
Language & Colonization: Statement of the Problem

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Coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns . . . In a way, as modern subjects, we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday.¹

Language carries culture, and embodies the beliefs, values, thoughts, and oral literature of nations. How a culture perceives the world, and what it values are also reflected in its language through literature, myth, custom, and history. Thus, culture and language are products of each other, and both are so closely tied to the concept of identity that it is hard to study them separately.

It is through language, culture, and identity that we perceive ourselves, and our places in the world. And it is mostly because of the strong relationship between language and identity that colonizers tend to impose their languages on conquered people. Through impacting indigenous languages, colonizers target indigenous/non-Western identities to take over the minds, thoughts, and values of those they colonize. Language is used as a tool to convey values and beliefs—invisibly yet effectively. This linguistic policy enables colonizers to continue colonization, and strengthen its roots in the colonized lands. In this way, colonizers have come to dominate indigenous people. As a result, indigenous people gradually accept the sovereignty of colonizers, and consider the colonizers' values superior to their own.

This paper focuses on the relationship between language, identity, power, and colonialism. In a nutshell, it suggests that language itself serves as a powerful mechanism for colonization—whose aim is beyond simple linguistic domination. From classroom practices to beliefs about the cultural constitution of non-Western students, many aspects of English language teaching (ELT) have been affected by colonialism. In this way, colonialism delivers its message of superiority and sovereignty through hidden curricula in ELT textbooks.

Colonization is often associated with economic and linguistic imperialism. What occurred in Ireland, Singapore, Kenya, and *Papua New Guinea* are good examples of this phenomenon. *The identity of the colonized population comes to depend on mastering the language of the colonizer.*

Language is a Colonial Tool

Given that language constructs identity, and given the importance of cultural sovereignty, colonizers mostly try to convey their culture in different ways.

Under the older model of coloniality, colonizers imposed their languages and cultures by forcing non-Western people to learn to speak a different language. The loss of African and American indigenous languages illustrates this phenomenon well. Colonial governments discouraged and suppressed thousands of years of linguistic diversity and knowledge by forced assimilation and integration policies.

For example, through linguistic policies such as enfranchisement and the residential school system, the Canadian government has left many indigenous languages extinct or endangered. In the residential school system, indigenous children were punished severely for using their

¹ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept,"

Cultural Studies 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 243.

native languages, which then led to a loss of many of these languages. Indigenous parents protected their children by not sharing their languages because they did not want their children to experience the same consequences that they had experienced. As a result, a valuable heritage of knowledge, values, beliefs, and culture slipped away.

It is worth noting that the concepts of education, curriculum, and language learning usually reflect positive images for people. However, those concepts can also work as a tool for coloniality such as in Indian residential schools. Additionally, the tendency of the West to define the hu/man—especially in the famous sentence, “Kill the Indian, and Save the Man”—cannot be easily ignored.

Under its new model of coloniality, colonialism tries to show the supremacy of its language and values by teaching with a hidden curriculum in ELT textbooks. A good example of this trend can be noted through the presentation of the belief that the British/American accent is the only high-level standard of English pronunciation. This perspective highlights a view from above, which implicitly classifies the users of other varieties of English as the accented/less competent speakers in terms of the ladder of power. Moreover, ELT materials portray the West in a positive manner: they do not tend to talk about discrimination, medical issues, financial problems, and unemployment in the West.

Whatever the model is, colonizers find a way to gradually inject their thoughts and values

through their languages. Fanon believes that speaking a language confers existence on an individual—if someone exists, they can express an independent identity through that language.²

Colonialism is alive, and the struggle continues since language, as a generative factor of power, is omnipresent.

In the wake of an independent identity, such a person may come to question or reject colonial sovereignty and *resistance* will begin to appear. On the other hand, if colonized people accept the colonizer’s sovereignty, they will adopt and follow the colonizer’s cultural characteristics.

As the result of this domination, the subordinated nations lose their identities, and the colonizers find a good market to sell their cultural and industrial products. As an illustration, the British Council’s annual report confirms the increasing benefit that the UK earns through English teaching, publications, and examining (e.g., IELTS) worldwide. ELT is a great source for the British and American economies as it systematically promotes English as the symbol of high civilization.

Language, then, is used as a means of “spiritual subjugation” by colonizers.³ The main aim of colonialism and imperialism is to expand economic, political, and cultural power. It seeks to dictate superiority. It is achieved by subjugating Indigenous people through weakening their languages and identities. Yet language is a double-edged sword which can work as a defensive or offensive tool. This depends on the will of a nation to preserve its languages and keep its identities. As Maldonado-Torres mentions, colonialism is alive, and the struggle continues since language, as a generative factor of power, is omnipresent.⁴

² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. Charles Markmann (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1967).

³ Wa Thiong’o Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London, UK: James Curreys, 1986), 9.

⁴ Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 243.

Is English a “Language Killer”

More than twenty percent of Earth’s population speak English, and for about 360 million people English is their first language.

Indeed, some researchers believe that the death of indigenous/non-Western languages is related to the growth of English. But is English a “language killer”? To answer this question, it is important to start by looking at language death.⁵

McMahon states this phenomenon depends on social factors and identifies two types of language death: “language suicide” and “language murder.”⁶ Language suicide happens when an indigenous language is absorbed into the colonizer’s language in such a way that the two languages are hardly distinguishable. Eckert and colleagues reference the case of Papua New Guinea, whose languages died from the effect of British colonization, as an example of language suicide.⁷ In fact, the language of Tok Pisin was born as the effect of the contact between indigenous people and the colonizers. English was gradually introduced as the language of education, and parents and schools gave up teaching children their indigenous languages. Hence, the subsequent generation slowly adopted the new languages, and indigenous languages died.

