

# Coloniality of knowledge, Ch'ixinakax utxiwa, and intercultural translation

## The (im)pertinence of language and discourse studies

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I state disquiet as I start this text. First, I write on coloniality of knowledge as an outsider from postcolonial studies. Second, in the social sciences research centre where I work, decolonial thinking is prominent but tends to consider language and discourse research minor, opaque and technical, as if immersed in “a cult of the binary arborescent system of hierarchy and command” (Deleuze & Parnet, 2004: 46–47) that needs undoing by poetics and art as radical language transformative activity. I am in a room next door. Third, my contribution in this new English medium language journal is valued by internalized rules of global publishing policies: I am too aware of the risk of reproducing the colonial hierarchical circulation of knowledge harshly criticized and rightly denounced by Cusicanqui.

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's text challenges language, discourse, culture and society researchers to un-think their discourses and practices under the light of internal and external colonialism. Drawing on my personal experience as a southern European white female language researcher, I identify at least four points of coloniality: academic *habitus*; institutional *research identities*; methodological, language and discourse *ontologies*; and *modes of knowledge* production and distribution. I discuss each of these, in turn.

My academic *habitus* is torn between co-existing regimes of coloniality. As an educated speaker of Portuguese, I am positioned by discourses based on symbolic spaces inspired by a monolingual colonial myth that celebrates Portugal in the centre of an imagined south Atlantic lusophone world since the 16th century, now turned into profitable capital mainly due to Brazilian emergent world economy. In addition, postgraduate training in British institutions has positioned me as a qualified yet peripheral Southern European researcher, a “non-native English speaker and writer” in the field of English language and sociolinguistics. This field is locally configured in a southern European higher education institution that

crosses central lusophone heritage prestige based on ancient medieval tradition and academic practice with modest Anglophone global contemporary international impact. This pattern of circulation between fast-track central and slow-pace peripheral European educational institutions has produced a kind of second-class citizen, a southern European *mestizo* elite, both colonial and colonised, whose mediation is central to maintain the flow of (certain) knowledges across English speaking networks and mainly across lusophone networks where practices and identities are replicated, like recolonization waves. Cusicanqui's attention to *internal colonialism* helps us identify with modesty that acts of knowledge and their producers are epistemically blind, affected by hegemonic positionings related to language, coloniality, racism, sexism, among others. This is a parochial monolingual limitation for any language researcher, one that blocks the full potential of heteroglossic practice. Assuming this almost unsurmountable epistemic limitation might allow us to change, create and transform.

I watch in my *research workplace* the equilibrium involved in the institutional survival of decolonial thinking based on the work on the epistemologies of the south by leading sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Under his more recent European Research Council (ERC) funded project, Santos has been setting up conversations with intellectuals and activists positioned in the south in the search for "alternative thinking of alternatives".<sup>1</sup> This is based on the principle that cultural completeness is impossible and thus in urgent need to be enriched by conversation with coexisting (and conflicting) cultural configurations, which he develops under the idea ecology of knowledges (Santos, 2004). This is one instance of how global research funding could provide possibilities for emancipatory practice. The risk of colonial appropriation is high, as mentioned by both Santos and Cusicanqui in their *IV Conversation of the World*, given the "arboreal structure of internal-external colonialism with centers and subcenters, nodes and subnodes, connecting certain universities, disciplinary trends, and academic fashions of the North with their counterparts in the South" (Cusicanqui, 2012:101). It needs to be countered by researchers who should exercise standing suspicion regarding the kinds of research and institutional practice to be considered decolonial, the flows of decolonial thinking across mainstream academic discourses and practices, the corresponding deployment as "new hegemonic models" as it were replicable top-down methodology. Based on principles of mutual learning, researchers do need to labour through alternative methodologies together with citizens and social movements across spaces inside and outside academia.

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1. ALICE – *Strange Mirrors, Unsuspected Lessons: Leading Europe to a new way of sharing the world experiences*. See IV "Conversation of the World" in Spanish <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjgHfSrLnpU>.

Practices mentioned above are imbued by tensions, ambiguities and contradictions that need critical reflexive language and detailed observation. Standing micro-political and multilingual attention to conversation, discourse and language could contribute to decolonial agendas in many ways, as it assumes from the onset that meaning making is informally negotiated, only partially grasped or regulated, and always in progress. I see two reasons for this not being the case. One, we have been socialized, as speakers of European dominant languages, into internal monolingual colonial ideologies that impact our understanding of grammar and our training in social, legal and language studies. Two, dominant *ontologies* on the political transformative potential of language tend to assume a normative stance that triggers the understanding that emancipatory discourse is best explored in its counterpart – verbal art and artistic performance. And yet, artists, legal, political and social researchers have been and are, as much as everybody else, socialized and positioned by internalized and embodied linguistic hegemonies.

