Vision and counterforces of a decolonial epistemology. Community engagement with urban multilingualism

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Abstract

Decoloniality is approached in this contribution as an epistemological stance with universalist outreach beyond places and populations whose history has been affected by European colonisation. The chapter argues against essentialising a binary opposition of 'colonised' and 'coloniser'. These notions are instead treated metaphorically to denote, respectively, those who feel that their voices are not heard in the public space, and those who identify with the prevailing social order and claim a privileged position in order to suppress initiatives for change and reform, often in pursuit of immediate self-interest. As examples of decolonial initiatives the chapter discusses work with populations of migrant background in a multilingual city along with the creation of a city language narrative as a way of reclaiming public space; and the re-casting of so-called 'expertise' on Roma as a reciprocal partnership and a channel to give voice to a disadvantaged group. The coloniser narrative emerges as a counterforce among those who fear competition from such initiatives. The relationship between coloniser and colonised is dynamic, determined by stance rather than provenance.

Keywords: epistemology, urban multilingualism, Roma, neoliberal university, Manchester

Introduction

In this contribution I join a growing number of authors who draw on first-hand experiences in the academic environment to reflect on ways in which decolonial principles can be applied in teaching, research and public engagement.

I argue in favour of decoloniality as a universalist stance, applicable to the way we organise, structure and motivate academic work. By 'universalist' I mean that we should look and act beyond places once colonised by European powers and more widely than on behalf of those who assert indigenous ancestry – understood as a claim to historical precedence in a given territory.

I propose to embrace a broader understanding of decoloniality as a method of knowledge construction: An epistemology that interrogates prevailing cultural hierarchies and the way they translate into power structures and which seeks to diversify methods of enquiry, content and ontologies and to give a voice to those who have a disadvantaged position in society.

My case studies draw on my research and public engagement projects on Romani, the language of a racialised minority in Europe, and on multilingualism in a globalised European city where many residents are of migrant background.

Protecting indigenous or autochthonous languages under the banner of decoloniality often entails singling out particular languages within demarcated landscapes and deriving entitlement from notions of historical ownership of place. We might refer to this endearingly as the 'I was here before you' narrative. My interest is, by contrast, in a civic language narrative (Matras 2024): It conjoins belonging to a place in the here and now with personal and intergenerational recollection of migration referencing the remote there and then. It is intrinsically trans-local and trans-national. It rejects the view that multiple forms of identity are inauthentic, contradictory or illegitimate. Its message is one of plurality and permanent fluctuation. It adopts a looser and more dynamic notion of ownership and links it to practice rather than to provenance. It treats decoloniality as an act of positioning not tied to predetermined titles and as a mode of enquiry rather than representation or control.

I regard the counterpart – colonial attitudes in academia – as a metaphor. It alludes to those who identify with prevailing power structures and whose academic enquiry and social engagement seeks to appease, reproduce and perpetuate those structures. I demonstrate how those representing such a stance put up a counterforce to weaken and contain decolonial initiatives.

From binarism to universalism

Decoloniality generally seeks to undo what is perceived as Western hegemony over knowledge and the shaping and legitimation of practice deemed culturally oppressive. Following Said (1978), Hall (1992) regards the West as a historical concept that emerged in the Enlightenment and is used for comparison among societies. It forges a binary distinction between the Self and the Other giving rise to a discourse that oversimplifies difference. At the heart of the decolonising agenda is the view that there are privileged narratives that dominate at the expense of other perspectives and which are the direct outcome of historical power relations between nations and the economic divisions that they create and perpetuate (cf. Mignolo 2011). For Smith (1999) decolonising means redefining privileges. That includes doing away with the representation of indigenous cultures through the prism of Western cultural norms and challenging the concept that the Other must accommodate to the norms of the colonial power.

Approaches to decoloniality are concerned with re-defining the beneficiaries of research, incorporating an advocacy agenda into academic work that responds to the needs of participants outside of academia and working beyond academic discipline boundaries towards internationalising a movement to mobilise for a change in power relations. They aim to bring about structural transformations within institutions such as greater inclusivity of personnel and more diversity of procedures and norms of interaction, working on the assumption that academic programmes constitute instruments of power and interest representation (cf. Pidgeon 2016, Woldeyes & Offord 2018, Luke & Heynen 2021). Auto-ethnographic essays often adopt decolonising as a personal strategy to navigate intercultural encounters and power relations in the academic environment (e.g. Bhattacharya 2016, Batac 2022).

