

# Decolonial Subversions

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The role of language in diversifying knowledge production: Reflecting on the experience of *Decolonial Subversions* as a multilingual publishing platform

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# The role of language in diversifying knowledge production: Reflecting on the experience of *Decolonial Subversions* as a multilingual publishing platform

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## Abstract

*Decolonial Subversions* was envisioned as a platform for the dissemination of decolonial perspectives by implementing a model that subverts current practices of knowledge production, validation and dissemination—both within and outside of academia. It does so by departing from mainstream standards of communication (which privilege English as language, text as format and intellect as the locus of knowing) and implementing a multilingual and multi-format publication model. This is based on the understanding that epistemic violence is perpetuated linguistically in significant ways, such as when converting multidimensional and embodied knowledge into rigidly mono-dimensional scholarly articles. Authors whose first language is not English are often forced to write in English in order to reach a wider audience and for their knowledge to be accepted as intelligible and valid. In response to this dynamic, *Decolonial Subversions* enables authors to submit their manuscripts in their first and working languages, as well as in an English version they can produce with the support of a translator, assistant or co-author, in addition to accepting visual and acoustic formats. This strategy aims to minimise the epistemic violence inflicted via linguistic requirements, maintain the text's original nuance, and simultaneously ensure that the work reaches and can inform Anglophone scholarship and thinking. In this essay, we discuss this approach in detail, how our contributors have engaged with the multilingual option we provide, and some of the challenges we have faced in moving towards a multilingual publishing model. The essay provides a publisher's perspective as a way of

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complementing the growing dissemination of multilingual articles reflecting authors' vantage points.

**Keywords:** *Decolonial Subversions*, publishing, English, linguistic violence, multilingualism, publisher perspective, paradigm shift

## Riassunto

*Decolonial Subversions* è una piattaforma per la diffusione di prospettive decoloniali tramite l'implementazione di un modello di pubblicazione che sovverte le attuali pratiche di produzione, legittimazione e diffusione della conoscenza—sia all'interno che all'esterno dell'ambito accademico. Per raggiungere questo obiettivo, *Decolonial Subversions* abbandona standard di comunicazione tradizionali (che privilegiano l'inglese come lingua, il testo come formato e l'intelletto come luogo del sapere) a favore di un modello di pubblicazione multilinguistico e multimodale. Questo si basa sulla convinzione che la violenza epistemica si protrae linguisticamente in vari modi, come ad esempio quando conoscenze sensoriali e multidimensionali vengono convertite in articoli accademici rigidi e unidimensionali. Autorə la cui prima lingua non é inglese sono spesso forzate a scrivere in inglese per poter raggiungere un pubblico più ampio e per far sì che la loro conoscenza venga considerata valida e accessibile. Per contrastare questa dinamica, *Decolonial Subversions* permette ad autorə di inviare i loro manoscritti nella loro prima lingua—o nella lingua in cui si trovano maggiormente a proprio agio—in aggiunta ad una versione in inglese, che possono produrre con il supporto di traduttoreə, assistentə o co-autorə; per lo stesso fine, *Decolonial Subversions* accetta anche contribuzioni audio e visive. Questa strategia ha lo scopo di minimizzare la violenza epistemica che viene inflitta tramite prerequisiti linguistici, mantenere le sfumature del testo originale, e garantire che il lavoro possa informare culture e pensieri anglofoni. In questo articolo illustriamo in dettaglio questo approccio, come autorə hanno interagito con l'opzione multilinguistica che offriamo, ed alcune delle difficoltà che abbiamo incontrato nel promuovere un modello di pubblicazione multilinguistico. Questo articolo presenta una prospettiva dal punto di vista editoriale, in modo da complementare la crescente diffusione di articoli multilinguistici che invece riflettono i punti di vista di autorə.

**Parole chiave:** *Decolonial Subversions*, pubblicazione, inglese, violenza linguistica, multilinguismo, prospettiva editoriale, cambio paradigmatico

## Introduction

Approaches to decolonise knowledge production and to move towards more inclusive, diverse and less Eurocentric epistemological paradigms are increasing and are under continuous exploration by universities, professional organisations, communities and others. Among these features *Decolonial Subversions*, a platform and network dedicated to decolonising knowledge production and publishing by encouraging open access, cost-free multilingual and multimodal publications. *Decolonial Subversions* is composed of an international team of collaborators and like-minded researchers, practitioners, artists, activists and professionals from at least 15 countries, which include India, Ethiopia, Senegal, Namibia, South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Morocco, Hong Kong, Hungary, Greece, Moldova, Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom and Sri Lanka.

