

Linguistic Imperialism: Colonial Violence through Language

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Colonial legacy is often remembered through its violence, massacres, looting, and lengthy reign over most of the 'free' world today. But, the one aspect which tends to be overlooked or not even counted as one such atrocity, is its effect on language. Where colonial violence is recounted as a memory, as something that started and ended in the past, the linguistic violence did not see an end as such, and may not see one ever or at least in the near future. Both, the imposition of colonial languages upon colonized people, as well as the erasure or prohibition of their national and regional languages, have fundamentally altered the colonized individual's relationship with oneself, others, and the colonist. Linguistic violence during and after colonization ought to be considered and examined more intricately, and not simply as a byproduct or accident. The attack on and ravaging of a language, it being such an essential aspect of culture and identity, must be seen as a deliberate effort among other types of violence, to loot, massacre, and dominate the colonized.

I will demonstrate in my paper the ways in which such 'linguistic violence' affects the colonized individual's understanding of herself, and experience in the world. I argue that a language contains in its every word and nuance certain ideologies and world views, which is necessarily accepted and adopted by the one speaking it, which in turn influences the way in which the colonized encounters her own subjectivity and the 'other'. With great help from the works of Fanon and Sartre, I explore the ways in which the colonial perspective of colonial language fundamentally alters who the colonized perceives as other, and how through this othering she also faces a non-recognition with herself. The insufficiency of the colonial tongue in expressing the lived experience of the those it was not intended for creates a unique and convoluted existence for the colonized. When the colonial language has embedded in it ideas of their lesser humanity and their Animality, how do they begin to understand themselves and confront their situation?

In speaking any language, one must adopt the weight of its culture. I look into how the colonized individual can support this weight, while either knowing or coming to realize

that it cannot in turn support their weight or their experiences. The way in which the language privileges certain views of humanity must reflect in the understanding of the world of the one speaking it. By examining this, one can see the ways in which the colonized individual's understanding of their own culture is altered, and so their understanding of themselves. The gaping crack between the lived and felt experience of the colonized in the colonial situation and the capacity of the colonial language to express emotion and bring into the world one's inner state, signifies a fundamental loss in translation, and the colonized individual's further othering of their lived experience. Language plays an enormous role in subjectivity, and the linguistic violence of colonization only convolutes this.