and that, being a concept, it has three characteristics: it is formed of words, it is modifiable and it contributes to giving form to reality.

Fabrizio Acanfora, *In altre parole. Dizionario minimo di diversità* Florence, effequ, 2021

Introduction

The Scuola Normale repudiates every form of discrimination and is committed to the promotion, within its community and beyond, of all those actions, initiatives and forms of good practice that aid in the enhancement of individual and cultural diversity and that work towards an open, fair and welcoming atmosphere.[1]

Communication plays a full part in this system of actions, in that it is a conveyor of information and content that need to be accessible to as many people as possible, in an attempt to break down potential language and cultural barriers and combat ableist attitudes; it is also a channel for representation – as wide and inclusive as possible – and for relationship.

The language (verbal and visual) that we use includes or excludes, renders visible or invisible, recognises or ignores, reproduces or triggers relational dynamics. For this reason it is important for the entire community to use it with awareness, thus contributing actively to the construction and protection of a welcoming space.

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[1] *«Each member of our community has the right to be treated with respect and not to be submitted to discrimination for such factors as their religion, gender, sexual orientation, personal convictions, physical aspect, language, ethnic or social origins, citizenship, personal or health conditions, pregnancy, disabilities, family choices, age or university role» (Ethical Code of the Scuola Normale Superiore, p. 2).*

«To amend administrative texts, eliminating from them any discriminating language and ensuring – maybe even improving – their level of legibility and communicative efficaciousness, requires *something more* than good will».[2]

These guidelines, meant for all the components of the community of the Scuola Normale, aim to offer criteria, examples and concrete solutions for communicating in full respect for gender, ethnic origin, neurodiversity, culture, religion, ability, age, geographical and social provenance. The intention is not to prescribe rigid regulations but to provide tools to aid in forging relationships marked by fairness and openness.

Translator's note: since the English language is gender-neutral, the translation of some of the examples into English would be meaningless. For this reason some of the parts present in the Italian version have been omitted in the English version and different examples have been introduced.

1. General principles

Every communication, whether formal or informal, is an action that builds relationships; words are never neutral: they exclude, welcome, ignore, enhance. To use expansive language[3] means to break down communicative barriers and to recognise and represent the various identities and differing stances, making for wider and more efficacious communication, but also to encourage a sense of belonging to the community in all its members.

Suggestions:

- Focus on the person, not their condition or (real or presumed) appurtenance.
- Use inclusive or neutral expressions (if in the context it is not necessary to specify gender or any other identifying characteristic).
- Avoid stereotypes and stigmatising formulae.
- Reduce the use of technical and bureaucratic language.

Examples:

– Instead of: "The disabled may apply" → "Those with disabilities may apply"

– Instead of: "The lecturer must sign" → "The person holding the course must sign".

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[2] *Guidelines for the use of gender in the administrative language of the MIUR* (2018), p. 16. The italic is ours.

[3] In this document it was decided to adopt the expression "expansive language" (and "extensive communication") instead of "inclusive language". The choice is in response to a reflection on the term "inclusive", which, albeit arising from an intention to enhance plurality, may suggest the existence of a "regulatory centre" that admits/includes outsiders. To refer to expansive language, however, means to recognise from the outset the multiplicity of identities and experiences, to refuse to adopt central positions that concede acceptance, and to expand the discursive and relational space. Expansive language does not only strive towards the avoidance of exclusion; it works actively to broaden the horizons of representation and to encourage equality in communication.

- Instead of "Lecturers are required to take part" → "The lecturing staff is required to take part"

- Instead of "the citizen/the citizens" → "the citizenry", "the people", "the population", "those residing within the territory".

- Instead of "no later than the deadline of 15th inst., it will be possible to forward applications for recognition of CFUs" → "recognition of Crediti Formativi Universitari (University Training Credits) (CFUs) must be applied for by 15th April"

- Instead of "Foreign students must..." → "International students must..."

