Decolonizing English: a proposal for implementing alternative ways of knowing and being in education

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ABSTRACT

There is a need to decolonize English in order to reframe our relationships with fellow beings and our environment. English can frame water or oil as infinite, uncountable nouns , a tree as an inanimate, unconscious being, traditional and respected territories as wasteland, and animals as wildlife. With the current climate crisis, we know that these categorizations fall short and can normalize environmental racism and injustice. A more equitable and sustainable way to use language would be to question the worldview or belief system that informs "ecologically destructive" assumptions and perceptions. The English language also carries a colonial and assimilationist legacy. In many cases, this colonial history is omitted in our history books or plainly avoided in many forms of curriculum. The danger of ignoring this legacy resides in the human exceptionalism, or "epistemological error", which dominates the current mainstream Western worldview, colonial education, and the English language. This paper proposes decolonizing the English language and exemplifies how we can do this and why we should learn from and implement ecocentric worldviews, such as those which are Indigenous.

Introduction

> It is not the English language that hurts me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, and colonize (bell hooks, 1995, p. 296).

There is a relationship between the language we use and the environment. Languages shape and create ways of looking at the world, or a worldview, and are not disconnected from the political, sociocultural and ecological contexts which evolve around them (Goatly, 2018; Pennycook, 2017; Whorf, 1956). As Nash (2018) remarks, "language and ideas of self and environment are amalgamated in complex relationships" (p. 359).

Some traditional Western linguists may contend that language is an abstract and decontextualized code for conveying "universal cognitive categories" (i.e., messages) between speakers (Nash, 2018, p. 356). This view, however, disregards the sociocultural and ecological grounding of language and makes it easier for language to be conveniently packaged or labeled as a commodity that can be exchanged for economic profit to meet the demands of capitalism or linguistic imperialism (Heller, 2010; Phillipson, 1992). This paper argues that the commodification and disembodiment of language and the lack of education on alternative, sustainable ways of knowing and being have been contributing factors to the current climate crisis.

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The search for new metaphors and stories in language

Language, more than simply being a code, shapes our belief systems, our values and our behavior (Schultz, 2001). Our linguistic choices are the result of mental models, or interpretations of sensory data (Joseph, 2004), and determine our relationship with the world. For example, as Halliday (1990) pointed out, the English language considers air or oil as uncountable nouns, or "without limit" (p. 194), and a tree as an inanimate, unconscious being. Other examples are metaphors to talk about land and our environment which are "ecologically destructive" (Stibbe, 2018), such as dirt, wasteland, and wildlife. These categorizations directly impact upon our everyday perception of our surrounding environment and ultimately how we treat it. We may think if air or oil is limitless, then it will never run out. If land is labeled "wasteland", then it is more likely to be subjected to environmental racism (Kuletz, 1998) where dumping or nuclear testing grounds can be legitimized and/or normalized in everyday language use (Rosenfeld, 2019). With the current climate crisis, some human beings are beginning to become more aware that this way of understanding or naming our environment is simply not equitable or sustainable. As Bateman (2009) remarks, we must "understand the process of negotiation between man and nature, and what can go wrong when the negotiation goes wrong – global warming, flooding, loss of biodiversity" (p. 150).

A more equitable and sustainable way to use language would be to question the worldview or mental models mentioned above that inform our perceptions, frames of reference (Lakoff, 2010), and assumptions. As Rosenfeld (2019) states, "our societies, relationships, and senses of self are constructed through story" (p. 2). The stories we tell and language we use are informed by the way we view and understand the world. We could search for new metaphors or "new stories to live by" (Stibbe, 2018) as opposed to "myths we live by" (Midgley, 2011). Okri (1996) encapsulates this sentiment, "stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories that individuals or nations live by and you change the individuals and nations themselves" (p. 21). New collectively told and retold stories could move toward more beneficial alternative forms of language, truth telling and myth debunking. For instance, the English language carries a colonial and assimilationist legacy. There is a long history of how English has been imposed on nondominant cultures and "vernacular/inferior" languages under the tenets of civilization and "linguistic imperialism" (Phillipson, 1992). This view of English as a superior language can be traced to the British empire where Great Britain acts,

> as a mighty teacher – and while she sits in her matchless powers of political supremacy, commerce, wealth and literature – these influences will combine to diffuse the language, with all the excellences kindred to it throughout the whole world. (George, 1867, p. 4)

Linguistic imperialism has led to the linguistic and ethnic genocide of the peoples colonized by the British empire, such as that perpetrated by the Indian residential school system where the "aim of education is to destroy the Indian" (Davin , 1879). In many cases, this colonial (hi)story is left out of our history books and/or plainly avoided in many forms of curriculum. The danger of ignoring this legacy resides in the human exceptionalism, or the "epistemological error" (Bateson, 1972), which dominates the current mainstream Western and anthropocentric worldview and the English language (e.g., Macedo, 2019; Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). By first understanding the roots of Western human exceptionalism, or the "process of negotiation between man and nature" (Bateman, 2009, p. 150), we can begin a process of "unlearning" (Laininen, 2019). We can (1) decolonize the mind (wa Thiong'o, 1986) by questioning the mental models and assumptions (Senge, 1990) through which we interpret the world, (2) decolonize English by creating new earth-centered stories to live by, and (3) move toward a more equitable, sustainable and transformative way of viewing and interacting with the world.

