Decolonial Subversions

My Encounters with the English Language and My Anti-colonial Praxis

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Abstract

In this paper, as my anti-colonial praxis, I reflect on my experiences with the English language. My accounts demonstrate that although I was aware of the colonizing effect of the English language and the education systems of the West, the academic and socio-economic contexts of Bangladesh that value competence in English and higher degrees from North America led me to pursue an MA and Ph.D. in Canada. While Canada claims itself as a racially democratic and multicultural country, my experiences at universities and workplaces represent how the lack of linguistic diversity and tolerance results in the marginalisation of other speakers, while fostering social difference and inequality and causing their self-doubt, trauma and damage. I call on English and multilingual speakers to work together to rupture the dominance of the English language in Canada and elsewhere in the world.

Keywords: The English language, colonization, suffering, autobiography, anti-colonial praxis.

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Mes Rencontres avec la Langue Anglaise

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Résumé

Dans cet article, qui s'inscrit dans ma praxis anticoloniale, je réfléchis sur mes expériences de la langue anglaise. Les résultats de mes recherches démontrent que bien que je sois consciente de l'effet colonisateur de la langue anglaise et des systèmes éducatifs de l'Occident, les contextes académiques et sociaux du Bangladesh qui valorisent les compétences en anglais et les diplômes d'enseignement supérieur en Amérique du Nord m'ont poussée à poursuivre une maîtrise (MA) et un doctorat (Ph.D.) au Canada. Bien que le Canada se présente comme un pays démocratique et multiculturel sur le plan racial, mes expériences dans les universités et les lieux de travail illustrent comment le manque de diversité linguistique et de tolérance conduit à la marginalisation d'autres locuteurs, tout en entretenant la différence sociale, l'inégalité, et causant le doute de soi, des traumatismes et des dommages. J'appelle les locuteurs anglophones et multilingues à travailler ensemble pour rompre la domination de la langue anglaise au Canada et ailleurs dans le monde.

Mots clés: La langue Anglaise, colonisation, souffrance, autobiographie, pratique anticoloniale.

সারাংশঃ এই লেখাটিতে আমি উপনিবেশবিরোধী চর্চার অংশ হিসেবে ইংরেজি ভাষা নিয়ে আমার অভিজ্ঞতা তুলে ধরেছি। যদিও আমি ইংরেজি ভাষা এবং পাশ্চাত্য শিক্ষাপদ্ধতির ঔপনিবেশিক দিকগুলো নিয়ে সোচ্চার, বাংলাদেশের শিক্ষাজগত ও আর্থ-সামাজিক প্রেক্ষিতে — যা কিনা ইংরেজি ভাষাদক্ষতা এবং উত্তর আমেরিকায় ডিগ্রি অর্জনকে অধিক মূল্যায়ন করে — আমি এম এ এবং পি এইচ ডি ডিগ্রী অর্জন করতে কানাডায় অভিগমন করি। কানাডা বহুসাংস্কৃতিক দেশ হিসেবে পরিচিত, কিন্তু বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ে এবং কর্মক্ষেত্রে আমি দেখেছি এখানে ভাষা বৈচিত্রতা চর্চার সংকট রয়েছে, যা সাধারণত অন্য ভাষাভাষীদের প্রান্তিক করে এবং তাদের মাঝে হীনমন্যতা ও দ্বিধা তৈরি করে। তাই কানাডা এবং অন্যত্র ইংরেজি ভাষার আধিপত্য ও ভাষার ভিত্তিতে তৈরি সামাজিক দূরত্ব, বিভাজন, এবং বৈষম্য নির্মূল করতে আমি ইংরেজি এবং অন্যান্য ভাষাভাষীদের একসাথে কাজ করার আহ্বান জানাই।

মূল শব্দ: ইংরেজি ভাষা, ঔপনিবেশিকীকরণ, ভোগান্তি, আত্মজীবনী, উপনিবেশবিরোধী চর্চা

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The linguistic context for my biography

