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### Linguistic Imperialism: Colonial Violence through Language

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2020

# Linguistic Imperialism: Colonial Violence through Language

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## Linguistic Imperialism: Colonial Violence through Language

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Ananya Ravishankar

Language is by no means an arbitrary fact of the world, similarly, it is also not any arbitrary fact of colonialism. We ought to consider it as another form of violence imposed upon cultures by colonial rule, as devastatingly treacherous as any other. Of course, there is an obvious distinction between physical and linguistic subjugation, and the previous claim is not to erase this in any element. Linguistic violence itself persists long past the departure of the colonist, it is a violence committed against a very culture, one from which it may never fully recover. Language is not merely a group of symbols or words, this is clear from the fact that we see it as having been the object of colonial assault. Imperial powers recognized it as anything *but* arbitrary, else it would not have even been seen as necessary to subject to the same ravage. We ought not to let the role of language in colonialism slip into the background for the sake of a seemingly more urgent or significant aspect of it. Language as a means of colonial dominance has too often been seen as “one of many symptoms of a larger colonial pathology” (Flores-Rodriguez 2012, 27), as a side-effect which does not require to be dealt with urgently or with equal dedication as with more wide-spread and common conceptions of colonial violence.

In order to understand the shattering impact colonialism has had on language, we must first address its significance. In this paper, I will explore the ways in which language exists and is adopted in colonization, as well as the effect of this ‘linguistic colonialism’ upon the people subjected to it. How does this affect their understanding of their own identity and of the ‘other’? How has colonialism maintained power over its former subjects through language? Language is an essential aspect of colonial violence, and I will demonstrate why it should be treated and understood as such. As a defining aspect of culture, language is not only the means by which we pass on culture or share it, but in order to do so it must, and does, carry on its back the entirety of a culture and civilization. Further, it acts as a “collective memory bank” (Thiong’o 1986, 15) of a culture’s historical existence and experience. Because of this, the erasure of language is necessarily also the erasure of pre-colonial history. By systematically and aggressively burying a language, also buried with it is every historical event, every story, every struggle, and every person who existed through it. It has the capacity to define oneself, to either make one visible or invisible. Something as fundamental as it becomes, or rather, *has been* a way by which we perceive ourselves as well as where and how we exist among others. As Fanon said, “to speak is to exist absolutely” (Fanon 1967, 8), and so when one examines the colonial circumstance, they can see the ways in which the linguistic take-over by colonial powers posed an existential threat upon the colonized. To take away one’s language is to take away their means of making themselves visible and perceiving themselves.

To speak a certain language is to essentially identify with a culture, to assume it as one’s own and experience a felt unity in a group. The forceful imposition of colonial language on the colonized is not simply a matter of easy communication and convenience, it is to impose upon a group, the task of supporting the weight of a culture which refuses to recognize them as human. To completely erase and prohibit languages are not merely decisions of efficiency, they are strategic. Can any aspect of colonialism possibly be purely accidental, a by-product which was unforeseen or unintended?

The colonist has violently inserted himself in another culture and space, relentlessly having invaded every aspect of their existence, fundamentally having changed their sense of self and understanding of their being and their existence. These anxieties can never be addressed for they can never make it out into language, at least one which would do them justice. The colonist's way of running the world becomes the only way they have seen, the colonist's language becomes the only one known to the colonized, the only way they know to communicate. The colonist stays forever in the existence of the colonized, he has "arranged to be the eternal mediator between the colonized" (Sartre 1964, 23) and between them and the world. The role of language in colonial power dynamics and strategies of domination cannot be regarded as unintentional by-products. The effects these have had on the culture of the colonized in the colonial era, and particularly the fact that they still live on today in such concrete ways, are indicative of the "use of language as a weapon for violence and oppression" (Flores-Rodriguez 2012, 28).

An important aspect of language is what Sartre calls language habits. The ways in which we use words and associate them with one another, contain in themselves underlying perspectives of the world from specific cultures. In the case of colonial languages, the kind of racial prejudice is evident in the type of values certain words apparently imply. For example, "'white like snow' to indicate innocence" (Sartre 1964, 26). The colour white implies virtue, life, innocence, and purity, while black seems to symbolize death, chaos, evil, and impurity. These value judgements are not exclusive to only words or colours, these translate into the colonial perspectives of the world. Whiteness embodies righteousness and peace, while blackness seems to embody violence, and untamed Animality in need of civilization. Language emphasizes the colonial claim of superiority and righteousness. By making these languages the primary or *only* means of speech and expression for the colonized, the colonists simultaneously make these language habits, which are passed off as inherent valuations, the only means by which the colonized understand themselves. For those who grow up speaking the colonial tongue exclusively, the language habits and valuations are learned almost in a harmless manner. They are seemingly *just* words and nothing more, but in the recognition of such distinct values for whiteness and blackness, and in the colonized individual's recognition of her own blackness, the two cannot avoid one another. Not only do they necessarily cross paths, but they converge in a violent explosion which sets the individual up to hate their blackness, and to aim for whiteness because of what it signifies. At some point not far from then, it becomes contradictory to think of blackness as purity, innocence, life or virtue (Sartre 1964, 26).

