

Finex Ndhlovu\*

# Decolonising sociolinguistics research: methodological turn-around next?

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**Abstract:** This short article argues that notwithstanding theoretical advances that have sought to unsettle the hegemony of mainstream theoretical frameworks, language in society researchers and other social science scholarly communities from the Southern orbit of the globe, continue to be wedded to conventional Euro-modernist methodologies. I suggest that the need to delink from imperial logics of doing research is a must and not an option. We need a language to explore spaces and modes of being that do not exist in the spaces of current Euro-modernist frameworks but that do exist in the majority of other communities around the world. In advancing this line of argument, I join ongoing conversations among indigenous and decolonial scholars speaking from the margins of the mainstream on the need for epistemic reconstitution of the discourse and praxis of research.

**Keywords:** applied linguistics; decolonising methodologies; epistemologies of the South; language in society; research methods; sociolinguistics

## 1 Introduction

Struggles for epistemic and cognitive justice are won and lost at the methodology battlefield. The methodologies we follow are the very technology that shapes the nature of our research questions and, ultimately, our answers to such questions – what we look for or overlook in our data sets. Mainstream research methodologies and practices that are seen as though they were an objective and technical issue of data gathering and collection procedures (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019) are ideologically laden and politically interested. They are defined by and carry the values of those in power. Ultimately, because mainstream research methodologies protect the power base of hegemonic social and political forces, they hide more than they reveal. In particular, research methodologies hide the fact that they occlude the

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\*Corresponding author: Finex Ndhlovu, University of New England, Armidale, Australia,  
E-mail: fndhlovu@une.edu.au

intuition of the observer/researcher; his or her ethical radar and moral compass (Tuck and Yang 2014).

The tenuous foundation of logical positivism embedded in mainstream research methodologies continues to exert an enormous influence in the social sciences (Baronov 2004) including in disciplines such as applied linguistics and sociolinguistics. It seems much of the burgeoning scholarship in these fields of research is yet to break free from the conventional scientific method. There is tendency to do very little or no analysis of the underlying assumptions and beliefs that form the ideological presuppositions of widely used social scientific approaches of the positivist tradition that underpin qualitative and quantitative paradigms. These are often treated as if they were ideologically neutral and objective yet, as we know, they emerged out of specific contextual and cultural conditions in the Global North. The content and *modus operandi* of conventional methods are predominantly shaped by colonial understandings of what constitutes valid and legitimate knowledge (Ndhlovu 2017). In their most recent book advancing Southern perspectives on language and society, Pennycook and Makoni (2020) push the envelope even further by pointing the laser light to questions of ontology. With a specific focus on research in applied linguistics, they question the discipline's foundation on traditional science within the Eurocentric perspective: the central themes on rationality, linearity, development, and disembodiment of science. A serious concern for Pennycook and Makoni (2020: 79) is about how "the colonial linguistic project and its applied linguistics offshoot produced a vision of language that had little to do with how people understood language locally". Such universalising tendencies of the conventional scientific method normatively used as underpinning pillars for project designs disregard contextual particularities – what Raewyn Connell (2007) calls the fallacy of universal relevance.

In this article, I suggest fruitful ways of exploring the next steps in decolonising the discourse and praxis of language in society research. I build on and extend Tuck and Yang's (2014) potentially productive notion of "refusal" in qualitative research. Tuck and Yang introduce "refusal" as a summary term for strategies we can employ in the analysis and communication of qualitative data to counter the universalising posture of claims made by colonial approaches to knowledge production and their regimes of representation. The argument is that the paths we follow in doing social science research must be those that are committed to re-membling (Wa Thiong'o 2009) and re-humanising indigenous and other Southern peoples subjected to more than 500 years of coloniality. A well-known leitmotif of colonial habits and practices of research was that of using colonised peoples as sources of raw data that were then processed in metropolitan

societies (Connell 2007). In such cases of knowledge theft, the intellectual property and theories developed became (and continue to be) the preserve of the coloniser.

As Wa Thiong'o 2009 advises, there is a compelling need to re-member and re-claim the stolen intellectual property. The crucial task of such re-membering, re-claiming and recovering the collective memory of formerly colonised peoples cannot be carried out using images, metaphors, symbols, language and approaches of the coloniser. In other words, mainstream research methods and approaches cannot be equal to the task because they are remnants of Euro-modernist colonial matrices of power, domination and control that we are trying to subvert. We, therefore, need to de-link from the habits and practices of the coloniser because they reflect "a matrix of commitments, histories, allegiances, and resonances that inform what can be known within settler colonial research frames, and what must be kept out of reach" (Tuck and Yang 2014: 811). We need to look beyond established/normative traditions of doing research to chart alternative pathways that push the envelope toward a more fruitful trajectory. In what follows, I invite all of us to engage in dialectical conversations about how best to design language research projects that are consistent with the quite contemporary anti-colonial, anti-foundational and transformative agenda that some sections of our academic communities are currently pushing.