This paper explores my encounters with language as a scholar from Bangladesh, who first arrived in English-speaking Canada as an MA student, then pursued her PhD., and now works in Canada as a Postdoctoral Fellow. I begin, though, in describing the linguistic contexts in which I have operated as they have had a powerful effect on my trajectory. In this paper, I use the term 'non-native' English speaker[3] to reflect on the colonial saga of the production of the dichotomy of 'native' versus 'non-native' English speakers as the paradox remains up to today, damages the self-perceptions of speakers of other languages and contributes to their pain and suffering. Thus, my use of the term does not convey my acceptance.

The dichotomy was produced at the height of British colonization to draw boundaries between some speakers and others, to construct the English-speaking superior self as opposed to the non-English-speaking inferior other and also to create a particular linguistic identity which is linked to "nationalism and Anglo-Saxonism" (Hackert, 2009, p. 306). The new science of language contributed to this dividing practice (Anderson, 1991). Although language is no longer the sole parameter of the right to claim nationhood, it still constitutes elements of nationhood. As such, the word nativeness invokes "a sense of being born to a speech community and thus language, which implies a naturally determined, inalienable and perfect competence and therefore, right to ownership, and connects linguistic ownership," and identity and political membership of a nation (Hackert, 2009, p. 306). Canada's preference for 'native' English speakers over others in institutional settings and for English language testing scores as a prerequisite for immigration to Canada arguably reflects its intention to preserve the dominance of the English language in Canada. However, representations of Canada continue to portray this settler colonial state as benevolent and celebrated for its multiculturalism (Bannerji, 2000; Dua, Razack, & Warner, 2005).

As Bennerji (2000) claims, multiculturalism officially developed in Canada through the 1970s and 1980s. Pierre Eliot Trudeau's official policy of multiculturalism facilitated a rapid influx of immigrants from the Global South in Canada. Still, in Quebec, the old English-French rivalry was intensified during that time. In this spectrum, the declaration of multiculturalism assisted in muting Francophone state formation aspirations as a strategy "of coping with the non-European immigrants" (p. 9). The inclusion of multiculturalism also aided in sidelining Indigenous peoples' movement of their land claims while facilitating "the nationhood of Canada with its hegemonic Anglo-Canadian national culture" (Bennerji, 2000, p. 9). My lived experiences in the following sections represent Canada's preference for preserving Anglo-Canadian culture and demonstrate how the dominant status of English as a world lingua franca can complicate racialized women's identity and put them at odds with

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[3] In this paper, I have used the term 'non-native' English speakers, although it has a negative connotation and contains some prejudices, including 'non-native' English speakers lack 'perfect competence' in English. L2 or LX are proposed as a better use for erasing prejudices (Dewaele, 2018; O'Rourke & Ramallo, 2011). However, as my experience reflects, using L2 and LX for multilingual speakers did not stop the power dynamic inherent in the English language due to the history of colonialism and neocolonialism.

their language, cultural and academic learning despite the ideology of multiculturalism. Further, education institutes in Canada not only value the Western "epistemic structures" of education that disregard other ways of knowing, learning, and living but also leads others to assimilate to the mainstream 'White culture and structure'. Regarding language, speakers of other languages are forced to master English to survive in Canada, which is detrimental for people with diverse cultures and languages. Although, as a critical sociologist, feminist, and anthropologist, I have been involved in research to learn about marginalized peoples' experiences, until now, I have not written about my own racialization and colonization experiences. I will reflect on this in this paper.

Epistemology and methods

In this paper, I combine autobiography and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze my racialization experiences. Autobiography is significant as its emergence is linked with the methodological and epistemological decolonization of social science methods that relied on Western ways of knowing and writing (Shantz, 2009). Autobiography, conversely, encourages absent peoples' knowledge production through reflections on their selves and interactions with others and societies.