*Decolonial Subversions* is conceived as a platform for the expression of historically silenced knowledge systems at the margins—whether in western, eastern, northern or southern geographies—where research can be disseminated without the constraints set by publication criteria typical of neoliberal and westernised dominant societies. Furthermore, individuals from within and outside academia can share their research and thinking without the necessity to master English or to comply with rigid styles and formats set by anglophone high-impact journals. Such criteria have historically made it difficult for researchers who, operating outside of westernised systems of thinking, produce and publish research which employs non-mainstream conceptual repertoires and brings to the fore issues of regional, national or local priority that are not understood or espoused in the mainstream. We understand linguistic and epistemological injustices to be interdependent: epistemic violence is perpetuated linguistically and through the norms of academic writing, such as when one is required to convert what could be perceived and experienced as multidimensional knowledge in their linguistic and cultural contexts into rigidly contained scholarly articles in English. Authors whose first language is not English are most often forced to write in English in order to reach a wider audience, and must follow Anglophone norms of writing and argumentation for their knowledge to be accepted as intelligible and legitimate, which we see as an important epistemological injustice that needs to be rectified. To reverse this dynamic, *Decolonial Subversions* enables authors to submit their manuscripts in their mother tongues, alongside an English version they can produce with the support of a translator, assistant or co-author. This strategy aims to minimise the epistemic violence inflicted through linguistic requirements by maintaining the text's original nuance, promote indigenous languages and, simultaneously, ensure that the original research or text reaches Anglophone audiences in some form; this can give scholars outside western Europe, North America and other neoliberal societies the opportunity to inform mainstream knowledge and thinking.

In this essay, we discuss this approach in some detail, describing ways in which our contributors have engaged with the multilingual option we provide, and illustrating some of the challenges we have faced in moving towards a genuine and sustainable multilingual publishing model. In response to the Special Issue Call, we also consider whether and how

this model could be applied more systematically, to start influencing and potentially rescripting current structures underpinning production of knowledge within and outside academia. The learnings shared in this essay contribute our perspective as publishers in an expanding scholarship on multilingual publishing, which thus far however primarily focuses on the experiences of multilingual scholars writing in English.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to illustrating how *Decolonial Subversions* works to promote decolonial modes of knowledge production, a caveat must be outlined. It is paramount to acknowledge that facilitating communication, no matter how decolonial and inclusive this aspires to be, is not always a desirable or innocent endeavour. An aspiration to seek and make multiple forms of knowledge accessible without reflexivity could reflect the same drive for unlimited expansion and reach informing colonial and imperialist dynamics. Marginalised individuals and communities might fear, and even become threatened, if sacred, ancestral and other intimate forms of knowledge were to become part of mainstream epistemic spaces.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, communities at the margins may resist engagement in order to actively express a radical alterity, thus forcing the West to acknowledge the arbitrariness of its centrality.<sup>5</sup> Embodied awareness and empathy are fundamental to recognising when communication is beneficial for and desired by the parties involved, and when it is not. *Decolonial Subversions* stands for diversifying and pushing the boundaries of knowledge only insofar as this promotes and strengthens more just and equitable systems of existence—an exercise that requires constant reflexivity, awareness, empathy and respect.

## The need for multilingual knowledge production and publishing

*Decolonial Subversions* aspires to a modus operandi that is collaborative and consultative, decentred, reflexive and bottom-up in its engagement with members, contributors and communities. The platform seeks to bridge academia, activism and practice, and to make knowledge more accessible and impactful in society at large. In publishing a vast range of texts—including specialist essays, journalistic articles, fieldnotes, opinion pieces, music

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Mary Jane Curry and Theresa Lillis, 2019. "Unpacking the Lore on Multilingual Scholars Publishing in English: A Discussion Paper," *Publications* 7: 27; Françoise Salager-Meyer, 2014. "Writing and publishing in peripheral scholarly journals: How to enhance the global influence of multilingual scholars?," *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 13, p. 78–82; Pedro Martín, Jesús Rey-Rocha, Sally Burgess, and Ana I. Moreno, 2014. "Publishing research in English-language journals: Attitudes, strategies and difficulties of multilingual scholars of medicine," *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 16, p. 57–67; Mary Jane Curry and Theresa Lillis, 2004. "Multilingual Scholars and the Imperative to Publish in English: Negotiating Interests, Demands, and Rewards," *TESOL QUARTERLY* 38:4, p. 663–688.

<sup>4</sup> An exemplary contemporary case is that of the Sentinelese tribe in the Andaman Islands, who made their desire to not engage in any form with outsiders clear multiple times—a request which has been violated multiple times in the name of science, communication and proselytism. See for example Sasikumar Mundayat, 2019. "The Sentinelese of North Sentinel Island: A reappraisal of tribal scenario in an Andaman island in the context of killing of an American preacher." *Journal of the Anthropological Survey of India* 68.1: 56–69.

<sup>5</sup> See Monika Hirmer, 2018. "The art of Telangana women and the crafting of the decolonial subject: From dialectics of 'othering' to expressions of radical alterity." *The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research* 11: 48–62.

lyrics and poetry—it also seeks to open knowledge to critique by practitioners and activists, so that contributing and accessing academic knowledge are not limited to those with academic capital.<sup>6</sup>

In pursuing these aims, *Decolonial Subversions* places emphasis on language, recognising the historical dominance of English and, to a lesser degree, other colonial languages such as French, and the barriers that these have historically created for conveying diverse worldviews and modes of being in the world. In an effort to break the cycle of linguistic dominance and exclusion, *Decolonial Subversions* encourages contributors to submit their works in local languages, where ‘local’ is defined in relation to one’s most proximate or relevant context, as long as they are accompanied by an English version. If contributors prefer to submit their work directly in English, we attempt to provide translations thereof, particularly into languages that are spoken by the communities who have contributed to the research, or to whom it might be most meaningful.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, we welcome contributions in any and all languages, provided their publication is technically feasible. For example, in the case of written publications not all alphabets are supported by software programmes; in such cases, we might encourage the publication of an audio output instead.