Contributions to a recent collection on *Decolonizing linguistics* (Charity Hudley et al. 2024) flag the need to consult with community members on research involving that community. That prompts the question of how to define community without essentialising belonging. They also call for work that is 'disruptive', that displays 'resistance' and that

instigates 'refusal' towards the mainstream while warning of the interventions of 'powerful counterforces' centred around prestigious universities and their commitment to neoliberal modes of operation. This conceptualisation of decolonial linguistics as a conflict zone (see also Deumert 2018) arguably gives rise to a redefined binarism, one that sets 'colonised subjects' of the Global South against 'colonisers' of the Global North.

Mufwene (2020) cautions against creating what he calls a 'Global South exceptionalism' and advocates instead for a plural linguistics that can capture a wider range of diverse phenomena. Other approaches of relevance to the decoloniality paradigm critique the notion of languages as fixed and self-contained systems replacing it by a view of language as practice that takes on fluid and hybrid forms (Busch 2012, Blommaert & Backus 2013, Pennycook & Otsuji 2015). There are also explicit calls to interrogate the way power relations create hierarchies among language varieties and to resist linguistic hegemony (Veronelli 2015, Cushing 2022, Heugh 2022). 'Linguistic citizenship' (Stroud & Kerfoot 2021) challenges essentialist links between language and identity. It promotes awareness of and respect for diversity and difference by making subjects visible and audible, for instance by introducing marginalised language varieties into new spaces. Unlike 'linguistic human rights' which focus on languages as delineated sets of structures for which entitlements are claimed, linguistic citizenship builds on the notion of 'languaging' as a communal act.

Discarding binarism fits nicely into the perspective taken by trans-national, globalisation and diaspora studies: They focus on networks of practice rather than on descent and fixed location in place as indicators of identity and belonging (Appadurai 1992, Werbner 2002, Brubaker 2005, Cohen 2008, Glick Schiller 2010). In this way we can view decoloniality as relating to stance rather than to essence. This also allows us to de-essentialise participant roles and identify 'colonisers' not by ethnicity but by action. Institutional actors like public service practitioners who subvert routines to accommodate to a diverse client population arguably side with the 'colonised'.

This universalist perspective on decoloniality evaluates positions on their merit. It rejects the proposition often put forward by those who feel that their voices have not been heard, that Who speaks is as or more important than What they say (Stewart 2017). At the same time, it is equipped to expose the risks and fallacies that emerge when neoliberal institutions appropriate terminology like 'diversity', 'social responsibility' and 'civic engagement' as a way of securing reputational capital while pursuing strategies aimed at maximising profitability and control (Lorenz 2012, Schiller 2015, Neary 2020).

Partnership as reciprocity

My voluntary work with the Roma began when I was a student in Hamburg. I took on various tasks on behalf of a Roma-led non-governmental organisation that campaigned to protect the rights of recently arrived Romani migrants. The president of the organisation advised me at the time: 'Everything that's been published about us in books is wrong'. For many months I avoided consulting any published literature on 'Gypsies' preferring to take in the experience of everyday immersion. When I finally broke the reading celibacy I discovered that much of what appeared in the books was in fact quite accurate. That experience gave me some confidence in the power of academic enquiry to enlighten while at the same time helping to protect me, I should like to think, from the complacency of having 'expertise'.

In my PhD I followed up with a reciprocal model of research and engagement: The Roma NGO wanted me to put my communication skills at their disposal wherever they were useful to their operations. I used the immersion to collect observations on their language. I was not providing 'expertise' nor was I submitting the content of my research for approval; I was part of the team, equally committed to its values and objectives.