2. Gender and gender identity

The Italian language does not include a neuter gender and has historically adopted the masculine gender to designate mixed gender groups, but also – for cultural and social reasons – to define certain titles and professions (*Avvocato, Ministro, Ingegnere, Cavaliere del lavoro…*), independently of the fact that over time persons assigned female have also gained the prerogative. In recent decades, however, the changes in cultural and social stereotype brought about through the feminist movements has prompted reflection on the overextended use of the masculine gender[4] and an attempt to overturn the trend, including in institutional communication.[5]

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[4] By "overextended masculine gender" we mean the use of the masculine gender to refer to groups that include or may include those assigned female or non-binary people

[5] In the context of public communication, the question was first brought to the fore in Italy in a systematic and critical manner by Alma Sabatini in *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana (Sexism in the Italian language)* (1987), promoted by the Commissione Nazionale per la realizzazione della parità tra uomo e donna (the National Commission for the achievement of gender equality) and by the Prime Minister's office. Alma Sabatini's proposals were introduced into the *Codice di stile delle comunicazioni scritte ad uso delle amministrazioni pubbliche* (Code of style in written communications for the use of public administrations), published by the Dipartimento per la Funzione Pubblica della Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (the Department for Public Administration of the Prime Minister's office) (1993) and subsequently in the *Manuale di Stile. Strumenti per semplificare il linguaggio delle amministrazioni pubbliche. Proposta e materiali di studio (the Style Manual. Tools for simplifying the language of public administration. Proposal and study materials)*, by Alfredo Fioritto (1997). An important reminder of the necessity to use non-discriminatory language subsequently came with the Directive of 23rd May 2007, *Misure per attuare parità e pari opportunità tra uomini e donne nelle amministrazioni pubbliche (Measures for establishing equality and equal opportunity for men and women in public administration)*, issued to establish Directive 2006/54/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council. A fundamental contribution to the revision of the language of Public Administration was Cecilia Robustelli's *Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo, Progetto genere e linguaggio. Parole e immagini della comunicazione (Guidelines for the use of gender in administrative language. Gender and language project. Words and images of communication)* (2012), produced in collaboration with the Accademia della Crusca and funded by the Tuscany Region, 2012. In 2018 the MIUR (the Ministry for Universities and Research) published the *Linee Guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo del MIUR (Guidelines for the use of gender in the administrative language of the MIUR)*, produced by a work group co-ordinated by Cecilia Robustelli.

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Almost all Italian universities have now adopted guidelines and handbooks encouraging the use of language that respects gender differences (although there is less widespread use of texts relating to the broader concept of expansive language), in the awareness that, by acknowledging gender identity in the words that we use, we are working towards overcoming prejudices, stereotypes and discrimination and promoting a culture of respect and the enhancement of differences.

Suggestions:

- Avoid the overextended use of the masculine gender.
- Alternate the feminine/masculine order, or use they/them/their
- For persons assigned female, use professional titles in the feminine form.
- Where it is not necessary to specify gender, opt for non-characterised formulae.

Examples:

- Instead of: "If the user requires help he should ask the assistant" " → "If the user requires help they (or she/he) should ask the assistant

- Instead of "The achievements of mankind" → "The achievements of humanity"

- Instead of "The chairman" → "The chair or the chairperson"

3. Sexual orientation and LGBTQIA+ identity

A welcoming communication avoids generalisations, respects an individual's self-identification and self-determination and uses terms that are up to date and correct.

Suggestions:

- Do not presume a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Recognise diversity without resorting to categories.
- Use the form "person + adjective".

Practical examples:

- Instead of: "Gays" → "LGBTQIA+ people".

- Instead of: "A trans" → "A trans person""

- Instead of: "the father and mother/the parents" → "the family"

4. Disabilities

To speak of disability means to adopt a perspective focussed on the person and the context, avoiding reductive labels, euphemisms and condescending formulae. The words that we use can dismantle stereotypes and nurture a culture of dignity, autonomy and respect.

Suggestions:

- Give priority to the person.
- Avoid euphemisms or pietisms.
- Use direct, precise and shared terms.
- Do not reduce a person to their condition.

Practical examples:

– Instead of: "The disabled" → "Persons with disabilities"

– Instead of: "Affected by blindness" → "Blind person" or "person with a visual disability".

