

# LANGUAGE RIGHTS AT RIGHTSCON 2021

## Language awareness can help breach the digital divide

The **Global Coalition for Language Rights (GCLR)** is a group of individuals and organizations working at the intersection of language and human rights. GCLR's goal is to support global efforts to increase access to critical information/services and equal digital representation beyond language barriers, as well as creating proactive responses to social, educational, economic and environmental challenges that involve speakers of all languages, including Indigenous languages and underrepresented languages.

One of the first tangible outcomes of GCLR's work was our participation in **RightsCon 2021**—the world's leading summit on human rights in the digital age. This was a doubly exciting achievement as language rights were given space at this high-level conference.

Our RightsCon 2021 session was titled *Mapping Language Rights in a Digital World*. Our goal was to map out how linguistic barriers can impact people's access to critical information and services. More precisely, our aims were to:

- Identify how linguistic and digital rights intersect
- Encourage participants to consider language rights in their work
- Establish new connections with activists and organizations to aid each other in our work.

We welcomed an enthusiastic group of participants who made insightful contributions and shared their valuable experiences in **six thematic breakout sessions**. You can find below the main take-aways for each thematic session.

### Language affects technology and digital rights

- Even if a technology is available in a local language, individuals may still use it in English or a second language. Reasons for that include
  - familiarity with using technologies in English or a second language out of prior necessity (lack of localizations)
  - a non-local language being a system default on a device
  - poor quality translation or user experience and design in the local language.
- Localization is not as simple as translation. Software localization in particular requires technical preparation and infrastructure. It must consider regional contexts in terms of language, design and even fundamental functionality of the technology.
- Establishing trust with the users of a technology is key. Trust is particularly important for technologies that address digital or physical security, healthcare and personal data. A properly localized tool creates trust, but partial or inaccurate translations and poor design can cause discomfort and skepticism.

### Language affects access to information and education

- There's a major lack of awareness of the scale of the problem and the ripple effects it has.
- It's important to raise awareness in our communities and in our own work.
- Organizations and communities must work toward making educational content accessible in users' native languages.

### Language affects access to healthcare and crisis response

- Language barriers reduce the effectiveness of healthcare communication.
- Activists and community organizers may struggle to translate concepts from their groundwork and effectively communicate them to the funders that can finance this work, to the healthcare workers, and to the public.

- Key health information should be translated in advance. e.g. Toronto has a lot of translated healthcare information, but translations of COVID vaccine information have been lacking.

### **Indigenous languages require special consideration**

- What comes first: Digitalization to get an Indigenous language “recognized” or fostering the actual online use of the language by the communities?
- It’s important to prevent colonial or extractive mindsets that could lead “preservation” or research initiatives to simply take linguistic and cultural knowledge without benefiting the communities themselves.

### **Language affects justice, environmental activism and civic participation**

- Provide translated information to the affected communities and encourage their input to decision making, as time constraints and organizational priorities allow.
- Societal infrastructures vary widely and can be based on different values (for example, oral versus written ways of transmitting knowledge).
- Explore best ways of sharing knowledge with Indigenous communities to ensure they have access to it and can participate and take informed action.

### **Language affects labour rights and economic opportunities**

- In Latin America, there are two layers of linguistic barriers: Indigenous peoples that don’t speak Spanish (and in a few countries, Portuguese or French) will have a hard time finding employment opportunities and accessing the formal economy. Additionally, globalization has made English not only a benefit, but a requirement for professional advancement. Nowadays, more people are aware of the language barriers present in their work, even if they aren’t sure what the solutions are. Recognizing the need for language access is a big step forward, but the solutions provided still center around majority languages (French, English and Spanish were the examples given).
- There is a lot of implicit bias in technological development, and language is one of the ways in which it manifests. The automation of language-related tasks can lead to inaccurate information, gender binarism, etc. Technology has become aware of these biases, so now it’s time to work to erase these built-in prejudices from our tools.

You can also find some of the sources used for preparing this session, in our [Related material](#) document.

We would like to thank, once again, all participants for joining us and contributing to our discussion. It was a pleasure and an honour to meet them and learn so much from all of you.

## ***Take Action!***

Would you like to **contribute to our Coalition’s efforts** by making this brief summary as accessible as possible through your translation skills? Please do get in touch and let us know how you would like to contribute. We will be delighted to hear from you.

And don’t hesitate to reach out if you think there’s any way in which we can support each other.

Most importantly, you can help by striving to expand language inclusion in your own work. You can reach out to us any time at [coalition@translationcommons.org](mailto:coalition@translationcommons.org) if you would like to discuss ways in which you can do this!

Also, do not forget to follow us on [Twitter](#) at [@GlobLangRights](#) to add language-related news to your feed and stay up to date with the initiatives of the **Global Coalition for Language Rights!**