At the University of Manchester, I introduced a course unit on Romani linguistics at which members of diverse Romani communities living in Britain were regular guests, providing most students with their very first real-life encounters with that community. The lecture addressed not just language but also attitudes: Roma, a non-territorial minority in Europe, might not fit the standard profile of an indigenous nation. Yet they have perpetually occupied the position of a disadvantaged group – excluded from power structures, denied a voice and judged as the opposite to what mainstream society wishes to consider itself as while also serving as a fantasy reference point for what it aspires to (Matras 2014): Portrayed as rootless, non-compliant, and lawless, but also as flamboyant, free, spontaneous and unrestrained. Students were encouraged to devote their essays to society's attitudes to Roma as much as to linguistic aspects, putting language into the societal context of majority's relations with its Roma minority.

Following the arrival in the city of Roma from Romania in 2008–2009 I was approached by Manchester City Council, which wanted to know their 'intentions' and whether they were planning to stay or 'move on' (a reference to the association of Roma with the image of 'Gypsies' as eternal nomads). I put together a small research team to undertake a survey of households. We offered the Roma to use us as a channel to communicate their needs and wishes to the local authority, in effect inverting the task (Matras et al. 2009). The City Council followed up on our recommendations to train young Roma as classroom assistants and community spokespersons.

This became the basis for a four-year research and outreach project in partnership with the Neighbourhood Regeneration team at Manchester City Council. The MigRom Project ('The immigration of Romanian Roma to Western Europe: Causes, effects and future engagement strategies, 2013-2017') was a cross-discipline consortium of academic institutions in five countries, Manchester City Council and the European Roma and Traveller Form (ERTF), an umbrella Romani NGO with consultative status at the Council of Europe. All academic partners engaged Roma in roles ranging from postgraduate researchers to research assistants and outreach workers. In Manchester, Roma outreach workers ran a weekly drop-in consultation session for Roma migrants at a local community centre. It was flagged as a 'self-reliance' enterprise intended to transfer skills to community members to deal with such matters as school registration forms, appointments with local service providers and so on, reducing dependency on external interventions (Matras, Barnes & Mills 2018).

We were confronted with opposition from a local organisation that partnered with the City Council's Education Department. They were active in schools, offering training sessions to teachers in which they portrayed Roma as having distinct education needs and supported classroom segregation as a way of alleviating perceived challenges that Roma pupils supposedly imposed on teachers (Matras, Leggio & Steel 2015; Matras, Leggio & Beluschi Fabeni 2018). They disseminated a narrative among City Council officers and scrutiny committees according to which young Roma were at risk of forced early marriage and school drop-out and that external intervention was therefore essential.

Our project supported a group of young Roma spokespersons. We helped them scrutinise what was being written about their community in City Council reports and approach elected councillors to convey their own perspective, putting right incorrect representations (Matras & Leggio 2018). A split emerged between two strands within the

local authority (Cools et al. 2017): One, based at the Regeneration Team, supported our project's strategy of self-reliance, in line with the Council's neoliberal policy to devolve advice and support measures to communities in order to reduce local government budgets. The other, based at the Education Team, insisted that their intervention was needed since Roma supposedly had a cultural predisposition to disengage from the reach of public services; this aligned with an effort to balance off austerity-led budget cuts and job losses by accessing EU funds available for Roma inclusion programmes.

The civic language narrative and the Chief Linguist

In 2010 I set up the Multilingual Manchester (MLM) project at the University of Manchester (Matras 2018a, 2023a, 2023b, 2024; Matras & Robertson 2017). Initially it was based around a new undergraduate course unit where students worked in groups to describe aspects of the city's multilingualism. We made use of a new online coursework submission system to create a digital archive of that work. It became one of the largest online archives of original undergraduate student research work and the largest online archive of essays on multilingualism in any one city.

We soon received enquiries about the city's languages from local health care outlets, schools and community groups. We followed up on those in the next batch of student coursework and with part-time research assistants. A template emerged by which students undertook original research to answer practical questions prompted by actors outside of academia while academic staff in supervisory roles facilitated research and engagement strategies. We inverted the usual formula of research-led universities whereby staff research informed teaching and was used to demonstrate 'impact' on non-academic user communities.