In this collision in which self-hatred takes its roots, sprouting and blooming with the colonial rains of an inferiority complex, there is not only a desperate move away from one's own blackness, but from blackness in general, from one's culture. This frenzied attempt at escape finds one fluently speaking just like the colonist yet rejected without a doubt from the colonial culture. As much as one tries to escape their blackness, the question is, escape *to where*? The culture which painted you in this way? The culture which made you despise yourself? And in this lost middle-ground, one feels an alienation from the culture into which they try to assimilate, while at the same time, an even stronger alienation from the culture out of which they came into the world and their situation. She is unable to posit the colonist as the other because that is where she desires to fit and to be claimed and recognized by, but she is also unable to posit her home country as the 'other' because she cannot deny her blackness, and neither can she deny the fact that although she is fluent in the colonial language, it is fundamentally unable to allow her to support the weight of colonial culture. She is faced with a contradictory state of existence where

she is not considered as a subject either by the colonized, or the colonist. The former perceives her as “almost white” (Fanon 1967, 11) – mastering the language and so also the culture of the colonist, she is feared. This fear of whiteness is not simply an association of the individual with the Frenchman or Englishman, it is a colonial whiteness which has ravaged a nation before, both feared and despised.

Fanon makes it clear that there is no in-between area, no liminal stage where one can be an Antillean and display his mastery of the French language – the greater his mastery, the whiter he becomes, “he will come closer to being a real human being” (Fanon 1967, 8). There is an exclusivity of language here, one cannot be their own and simultaneously master the colonial language. Mastery necessarily moves them away from their group identity into the colonial identity. The black Antillean, who is neither white nor human in the eyes of the colonist, cannot simply be a black Antillean who knows French, he necessarily has to move toward whiteness and humanness, even though he will never fully be there. This is not a reflection of, or in any part due to his own abilities, but because his blackness and Antillean identity prevent him from being perceived as a fellow Frenchman. A purity surrounds language, the notion that the Antillean will always speak an *Antillean* French, not ‘real’ or ‘pure’ French. He could never be ‘one of them’ at the risk of contaminating French culture. He is at the same time too black to be French, and too French to be Antillean. He can never be recognized as anything but ‘other’ in either culture, and in himself he faces a similar non-recognition.

The colonial language carries the colonial view of the world and has the capacity only to perceive it with a certain set of ideologies latched on to its language. It is “forged thousands of miles away in another epoch to answer other needs and to designate other objects [...] unsuitable to furnish him with the means of speaking about himself, his own anxieties, his own hopes” (Sartre 1964, 23), and so to the fluent speaker among the colonized, the language is at the same time not foreign for they have always spoken it, yet at the same time unable to express his experience of the world. While there is familiarity in speaking the language, they still encounter their alienation from it. Their language is made to express *human* emotions, *human* experiences of the world, and the *human* condition. If the colonized, be it the Antilleans, Malagasy, Indians, etc., were not considered by the colonists to be human beings, or at least *full* human beings to begin with, what would exempt their languages from this view? Their languages then convey and are able to express those experiences and conditions of *only* colonists, the *full* human beings. Because of this, their language can easily convey the fears and joys of the European man for it was made for him and made to hold him up as the standard. Therefore, to impose such a language upon the colonized, to the extent that some knew nothing else but French or English, was meant to keep the colonized subjects stuck – traumatized by colonialism, with no means to let it out, they themselves served as cages to hold back their experiences and cries for humanity. The language of the colonizer does not contain within it the ability to express the felt being of a group that it was never intended for. The language of the colonizer is able to express human emotions, anxieties, pride, fear etc., but it was never made to express those things for those who it never considered to be human in the first place. It is not just a matter of it lacking, or being insufficient, but that it was never intended to be, in the slightest, sufficient to begin with. The anxieties of the colonized were not ‘human’ anxieties,