Unlearning the roots of ecologically destructive language: human exceptionalism and the era of the anthropocene

Human exceptionalism neatly separates the human from the nonhuman and views humans as separate, or superior, to the rest of nature (e.g., animals and ecosystems) (Haraway, 2008). The

Western, colonial worldview holds a human-centered perspective which essentializes the purpose of humans into a mechanistic control and exploitation of the earth and all its resources (Steffensen & Fill, 2014).

Earth, in hegemonic Western thought, is viewed as a resource for humanity and the objective of humanity is neoliberal economic growth, consumerism, and technological progress (Murphy, 2011; Stibbe, 2018). When we mix this colonial worldview with the capitalist mind-set, we can begin to get a better idea of how we have arrived at the present-day era of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene, formed by the not-so-conspicuous *anthro-* (human) root, is characterized by a "large-scale human modification of the Earth System, primarily in the form of climate change" (Malm & Horborg, 2014, p. 63). Crutzen (2006) reasons that "considering . . . still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global scales, it is thus more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by using the term 'Anthropocene' for the current geological epoch" (p. 16).

Of course, not everyone who speaks English (or any other dominant language with a colonial legacy) holds the same worldview or perspective. It is enough to think about the numbers of English speakers across the globe to understand that speaking the same language does not mean we all agree or think the same. That said, in order to debunk myths we live by for the sake of new stories to live by, it is important to acknowledge that English language speakers who do, or who have enacted a colonial, anthropocentric worldview of human exceptionalism and linguistic imperialism have, even unknowingly, legitimized the subjugation of nondominant heritage cultures (in many cases, through linguicide and genocide) and destroyed ecosystems (Steffensen & Fill, 2014; Tom et al., 2019; Van Lier, 2004). The trickle-down effect of the ecological imbalance can already be felt through the impact of the human-caused climate crisis (Salick & Ross, 2009).

This paper argues that a major contributor to the climate emergency may very well have been the lack of education, or knowledge of alternative ways of being and knowing. As Laininen (2019) remarks, "[schools] reflect deeply our Western worldview which is the underlying cause for the sustainability crisis" (p. 185). Unless we are bi- or multilingual, English speakers who have not been exposed to alternative ways of knowing and being are more "likely accept the ordering of experience imposed on us by language as natural and commonsense. Ideologies determined by the lexicogrammar, such as anthropocentrism or the domination of nature by humans, might remain latent or undetected" (Goatly, 2018, p. 228).

Decolonizing English: implementing alternative ways of knowing and being

So, what can we do? This paper contends that educators and educational stakeholders could frame language in a more positive manner which no longer views nature or the "Other" as passive or inferior and enables cognitive and linguistic decolonization (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020, p. 96). Epistemic and transformative learning can enable this shift in awareness and a way of seeing the world from a reflective perspective (Laininen, 2019).

In schools we can start this process by (1) learning from earth-centered, not only human-centered, perspectives, (2) decolonizing our thought processes and mental models in English, and (3) collectively inspiring a bottom-up paradigm and perspective shift in educational instruction to fully embrace and validate more sustainable and holistic worldviews. As Laininen (2019) explains, "the main goal of education would be to give future generations tools for thinking and seeing the world differently, constructing their own worldviews, and acting to create a sustainable future" (p. 187).

But, how? First, we should learn from earth-centered (ecocentric) worldviews which are not grounded in human exceptionalism. For example, Indigenous worldviews, although different and varied across nations and the globe, share some key characteristics such as the principles of reciprocity and relationships between communities and the local environment (McGregor, 2004; Wilson, 2008). For Indigenous Peoples, language and culture are viewed as one and the same and as inseparable from the land (McGregor, 2004). Safeguarding Indigenous languages and learning from these ecocentric

perspectives both counteracts the human exceptionalism which characterizes the Anthropocene and is a primary local response to the climate crisis. In other words, Indigenous languages transmit knowledge, such as *Traditional Ecological Knowledge* (TEK), through positive earth-centered stories, song, humor, and ceremony about how we can meet our needs in harmony with nature without destroying the ecosystems of which we are part. As Abram (1996) explains, "the linguistic patterns of an oral culture remain uniquely responsive, and responsible, to the more-than-human life-world, or bioregion, in which that culture is embedded" (p. 68). Learning from Indigenous and earth-centered worldviews (e.g., learning an Indigenous language or listening to the viewpoints of Indigenous peoples) can inspire new ways of using language that respects the natural world and conveys positive stories about the relationship of humans with nature (Stibbe, 2018). As Bringhurst (2008) remarks, "if we do want to learn how to live in the world, I think the study of Native American literature is one of the best and most efficient ways to do just that" (p. 171).