While it is not our intention to accentuate the dichotomy between the dominant English language and all other languages of the world, offering an English version for each contribution submitted can ensure that a wider audience accesses it. Besides reaching audiences commonly excluded from mainstream publication spheres, publications in languages other than English fulfil the crucial need of destabilising the gaze of those whose first and/or main working language is English, thus calling for a revision of universalised language inequalities not only in principle but, also, through experiential cues. Importantly, we understand the risks of perpetuating a binary between English and non-English languages; however, we see our model as a necessary, albeit flawed, transition towards a more inclusive publication model. It should be noted that our current priorities do not reflect the ultimate publication model we envision for *Decolonial Subversions*, as we hope that future volumes will contain more publications in multiple languages, regardless of their reach, and irrespective of the provision of English translations thereof. Only then can the *Decolonial Subversions* multilingual model be entirely fulfilled.

By encouraging submissions in the languages that are most relevant to research communities, the platform seeks to make knowledge production less extractive and accessible for use and critique by those directly involved in the research, or those who otherwise have a stake in this knowledge. On the other hand, encouraging English translations of outputs produced in other languages aims to facilitate a dialogue between researchers of different cultural backgrounds and geographical locations and to increase the likelihood that historically marginalised knowledge systems will be heard in the mainstream

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<sup>6</sup> Márton Demeter, 2021. *Academic Knowledge Production and the Global South: Questioning Inequality and Under-representation*. Palgrave: Macmillan.

<sup>7</sup> This task is supported by *Decolonial Subversions*’ Language Editor, our most recently established position.



academic framework and can begin to subvert the dominance of Anglophone thinking. Contributors are encouraged to partner with translators acquainted with the cosmological and linguistic systems of the communities they work in to produce translations. The underlying premise here is that worldviews and languages are intertwined and that terms are not mere semantics—thus, to be able to translate linguistically, one must first understand the cosmological system in which this language has been formed and is spoken.

Established academics are also encouraged to collaborate with early career researchers or students in other linguistic communities who can serve as translators, and Northern or foreign researchers are encouraged to pair with indigenous translators. This should facilitate ethical collaborative learning processes and create opportunities for training and publication for those who are less established within academia or minoritised outside of it. It is also a way of acknowledging the material and financial disadvantages that local collaborators often face vis-à-vis their western counterparts. The aim is to start to subvert current material and power asymmetries, firstly between established academics and emerging researchers and, secondly, between researchers from profit-driven industrialised societies and researchers, assistants, translators and other stakeholders in low and middle-income countries, indigenous groups, and minority communities within majority countries. The platform is adamant that translators must be fully acknowledged for their work and duly identified at their own discretion. Where authors, whether from the Global South or North, are proficient in two or more languages, they are invited to provide their own translations, but they must include adequate context and justification to their translations. This, essentially, means that translators who are translating from/into a language not their own must show clearly their rationalisations for translating in the ways they do, especially of concepts that are new or newly introduced and are being debated in specific linguistic communities. They should also avoid presenting their translation as normative, see translation rather as tentative and open to re-evaluation and reconsideration.

*Decolonial Subversions* is also considerate of the fact that an increasing number of people, whose first language is not English yet whose primary locus of writing is in Anglophone educational systems and academic platforms, may find it difficult to revert back to their languages of origin to write research.<sup>8</sup> This is a phenomenon of profound and overlooked consequences, if we recognise that a language is not isolated from and reflects distinct worldviews, modes of argumentation and systems of organising information. Thus, the assimilation of English implies that original modes of thinking and ways of relating to one's surroundings have been altered in order to adjust to Anglophone models of thinking and conveying the world into academic writing.

For example, both authors of this essay have written in languages other than English for academic purposes. R.I. previously found it difficult to translate back to one of her original languages (being bilingual) philosophical terms originating in western epistemology and, in particular, genealogies of concepts that did not necessarily emerge from the worldview that

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Ken Hyland, 2016. "Academic publishing and the myth of linguistic injustice." *Journal of Second Language Writing* 31: 58-69.

engendered and defined the contours of her mother tongues. Thus, in the process of conveying well-established concepts manufactured within a western worldview and Anglophone epistemology, she had to innovate by adjusting, altering or combining existing terms in her original language that had previously meant something different. M.H., in turn, experienced a disconcerting sense of alienation when reverting back to either of her two mother tongues in academic contexts. Beyond matters of vocabulary, non-Anglophone modes of argumentation that were once intuitive to her are now often tainted by the rigid linearity that is characteristic of the Anglophone education system.