– Instead of: "Confined to a wheelchair" → "A person who uses a wheelchair".

5. Accessibility

Everyone must be able to access information and make use of contents in a fair system. An accessible communication is one that takes into account the diverse sensorial, cognitive, linguistic and technological abilities and that adopts non-exclusive expedients.

Suggestions:

- Use clear and legible characters.
- Take care over the chromatic contrast between text and background.
- For images, insert captions into printed texts and alt texts on web sites and social channels.
- Do not transmit information solely via image files.
- Avoid tables with implantations.
- Use simple and direct language, avoiding useless technical terms.
- Avoid symbols not recognised by screen readers (such as ə).
- Avoid italics.
- Avoid justified text and opt for left alignment, which improves legibility.
- Avoid the excessive use of capitals, which may be difficult to decipher.
- Use adequate font sizes (at least 12-14 pt for main texts).
- Organise contents in an orderly and coherent manner (titles, lists, paragraphs).

Practical examples:

– Instead of: PDFs composed of images acquired without a selectable text → Use preferentially: accessible files with digital text compatible with voice readers.

– Instead of: "Click here" without a context → Write: "Further info/Read the call/Apply for the competition".

- Avoid the use of the schwa (ə) in official documents → Use preferentially: inclusive and accessible forms (doubling, collective nouns, impersonal nouns).

- Avoid fonts with narrow serifs (Times New Roman), irregular characters (Comic Sans) and `monospaced ones (Courier New)` → Use preferentially Arial, Verdana, Aptos, Helvetica, Avenir.

- Attach icons and visual maps to complex texts and instructions.

6. Neurodiversity and comprehensible language

University communication must take into account the multiplicity of ways of perceiving, processing and interacting with the world. Those displaying neurodiversity – including the autistic spectrum, ADHD, dyslexia and other atypical cognitive profiles – may encounter obstacles in the interpreting of certain communicative modes and hence may not have access to all the information.

To consider neurodiversity in language is not only a question of accessibility: it is a way of enhancing different forms of intelligence and participation. Clear communication encourages learning, collaboration and fairness.[6]

Suggestions:

- Use short, direct phrases in the active form.
- Avoid complex constructions with multiple parentheses or lengthy subordinate clauses.
- Limit the use of jargon, bureaucratic expressions and figurative language.
- Write acronyms and initials in full at the first mention and define technical terms.
- Clarify the key words of a discourse or a text.
- Use bulleted lists, short paragraphs and clear titles.
- Where possible, use visual diagrams, conceptual maps or diagrams that are an aid to organising the textual information.
- Avoid ambiguity in pronominal or temporal references.

Practical examples:

- Instead of: "Should the interested party, having submitted an application by the deadline but not having received confirmation…" → "If you have submitted an application by the deadline but have not received confirmation…".

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[6] Making the language of official documents more comprehensible to those with cognitive disabilities, or neurodiversity, is also useful for more efficacious communication with those whose mother tongue is not Italian. The Scuola Normale promotes bilingual communication (Italian/English), but some members of its community may possess an advanced level of competence in neither of the two languages; in this sense, the simplification of syntax and lexis also makes for easier access to information for those without an in-depth command of Italian or English.

- Instead of: "Feedback will be collected via the online from" → Write: "We will collect comments using an online form".

- Instead of: "The GEP has been submitted to the CUG" → "The Gender Equality Plan (GEP) has been submitted to the Comitato Unico di Garanzia (CUG)".

- Instead of: "The service is subject to the signing of a declaration of acknowledgement and acceptance of the conditions of use herein" → "To access the service you are required to sign an acceptance of the conditions of use indicated in this document".

7. Ethnic origin, provenance and skin colour

The way in which we refer to ethnic origin, geographical provenance or skin colour has a direct impact on the representation of individuals and of the community.

Reference to these factors is appropriate only when relevant, in specific contexts (such as research studies, statistical data or topics of inclusion), and never as a primary definition of the identity of a person. Any language should be avoided that generalises, simplifies or reduces the complexity of cultural, ethnic or migratory identities. It is important to favour the use of contextual descriptions, to avoid expressions that are exoticising or stigmatising, and not to presume the provenance or juridical status on the basis of appearance.