CRT is significant for unpacking the complexities of my racialization in Canada since today in Western society, the mass of racism is perpetuated through its legal systems and other institutions (Gillborn, 2018) and the "majority of racism remains hidden beneath a veneer of normality, and it is only the more crude and obvious forms of racism that are seen as problematic by most people" (Gillborn, 2018, p. 339). The West has produced itself as superior while naturalizing its colonial power as beneficial for colonized people, leading them to alter their cognitive thinking and their ways of living to match Western norms and structures (Khan, 2017; Lock & Nguyen, 2010; Mills, 2017; Nandy, 1983; Scheper-Hughes, 1987; Spivak, 1988). The colonial power of the English language is not an exception, and it has been presented to colonized people in the form of their empowerment. As such, Motha (2014) unpacks the ways colonial aspects of the English language have been hidden in today's world, noting in the past, colonial governments imposed "European culture and practices by making laws and policies, such as during the 1800s, the British government ensured that English was taught in schools in the British colonies" (p.13). Since the 1950s, the technology of White supremacy has changed. Multiple sources, media, transnational corporations, the United Nations and its affiliated organizations, religious bodies, non-governmental organization, and educational institutions have been working together to create value of Western culture and the English language (p.13), which made it difficult to combat the dominance of the English language in the Global South and elsewhere in the world. However, speaking against it and exposing colonial power relations are essential for decolonial praxis (Hwami, 2016). In this paper, I speak against White supremacy through my narratives.

My narratives as my praxis

This section explores my experiences with the English language in Bangladesh and in Canada by dividing into two subsections. First, the colonial and economic contexts of immigration to Canada from Bangladesh will be reflected on. Then, my experience as a colonized subject and my praxis in Canada, particularly at my university, will be elaborated.

In Bangladesh

I was born and grew up in Bangladesh, completed a bachelor's and Master's of Social Science in Anthropology at Jahangirnagar University and was a faculty member and scholar of anthropology at two well-known public universities before migrating to Canada for my MA and Ph.D. Bangladesh emerged as an independent country in 1971, following some two hundred years of colonization by the British and then 24 years of economic and cultural dominance by West Pakistan (Parvin, 2019). Because the territory had a long history of colonization, it became dependent upon foreign aid, particularly from the Global North. Because of this dependency, aid agencies began intervening in most of Bangladesh's so-called Western development-related plans and programs. Due to colonization, later globalization and neo-liberalization, Western ways of forming subjecthood, learning, seeing, and living have been interpreted as progress while compelling Bangladeshi people to mimic the culture of the West and language.

With respect to migration, until the 1970s, people were reluctant to migrate abroad, even to other towns and cities within the country, as preserving paternal households was considered significant to Bangladeshis (Gardner, 1995). Prior, people used to migrate to the UK and the USA, most of whom were generally from upper-class backgrounds and had formal institutional education. After the 1990s, migrating abroad has become a metaphor for power, progress, and advancement (Gardner, 1995). Migration has begun to be seen as upward social mobility that brings not only higher earnings and consumption but also higher status and education (Rao, 2014).

In the colonial and neoliberal economic restructuring, Western education systems are legitimized as the best education systems for developing oneself and obtaining economic opportunities in the world (Rizvi, 2007). As a student and faculty member of Anthropology, I observed how course curriculums of anthropology primarily include reading materials written by White scholars. Nevertheless, several scholars, including, me worked to include diverse scholarships and took up anti-colonial perspectives in courses syllabus and research, in particular at Jahangirnagar University. Despite having a critical approach against colonialism, I acted on discourses on the importance of having a Western academic degree to better serve my students in Bangladesh. In addition to that, pursuing higher studies in the West became a matter of proving my intellectual capability in academia. The policies of public universities encouraged faculties to go abroad for higher study by granting a study

leave with pay for five years. Some private universities, such as North South University in Bangladesh, prefer North American Masters and Ph.D. when hiring faculty members.

