

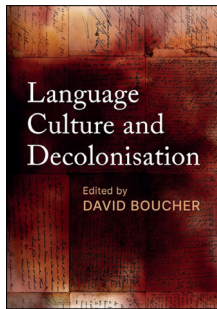


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Reflections from South Africa on *Language, Culture and Decolonisation*

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Language, culture and decolonisation



EDITOR:

David Boucher

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REVIEWER:

Kathy Lockett^{1,2}

AFFILIATIONS:

¹Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning, Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa

²Centre for Higher Education Development, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

EMAIL:

kathy.lockett@uct.ac.za

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The chapters in this book originated at a series of conferences hosted by the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Johannesburg. As the title suggests, the focus of the book is on relations between language, culture and decolonisation, in particular on strategies for countering the injustices, erasures, and manipulations of the languages and cultures of the colonised. Given the book's origin, South Africa and South African authors feature prominently, with the majority of chapters focusing on the role of language in relation to the decolonising project in South Africa and/or Africa and the African diaspora.

In the Introduction, the editor sets out the salience of a book that investigates language oppression for taking forward the contemporary project of intellectual decolonisation in a context where political decolonisation has failed to realise justice for colonised peoples. Boucher claims that the book 'rise(s) to the challenge of exploring strategies for taking possession of language(s), and breaking the silence that...the seeing power of race...has imposed on the invisible and inaudible' (p. 9). He offers three (overlapping and not necessarily exclusive) types of colony to explain why intellectuals in the colonies have historically theorised and practised different forms of resistance and associated approaches to language and culture. The three categories are white settler colonies, colonies administered by indigenous elites, and colonies where the 'natives' were considered so primitive that they first had to be 'civilised' in preparation for self-rule. In a context where we are currently inundated with generalised, abstract calls to action for decolonisation, Boucher's recourse to historical context is welcome: "We must not, however, fall into the trap of believing that a 'general theory' of coloniality and decoloniality will explain each instantiation of the relation between colonizer and colonized. The lived experience of each liberation movement, and the centrality of language to its character and identity, is always contingent and circumstantial" (p. 9). Thus the book aims to introduce the reader to the complexity of the language question and its constitutive histories in the post/neo-colonies where people move in and out of colonial languages, indigenous languages and creoles, for different purposes and with varying degrees of proficiency. One of the key issues discussed in the book is the debate around the role of indigenous languages and creoles in relation to the formation of national consciousness and reclamation of African sovereignty.

In Chapter 1 (p. 19–34), Boucher usefully outlines three approaches taken by colonised intellectual and political leaders in response to language oppression:

1. The appropriation of the colonial language for revolutionary purposes – a pragmatic approach often found in large multi-lingual countries such as India (and by the ANC in South Africa), or in diasporic contexts, such as Negritude's subversion of French. This approach tends to view language as a universal human capacity used to express a given reality.
2. The assertion and revival of the indigenous languages – as constitutive of colonised identities, dignity and self-consciousness and necessary for authentic cultural expression (the imposition of colonial languages is seen as culturally and psychologically destructive). This approach is based on linguistic relativism (articulated in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) where languages are understood to have different (even incommensurable) conceptual and semantic structures.
3. The positive (re)clamation of pidgins and creoles as new languages and expressions of hybrid cultures infused with new identities, values and creativity – usually in contexts with histories of slave-slave-settler interaction and transculturation. This approach is based on a view of language as fluid, dynamic and relational socio-cultural practice as opposed to innate capacity or discrete cultural system.

I use this framework to reflect on two of the chapters that highlight the contradictions and challenges of the language question as the authors grapple with taking up approach 2 and 3, respectively. Chapter 3 (p. 47–64) by South African philosopher John Lamola is a good example of a critical discussion around the second approach to the language question in postcolonial contexts – an approach that adheres to a strong theory of decolonisation.¹ Lamola explores the claim that authentic African philosophy can only be articulated by African people in their indigenous languages and that the idea of African philosophy articulated in a colonial language is not only a philosophical absurdity, but also has 'grave psycho-social ramifications' – for example, double consciousness or self-division (Du Bois, Biko). On the other hand, Lamola also wishes to avoid trapping African philosophy in a myriad of 'tribalised social ontologies' that Hountondji (1983) has long since rejected as 'ethnophilosophies'. Lamola discusses the works of established African philosophers such as Senghor, Mbiti, Wiredu, Eze, Oruka and Tangwa to argue that by aligning themselves with positions close to language approach 1, they represent the African elite who advocate Western modernisation for Africa, thus reproducing neo-colonialism. Lamola claims that 'as a philosophy emanating from the historical milieu of a traumatised people, (African) philosophy still has to make peace with the searing challenge of the psycho-political effects of language in all its varied implications and complexities as raised by Fanon and Ngugi'; concluding that 'professional African philosophy remains an intractable defective enterprise'.

By contrast, Chapter 4 by Brian Sibanda contests Lamola's position from a reading of decolonialisation that best aligns with language approach 3. Sibanda is critical of Afro-radicals who seek to abolish colonial languages in order to build new nativist hierarchies and 'return to some impossible pristine place' (p. 68). Instead he argues that the decolonial project is not a philosophy of revenge but one that seeks to liberate all people, both coloniser and colonised, by disestablishing hierarchies, decentering colonial languages and promoting linguistic multiplicity

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within a new inclusive pluriversality in which indigenous languages are accorded equal status – thus making transcultural conversations possible. Using the seemingly contradictory examples of Achebe (approach 1) and Ngugi (approach 2), Sibanda argues that both colonial and indigenous languages have a role in a collective decolonial project that is built on recognising difference and multiple local particularities in the quest to rehumanise the world.

My own brief reflections on these two chapters are firstly that Lamola (writing in academic philosophical discourse in English) falls into the trap of homogenising Africa and Africans and so fails to adequately address the problems posed by the multilingual nature of Africa as well

as the desire of many Africans to appropriate modernity in their own styles and languages. On the other hand, while Sibanda's approach to the language question seems more realistic, he fails to adequately take unequal power relations into account, especially the global hegemony of the English language and thus the need for political power and will to challenge its dominance and protect and nurture indigenous languages.

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