To assume the colonial culture means necessarily assuming its outlook on the world, holding ‘its own’ people and country at the top, while the rest are lowly, animal-like dwellers. Fanon gives the example of the Antillean who returns from France, who “no longer understands the dialect, he talks about the Opera [...] but above all he adopts a critical attitude toward his

compatriots” (Fanon 1967, 13). The man does not adopt such attitudes toward his compatriots after having learned something new, reasoning through it, and arriving at the conclusion that his compatriots ought to do things differently. Instead, he adopts this attitude because as a part of the need to align himself with the French in the hopes of being a true, pure, ‘Frenchman’, he must assume the French culture and language. The dislocation from the culture he was born into is not out of a personal choice to distance himself, but it is what is necessitated by the identity he so desires to align himself with. Speaking the French language, mocking the regional language, these are both a part of this process of becoming the colonist. Through this, he is needed not only to posit the locals at his home country as the ‘other’ of whom he is the opposite, he is also required to posit as ‘other’ everything within his being and personality – his cultural practices and beliefs, his values, his feelings and anxieties – to get as close as possible to attaining the privileges of the colonist.

Now, when the colonized subject wishes to speak of herself, or of the condition of her being, there is a fundamental shortcoming because this new language creates a ridge where there is a “patent difference that separates what [s]he says from what [s]he would like to say” (Sartre 1964, 24). In the movement of her feeling, to thought, to its expression through speech, there is a key aspect of meaning fundamentally lost in translation. The incapacity of the colonial language to express the fear and anxieties of the colonized, subdue and mute those feelings to the point where she is now only able to express all that the language allows her to, all that the colonist has the capacity to comprehend. The nuances, complexities and subtleties of emotion and affect which are unique to her have no outlet, no way of being brought out into the world, remaining trapped in the body of the colonized. Regardless of how comfortable she may get with the colonial language and its culture, eternally there will remain a gap between her inner self and the self which this language allows her to outwardly express to both the world and herself. What is expressed is *some form* of what is felt, but misses the true embodiment by more than just a sliver.

One who recognizes a noticeable gap between what they are able to say and what they experience can either recognize the shortcomings of the colonial language, or project that frustration inwards. This individual might resolve to seeing their uncommunicable anxieties as ‘other’, as misplaced and alien. This is precisely the colonial mindset, that whatever is unheard of and foreign to the white European and his experience of the world, ought to be considered alien, wrong, and in need of fixing. Due to the insufficiency of the colonial language, the colonized subject then proceeds to perceive their cultural experiences and understanding of the world as fatally and legitimately skewed. The language was “codified in favor of those in power” (Flores-Rodriguez 2012, 29) and in active spite of those who were not. The frustration and anxiety further stemming from unexplained and inexpressible inner anxiety only leads to a renunciation of one’s culture. So, with every push down on these feelings which invade, she renounces her blackness in a step toward whiteness (Fanon 1967, 9).

The elitism and praise which comes with fluency in English is synonymous with the praise of the colonial motherland. For decades after they have duly departed, we essentially chase after them, seeking validation and approval of our English, our ‘western’ ways and habits. It seems as though it is a silent cry not only for validation but to stand on equal footing. The colonized then aims to be as the colonist is. Every dream and aspiration, the sky is not the limit, but the colonist is. But, the need or want to speak the colonial language is more than just receiving praise or validation. To talk and to live like the colonist are both ways of gaining access to all those things which were denied to her when her language was gotten rid of. There is a desire to have all the opportunities, the privileges, and the luxuries which were either taken

away on account of being ‘lesser than’ or ‘uncivilized’ rightfully returned. Learning the language of the colonist is the “key that can open doors which were still barred to him fifty years ago” (Fanon 1967, 25). Beyond a sense of ‘getting back what was deserved’ or what was taken, it is also an attempt to prove herself. Sounding like, and carrying herself as ‘elite’, as being just as good as ‘them’, to prove how ‘civilized’ she is. It seems as though language is the easiest way of slithering anywhere remotely close into the subjectivity of the colonist. The colonized who wants to be white, sees the colonial language as a means to that end.