In the Anglophone context, it is customary for authors to gain the respect of the scholarly readership by providing, usually at the beginning of their academic essay, an extensive overview of current literature in the field to show their mastering of it, explicating gaps and suggesting amendments—thus setting the author apart and above their cohort. In the Italian context, it is rather customary to gain the respect of one's audience by leaving room for negotiation and by showing humbleness. While this is most evident in informal everyday life situations, it emerges also in more formal settings, such as academic conferences, and in scholarly essays, where it is not uncommon for authors to start with an illustration of their own relation to the subject treated and an admission of their initial bafflement or mistaken interpretations.<sup>9</sup> Most eminently, this particular way of engaging in dialogue with the other, is conveyed by the locution "Non fare i complimenti" (semantically untranslatable, but best rendered as "don't be ceremonious"), commonly encountered in numerous Italian everyday contexts: if offered to speak or asked about something, the respectful and polite interlocutor at first refuses to take on the offer or to deliberate about the topic, claiming, among other things, that they are not worthy or capable of it and prefer not to be a nuisance; following which, the other party, if equally polite and respectful, insists on delivering the offer or wanting to hear the interlocutor's arguments. This negotiation can last from a few exchanges to extensive forth and back—depending on regional peculiarities within the country—and, usually, entails expressions of admiration for the other party. A simplified example of how a typical conversation could unfold, is as follows:

G.: "Corrado, perché non ci illustra lei questo passaggio nel testo di Pavese?"  
[Corrado, why don't you explain this passage in Pavese's text?]

C.: "Non penso di avere molto da aggiungere oltre ciò che è già stato detto da lei, Giulio, e dal collega". [I don't think I have much to add to what has already been said by you, Giulio, and our colleague].

G.: "Ma su, non faccia i complimenti, lei ha un dottorato in letteratura oltretutto".  
[Please, don't be ceremonious, after all you have a doctorate in literature].

C.: "Va bene, se proprio insiste..." [Okay, if you really insist...].

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<sup>9</sup> As examples, see Lia Zola, 2012. "Note sullo sciamanesimo centro-siberiano: Dal diario di campo di Marie Czaplicka (1914-1915)." *La Ricerca Folklorica*: 133-142 and Francesco Zanotelli, 2004. "Luoghi, corpi, denaro: Lo scambio tra vivi e morti nella narrativa orale dell'Occidente messicano." *La Ricerca Folklorica*: 67-76.



This example demonstrates that the premises that legitimise the process of argumentation are different across worldviews and languages, and cannot be translated linguistically, since they reflect more profound differences in modes of relating to the other, be this in an everyday context or in an academic setup.<sup>10</sup>

What is also untranslatable is the attitude that different communities, worldviews and language systems have towards the idea of time. For example, while conceived as mostly linear in Anglophone settings, in the South Asian contexts where M.H. works in, time is understood in rather cyclical terms. Words such as the Hindi *kal*, which indicates, at once, tomorrow and yesterday, and *parason*, which means the day before yesterday as well as the day after tomorrow, remind one of the space for negotiation and adaptability typical of the Italian context discussed earlier. They also demonstrate that context is paramount for a word to acquire meaning. While, within their contexts, *kal* and *parason* can, to a large extent, unequivocally be translated as either ‘tomorrow’ or ‘yesterday’, or ‘day after tomorrow’ or ‘day before yesterday’, their inherent fluidity and, importantly, the cyclicity of time within which they are embedded, cannot be conveyed in English without resorting to laborious explanations.

It is also interesting to notice how, when relaying the way in which Sanskrit words are rendered in English by the South Asian priest/esses that M.H. works with, western Sanskritists repeatedly ‘rectify’ these indigenous renditions. Since Sanskrit, like all languages, is contextual and evolves over time, there is not one single type of Sanskrit, as is also reflected in the malleability with which it is used—orally and in written form—in past and present South Asian contexts. Scholars, on the other hand, often acknowledge only one type of canonised Sanskrit that has been standardised by grammarians at one specific point in time and elevated to be the ‘correct’ one, thereby not only prioritising artificial, rigid constructs over language as a flexible and contextual entity unfolding over time but, also, appropriating a language that has never been ‘theirs’.<sup>11</sup>

The shift towards an Anglophone terminology, grammar and syntax, alongside the predilection of text over orality—whether through external imposition, gradual internalisation or a strategic shift to other languages<sup>12</sup>—are intimately linked with immeasurable cultural loss, as they marginalise and delegitimise non-Anglophone ways of seeing the world and oneself, and limit one’s ways of being in the world and being

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of such forms of ceremony in the Italian context see Giovanna Alfonzetti, 2009. *I Complimenti nella Conversazione*. Editori Riuniti. Suresh Canagarajah, writing with respect to Tamil, notices a similar mode of proceeding that generally starts with a confession of one’s limitations (Suresh Canagarajah, 2022. “Language Diversity in Academic Writing: Toward Decolonizing Scholarly Publishing”, *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, pp. 1–22).

<sup>11</sup> See pp. 26–27 in Ute Hüsken, 2013. “Denial as Silencing: On Women’s Ritual Agency in a South Indian Brahmin Tradition”, *Journal of Ritual Studies*, Vol. 27, 1, pp. 21–34, for an evaluation of the contribution of colonialism and Sanskrit scholars, alongside Brahmin priests, towards the formalisation of Sanskrit and the elevation of texts as repositories of ultimate truth.

