



The Debate Around the Term "Latinx"

As inclusivity has taken center stage in our culture and workplaces, new terms and phrases are adopted to ensure that we're as intentional in our language as possible.

Who that language is for and how we use it is an important part of its development that can't be overlooked. Sometimes, a new term begins to be used interchangeably with another that means something different. For example, you may have noticed how some people use African Americans when referring to Black Americans. Similarly, this is true of Hispanics, Latin and Latinx, the latter of which has been a source of divisive debate.

Throughout the last 60 years, American corporations, media outlets and politicians have searched for a single term that could capture the diverse interests, political agendas and experiences of people from Latin American cultures. Each of these efforts, be it Latin American,

Hispanic, Latino or Latinx, has generated controversy of its own.

Sometimes, adjustments to terminology are made yet don't quite suit the culture — or worse, they don't make it easy for the people those terms that are supposed to serve to identify with the language used. Many have begun to wonder about the use of Latinx and whether it's a culturally appropriate way to create inclusive language around Latin American culture.

Writing for Mother Jones, activist and author John Paul Brammer said the usage of the term Latinx increased following the 2016 shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, when a gunman killed 49 clubgoers and injuring 53 others during a "Latin Night" event. Latinx is a gender-neutral compromise for those who didn't identify as "Latino" (male) or "Latina" (female), as is the case for many within the LGBTQ community.

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After more than a decade of usage, and after the term Latinx was added to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary in 2018, you might expect it to be widely adopted by people within the Latin and Hispanic community, just as it is in corporate diversity pamphlets.

According to an August 2020 study from Pew, that simply isn't the case. Only 25% of the Hispanic population has heard of Latinx, while roughly 3% actively used it. The majority of those who use the term are younger people, with 7% of those aged 18-29 using it compared to just 2% of people over 30.

The research also shows that Americans primarily use the term, most often by well-educated people who tend to lean left on the political spectrum. This has led critics to conclude that the use of Latinx is an exercise in political correctness rather than serving the people it aims to include.

A Linguistic Issue

The term is reflective of a mentality of gender-neutral inclusion, but not necessarily Hispanic culture or the language that permeates it: Spanish. Pronounced "La-TEEN-ex" by people in the English-speaking world, the phrase doesn't translate well or phonetically to the language that many of the people it's meant to represent.

The letter X is always preceded by a vowel in Spanish, meaning Latinx isn't consistent with Spanish linguistics. As a result, some have proposed alternatives such as "Latinu" or "Latiné."

Pronunciation is important because the letter X is often used in so many different ways that just the mere sight of the word Latinx could be confusing. On paper, it may appear to those new to the term as a typo. When speaking, X can be used to replicate a variety of sounds in both English and Spanish, so much so that linguists sometimes call it a "phonetic chameleon."

Examples of sounds X include:

- **Ks** – as in "tax" or "example"
- **Z** – as in "xenophobic" or "xylophone"
- **Gz** – as in "executive" or "examine"
- **Kzh** or **Ksh** – as in "luxury" or "obnoxious"
- **Silent** – as in "faux pas"

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As you can see, the letter X is versatile. For the non-English speaker or someone learning and using English as a second language, this can be difficult to understand or get right every time in simple terms.

In Spanish, the letter has some similar uses and some that are completely different, such as an "H" sound in names like "Don Quixote" or the Spanish pronunciation of "Mexico." Speakers of certain Spanish dialects pronounce X with a "sh" sound; Xela, Guatemala's second-largest city, is pronounced "SHEH-lah."

Beyond the language, the cultural perception of the letter X is different between the countries that make up Latin America. As Billboard's Leila Cobo notes, in Mexico or Colombia, a person referred to as "equis" (X in Spanish) is the equivalent to John or Jane Doe. It also could be interpreted as "nobody" or being someone with a bland personality.

There are also varying cultural and symbolic translations of the letter X throughout centuries. It has a long history of being a number or symbol of representing someone being incorrect, evil, dangerous, exact, unknown, prestigious, canceled out, pornographic or it denoting a status, death, quantity, size, generation or chromosomes.

This one letter has such varied meanings that by its very nature, it is ambiguous and ubiquitous. For those in search of a term that encapsulates their identity and life experience, it's not surprising that Latinx hasn't been met with widespread embrace.

What Can You Do?

While the search goes on for a neater way to create an inclusive language for the Latinx population, the best thing that companies and their HR teams can do in the meantime is simply learning and respecting how these individuals self-identify.

In the end, people will use language to express their life experiences how they see fit. Many will embrace language that already exists, but in either case, the terms used do not create the person's reality. Ultimately, this is what you are trying to give your respect, empathy and consciousness to.

For a growing number of people, Latinx makes sense and is something they identify with. Those numbers may continue to grow as widespread media usage and the government's application of the term wields a certain amount of influence over these matters. But for those who don't, perhaps it's time we let them set the terms they are most comfortable with.