To promote respectful language in this context also means to avoid visual or cultural labelling and the reduction of individuals to their provenance, citizenship or ethnic categories.

Suggestions:

- Do not use "race" in a non-critical way or as a standard descriptive category.
- Avoid simplifications or homologising categories such as "Blacks", "Asians" or "Middle Eastern".
- Do not use stigmatising or obsolete terms such as "*extracomunitario*" used derogatorily to mean "immigrant", "illegal immigrant" ("*clandestino*") or "gypsy".
- Use contextual and neutral descriptions such as "persons of …...origin...", "persons with a migratory background" or "international students".
- Avoid references to provenance if unnecessary in the context (e.g. "the Senegalese colleague" in a phrase where nationality is irrelevant).

Practical examples:

- Instead of: "A foreign student" ("Uno studente extracomunitario") → "An international student" or "a student coming from a country not belonging to the EU" (only if this needs to be specified).

- Instead of: "Young black people → "Afro-descendent persons", "Persons of African origin" (depending on the context and the register).

- Instead of: "The Arab vendor" → "The vendor at the corner shop".

- Instead of: "An immigrant family" → "A family with a migratory background".

- Instead of: "A refugee" → "A person with refugee status" (first the person and then the status).

- Instead of: "The Ukrainian caregiver" → Write: "An assistance worker/a family assistant/a person who gives care in the home (“*coming from Ukraine” only if relevant*)".

8. Socio-economic condition

Language can help to banish the stigma linked to poverty, economic disadvantage or employment in sectors considered "humble". When we speak about people in a disadvantaged economic situation, we need to avoid reducing them to their condition, and to recognise the social and structural context in which the situation plays out; the same goes for the way in which we refer to those professions that are less socially appreciated, where precise, dignified and non-reductive language is called for.

Also to be avoided are heroic or guilt-inducing statements ("He/she made it despite everything", "she's poor because she doesn't make an effort"), in acknowledgement of the complexity of the social, cultural and economic factors that influence the decisions made by individuals.

Suggestions:

- Avoid labels such as "the poor", "tramps" or "the lowest of the low", and use expressions that put the person at centre stage.
- Speak about work without reducing the person to his or her role or reproducing stereotypes ("cleaning ladies"), instead enhancing professionalism and the working context.
- Avoid pietistic, charitable or disparaging tones.

Practical examples:

- Instead of: "The poor" → "Those in a condition of poverty/in a disadvantaged economic situation/with limited economic resources ".

- Instead of: "A cleaning lady" → "an employee of the cleaning service firm/co-operative".

- Instead of: "Tramps" → "People of no fixed address".

- Instead of: "The lowest of the low → "Those in situations of economic vulnerability and social exclusion".

9. Religion and personal convictions

In a pluralistic society and in a secular state such as Italy, public communication must respect all religions (and their absence), without taking for granted or imposing the religion of the majority. The Italian Constitution ensures religious freedom and imposes neutrality on its institutions:[7] the language used in university contexts must also reflect this principle.

It is important to avoid implicit or automatic references to the Catholic religion as the only shared cultural reference point. This goes not only for explicit content but also for daily expressions, religious metaphors and festive or symbolic references that may exclude those belonging to other religions or who do not profess any faith.

Suggestions:

- Avoid stereotyped or labelling expressions linked to particular religions (such as "religious fanatic", "Middle Eastern fundamentalist").
- Use neutral and respectful expressions: "those of the Muslim faith", "Jewish person", "Christian person", only if relevant in the context.
- Do not automatically associate religion, ethnic origin and nationality.
- Take care when referring to religious festivities in the institutional language.

Practical examples:

- Instead of: "During the Easter holidays no lectures will be held" → "From…to…no lectures will be held".

- Instead of: "Our Muslim colleague is observing Ramadan" → "Some of those in our community are celebrating Ramadan" (if necessary, refer to the period).

- Instead of: "Religious fanatic" → "A person who is part of a radical religious movement" or "of a confessional extremist group", only if absolutely necessary and quoting the context.