<sup>12</sup> Kofi Agyekum, 2018. “Linguistic imperialism and language decolonisation in Africa through documentation and preservation.” In *African linguistics on the prairie* (pp. 87–104). Language Science Press. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1251718>.

empowered by it. Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has referred to this phenomenon eloquently when he discussed the effects of colonialism on indigenous communities, stressing the importance of reclaiming one's own language as a way of feeling empowered in a post-colonial order where English is still a dominant language:

What happens during the colonial process, whether in the case of Māori, Africans or Native Americans is that it is always a process of alienating the colonised from his base—his economic base meaning his natural resources, his political base which is no power in his own land and his cultural base meaning the disconnection to language.

By “secure the base” I am saying we must connect to our base in terms of those resources and return to our languages as a base. Languages carry the memory of a community and are a memory bank of our experiences in history.<sup>13</sup>

To counter the phenomenon of disempowerment that comes with one's alienation from one's language, *Decolonial Subversions* encourages contributors to explore ways of expression that make sense within their own indigenous and local contexts, and to break free from the limitations of standardised and rigid structures that govern written text in Anglophone epistemology. Alongside written pieces, acoustic and visual modes of expression are open for exploration by contributors as per their preferences, contexts, and needs.

## Reflections on *Decolonial Subversions'* multilingual model

Despite the platform's commitment to working with all languages in the world and supporting contributors with translations and peer reviews in the languages of their preference, the transition to a multilingual knowledge production and publishing model has been challenging. We probably underestimated the combined effects of political, social, epistemological and environmental factors that continue to favour English in written form as the dominant language of academic knowledge production and publishing, media engagement and business internationally. Moreover, English is in many countries associated with elitism and advancement in life, which can foster preference for early socialisation and education in English.<sup>14</sup>

One consistent learning from the platform's first three years of existence is our contributors' tendency to submit written contributions and academic research papers in English, despite the majority of contributors being based or originating in Africa, Asia or

<sup>13</sup> See interview featuring Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in Makanaka Tuwe, “Why Decolonisation Starts With Reclaiming Language”, 8 June 2018, *VICE*, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/9k8zja/why-decolonisation-starts-with-reclaiming-language>.

<sup>14</sup> Kofi Agyekum, 2018. “Linguistic imperialism and language decolonisation in Africa through documentation and preservation.” In *African linguistics on the prairie* (pp. 87–104). Language Science Press. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1251718>.

other non-western countries. While we invite original contributions in any language for which we are able to find reviewers, the majority of our authors have shown a consistent preference to write in English and have only contributed translations in first languages where contributions have been relatively short, non-written, less ‘academic’ and, thus, more manageable (e.g. a written essay, an audio recording or a video submission), allowing for more flexibility in the use of language when translating. One such example is Márton Demeter’s translation into Hungarian of the essay ‘Plan S and the “opening up” of scientific knowledge: A critical commentary’ co-authored originally in English with R.I.<sup>15</sup> Another example is Elisée Byelongo’s translation of his audio submission ‘Kiswahili as a Language of Peace in an Environmentally friendly Approach’ in Swahili.<sup>16</sup> João Araió’s short film ‘Os verdadeiros lugares não estão no mapa’ is in Portuguese and accompanied by English subtitles;<sup>17</sup> significantly, its abstract and review are, till date, only in English. Besides receiving translations in Hungarian and Swahili, we also host contributions in Esperanto and Arabic.<sup>18</sup> In addition, a video contribution by Veronica Calarco featured Gunnai/Kuṛnai, an Indigenous Australian language, and Cymraeg or Welsh, a European Celtic language.<sup>19</sup>

Multilingual contributions such as Demeter’s and Byelongo’s were short and generally required less cumbersome processes to be translated. It is important to note also that it is not unlikely for some contributors to translate contributions back to first languages with the help of Google translation tools when these languages are available. While such machine-generated translations will be imperfect, they provide a helpful draft translation that can be manually refined by the contributor at a second stage, in this way significantly reducing the work they need to do on their own. Many indigenous and minoritised languages are not yet translatable via Google translation tools, which means that authors from such linguistic communities would have no facilitation for translating.

The tendency to write and submit written contributions in English could have numerous other reasons beyond the mere difficulty of translating highly academic or convoluted research papers into another language. In our conversations with colleagues across the world we have been told that often authors prefer to write in English because the publication will be considered international and will, subsequently, have more legitimacy within their own non-western academic institutions and universities contributing to their

<sup>15</sup> Márton Demeter and Romina Istratii, 2020. “A Plan S és a tudományos tudás „hozzáférhetővé tétele”: kritikai kommentár”, *Decolonial Subversions*, Main Issue 2020 (Written), pp. 22-30.

<sup>16</sup> Elisée Byelongo, 2020. “Kiswahili kama Lugha ya Amani ya Kutunza Mazingira”, *Decolonial Subversions*, Main Issue 2020 (Acoustic). <https://soundcloud.com/elisee-byelongo-isheloke/kiswahili-kama-lugha-ya-amani-ya-kutunza-mazingira-aud-20191222-wa0001>.

<sup>17</sup> João Araió, 2021. “The Real Places are not on the Map”, *Decolonial Subversions*, Main Issue 2021 (Visual). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ucb1jFICiaY>.

<sup>18</sup> Giridhar Rao, 2021. “Lingvaj homaj rajtoj kaj multlingva edukado: raporto de barata universitato”, *Decolonial Subversions*, Main Issue 2020 (Written), pp. 72-80; Layachi El Habbouch, 2022. “Manifesto, Arabic version”, *Decolonial Subversions*, Main Issue 2022 (Written), pp. 1-8.