I had to submit an International English Language Test (IELTS) score for my MA admission and for a study visa application to Canada. The test fee is high for most Bangladeshi people, and the growth of the English language business is remarkable despite Bangladesh having a proud history of fighting for the mother tongue Bengali in 1952 when it was a part of Pakistan. In August 1947, British India was divided into two independent states: India and Pakistan. Pakistan was split into two areas: West and East Pakistan (Bose & Jalal, 2017). From the beginning, West Pakistan established cultural and economic dominance over East Pakistan (Parvin, 2019). As an internal colonization process, Urdu was declared to be the official language of East Pakistan, although the majority of the people spoke Bengali. Thousands protested the declaration; five died, and hundreds were injured in the protest rally. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared February 21 as International Mother Language Day to acknowledge the martyrs of the Language Movement. The recognition by UNESCO is interesting because it did not reduce the supremacy of the English language in Bangladesh but instead increased it at the expense of its national language Bengali, which represents the pitfalls of UNESCO's recognition as it failed to facilitate language diversity. However, as opposed to the Urdu language, the dominance of the English language has been framed as nonthreatening for Bangladeshi peoples' mother tongues through the discourses of economic progress and national and global opportunities. In order to understand the dominance of the English language in my country, situating it in the intersecting history of capitalism, colonialism, neoliberalism, and the material relations of production and distribution of resources is crucial (Heller & McElhinny, 2017).

As noted earlier, the dominance of the English language originated with European imperial domination in British India, and the territory now known as Bangladesh was a part of India. Notably, the colonial government began imposing English on the local people after 1831 when the Crown renewed the functions of the East India Company (Annamalai, 2004). In 1833, the East India Company created policies of recruiting local people for the colonial government's civil service office to offset the administrative cost of governing India. A certain degree of proficiency in English became a prerequisite for getting a civil service job. The Anglicist policy of using the medium of education in English in schools was developed in 1835 to facilitate education in English. Jobs in new industries, British government offices, law, medicine and teaching were obtained through the English medium of education, which made new urban elites and the ruling class and mediators between foreign rulers and the general population (Annamalai, 2004). English became the way of accessing jobs, resources, power, and status. This trend continued and is still prevalent due to globalization and neoliberalism. In a neoliberal economic setting, resource mobilization throughout the world and peoples' freedom and rights to access resources worldwide are encouraged, and proficiency in English became vital to avail of opportunities (Annamalai, 2004). Within this spectrum, Bangladeshis became motivated to work on their English to avail opportunities

nationally and internationally. I was a part of this process even when I knew the colonizing effects of the language on me.

Returning to the stories of my IELTS score; it was mandatory for my MA admission at my university in Canada. The British Council and the International Development Program (IDP) of Australian Universities, Colleges and Schools arrange the test in Bangladesh. The test model is highly ableist as test takers require a high reading, writing and listening speed if they aim to get the expected and higher scores. All the contents (except speaking) are basically informed by Euro-American culture and education practice, idealizing the Western ways of reading, listening and writing; ultimately, imposing the Western worldviews and negating other ways of knowing and learning. Further, IELTS scores are based on a model of standard British English, that is not even used across the board by some 'native speakers' of English in the UK. For example, the speaking test scored 'native speakers' at a lower grade if they use phrases such as 'I ain't' even though this might be one example of a vernacular used in their 'native speaker community' in the UK.

In Canada

My journey to Canada began on January 22, 2014; the temperature was -40, which was difficult as I had never experienced such cold weather before. Specific rules in the rented house were unfamiliar and discriminatory, and I began feeling like a stranger. Alongside the new environment and house rules, I started to see myself as stupid at my university due to my English language. I recall being nervous as I needed to repeat my questions to make them meaningful to many English speakers, which is arguably associated with the fact that I moved to a White-settler-dominant city (Gone, 2013). There is an increasing focus on providing culturally sensitive services to its Indigenous population, who are displaced and experiencing generational traumas due to colonial violence, racist policies, and genocide (Gone, 2013). However, to my knowledge, when I moved to Canada in 2014, the city lacked sufficient culturally diversified services for racialized immigrants, which can leave newcomers feeling lonely and excluded.