Linking up with local actors whose questions informed our research we created a 'stakeholder community' with regular cross-sector encounters on the theme of multilingualism. It included community-run heritage language schools, speech and language therapists, city council officers, youth centres, hospital procurement managers responsible for interpreting services, refugee support groups, community outreach managers, and more. We created the university's very first faculty-based student volunteer scheme, offering credit for work with community groups and public service providers around the theme of multilingualism, including English language support for refugees. We set up a Supplementary School Support Network that brought together teachers of home and heritage languages to compare experience and undergo training with particular attention to the role of dialect and regional variation when teaching home languages, an aspect that is largely ignored in the curriculum (Matras & Karatsareas 2020). We lobbied the local authority to give more consideration to home language skills.

The MLM initiative was at first regarded with suspicion by the university's middle management: The setup departed from institutional orthodoxy as it engaged research staff and administrative support staff with subject-area expertise under a single supervisory strand and brought together academics from different departments, all blurring conventional line-management boundaries and by implication the pathways of institutional control. But in 2012 a system was introduced to award UK academic institutions financial incentives to demonstrate impact on society and policy. Simultaneously, student fees were increased with the justification that university degrees were a way of securing higher earnings. The University of Manchester adopted 'social responsibility' as a corporate marketing tool to distinguish itself from competitors in recruiting fee-paying students, promising hands-on experience to maximise high-earning

job opportunities. The neoliberal agenda embraced MLM as a showcase enterprise that promised to attract students through an innovative student experience. The project was awarded internal funding on an almost unprecedented scale for a Humanities initiative.

In 2013 our piece of research on the city's language diversity based on available statistics received wide media attention and gave the project international exposure. A narrative emerged under the motto 'City of 200 Languages' and even 'Britain's City of Languages' that was to be adopted as a way of branding the city for cultural festivals and business investment. MLM hosted events for UNESCO International Mother Language Day at which City Council executives acknowledged the city's multilingualism as a cultural asset and strategic resource. Their statements, inspired and informed by MLM's briefings, fed into an emerging civic language narrative that differed sharply from the 'English First' discourse that was being consolidated at national level in the run-up to the Brexit referendum (Matras 2024).

In late 2016, MLM became the core element of the University of Manchester's participation in the Open World Research Initiative (OWRI), a £16 million scheme involving over a dozen universities with the aim of raising the profile of research and teaching on languages. The timing coincided with the referendum in which the UK voted by a narrow margin to leave the EU. There were concerns that the nationalist, isolationist public discourse would discourage language learning and lead to an even greater decline in enrolment in language programmes (Kelly 2018). Celebrated at first for its reputational success, MLM gradually became an outlier: Our attempts to represent multilingualism at city level within the scheme's portfolio of policy papers was rejected by a group of professors of European languages who had put themselves in charge of the scheme. Instead, OWRI's official communications impressed on policymakers that skills in European languages were needed by the country's civil servants to strengthen diplomacy, security and global trade post-Brexit (Matras 2024).

In November 2018, those who took it upon themselves to speak on behalf of OWRI released a statement calling on the government to appoint a 'Chief Linguist'. They argued that coordination of language teaching was needed for international relations, diplomacy, security and defence, mentioning only in passing indigenous and community languages. The Chief Linguist was to be accommodated within the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the UK's intelligence and security agency. I took a critical stance, asking to foreground a domestic language policy and recognise the UK as a multilingual society. In reaction, I was excluded from the public event at the Houses of Parliament at which OWRI presented its proposals. (That event was hosted by the Labour Member of Parliament Neil Kinnock, who in the run-up to the Brexit referendum warned that high levels of immigration would lead to racism). Under pressure by senior figures in OWRI, my university instructed me not to make my views on the subject public without explicit permission, a blatant assault on academic freedom (Matras 2026).

In 2011 the UK Census introduced the question 'What is your main language?'. We pointed out the ambiguity of the wording and the consequent risk of data inaccuracies (Matras & Robertson 2015) and recommended to the Office for National Statistics to replace it by a question that would be more inclusive and differentiated. The government countered that the purpose was not to learn about linguistic diversity but to establish language correlates for low proficiency in English, which it regarded as a predictor of poor social integration. Our efforts to launch a campaign in favour of a change were obstructed by those controlling the OWRI scheme's publicity resources. They demanded that we should not 'antagonise civil servants' and insisted that any representations to policy makers should follow back-door channels through Oxford and Cambridge graduates.

