

The fight for language rights – and with it, language justice – has long noted the 1996 Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (UDLR) as a watershed moment of international cooperation and recognition for the protection of linguistic minorities, including those who are migrants to a new cultural home. However, examining translations of this document raises some potent problems regarding equivalence and equality. This essay explores whether the political notion of equal rights can hold when the translations thereof are patently unequal, thus undermining fundamental Western political concepts even while articulating them. But perhaps the lack of equivalent translations can lead us beyond the trap of political equality. Using the work of Western Sioux philosopher Vine Deloria, Jr., this essay critiques how the West - and American Studies with it - has conflated equality with justice, even across languages and cultures, a move that has ultimately limited our ability to redress linguistic grievances and imagine new forms of political coexistence. Instead, examining equality's unequal translations in the UDLR helps us chart new paths to justice by redefining our freedoms, so that language can become the source of its own emancipation.