While I have many racialization experiences, for brevity, I have limited my analysis to a few experiences in the following discussions. I intend to provide messages about how newcomers suffer due to structural and cultural differences and uncover the structural incongruity but not to disrespect any individuals exposed in my narratives. I believe that individuals' actions are shaped by structures, cultures and discourses. Thus, my intention is to point out the structural gaps, not to disrespect individuals. I acknowledge that well-intended White folks can unintentionally engage in subtle forms of racism. That said, I was supported by several White professors, friends, and colleagues, my Ph.D. and Post-doctoral supervisors, who were /are active in anti-colonial movements. In several ways, my activisms are informed and strengthened by them.

Returning to my racialization experience, I reminiscence that in the beginning, in my classes, I often provided examples from my culture to explain a theme of sociology classes. One day after a class, one of my cohorts asked, as I recall: "Why do you often bring examples from your culture when most students are White and do not have any ideas about your culture?" I felt guilty immediately for my class discussions as they seemed unnecessary to my classes, which created my hesitance to reflect on my culture in next classes. I admit that the classmate might have well intentions for me, but situated in the historical context, the comments by my classmate can be read as part of a long history of devaluation and delegitimization of other knowledge and practices. Fanon (2007) and Fernando (1988) examined how a number of disciplines during the mid-nineteenth century in the West and at the height of European colonialism produced knowledge about intellectual inferiority and backwardness of Africa, Asia, and South America as well as the 'natural' superiority of Europe, which became entrenched ideals by the nineteenth century. The material effects of the construction are still prevalent; thus, my experiences and education from the Global South were viewed as incompatible in Canada.

Another example of my distress is receiving feedback on my English language in some course papers; even in one piece, some points were subtracted because of my flawed language. This experience can be linked to Maria Sílvia Cintra Martins' (2023) claim in this Special Issue that writing in English is an academic genre where speakers of other languages enter the colonizer's territory.

A writing centre was at the university to help all students with their academic writing, but booking an appointment was difficult, and no services were solely available to support the writing of students of other languages, which arguably indicates that the university did not address students' different needs, backgrounds, and languages. I seemed to be responsible for my flawed language, which represents how the university upheld neoliberal culture and nourished a colour blind approach that assumes everybody has equal resources and backgrounds for their academic progress while failing to understand how racial category, class, gender, language, and other social locations impact individuals' lives (James, 2018, p. 276). Thereby, the colour blind approach has perpetuated dominant power relations and colonial politics have broadened and deepened through the tropes of countries like Canada as racially democratic and non-racialist. My self-blame regarding my language deficit and individual responsibility to navigate this process occurred within the neo-liberal and colour blind education system that perpetuated racism by ignoring my needs.

These experiences, primarily, caused me to doubt my academic ability although I had the best academic result in my Bachelor's and Master's in Anthropology in Bangladesh. I felt I did not belong to the education system, and I was rendered as foreign as the language was colonial and not mine. The pain and suffering that were initiated because of my English language, I defined as emotional violence; and to borrow Fanon's and Du Bois's concept, I developed a double consciousness that I began to see and evaluate my strengths through the eyes of White language and structure (Du Bois, 2007; Fanon, 1961/2007; hooks, 1992), which created a threat to my self-evaluation and caused my emotional challenges. Sometimes I was