In the decade of its existence MLM had gone from grassroots obscurity to a showcase project that 'ticked all the boxes', and on to a potentially rogue element which the university and research partners sought to control and contain through threats and intimidation.

Doing and undoing

MLM worked to increase the public visibility of languages. In 2015 we launched Levenshulme Language Day, a neighbourhood weekend event at which supplementary schools, dance and theatre groups and others were invited to offer stalls and performances on the theme of language, including language taster sessions. For speakers of lesser-known languages such as Amazigh and Romani it offered a rare opportunity to showcase their linguistic heritage. The celebration aspect allowed us to use public spaces to put multilingualism on display. In 2018 we persuaded the City Council to adopt UNESCO International Mother Language Day as an official annual event. At the invitation of City Council executives we drafted a City Language Strategy, aspects of which were discussed at scrutiny committees. At an international conference hosted by MLM in 2019, a manifesto was adopted calling for the formation of an international Multilingual Cities Movement. However, the hiatus during the Covid outbreak disrupted the emerging Language Day routine. In 2021 the City Council hired a team of marketing experts and event organisers to facilitate Language Day. The focus shifted away from a grassroots festival on language diversity and on to professional artists and literary activities in English. The event was being assimilated into the standard portfolio of the city's 'creative industry' that sought to justify investment in culture through a competitive profitability edge. The University of Manchester aligned itself with that position in the goals that it set to its Arts subjects including Languages and Literatures.

In the spring of 2019, we launched the Multilingual Streets activity working with a secondary school for boys in a deprived area of Manchester (see Matras 2023a, 2023b, 2024). Over eighty percent of its pupils came from multilingual households of immigrant background. The school classified the activity as part of its citizenship and social engagement curriculum strand. Its aim was to offer pupils opportunities to explore areas of the city outside their immediate neighbourhood. We organised visit days that started with a session in a university teaching room. We used as stimuli photos of multilingual signs, taken from MLM's online map 'LinguaSnapp' and bespoke worksheets. We encouraged pupils to reflect why signs might display different languages and what that might tell us about the way we use languages.

The second stage of the activity featured a walk around a multilingual neighbourhood in the vicinity of the university campus. The objective was to transfer the reflection from the earlier session onto street observations. Working in small groups the young people were prompted to identify signs in different languages, to take photos or draw pictures of them and to take a short meta-data inventory to accompany each sign stating the languages and scripts and the outlet to which the sign was attached.

For the next session the group moved to the nearby Whitworth Art Gallery. Surrounded by art displays they were provided with a kit of materials for cutting and pasting paper in different colours and were asked to create an artwork poster based on their workbook and street observations. In this way observations were transferred into a multi-modal visual representation using scripts, colour and material shapes to identify themes that appeared to the participants as salient.

In the final activity stage, the groups were filmed on video showing and discussing their posters. The performance on camera to an imaginary audience prompted the pupils to combine a description of the artefact (the poster) with an explanation for the choice of objects depicted on it and the choice of materials used to represent them. It also offered a justification for the choice of themes. The recurring theme was one of plurality, conveyed by the keywords 'diverse', 'multicultural' and similar. The young people were creating a synthesis of various sources of knowledge: They drew on the day's workshop discussion and their recorded observations. They also incorporated elements of knowledge acquired through other school activities that were deemed relevant to the theme of plurality as well as their own personal knowledge and experience, in particular their own multilingual repertoires which they used to interpret the languages they encountered on the street.

Our method of engagement allowed guided observation to valorise the young people's personal knowledge and experience, which came to the fore in the performance. From the school's perspective the activity offered an educational experience that helped pupils attach value to their personal knowledge and experience as an identifiable skill. That skill could be used to obtain formal qualifications and so it could be deployed as career boosting capital. It could also help pupils build confidence as equal members of the local civic community – an explicit goal of the citizenship curriculum.

