

# Decolonising Language in History

Humanise, Decentre, Specify, Expand, Listen

By Emilie Tenbroek

Universities and academia in Britain and beyond have been central to the history of imperialism. The knowledge they produced provided the ideological underpinnings of the colonial project. As institutions they benefitted directly from the wealth extracted from the colonies, and their studies from the artefacts and knowledge stolen from colonised cultures. British universities still enjoy a privileged position in an unequal world system inaugurated by imperialism. Decolonisation must both confront these histories and address the continuing effects of imperialism in the present.

This must occur at the institutional level, but also on the individual level in the research and writing produced by every individual within the university, including undergraduate students. Engaging with the way our own reading, writing, and conversations in seminars might perpetuate harmful attitudes, institutionally embedded bias, and inequality is crucial.

Intended for Durham History students, the focus of this document will necessarily be on decolonising History in a British context. Although many of the dynamics and debates discussed will be relevant to other imperial histories or decolonising work at other institutions elsewhere, decolonising History may look different when working with other contexts and their unique histories. Students should be aware of and research how the issues and histories brought up by colonialism manifest in the specific context they are examining.

## Why Language?

Colonialism was as much an ideological project, its physical manifestations justified by a system of ideas, assumptions, and worldviews which continue to marginalise certain groups in the present. Ideas and assumptions are communicated by language, both explicitly and implicitly. The project of decolonisation must involve decolonising the language we use if we are to avoid perpetuating harmful ideas.

Language was also a key means of control in many imperial contexts, including under British colonialism. The use of English was enforced in many regions and remains one of the official languages in several former British colonies, such as in South Africa or Fiji. Replacing indigenous languages with English was not only humiliating, but forcibly dissociated people from the identity and culture contained in language. Enforcing English as the sole language of government, high culture, and learning constructed the indigenous language and its speakers

as lesser, as well as disqualifying non-speakers from public discourse, education, and cultural production thus sustaining the dominance of the colonisers.<sup>1</sup>

*'The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised.'* Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

Questions of value, power, and access are in this way deeply intertwined with language. Language mediates who gets to speak and where, and who is listened to. For instance, prominent journals in many disciplines publish in English and many universities worldwide increasingly favour English in teaching and research, excluding or disadvantaging non-native speakers and marginalising debates that are taking place in academic environments in other languages.<sup>2</sup>

These issues are fundamental to the study of History: History is accessed through language. We construct histories using predominantly textual sources, engage with the views of other historians through their written word, and communicate our own thinking through language. Our own discipline tells us that language is never innocent: we pick apart the language of our sources for what it might reveal between the lines, examine the effects of propaganda, and assess the historical impact of particularly influential texts. We are engaged in debates about the correct terminology to describe a historical phenomenon and what exactly contemporaries meant by the language they used. The interrogation of language is an essential practice to the discipline.

Decolonising History must involve a decolonisation of the language used when writing if we are to empower disenfranchised groups and dismantle oppressive attitudes and structures. We must think critically about our language choices: who might be excluded by the language we use, what assumptions or worldviews might be obscured by our word choices, and whether our language repeats certain erasures or colonial inequalities.

So how do we decolonise language in History? The following suggestions are intended as starting points that might help guide reflection on issues of language and imperialism that arise when reading and writing history at an undergraduate level, in writing essays, working with primary sources, or preparing for seminar discussions.

## Humanise

Use language that is respectful and emphasises the humanity of the people that are discussed, so as not to repeat the erasure or oppression of marginalised groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature* (East African Publishers, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Sheila Trahar, Adisorn Juntrasook, James Burford, Astrid von Kotze, and Danny Wildemeersch, 'Hovering on the periphery? "Decolonising" writing for academic journals', *Compare* 49 (2019), pp. 149-167.

This is particularly important when dealing with primary sources, which might use offensive, racist, or outdated language. Be sensitive when quoting from these texts, acknowledging their offensive nature. Avoid using offensive terms outside of verbatim, direct quotation where necessary and opt for respectful alternatives in your own prose. In seminar discussions, consider whether reading out offensive terms used in sources is necessary and the effect doing so might have on others in the room.