<sup>19</sup> Veronica Calarco, 2021. “Y tir wedi’i dad-dewi / The Land Unmuted: Field Notes”, *Decolonial Subversions*, Main Issue 2021 (Visual). [https://vimeo.com/658569672?embedded=true&source=video\\_title&owner=138825724](https://vimeo.com/658569672?embedded=true&source=video_title&owner=138825724).



career development and promotion. Other colleagues have noted the difficulty of selecting a local language to write in, in contexts where multiple languages are spoken and are associated with specific ethnicities or identities, making the use of language and its choice political, or easily politicised. Thus, writing in English sometimes eschews these political intricacies and enables authors to share ideas or information that can be appraised less biasedly by others who share their social and political context.

Simultaneously, many of our contributors are not financially secure, and exert significant amounts of energy and time to establish themselves in the global academic field or in other practical and activist fields. Therefore, they are unable to invest in translating lengthy publications that would have little or no direct impact on their careers, livelihoods or activist aims. While most of our contributors are genuinely keen to produce translations into languages that are relatable to the communities they work with, they know that they will need to pursue these options voluntarily, which can be prohibitive since they can afford little or no time for unpaid work.<sup>20</sup> While it is our vision to set aside funds for supporting the translation of works submitted to the platform (either by reimbursing the original contributors if they offer to submit a translation, or by hiring a translator to work with the original contributor towards developing a translation), we cannot yet offer this option due to lack of a stable stream of funds and donations.

Given our contributors' frequency to write in English (a trend that is, as we suggested, less visible with acoustic or visual contributions), we have found that more time and more resources need to be used to support authors with editing and proofreading their written contributions. The *Decolonial Subversions* team includes two professional proof-readers and one assistant editor who contribute their work voluntarily because they are committed to the platform's vision. The editors-in-chief (authors of this essay) are also heavily involved in the editing process of written contributions when they edit or co-edit special issues. Extensive work is done to support contributors in order to bring their papers to publication standard and, importantly, in a way that respects and maintains the original tone and intention of the authors. As it was said, the English language may lack the exact terms to convey concepts and ideas that are more easily conveyed or were originally expressed in non-English languages and terminologies.<sup>21</sup>

There is also the case where authors may purposely use English in a grammatically non-structured way to convey different meanings, to subvert language rigidities that they may experience as epistemic colonialism, or because they speak a version of English that

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<sup>20</sup> Canagarajah provides various examples of how to implement strategies of linguistic resistance by interspersing standardised English with Sri Lankan English and his native Sri Lankan Tamil. The scholar, however, admits that they could adopt such strategies only once their academic status was well established, when they could take risks junior scholars cannot afford (Suresh Canagarajah, 2022. "Language Diversity in Academic Writing: Toward Decolonizing Scholarly Publishing", *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, pp. 1-22). Besides the obvious persisting structural inequalities, there is the concern that, by the time a scholar becomes established, they may have assimilated most of the standardised modes of knowledge production, legitimisation and dissemination.

<sup>21</sup> See also the important work done by the *Consortium for Democratizing Academic Publishing and Knowledge*, <https://sites.psu.edu/publishing/>.

was affected by interactions with other languages and has its own legitimacy outside the Anglophone mainstream. Nevertheless, such intentional and historical adaptations or distortions are often delegitimised by being presented as 'bad English' in the Anglophone mainstream. Once again, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has pointed to this phenomenon in reference to colonial experience, and it is worth citing him directly:

You think specifically the case of black speech or Ebonics for instance, what have they given us? They have given us the spirituals that were sung talking about freedom and those melodies are still used and they are so powerful. They were created by that linguistic tradition to Africa and through it new languages were formed. They also did something else which is not often recognised, they articulated freedom and independence. Through the same linguistic tradition they gave us jazz, they gave us hip-hop and hip-hop is now all over the world. If you take that linguistic tradition and ask yourself what other language in the same period of time has managed to police a cultural tradition that has an impact all over the world.

At the same time black people are then told that the language spoken by their people is not good English, it's bad English. Yet, it's the same language that produced jazz, spirituals and yet you think 'Huh, how is that bad English?' Again the same process of linguistic disconnect. Everything comes back to the question of language and I am not saying language solves everything because there are also battles within languages but that return to our base is crucial.<sup>22</sup>

This brings us to fundamental questions around 'whose English' and 'whose grammar' is to be used in the context of *Decolonial Subversions* and, more generally, within and outside academic knowledge production. When official English grammar and vocabulary are distorted as a liberatory means by subcultures within an Anglophone context<sup>23</sup> and by populations outside (as, for example, is the case with Pidgin English or Hinglish<sup>24</sup>), is it not epistemic violence if these subversions are made to conform to an official, centralised, canon?