Multilingual Streets contributed to breaking down barriers between the university and a population that was otherwise unlikely to connect with it. The direct and short-term marketing value in terms of potential student recruitment – normally the target of such visit days to the university – remained questionable in light of the age group involved and their educational background (only some pupils from this school continued to acquire the higher secondary school qualification that was a prerequisite for admission to university). The value to the university was therefore to be measured in a different way, namely in the ambition to use the higher education environment as a platform to empower marginalised population groups. Activities like Multilingual Streets could be a contribution to long-term capacity building in citizenship. The university's stake in this activity was not to strengthen its own capacity but to act as a responsible contributor to the civic community around it.

After MLM was discontinued in 2021, the University of Manchester set up a virtual group named 'Linguistic Diversity Collective', seeking to continue to capitalise on its reputation of public engagement around multilingualism. However, the new outfit replaced the outreach and engagement strategy that sought to build on participants' own knowledge and interests, with talks to the wider public at which university staff introduced their own research. It became a point-scoring exercise in which 'outreach' was reduced to a metric, quantifying non-academic audiences who received casual exposure to university-internal activities.

During the Covid outbreak, as Manchester's largest museum (owned and operated by the University of Manchester) closed its doors and turned to online activities, we set up the Multilingual Museum: A digital platform on which the Museum displayed images of artefacts and exhibits accompanied by short explanatory texts in English ('interpretations') (see Matras 2023b, 2024). Drawing on personal contacts and a network of volunteer teachers of heritage languages, we approached families and encouraged them to contribute in their own language varieties. We developed the concept of 'storied translation': Contributors were invited to write down or record their impression of the artefact and the accompanying text in their choice of language variety including regional languages and dialects and to comment on other uploaded contributions. It was an experiment in providing an online space with a reputable local institution for creative, individual, unregulated contributions often in non-standard forms of language.

We understood 'storied translation' as dynamic, fluid, and imaginative and a product of individual agency and creativity. It embraced multilingualism as a repertoire of linguistic features rather than a juxtaposition of named languages with strict boundaries. Rather than produce a definitive translation, the goal was to promote engagement with the museum and its collections. We invited multiple translations of the same object to appear side-by-side even in the same language, as text, audio or visuals. Language was regarded as heritage in its own right. We assumed that the process would engage individuals with various levels of language proficiency and various degrees of experience in writing their own language (as some languages were regional or minority languages that are not frequently written).

In interviews that followed, contributors reported feeling proud to be supporting a prestigious local institution in the city. They felt that the presence of their language on the museum's platform was a token of recognition and valorisation of their culture and identity (Matras 2023b, 2024). The task motivated and empowered contributors to act creatively in regard to the design of their own language outputs. Some had had little or no schooling in their family language and possessed no writing routine in that language. They turned to their overall repertoire feeling comfortable and confident to embrace variation in form as well as to take an integrative approach to their language resources. They deployed words and writing conventions from the set of features that they had at their disposal rather than aspire to set strict and consistent boundaries between named languages.

The testimonials also showed how the task opened up opportunities for a dedicated intergenerational dialogue around language heritage: A notion of the family's past, memories, particular traditions that are shared with co-ethnics in the local diaspora as well as a continuing affinity to their place of origin through family and other connections.

For some participants it prompted a dialogue within the work place among colleagues of different backgrounds. The theme of language and the motivation to complete a language-based task turned into an opportunity to strengthen inter-personal bonds and to develop a local collective identity – a micro-level practice community – around multilingualism.

Aiming to ensure longevity, our team applied successfully together with the Museum for an external grant to continue the work. I wrote the grant application and received personal assurances from the Museum's management that the two-person team of multilingual collaborators within whom I had worked at MLM would be hired to continue the project if the grant was awarded. But the Museum then used most of the funds to cover the cost of its own (monolingual) staff members. It ran the project under the motto of increasing 'digital volunteer' statistics. It effectively abandoned the ethos of the storied translation approach and deleted from the online platform all contributions that had been uploaded by users in the first phase of the project, erasing unaffiliated actors' participation and their effort to reclaim an institutional space creatively embracing non-standard language variants.