For instance, while you might directly quote the term 'coloured' used in a source, it is now considered outdated and potentially offensive so using it outside of quotation in your own prose would be inappropriate. Terms like 'Black person', 'African-American person', 'African-Caribbean person' or other appropriate terms for the group in question do not reduce individuals to their skin colour or ethnicity but recognize them as people first.<sup>3</sup>

The language used when writing about slavery is also important. Although commonly used, the terms 'slave' and 'slave master' reproduce the erasure of enslaved persons' identity and individuality, while also reinstating and naturalising the hierarchy between enslaved person and enslaver. 'Enslaved person' and 'enslaver' restore the personhood of those who were enslaved that was denied them, while providing greater historical accuracy to the actions of enslavers. Gabrielle Forman has provided further useful guidelines:

- *Enslaved persons* rather than *slaves*
- *Enslaver* rather than *slave master*
- *Fugitive from slavery* or *self-emancipated persons* rather than *runaway slave*
- Language that identifies *sexual violence* and *forced reproduction* rather than *slave mistress*, *slave concubines*, or *slave breeding*
- Name enslaved persons wherever possible
- *Black activists* rather than only *abolitionist* to reflect the radical and expansive nature of their work and ideas, which continued after slavery<sup>4</sup>

Questions that may be useful to ask when considering whether language is respectful include:

- Does it put people first?  
*The term 'enslaved persons' rather than 'slave' emphasises the individual's humanity.*
- Does it use an adjective as a noun?  
*'Black people' is a respectful phrase whereas 'blacks' is offensive, reducing individuals only to their skin colour and perceived racial classification.*
- Does it suggest inferiority or superiority?  
*'Slave master' suggests superiority, whereas 'enslaver' describes the action without a value judgement.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Amelia Butterly, 'Warning: Why using the term "coloured" is offensive', *BBC News*, 27 January 2015 [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-30999175].

<sup>4</sup> Gabrielle Forman, 'Writing About Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help', crowdsourced document [https://naacpculpeper.org/resources/writing-about-slavery-this-might-help/].

<sup>5</sup> Guidelines from Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Centre, 'Writing About Race, Ethnicity, Socioeconomic Status, and Disability', Hamilton College [https://www.hamilton.edu/documents/Writing%20about%20Race,%20Ethnicity,%20Socioeconomic%20Status,%20and%20Disability.pdf].

## Decentre

Decentre language that projects Western attitudes, assumptions, and worldviews. Imperialism placed Western ways of thinking in a position of supremacy over those of the groups it marginalised, an imbalance that must be addressed. Language transmits worldviews through its implicit meaning, and these connotations should be examined.

Considering this is imperative when engaging with primary sources. Even where language does not appear to be explicitly offensive, concepts and terms used in source material may project certain outdated or damaging assumptions. Language used by sources should be critically examined for the attitudes it conveys, and where it perpetuates the privileged position of Western ways of thinking not adopted in your own prose but decentred.

### ***Civilisation & modernity***

The binary 'civilized' as opposed to 'barbaric', 'primitive' or 'savage' was born of a Western, colonial worldview that constructed colonised peoples as other, lesser, backward, and incapable of self-rule to justify imperial control as a 'civilizing mission'. Using these terms without awareness of their connotations and complicity with imperialism risks reproducing these inequalities and racist attitudes.<sup>6</sup>

This binary worldview infuses other common concepts such as 'modernity', 'rationality', and 'objectivity'. Also arising from the European Enlightenment thinking that formed the ideological foundations of empire, these ideas further constructed the 'rational', 'modern' Colonising Self in contrast to the 'primitive', 'superstitious' Colonised Other to justify colonialism. Uncritical use of this paradigm obscures its ideological implications and history of imperialism, as well as perpetuating the exclusion and devaluation of indigenous knowledges that do not conform to Western intellectual traditions of 'rationality' and 'objectivity'.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Tribe***

Another example of this worldview is 'tribe'. Historically used to describe African, Native American, and other marginalised communities, the term can project the racist image of these groups as unchanging, timeless, backwards, and superstitious. This upholds the colonial narrative of the 'primitive' colonised Other, while erasing their real, complex socio-political configurations for failing to conform to Eurocentric notions of the nation-state. There is often a double standard as ethnic, national, or language groups in other regions or time periods are not regularly described as 'tribal': for example, we speak of late medieval French 'kingships', 'peoples' and 'nations'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Alexis Heraclides and Ada Dialla, 'Eurocentrism, "civilization" and the "barbarians"', in *Humanitarian intervention in the long nineteenth century* (Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 31-56.