Second, an earth-centered view of language (i.e., how we describe, experience and ultimately treat the environment) can enable us to decolonize our thought processes, mental models, implicit assumptions, and taken-for-granted "Eurocentric logic". For example, the grammatical system in English categorizes water (like air or oil as previously mentioned) as an uncountable noun, an "infinite" source which can be ultimately exploited. Moreover, the current negative, uninviting (colonial) definition of water as "tasteless" or "odorless" is the polar opposite of relational, experiential worldview encapsulated in many Indigenous languages (e.g., the view of water as a life-giving and -sustaining spirit with memory) (Chiblow, 2019). When water is positioned to us as a product, a tasteless commodity which is an infinite resource, there are more probabilities of becoming complicit in environmental racism. We are more likely to take for granted its life-sustaining qualities and forget that there are many who do not even have access to clean drinking water in "First World" countries (e.g., several First Nations communities in Canada). The "ecologically destructive" terminology we use to describe what is currently happening to our planet is another reason why we should "unlearn" while learning, search for new stories to live by, and decolonize our thought processes (i.e., myths we live by) in English. Many continue to call the devastation and extinction of species as "climate change" as opposed to a more accurate term, such as "climate crisis" or "climate emergency". When we use a word like "change", we are more likely to perceive the event as being somewhat natural, or even normal. We should use more appropriate metaphors and terms to describe the urgent need to take communal action for environmental justice, and this could begin in the terminology used in classrooms, governmental documents, policy sessions, and in our very own choice of words when we speak.

Third, the paradigm and perspective shift from an anthropocentric to ecocentric worldview need not be difficult. Education, the place or moment where minds are formed, sculpted and made, is the place to start. We can prompt our learners, our friends, family, colleagues, and, of course, ourselves to continually reflect upon our worldview, our experiences and our language choices. We can share how we have each related to our surroundings (e.g., people, the environment, and objects) at certain points in time (infancy, childhood, adulthood) and how our worldview and language has evolved (or not) in that time. We can also share experiences and understandings we may have in our heritage culture/language (i.e., disfranchised cultures/languages as a result of colonialism which have emotive and cultural significance). All of these experiences can be shared in a story, drawn, written in a reflection log, or even acted out as part of a decolonizing English journey (Meighan, 2019; heritage language pedagogy).

Ultimately, embracing an ecological worldview in English and learning from alternative knowledge systems (e.g., relating to water as a spirit, life-sustaining, thirst-quenching as opposed to tasteless) will be of great importance to society. If we have greater opportunities to relate to and share our experiences, heritage languages and traditions, there will be greater transfer of worldviews and local knowledge which could lead to more sustainable solutions in combatting the climate crisis. An example of this could be sharing how our ancestors used to take care of the land, or sharing the original name for a place in the Indigenous language which may lend insights about the local

ecosystem. For instance, in Scottish Gaelic (*Gàidhlig*) and in my home islands of the Outer Hebrides (*Na h-Eileanan Siar*), there is a stretch of water named called "*Caolas bogadh na mara*" which translates as "the dipping narrows of the sea" and guides fishermen in their day-to-day work (MacKinnon & Brennan, 2012, p. 15). In short, there is much to be learned from alternative knowledge systems and sharing insights from diverse worldviews, particularly from those Indigenous and from the Indigenous languages themselves which possess an abundance of TEK (Geniusz, 2009; McCarthy & Nicholas, 2014; Whyte, 2016).

Once we begin to shift our perspectives, listen to and learn from alternative knowledge systems, embrace nondominant heritages and languages, there will be a better chance for implementing lasting and sustainable change which is focused on hope, change, and on raising awareness of how English represents Earth. By encouraging epistemic learning in education, there will be a genuine opportunity for English speakers who have only been raised in the anthropocentric worldview to learn from a decolonial, reflective, and transformative experience. We can question the status quo and decolonize the English language by embracing an ecocentric and relational worldview rooted in equitable relationships and experiences with people and the environment.

Conclusion

Languages are not commodities, universal codes, or neatly compacted products as a result of standardized tests and other colonial teaching practices, but are inseparable from the greater ecosystem, the land, culture, and environment. We no longer need to view ourselves, our education, our language, or our planet as a commodity to be maximized, measured, or exploited. By decolonizing our minds and searching for new stories and metaphors to live by, we can form more sustainable and transformative relationships with people, with our communities, with our ancestral heritages, and with nature. Learning about and implementing alternative ways of knowing and being can be the hope and change that will help to sustain the future of our planet and that of future generations.

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Paul John Meighan (*Miadhachàin*)-Chiblow is a *Gàidheal* (Scottish Gael) from Glasgow, Scotland. He is currently a PhD candidate and a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Joseph-Armand Bombardier scholar at the Department of Integrated Studies in Education (DISE), McGill University, Montréal, Canada. Paul has a background in translating and teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language, Spanish and French at secondary, college, and university level internationally. His research interests include Indigenous language revitalization, decolonial education, and heritage language pedagogy. Paul would like to say *miigwetch* and *tapadh leibh* to his family, friends and mentors for all their support on this lifelong learning journey.

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