Sartre, in *Black Orpheus*, speaks about the white colonist who enjoys the privilege of “seeing without being seen” (Sartre 1964, 13). He refers here to his idea of ‘the gaze’ which sets up a subject-object relation and dynamic, the person who the gaze falls upon becoming the object, and the one *gazing* as the subject. When he talks of the privilege of seeing without being seen, he refers to the fact that the colonized were continually subject to the white gaze, constantly being posited as the object, whereas this gaze never fell upon the white European colonist. With the colonized always being posited as object, they are never permitted to gain or assume the status of subject, they are not allowed a subjectivity. The attempt to *be* the Englishman, the Frenchman, the Spaniard, whoever it may be, seems like an attempt to take back a subjectivity which was once robbed. There is an intensified inferiority complex, the aim of which is not to turn the tables and make the European the inferior. Instead, it is simply to feel equal with the European, to know what it feels like to see without being seen. But, before delving into this, there is also the manner of speaking the language of the colonizer which Sartre discusses in *Black Orpheus*, namely one in resistance. In the former, one is using European phrases, words, speaking and writing habits all to contribute to some feeling of equality, this is the way they choose to create for themselves a subjectivity. Here it is a willful learning and adoring the language, it was not out of *no* choice, it is not learned as a form of resistance and anti-colonial gesture. This path allows one to get as close as they can to feel *like* the oppressor, and overlook the feeling of inferiority.

In the latter however, speaking the colonial language is not intended as an aspirational gesture, nor is it complacency, but it is a form of resistance – a way for the colonized to take back their subjectivity. The colonized are “smothered” (Sartre 1964, 16) as the colonist and his empire have fundamentally altered the politics of the colonized, the economy, the religion, the culture, the language, everything. The colonized are essentially trapped in the midst of a circle of colonists dancing around them in their misery and subjugation. Here, the only way out is through. There is no space to be courteous, to conduct revolution politely, no room nor reason to respectfully walk around the colonial mess, it *must* be through. When it is firstly a challenge to express oneself, it is an even greater one to assert one’s place in the world, to fight against those who this language and politics were made to stand for. By going through, using the language, the politics, and the culture of the colonist and bringing about radical change within them, the colonist no longer has a united oppressive front for their own language is being used against them, their own politics being used to overthrow them.

Sartre describes just this in his account of Negritude – the effort to “*de-Frenchify*” (Sartre 1964, 25) the French language. This deterritorialization of colonial language has a violence to it, a stripping of exclusivity, undermining a hegemonic claim to the French language. In this process, the language is forced to face the cultures and people it has murdered, it is forced to account for them and to understand the anxieties and fears of the people it violated. The colonial language is forced to face its violent rebirth as both a product and at the same time the perpetrator of the current state of existence of the colonized and oppressed. The language is

overturned to allow blackness to be light, fire, radiance, and peace, an attempt at rehabilitating the image of blackness. This means more than just changing the value of words, it is to change the understanding of the self and of one's own blackness. But, however much she wishes to revolt against the colonial power or the colonial language, as long as she is only able to do so in that very same language, she contradicts herself. Every time she speaks the language, she affirms it while at the same time rejecting it. She, at the same instance of rejection, takes on the identity of the 'other' who is the object of rejection. And, on looking inward at her affective experience of the world, it will never allow her to express the entirety of it, it posits her own experience as 'other'.

Colonialism today may not exist in the same ways which we tend to imagine, it adapts, morphing and shape-shifting to manifest in new forms. Colonial dynamics continue to exist, no doubt, it is a matter of recognizing them in those aspects of existence which one does not doubt nor expect. Turning a blind eye to its presence in language, "overlooking the formal, thematic and discursive aspects" (Flores-Rodriguez 2012, 30), implicates each one in its violence. The physical violence of colonialism was visibly bloody and brutal, but the violence of language was gentle, and still is. Through its actions, it asserted the idea that language was just as important in domination as the colonial subjects themselves. Language has been seen as a way to gain entry into the colonial world of privilege, only to realize the contradictory nature of the colonized subject speaking the tongue of a colonist. To speak is to move beyond just existing plainly, it is to assert one's place in a culture, and to assume that culture as one's own. One assumes the weight of another language only to realize that it has been made not to support the colonized subject caught in the colonial trap, it was never intended to do so. The colonial dominance of language allowed the colonist to remain in the culture of the colonized, long past their departure. To have essentially changed the foundations of language of entire generations, was to maintain their power indefinitely. The ghost of colonial empire lingers in every utterance of the colonial tongue. With every unexpressed anxiety it hacks away, accumulating pieces here and there, building its colony. With every child who, straying farther from their cultural language, claims English as their primary one, the colonist profits incrementally – with each gain comes a loss of culture. Ultimately, the colonial power has maintained its grip on its former colonies, not only in the maintenance of the colonial language, but also in trapping them in it, unable to express themselves, and unable to turn elsewhere to do so, the colonial power still has us subjugated.



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