<sup>7</sup> Anibal Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', *Cultural Studies* 21.2-3 (2007), pp. 168-178; Walter D. Mignolo, 'DELINKING: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality', *Cultural Studies* 21.2-3 (2007), pp. 449-514.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Lowe, 'The trouble with tribe', *Learning For Justice*, Spring 2001 [<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2001/the-trouble-with-tribe>].

‘Tribe’ has been reclaimed by some communities, as positive self-identification and self-description as belonging to a particular group. These contemporary uses aim specifically to disrupt the term’s negative connotations through reclamation, with awareness of its problematic history. It may also function as a bureaucratic term, such as in the United States where a community of Native American people must be recognized as a tribe to gain access to certain legal rights.

Where ‘tribe’ is a positive self-descriptor used by communities themselves it may be the most appropriate term for some groups. But where it is an imposed term as might be the case in source material, many scholars prefer other terms like ethnic or language group, people, nation, village, community, kin-group, or chiefdom that avoid the connotations of primitivity and more accurately describe the nature of the group in question.

### ***Beyond colonialism***

Be aware of language that projects Western assumptions and places Western modes of thought in a position of superiority in contexts that are not formally colonial in nature. Similar processes of marginalisation have been directed at other times, places and peoples where similar power imbalances might need to be addressed and language decentred.

For example, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe have historically also been posited as North-Western Europe’s Other, described with similar language of primitivity and tribalism. In this context, the language of ‘tribe’ was already questioned by nineteenth century sources who began to describe Balkan regions and peoples as ‘nations’, if ‘immature’ and ‘incomplete’. Dealing with sources using this kind of language would also benefit from decentring these paradigms, although this process may have already been started by contemporaries.<sup>9</sup>

Thinking critically about the connotations, history, and worldviews suggested by the language we and our sources use helps to decentre Eurocentric attitudes and prevent the re-inscription of colonial inequalities, while simultaneously revealing more about the sources using these terms.

## **Specify**

Use language that is specific. Marginalised groups are often homogenized and collapsed, despite great variation in their experiences. This perpetuates the erasure of these groups’ experiences and voice, denying them the individuality afforded to more privileged groups. Be specific about the group under study. Gender, age, racial status, class, sexuality, gender identity, and ability may all produce vastly different experiences.

Be specific about the processes too. Racism and colonialism are distinct structures and should not be used synonymously. For example, racism may develop in a society independently of

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<sup>9</sup> Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, (Stanford University Press, 1994).

colonialism. There are different forms of colonialism that produced vastly different experiences: settler colonialism, exploitation colonialism, surrogate colonialism, and internal colonialism. Experiences of oppression should not be homogenized as ‘colonization’ or all resistance as ‘decolonization’, as this erases the experiences of those communities affected by these processes.<sup>10</sup>

Racism and colonialism are real historical structures and processes, that had profound effects on individuals. Being specific in our analyses of them can not only better illuminate certain experiences but also affords the subject the respect it deserves.

## Expand

Diversify the sources used, to incorporate a wider range of perspectives and decentre Eurocentric narratives. Expand reading for essays and seminar preparation beyond the established canon, in terms of the authors, subject matter, and approach used.