- Instead of: "Muslim" to refer generically and/or arbitrarily to a provenance of south west Asia → Specify the information that is effectively relevant (e.g. citizenship, religious faith or language spoken), without the use of presumptions or generic or misleading labels.

10. Visual communication

Visual communication too needs to take into account the variety of bodies, faces and contexts and to reflect multiplicity. Visual images, illustrations and materials contribute to the construction of imagery, models and expectations, hence its attentive and mindful use of iconographic apparatus can encourage nurture a sense of welcome, belonging and fair

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[7] Cf. Articles 19, 8 and 20.

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representation. Visual communication does not necessarily have to "bring in diversity"; it must start from a real, complex and respectful image of the society in which we live. Making careful choices is a cultural and political responsibility.[8]

Suggestions:

- Represent human diversity: in photographic and illustrative images include persons of different ages, ethnic origin, gender, abilities, physique, dress styles and academic and working roles.
- Avoid stereotyped images and tokenism (e.g. "a lady serving the coffee", "the person with a disability who is always smiling").
- Do not use exclusively glossy, hyper-performative or idealised images: use preferably realistic and authentic contexts.
- Enhance also those who do not conform to the dictates of beauty, slimness, youth or ability that so often dominate the mass media.
- Represent the community in a way that reflects a fair gender distribution.
- Alternate images with formal and informal environments so as to transmit the multiplicity of university life.
- Be aware of the variety of postures, expressions and activities represented.

Practical examples:

- Instead of: photos with only Caucasian men → Images with varying ages, gender or ethnic origins, represented in realistic contexts.

- Instead of: photos of a single smiling woman amongst men → Mixed groups, in equal roles, with varied expressions and postures.

- Instead of: representing a person with a disability who is always assisted → Images that show autonomy, participation and daily or professional activities.

- Instead of: generic promotional images, lacking in context → Scenes from real university life, with lecture rooms, laboratories, libraries and interactions.

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[8] The current composition of the student and teaching body of the Scuola Normale reveals a sizeable prevalence of the male gender. However, a visual communication using only the masculine gender might give rise to an imbalanced view and could discourage the identification of potential female students. It is thus strategic and legitimate to adopt visual representations that reflect the change: to project balanced, plural and inclusive images is a way of creating awareness of the space that the Normale intends to open up, an endeavour yet to be fully achieved. This is a symbolic and proactive act, in line with the purpose of recruitment and the readdressing of the gender balance to which the Scuola Normale aspires.

Handbook for the use of expansive language

1. **Gender**: use dual gender, collective terms or neutral forms.
2. **Disability**: first the person, then their condition. Avoid pietism and euphemisms.
3. **Ethnicity**: avoid labels; use contextualised descriptions, and only when they are needed.
4. **LGBTQIA+**: do not make presumptions, respect self-determination and avoid simplifications.
5. **Religion and convictions**: nominate only if necessary; do not impose your own cultural vision.
6. **Socio-economic condition**: use dignified terms and do not reduce a person to their condition.
7. **Neurodiversity:** use simple language and short phrases; write acronyms and initials in full.
8. **Accessibility**: use legible formats, alt text, clear fonts and non-justified texts.
9. **Visual communication:** display a variety of ages, bodies, ethnic origins, roles and contexts. Avoid stereotypes and tokenism.
10. **Useful words**: person, community, humanity, citizenry, who, whoever, resource, figure, profile.

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Scuola Normale Superiore
Expansive language

01 Gender
use dual gender, collective terms or neutral forms.

02 Disability
first the person, then their condition. Avoid pietism and euphemisms.

03 Ethnicity
avoid labels; use contextualised descriptions, only when they are needed.

04 LGBTQIA+
do not make presumptions, respect self-determination and avoid simplifications.

05 Religion and convictions
nominate only if necessary; do not impose your own cultural vision.

06 Socio-economic condition
use dignified terms and do not reduce a person to their condition.

07 Neurodiversity
use simple language and short phrases; write acronyms and initials in full.

08 Accessibility
use legible formats, alt text, clear fonts and non-justified texts.

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