While English is established to such an extent that it can afford such distortions, minority languages require fixed grammatical structures and consistent conformity in order to maintain or, even, acquire official status, be protected and taught in schools to avoid extinction. Whereas Portuguese, French, Italian and Spanish among others have, through a formalisation (codification) process over the years, been established as official languages, other Neolatin languages, such as Francoprovençal, Judezmo, Gallego, Aromuno, Aragonese and many more, despite being acknowledged to a certain extent, have not yet established

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<sup>22</sup> See interview featuring Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Makanaka Tuwe, "Why Decolonisation Starts With Reclaiming Language", 8 June 2018, *VICE*, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/9k8zja/why-decolonisation-starts-with-reclaiming-language>.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, for example, elaborates on the powerful subversion of the term 'queer' which, from derogatory, has become an instrument of pride (Judith Butler, 1993. "Critically Queer", in *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, New York: Routledge pp. 169-215).

<sup>24</sup> See also Homi K. Bhabha's work on hybridity and mimicry, in Homi K. Bhabha, 1994. *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge.

codified norms with regards to what constitutes 'correct' grammar and language'. This is significant, since a language's level of normativisation determines its legal status as a 'language', 'minority language' or 'cultural patrimony', with obvious implications for its diffusion and preservation.<sup>25</sup> One language's apparent adaptability often goes hand in hand with its domination over other languages, while another language's quest for standardisation may reflect its marginalised status and its desire to gain legitimacy.

It is evident that language implies politics, which, in turn, implies power and knowledge. As a multilingual publishing platform committed to challenging dominant systems of knowledge production, *Decolonial Subversions* needs to be acutely aware of the politics of language and must find ways to sensitively deal with these complexities through the involvement of skilled proofreaders, grassroots language speakers and informed insiders. There is no single one-size-fits-all solution or *modus operandi* that can overcome this challenge, but rather specific solutions that have to be devised according to context and case, some of which may involve committing to structure and some embracing flexibility.

Oftentimes, a bigger challenge is found when certain words that contributors choose to use in English can be perceived or received differently within the Anglophone mainstream than within the contexts which these contributors operate in. This reflects the fact that terms are always imbricated in specific worldviews, political climates and genealogies of theoretical/philosophical thought, which together define the meaning of words in complex ways. When these subtle connotations are not fully understood, the use of certain vocabularies might disorient readers grounded in different worldviews, thought traditions and epistemological frameworks. To communicate across these different contexts in a way that ensures that all sides perceive the same idea, contributors would need to be fully aware of the subtle and complex meanings that concepts have in Anglophone knowledge production in order to make informed decisions regarding their word choice. This is not always easy to do, since for many of our authors English is a foreign language and, therefore, not grasped with the depth one might understand one's first or working language. Supporting contributors in conveying these intricacies can be an extremely time-consuming task, and practically unviable within the relatively short publication cycle *Decolonial Subversions* offers. It can also put off some contributors, such as individuals who are more established in their careers and whose vocabularies have ossified and who may be less inclined to new linguistic explorations. It could also put off those who may perceive such linguistic negotiations with the editors, reviewers or proofreaders as a compromise and at odds with their own decolonial, post-colonial or other sensibilities. The platform has lost potential contributors for reasons such as the above and, while this is saddening, it is also a reminder that *Decolonial Subversions* is neither the ideal publishing outlet for all, nor has full answers on how to publish effectively across diverse cultural and linguistic communities.

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<sup>25</sup> We thank Dr Fabio Armand for sharing his insights on these matters. For more on the complexities around this issue see Julia Sallabank, 2012. "Language Policy for Endangered Languages", in *The Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press pp. 277-290.



One lesson we have learnt from this is that communication should be conceived of and practised as a joint effort: Anglophone readers should also make the effort on their part to meet authors whose first language is not English midway by interpreting texts with generosity and an inclination towards finding common epistemic grounds. Moreover, as noted earlier, univocal, often-rigid interpretations can be undesirable, as they may reinforce colonial legacies.

## Moving the frontier of decolonial knowledge

Despite the platform's bold use of innovative approaches in engaging with diverse languages and modes of expression, more profound ontological and epistemological questions around how to produce knowledge remain unresolved and continue to challenge us, inviting us to reconsider and improve our *modus operandi*. Most mainstream methods of knowledge production continue to represent the majority, the physically abled and the English-speaking, who tend to associate with the elite and better-off classes, and those who meet the current normativised academic standards. The inevitable differences we have as beings existing in diverse cultural, social, economic and political conditions and geographies still keep us largely disconnected and unable to communicate with each other. If we wish to move away from the above asymmetries and exclusions in producing and accessing knowledge, we may need to critically and radically rethink the method of knowledge production at a fundamental level, which, we believe, a shift to a multilingual model alone cannot resolve.

For communication and, thus, knowledge to subvert the asymmetries it currently implies, it needs to go beyond the translation of semantic categories, since categories are themselves always already culture- and community-specific. It is well-established that the very notion of knowledge, as per Anglophone mainstream, is built on the assumption of a mind-body separation and on the idea of its abstractability.<sup>26</sup> This metaphysical assumption about the nature of knowledge already excludes or obfuscates embodied and pre-objectified modes of being-in-the-world.<sup>27</sup>

An online publishing platform such as *Decolonial Subversions* cannot counter the marginalisation of embodied knowledge and, perhaps, partially reaffirms the prevalence of representational modes of existence, despite our efforts to work at the margins and to be

<sup>26</sup> Among authors criticising this dichotomy and the presumed superiority of mind over body see, for example, Tim Ingold, 2000. *The Perception of the Environment. Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, London: Routledge, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 2003. *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