Responding to the university's neoliberal call to use research and public engagement to create new income streams, we founded a commercial consultancy under the MLM banner – 'MLM Analysis'. It offered forensic linguistic expertise drawing on research databases created as part of my externally funded projects on the dialects of Kurdish, Arabic and Romani (Matras 2018b, 2021, 2025). Most clients represented asylum seekers whose applications had been rejected by the authorities based on externally contracted language analyses that claimed to show a discrepancy between the applicant's language variety and that expected in their stated region of origin. We were commissioned to carry out counter-expertise and to evaluate the government's language reports. Our team proved in numerous cases that the government contractors arrived at incorrect conclusions.

Without exception the courts followed our arguments, overturning the government's decisions to reject the claims. Our team was highly qualified for the task: It was led by a linguist who knew the relevant languages and had research expertise in their dialects. It included postgraduate students in linguistics who were speakers of the relevant languages and specialised in their dialectology. Our protocol drew for comparison on comprehensive dialectological databases that were accessible online and thus verifiable.

Two counterforces appeared on the scene. A circle of academics mobilised argumentative support for the government contractors. They put forward the thesis that language analysis for the determination of origin could be carried out by linguists who have no knowledge of the relevant language, relying instead on the casual impressions of native speakers who lacked linguistic training. They argued that the intuitive knowledge of native speakers was superior to the acquired knowledge of a linguist combined with verifiable database evidence used as a control sample. Their insistence on 'native speaker intuition' reproduced an essentialised view of language. They also projected a hostile attitude towards asylum applicants accusing them wholesale of attempted deception (Matras 2021, 2025).

The second counterforce was the University of Manchester, which hosted the consultancy and benefited from it financially through a steady stream of income and, even more substantially, through an impact case study submitted to the national research evaluation scheme (Research Excellence Framework or REF). After I left the university in 2020, a senior administrative manager ordered the erasure of all three dialectological databases in an apparent attempt to prevent other academic institutions from using the data to carry out similar consultancy services (and reap financial and reputational benefits, supposedly). The neoliberal short-sightedness of profitability and control overrode the commitment to assemble knowledge. It also violated the university's own contractual and ethical obligations towards the funding bodies that had made it possible to create those digital repositories. It breached the trust of the international research community that used them, and of the communities of speakers, particularly of Kurdish and Romani, for whom the digital resources represented an important recognition of their linguistic identities. Our manifesto for a Multilingual Cities Movement was also deleted from the university website.

MLM was discontinued after I left the University of Manchester in 2020. The university disowned a plan to allow it to run in partnership with several external initiatives including another university, the City Council, the museum, and schools under the umbrella of Manchester City of Languages, fearing, apparently, that it would no longer have complete control over its work. It even issued threats to the newly founded Manchester City of Languages initiative not to replicate or use content that it believed it owned, including lists of contacts of local schools and elected councillors that were in the public domain and even photos that I had taken in my own time during my twenty-five-year period as a university employee. MLM's value to its host institution, the University of Manchester, was not in its potential to work for the benefit of the local community but as reputational capital that could be translated into an advantage over competitors, always under tight control.

Who are the colonised, who are the colonisers?

Said (1978) and Hall (1992) had decried the binarism imposed by the West's viewing of the rest of the world through the prism of European Enlightenment. We are now at risk of allowing a reversed binarism to emerge, one that essentialises both 'colonised' and 'colonisers', defining them by virtue of their presumed belonging by birth or descent to a class, race or community within pre-set, fixed boundaries.

In earlier work (Matras 2005) I critiqued the romanticised notion of the 'salvation linguist' who sets out to document endangered languages as if on an emergency humanitarian mission. I showed how some speaker communities sought the help of linguists for particular tasks such as expanding their acquaintance with other dialects while others were indifferent to the ongoing decline of their language in light of other hardships that they faced. To expect communities to be united around language is unrealistic. Yet we are right to insist on some form of validation of respect and sensitivity towards the needs and wishes of community members and on censoring exploitation.

In this contribution I have followed up on that position by arguing in favour of approaching the contrast between colonised and coloniser as a metaphor to capture a dynamic process. The role of colonised is attributed contextually to those who act on the perception that their voices are not being heard where they should be.