anxious in front of White people to know if they could understand my English, which reflects the work of Franz Fanon (1961/2007), who examined how Black people feel nervous in front of Whites. As to Fanon, the sensation is linked with the historical and colonial construction of Black people as inferior and backward. Fanon (1961/2007) explains that when Black people encounter the White world, they go through an experience of sensitization, and their egos collapse because of their perceived inferiority. While Fanon primarily examines the colonization of the Black folk's mind and body, Fanon's analysis is helpful to understanding my sensitization in the West. My survival strategy with the situation was to withdraw many aspects of self, and yet I suffered a chronic sickness of hemorrhage and emotional pain and trauma within four months of coming to Canada. Within this space, I was silent most often because I was afraid, sometimes justifiably, sometimes not, or to resonate with Audre Lorde (1977), I felt that if I spoke, my words would not be welcomed. I was scared and blamed myself for my English language because I absorbed the neo-liberal and colour blind approach that success and failure are individual responsibilities. Nevertheless, I succeeded academically and at my workplace by working hard and building resilience. The persons who sustained me in Canada were White and racialized individuals, my Ph.D. and Post-doctoral supervisors, some professors at my university, and my White and racialized friends in Canada, all of whom shared a war against colonial violence and subjugation. They provided care, without which I could not have survived intact. I can recall such heartwarming comments I got on my Ph.D. thesis from my committee members. If there were any errors in my thesis writing, the professors commented like this: "the English language is the culprit here." My Post-doctoral supervisor has a similar approach, providing me with comfort. These acts can be seen as their decolonial praxis to rupture the supremacy of the English language in academia and at work, which propelled me to engage more in anti-colonial activism.

I completed an MA and a Ph.D. from the same university in Canada. During my Ph.D. program, I was looking for jobs; most of the advertisements focused on excellent verbal and written communication skills in English. In some job advertisements, 'native' English speakers were given preference. Yet I wrote to one employer explaining how I fulfilled the other requirements. I was taken seriously, interviewed, and hired. As discussed earlier, some forms of racism are embedded in systems, naturalized, and often seemingly invisible and benign to White folks; even sometimes, well-intended White people can unintentionally inflict racism. Thereby, asking them to reflect and take deliberate action to unsettle the dominance of the English language is a crucial step for decolonial praxis.

After completing my Ph.D., I taught two courses in two different universities; I was appreciated by one class, while for the other, students mostly commented on my English accent, which arguably is part of the historical devaluation of different languages and the speakers of other languages. I call on White students to reflect on their positionality and privileges and would like to convey a message that speakers of other languages also struggle to understand English speakers, but arguably fear to comment on their accent as the hegemony of the English language has become so normalized that not understanding

English can be seen as an individual fault and weakness. I also invite privileged/White/ English speakers to reflect on how White supremacy has created the enduring structures of inequality and to act and make decisions to unsettle colonial structures. They must be a part of making a common platform for diverse cross-cultural people where people can sacrifice space for each other, accept marginalized knowledge, language, and practices, and disrupt discriminatory structures.

Conclusion

In this paper, by intersecting autobiography and CRT, I reflected on my colonization due to my English language. My stories signify the ways the hegemony of the English language in Bangladesh has increased at the expense of its state language Bengali and several ethnic languages. Whereas I was critical of the expansion of the English language in Bangladesh, I came to English speaking country, Canada to pursue higher studies. Passing an academic English language test to gain admission in Canada was mandatory, and the test was similarly important for getting a study visa to entry to Canada. My university in Canada in question nourishes the supremacy of the English language and is yet to be equipped to meet the needs of students of other languages. A lack of linguistic diversity and tolerance in Canada as a settler nation resulted in the marginalisation of other speakers, Indigenous peoples and French-speaking Québécois, along with preserving and continuing the colonial saga of the production of the paradox of 'native' versus 'non-native' English speakers, which is detrimental for the self-perceptions of multilingual speakers. By speaking against the dominance of the English language and its damaging effects, I deliberately unsettle White supremacy. I posit that, in addition to making a common platform for diverse cross-cultural people where they can work together to disrupt the English monolingual biases and structure, much work is needed at policy and institutional levels and beyond to value other languages.

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