For instance, it might be useful to consider whether reading has included pieces:

By a woman	Incorporating postcolonial or anti-imperial perspectives
By a black woman	
By a black man	Incorporating feminist perspectives
By a non-black woman of colour	Incorporating alternative economic analysis
By a non-black man of colour	Incorporating queer perspectives
By a relevant diasporic group	Incorporating disability perspectives <sup>11</sup>
By a non-elite group	

Expanding reading might also include looking beyond established journals and the historiographical canon, devaluing established hierarchies. Where possible look beyond English and other colonising languages for sources in or translated from colonised languages. Canons and publishing infrastructure are informed by ideas of academic value that excluded those groups marginalised by imperialism, whose languages and cultures were deemed inferior, and who were excluded from places of education and their access to publishing. Incorporating those perspectives, writers, and sources not traditionally afforded value under imperialism helps to redress this exclusion.<sup>12</sup>

This is not to say that every piece of work must include every single type of author or perspective, or to disregard the established historiography or module reading lists, but rather to *add* diverse voices, expand what we consider useful or valuable, and encourage reflection about which voices are excluded, why, and how this might alter our sense of what we study.

<sup>10</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, ‘Decolonization is not a metaphor’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (2012), pp. 1-40.

<sup>11</sup> Guidelines from M. Adryael Tong [@MAdryaelTong], ‘Decolonization checklist for teachers of pre-modern history’, Twitter, 31/05/2020. See further reading for details.

<sup>12</sup> Pat Lockley, ‘Open Initiatives for Decolonising the Curriculum’, in Gurminder Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişancıoğlu (eds.), *Decolonising the University* (Pluto Press, 2018), pp. 145-170.

## Listen

Listen to the voices and experiences of marginalized groups. The historical and continuing impacts of imperialism are their experience, and they are best placed to identify what is harmful for them.

## Useful Links and Further Reading

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2019/03/12/how-diverse-is-your-reading-list-probably-not-very/>

<https://wonkhe.com/blogs/to-decolonise-the-curriculum-we-have-to-decolonise-ourselves/>

<https://soas.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=31732106-af15-4b0a-a26c-43ed766f0d34>

<https://brownpoliticalreview.org/2017/04/linguistic-colonialism-english/>

<https://medium.com/@matthijsbijl/language-and-the-decolonization-of-the-mind-558b9cef7e79>

<http://www.criticalethnicstudiesjournal.org/blog/2019/1/21/do-not-decolonize-if-you-are-not-decolonizing-alternate-language-to-navigate-desires-for-progressive-academia-6y5sg>

<https://www.bgdblog.org/2013/12/mean-say-colonized/>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/08/25/othering-ebola-and-the-history-and-politics-of-pointing-at-immigrants-as-potential-disease-vectors/>

<https://www.cumbria.gov.uk/elibrary/Content/Internet/537/6381/6387/40828163633.pdf>

<https://abc7.com/racism-black-lives-matter-racist-words/6302853/>

[https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/teachers/huck/section1\\_2.html](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/teachers/huck/section1_2.html)

[https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/equality/?page\\_id=130](https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/equality/?page_id=130)

<https://www.umass.edu/legal/derrico/name.html>

<https://survivalinternational.org/info/terminology>

M. Adryael Tong [@MAdryaelTong], Twitter, 31/05/2020.

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 **M Adryael Tong, Ph.D.** @MAdryaelTong

Decolonization Checklist for Teachers of Pre-Modern History:

- ✓ 1 assigned reading by a black woman
- ✓ 1 assigned reading by a black man
- ✓ 1 assigned reading by a non-black woman of color
- ✓ 1 assigned reading by a non-black man of color
- ✓ At least 2 assigned readings by women

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Replying to @MAdryaelTong

- ✓ 1 assigned reading on non-elite peoples (slaves, non-citizens, the working poor)
- ✓ 1 assigned reading from a diasporic group as defined by your field
- ✓ 1 assigned reading incorporating disability perspectives
- ✓ 1 assigned reading incorporating queer perspectives

2 7 36

 **M Adryael Tong, Ph.D.** · 31/05/2020 · ...

- ✓ 1 assigned reading incorporating feminist perspectives
- ✓ 1 assigned reading incorporating post-colonial/anti-imperial perspectives
- ✓ 1 assigned reading incorporating Marxist or other radical economic analysis as defined by your field

Nothing can double-count.

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