<sup>27</sup> M.H. has first had the opportunity to explore how different ontological coordinates legitimise different knowledge systems within the South Indian context where she conducted extensive fieldwork. See, for example, Monika Hirmer, 2020. "'Devī Needs those Rituals!' Ontological Considerations on Ritual Transformations in a Contemporary South Indian Śrīvidyā Tradition", *Religions of South Asia*, Vol. 14.1-2, pp. 117-149.

innovative and experimental. At the same time, we are aware that representational—and, also, virtual—communication is paramount in many facets of everyday life; *Decolonial Subversions*, for example, could not exist and span across countries without leveraging on the benefits of recent communication technologies. We believe that such limitations and fundamental paradoxes need to be made explicit, acknowledged and collaboratively explored. Only then, might we be able to create new spaces that bring both embodied and representational types of knowledge centrestage. This can take different and creative forms, and is something that *Decolonial Subversions* as a network and collective seeks to explore further into the future.

## Lessons and future directions

Despite the challenges and limitations experienced during the platform's first three years, it is important not to lose sight of the lessons learned, as well as the achievements made, small as they may be. While the challenges we have faced to consolidate the aspired multilingual publishing model of *Decolonial Subversions* have been substantive, the platform has contributed to new intersections between languages, contexts and cultures, languages other than English being made visible and represented in academic and public knowledge making and sharing, and a growing network of translators and multilingual writers, who are keen to make more resources available in more languages in the future. Already, a language editor has come forward to assist with producing more translations within *Decolonial Subversions'* annual publication cycle.

Moreover, the lessons learned have contributed to adapting our publishing model, and its evolution into a more intentional and practical approach. Having seen the consistent tendency among contributors to write in English, we now more strongly encourage prospective contributors to consider making their submission available in other languages other than English, alongside their main submission. This is a departure from our initial approach which was more flexible and let contributors submit an English submission at first stage and a second language translation at any time in the indefinite future. Moreover, we have become more intentional and strategic with the curation of written, acoustic and visual contributions, such as by recruiting the help of editors who can reach new linguistic communities not previously reached (for example, the editor of the 2023 volume is Arabic-speaking, a linguistic community that we previously did not effectively reach). In other words, we are currently implementing a model that largely leverages on the multilingual and multi-cultural elements and resources of *Decolonial Subversions'* immediate and extended membership, which enables us to build more relationships with different linguistic groups and communities and attract more translators inspired to support this work.

Although we do not claim that any one change seen in recent years within the publishing landscape fostering a more substantive engagement with multilingualism and diversity of media of communication should be attributed to the work of *Decolonial Subversions*, we

believe that the platform has also served as an example for influential and high-impact publishers to start to rethink some of their practices. We have noticed more journals publishing article abstracts in various languages, mainly Spanish, French and Chinese Mandarin. Serving as reviewers for diverse journals, we have also been able to observe changes within peer review processes, such as more journals seeking reviewers outside of the Anglophone mainstream, asking reviewers not to be overly concerned about 'right English' but to focus on content, meaning and ideas. We have also seen more multilingual regional journals and initiatives sprouting in recent years that are led by researchers, academics, artists and activists, which appear to be inspired by aims similar to those motivating *Decolonial Subversions*.

These lessons, achievements and larger effects suggest that the model implemented by *Decolonial Subversions* could be applied more systematically to start influencing and, potentially, rescripting current structures underpinning the production of knowledge within and outside of academia. The multilingual and multimodal model implemented by *Decolonial Subversions* stands as a reminder that language and communication should be placed at the heart of data collection, writing and publishing processes. The complexities of translating across linguistic and cultural communities we have been confronted with in the past three years are evidence that linguistic and cosmological translation needs to be considered a significant component of conceptualising and doing research and communicating this to different audiences. As R.I. has extensively argued in a decolonial study of domestic violence in Ethiopia, and M.H. in a decolonial study of a contemporary South Indian Śrīvidyā tradition, how one communicates with one's participants and stakeholders and how one decides to translate concepts in cross-cultural research will largely determine one's findings and insights.<sup>28</sup> The work of *Decolonial Subversions*, albeit being experimental and imperfect, has started to demonstrate in concrete ways that language matters and that publishers must intentionally and strategically promote multilingual contributions with an understanding of those factors that favour writing in English, giving non-English and multilingual publications and linguistic translation the attentiveness and transparency they merit. Engaging with languages substantively can open readers' views into worlds and conceptual repertoires not previously imagined, achieving a palpable diversification of knowledge, expression and understanding in the world.

think freely !

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<sup>28</sup> Romina Istratii, 2020. "Linguistic and cosmological translation" in *Adapting Gender and Development to Local Religious Contexts: A Decolonial Approach to Domestic Violence in Ethiopia*, London: Routledge, pp. 40-62. Monika Hirmer, 2022. "'Let us now invoke the three celestial lights of Fire, Sun and Moon into ourselves': Magic or everyday practice? Revising existentiality for an emic understanding of Śrīvidyā", in Aciri and Rosati (eds.) *Tantra, Magic, and Vernacular Religions in Monsoon Asia: Texts, Practices, and Practitioners from the Margins*, London: Routledge, pp. 116-136.



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