Decolonial linguistics understands 'expertise' as making use of the academic stage to draw attention to needs and interests that are not given sufficient consideration in the mainstream. In our work with communities of migrant background in Manchester, we used celebratory events to showcase the city's linguistic diversity and multilingualism. We drafted elements of a domestic language policy that acknowledged multilingualism, worked with young people and families to raise confidence in language heritage and created a network of practitioners centred around ways of responding to a multilingual population. Our work with Roma went beyond the aspect of language to break communication barriers and dislodge prejudice.

Just as our understanding of 'colonised' is bound to context, so is our ability to identify actors as 'colonisers' necessarily linked to the way they position themselves in relation to decoloniality initiatives. In his discussion of the city as a prospective multilingual utopia, Rehbein (2013) notes how monolingual ideology stands in the way of recognising and facilitating change in institutional settings. He concludes by suggesting that research institutions should play an important part in counteracting nationalistic ideologies that are averse to multilingualism, by creating models of multilingual practice and internationalisation and facilitating cross-sector spaces that work as a movement to promote multilingualism.

MLM endeavoured to do just that. But it found that in the neoliberal and neo-nationalist environment of Britain in the twenty-first millennium the research institution is itself not impermeable: It sways between indifference to enterprises that seek social justice, appropriation of such endeavours to serve its own ends of maximising reputation capital, and cruel oppression of what is perceived as insubordination.

The research institution consists of different actors and shifting power constellations. The story of MLM shows that when a group of people derives its relevance from an aspired proximity to political power it will turn against its institutional colleagues and avail itself of instruments of control, containment and even coercion to eradicate what it perceives as rivalry or subversiveness. The community of academic researchers in Modern Languages was keen to protect its own domain in light of falling enrolment (which in a university setting based on profitability means a risk of shutting down degree programmes). Embracing the mainstream political narrative of the day, they used their privileged position to turn against those who put forward an alternative framework as part of the civic language narrative, denying them resources, curtailing their academic freedom and seeking to monopolise access to policy makers.

Within the university that hosted MLM, attitudes turned from indifference to enthusiasm once the project came to be regarded as a marketing asset. But the drive to exercise complete and jealous control over content, branding and projected revenue led the institution to try to cancel and erase MLM's achievements. The local authority, too,

fluctuated, with different actors taking different stances: It sought our advice on an engagement strategy with Roma and implemented major proposals that we made while one of its departments, feeling that its position as exclusive experts was being weakened, briefed against our project. The same City Council education department was also hostile to our engagement with language supplementary schools, fearing interference with its own mandate, which focused on scrutinising such schools from a strictly safeguarding and anti-radicalisation agenda (Children's Services were entrusted with implementing the UK government's Prevent strategy which involved reporting on signs of political extremism, targeting primarily schools with a large Muslim population). The Language Day celebration was adopted into the civic calendar as yet another way of distinctively marketing the city, but no structural consideration was given to the ambition to be a 'city of languages'.

The counterforce made its appearance in more subtle ways, too. During the phase in which MLM was proudly showcased and financially supported by the university, the Acting Head of School suggested that the project should offer to use its contacts in migrant communities to confront political radicalisation and extremism. That same individual also commissioned an information brochure about MLM which described the project's potential to serve the Brexit agenda by harnessing the benefits of multilingualism to support trade with India. The project's decoloniality ethos was completely lost on those who held overall managerial authority over its enterprises. Needless to say, we rejected both the strategy proposal and the text (which has been commissioned without our knowledge or consent, at considerable expense). That, and later our critique of the Chief Linguist initiative, led to accusations that the project – and I, a foreign-born academic leading it – was undermining the institution that hosted it.

Activism in support of linguistic pluralism seeks to change reality towards greater social justice. It aims to put the broader interests of other population sectors first. Anchored in a decolonial critique of knowledge construction and power relations, it is an act of innovation but also an act of opposition – some might say one of resistance and refusal. What we might denote metaphorically as the coloniser narrative emerges as a counterforce to the critical epistemology that is committed to diversifying ideas, interrogating and resisting power, accepting difference, being humble with 'expertise' and offering a voice to others.

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