In the case of language murder, the colonizer’s language is instructed at school and the children abandon learning their native language officially. The colonizers’ language completely takes the place of indigenous

languages. In this regard, English in the USA and Portuguese in Brazil can be considered as cases of language murder. In these examples, the new language is the symbol of “modernity” and “democracy,” which is associated with power and access to authority. Thus, in some cases the subordinated people become bilingual in order to have access to new opportunities. The indigenous language is then generationally replaced by the imposing language.

The colonization of the United States in the 17th century can be considered as the starting point of the English language conquering the world. The spread of English increased after the Second World War by the British Empire’s expansion. The English language “devoured” the conquered countries’ languages while firming its place. Given this historical outcome, following globalization, the English language has spread around the world at a rate that has never been seen. It has become the language of technology, science, commerce, and international communication. That is to say, globalization has encouraged a utilitarian trend supporting the idea that English is the only language the world needs.

The domain of English conquests is not limited to the countries with weaker political systems. It has also affected Germany—which has a strong policy and its own written language—but it did not lead to language death in this context. Because of intense influence, and under socio-economic pressures, many Western countries—including Ireland, Malta, U.S.A, and Canada) and non-Western countries (including

⁵ See the following: Nick Ceramella, “Is English a Killer Language or an International Auxiliary? Its Use and Function in a Globalised World,” *International Journal of Language, Translation and Intercultural Communication* 1 (2012): 9-23; Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, “Linguistic Diversity and Biodiversity: The Threat from Killer Languages,” in *The Politics of English as a World Language: New Horizons in Postcolonial Cultural Studies* 7 (2003): 31-52; Salikoko S. Mufwene, “Globalization and the Myth of Killer Languages: What’s Really Going On,” *Perspectives on*

Endangerment 5, no. 21 (2005): 19-48; Tanja Eckert, Andrea Johann, Anna Känzig, Melanie Küng, Bianca Müller, Cornelia Schwald, and Laura Walder, “Is English a ‘Killer Language’? The Globalisation of a Code.” *eHistLing* 1 (2014): 106-118.

⁶ April M.S. McMahon, *Understanding Language Change* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 286.

⁷ Eckert et al, “Is English a ‘Killer Language?’,” 112.

the Philippines, Singapore, and South Africa) have given up their native languages and have accepted English as their primary language. Consequently, a large number of populations in the previously mentioned countries speak English as their vernacular language.

Across the globe, many people are losing their native languages.

I therefore call for resistance. For instance, the resistance of German speakers against

English, or the resistance of Persian speakers across thousands of years of history against English, French, Russian, Mongolian, and Arabic speakers. These examples all shed light on the fact that resistance through policy—and the will of the people—is feasible.

There are some developing countries such as India and Pakistan where English is one of the official languages, but many local people cannot speak it. Although the colonizer's language is taught at schools, only the elite have (wider) access to learn and communicate with it. In these countries, English works to promote the hegemonic relation between those who can and those who cannot afford to learn this language. The dichotomy of educational “standards” strengthens the belief that English is necessary for everyone wishing to be prosperous in life.

This is what Phillipson calls linguistic imperialism. He defines it as the notion that “certain languages dominate internationally on others.”⁸ On the other hand, linguistic imperialism results in discrimination—communicative rights and resource allocation.

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The distinction is imposed as an “ideological yardstick” to measure all other cultural values. In line with abovementioned points, Agyekum argues that Western languages, mainly English and French, have been so rooted in African culture that many people in cities tend to communicate with their children in those

languages and, consequently, children cannot speak their native languages anymore.⁹ There is a negative attitude

towards African languages in these societies—people are ashamed of speaking their mother tongues and prefer Western names to native ones. In other words, the forcible integration of Africa has caused the problem of identity for Africans. This, in spite of the fact that the system was designed in such a way that native languages would not be endangered by Western languages directly. Rather, colonizers indirectly control the economic, political, and cultural practices and therefore the linguistic practices as well.

Ceramella argues that language killing is an unavoidable side effect of globalization.¹⁰ Macedo asserts that viewing English as the only international language that everyone wishes or needs to learn is “part and parcel of the imperialist desire.”¹¹ And although Mufwene does not consider English as a language killer, he discusses globalization as an aspect, if not a product, of colonization.¹² In this way, although globalization is a non-linear and multidimensional process, its connection to colonization cannot be ignored.

⁸ Robert Phillipson, “Linguistic Imperialism” (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 47.

⁹ Kofi Agyekum, “Linguistic Imperialism and Language Colonisation in Africa through Documentation and Preservation,” in *African Linguistics on the Prairie* (Berlin, Germany: Language Science Press, 2018): 87-104.

¹⁰ Ceramella, “Is English a Killer Language or an International Auxiliary,” 12.

¹¹ Donaldo Macedo, “Imperialist Desires in English-Only Language Policy,” *The CATESOL Journal* 29, no. 1 (2017): 82.

¹² Mufwene, “Globalization and the Myth of Killer Languages,” 20.

Conclusion

From a linguistic point of view, no language is superior to another.

Languages represent people's identities and reflect their ancestry. Languages can convey a sense of uniqueness and solidarity simultaneously. They change over time and some of them are eventually lost. Language is a powerful tool that can control beliefs, values, and identity. Being aware of the importance of language, colonizers look for linguistic domination to pillage the indigenous land and its resources. Colonization is associated with globalization to the degree that both are implicated in asymmetrical power relationships.

Language policies that are able to strengthen and preserve linguistic diversity are required all over the world. Now, more than ever, we need linguists more than we need politicians.