Cusicanqui's proposal of modern indigenous hegemony mediated by Quechua and Aymara redeems local language practice to counter colonial hegemony. *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa* assumes the need to recognize and fight for alternative hegemonic versions of modernity – indigenous modernity – that will include drawing on colonial knowledge. This includes linguistic knowledge, now appropriated not only as trophies of war and past trauma but as local strategic resources for indigenous emancipation and activism. Founded on non-linear understandings of time as an ongoing present (*aka pacha*) and on *ch'ixi's* heteronomy that visually assumes colonial and local knowledges and practices side by side, it liberates contradiction from the verbal-based linear need of synthesis, and works from the onset on principles of mixed repertoire, diverse co-existing centres (polycentricity) and mutual fragility that frees language from the pre-textual implications of cultural hybridity that Cusicanqui considers infertile (like *mules*). Cusicanqui situates the decolonizing transformative potential in local horizontal meaning-making activity, produced in the here and now, mediated by multiple modalities at play – vision, multi-sensorial, verbal, non-verbal. In sum, Cusicanqui's proposal is meaningful because it is situated in Quechua and Aymara's mediated sociocultural practice.

To overcome logocentric discursive rationalities from a southern European position imbued by a distinct set of rhetorical and linguistic hegemonies, Santos proposes a communicative metaphor for an ecology of knowledges, which he calls the work of *intercultural translation*. As all knowledges are fragile and incomplete, he says, any claim has transformative potential, provided it (a) makes sense, is used and matters for those in subaltern positions and across localities, and (b) keeps other ways of doing, being and saying ('difference')

from being assimilated by dominant and internally colonized discourses. Beyond translation between separate pre-existing languages or cultures, intercultural translation is rather radically local, ethical, performative and pragmatic meaning-making work mediated by multicultural – and I would add multilingual – practice (Santos, 2004; Ribeiro, 2004).

Both decolonial insights assume local language practice as a way of claiming alternative hegemonies: they suggest meaning-making dynamics that circulate horizontally across events and practices and materialize by means of multiple sensorial modalities, which potentially liberates knowledge from the logocentric bias of verbal language. In this sense, language, culture and society researchers do make explicit the historically situated, the local multimodal activity, the material circulation of meanings across texts, events, practices and speakers, which paves the way to undo power and ideology and to decolonize the political nature of situated human (semiotic) activity. Yet the question remains about who engages in what kind of research, how and with what resources, where from, for whom and what purposes, on whose benefit. If seriously taken, the search for alternative *ontologies* forces the language researcher to transgress her own disciplinary categories and be open to inter or transdisciplinarity – in the words of Moita Lopes, engage in “indisciplined” research (Moita Lopes, 2006). In this line, too, Cusicanqui rightly defends the need to situate knowledge beyond the geopolitical (north-south or south-south), rather in the political economy of local meaning-making practice.

The political economical lens helps language and discourse researchers deconstruct our modes of production and exchange of knowledge situated in the peripheries or semi-peripheries. I draw here on my recent experience as President and member of the executive board of EDiSo<sup>2</sup> an associative solution promoted by a group of discourse and society researchers, students and social movement activists, mostly based in the territory of the Iberian Peninsula, with networks in other parts of Europe and Latin America. Intensified by global crisis and austerity policies affecting southern Europe, their lived experience results from socialization in higher education systems affected by neoliberal models of knowledge production, distribution and personal enterprise that leads to isolation and individualism. Acknowledging the precarious lives of a significant part of its members, as well as their attempts to contest or survive contemporary rationalities inside and outside academia, the EDiSo association emerged as means to promote solidary and alternative spaces of knowledge, resource and identity building.

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2. EDiSo | Asociación de Estudios sobre Discurso e Sociedade | Associació d' Estudis sobre Discurs i Societat | Associação de Estudos do Discurso e Sociedade | Association for the Study of Discourse and Society. See <http://www.edisportal.org/>

Founded on the idea of *the commons*,<sup>3</sup> the work was grounded on collective deliberation and horizontal networking by its members and on the search for common discourse-related problems that need interdisciplinary insights guided by concerns with social and linguistic inequality. EDiSo's guidelines prioritize horizontal conversation between senior and junior, academic and non-academic professionals and activists, acknowledge multilingual resources and facilitate participation in knowledge building practices. Yet, the risks of commodification linger, like recognizing certain (but not others) multilingual configurations, legitimizing certain (but not other) practices related to meetings, publishing or communicating, or even investing on certain (but not other) aspired personal academic/professional positions. There is constant need for critical reflexivity, for the "impact" of an enterprise like EDiSo did emerge from academics, professionals and activists who act upon local adequate alternatives, not from pre-established imposed global fast-track knowledge production rationales.

In this light, decolonial thinking as proposed by Cusicanqui and others is an urgent call for reflexivity and alternatives. It forces us to unlearn and unthink our personal, institutional and ontological trajectories as researchers of language, culture and society. It claims for long term detailed and highly reflexive slow science, attention to multi-sited research, knowledge circulation that assumes unresolved contradiction, as well as research positionings that struggle for local collaborative interdisciplinary ways of knowing, with transformative results. Maybe in the end it might keep us from missing what is at stake in our own contexts, especially those moments where language, culture and society intersect in singular and remarkable ways. Certainly, it will force us to clarify to whom it actually matters.

## References

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3. The commons is an activity of self-government that produces a certain number of goods of common usage. By collective deliberation, we determine what is common: an instituting praxis" (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 352).

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