## 2 Theoretical advances, challenging methodological stasis

Scholars of sociolinguistics and allied disciplines have made quite commendable theoretical and conceptual progress when it comes to challenging linguistic normativity and those frameworks that have crystallised into some kind of traditional orthodoxy in language research (Ndhlovu 2018). Theorisations around language as process date to the 1970s and 1980s work of Einar Haugen (1972), Lachman Khubchandani (1997), John J. Gumperz (1982) and Howard Giles (1984). By the 1990s the number of voices following this line of critique had grown, with Lachman Khubchandani (1997) proposing what he called "plurality of consciousness" and "communication ethos", which are about consideration of how individual language users have "day-to-day, moment-to-moment successes that make language transactive, functional and alive" (Khubchandani 1997: 14). This was a call to shift the locus of enunciation from fixity to fluidity (Pennycook and Otsuji 2010) through looking at language as an ongoing process of social transaction and not something that is located in an institution. This critique of conventional understandings of language has continued to gather momentum with the emergence of new

approaches such as “translanguaging” (García 2009; García and Kleyn 2016; García and Li Wei 2013) and “metrolingualism” (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015). A crucial foundational premise shared by these theoretical frameworks is their call for unbounding language from its position as an object of study and situating it in the sociocultural complexity that surrounds speakers’ “real language use” (Ndhlovu 2013; Ndhlovu 2018).

Notwithstanding these commendable strides in questioning colonially-inherited theories and concepts, progress is so far quite limited when it comes to challenging the dictates of the “scientific method of enquiry”. Conventional research methods that proceed from the (post)positivist tradition remain erroneously treated as if they were universal, self-evident things of a natural kind that are forever relevant and applicable in every context in similar ways. We must remember though that mainstream social science methods we use in language and society studies originated from observations made in specific socio-cultural contexts and conditions that are different from those that obtain elsewhere around the world. In this connection, Tuck and Yang’s (2014) clever notion of refusal is informative. Refusal “encourages researchers to take up a stance of objection, one that will interrogate power and privilege, and trace the legacies and enactments of settler colonialism in everyday life” (Tuck and Yang 2014: 814). Contemporary sociolinguistics and applied linguistics discourses critical of conventional social-scientific theorisations need further development in this area. In addition to questioning and challenging the universalising pretensions of mainstream theoretical frameworks, we also need to turn the laser light to mainstream methodologies and subject them to the same process of refusal. We need to refuse and unsettle colonial ways of knowledge production: “the god-gaze of the objective knower, refusing to draw conclusions about communities – choosing to write instead about power” (Yang and Tuck 2014: 15) that lies beneath the code of methodology that masks unequal power relationships.

Decolonising methodology (Chilisa 2011; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo 2011; Smith 2012) is, therefore, one fruitful way to ensure “the worldviews of those who have suffered a long history of oppression and marginalisation are given space to communicate from their frames of reference” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019: 1). The significant point here is that while the language now exists for us to talk about the possibility of other forms of knowledge apart from hegemonic mono-epistemic models, the struggle for legitimacy in the eyes of the academy continues (Smith 2012). In the fields of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, the imperative to conduct research in ways that disrupt the colonial order of things is evidently an urgent ethical, ontological, and political exercise (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019).

However, a major challenge remains around what I would call methodological stasis – a situation where we have remained tied to methodologies that sustain the

very same epistemological hegemonies we are seeking to unsettle. As decolonial theorist, Walter D. Mignolo has advised, we must step away from inherited Eurocentric habits through delinking from colonial legacies (Mignolo 2011). I would argue that the methods we use today to test theoretical suppositions of contemporary frameworks such as translanguaging originated from what others have called “colonial linguistics” (Christine Severo 2016; Fardon and Furniss 1994; Joseph Errington 2001, 2008; Sinfree Makoni 1998, 2003). Early missionaries and other colonial academics who pioneered language research in sub-Saharan Africa for example, followed Euro-modernist imperial methodologies. Three interrelated forces colluded in the Euro-modernist project of executing language-based forms of epistemicide: colonial imperialism, Christian modernity, modern nation-state ideologies, and technologies of orthography and orthodoxy (Ndhlovu and Makalela 2021). The upshot of all three processes combined was the invention of a set of narratives emphasising the role of power to save, rescue and develop other people (Mignolo 2011). Hierarchies of humanity produced through these discursive constructs of language, culture and race justified Euro-modernist imperial projects. Such methods and assumptions about the nature and role of language in society still underpin the way we currently collect, document, analyse and disseminate data.

Therefore, as decolonial theorists have suggested, we must undo the dirty history of conventional Euro-modernist methodologies because they emerged as handmaiden of colonialism and imperialism. Under the aegis of colonial scholarship, “research” became a critical part of the imperial colonial project. A perennial challenge that remains firmly ensconced in the academy is one about how scholars who try to exercise epistemic disobedience through the strategy of refusal are disciplined into an existing methodology. This effectively drains such scholars of their profundity (Ndhlovu-Gatsheni 2019). Scholars speaking from the Global South are especially the ones most subjected to these gate-keeping mechanisms we often find in peer-review processes and so on. Delinking from the Euro-modernist imperial logic of doing research is, therefore, a must and not an option. We need a different set of narratives on how to carry out research; a counter-discourse that emphasises the role and power of scholars speaking from Southern and decolonial perspectives to not only theorise but to also develop and own the methods they use to elicit empirical data that support their theoretical suppositions. This is about pushing forward the agenda of epistemic reconstitution (Mignolo 2011; Smith 2012).

### 3 Implications for IJSL and contributors

What are the implications of all of the above for IJSL and its contributors? First, it means we need to develop new narratives, new words, new grammars, and new

vocabularies for eliciting empirical data to support the suppositions and arguments we advance in our anti-conventional and anti-colonial theoretical approaches to language and society research. Such alternative trajectories require a decentering of the dominant (methodological) voice and an increase in other voices speaking from different methodological postures that are yet to be tried and tested. Second, a rich collection of thought from a broad spectrum of epistemological traditions or ecology of knowledges (de Sousa Santos 2007) is required if we are to develop new models and push the frontiers of the existing body of thought. This is because “knowledge is produced in many languages, cultures and cosmovisions” (Jordão 2020: 840). The community of scholars working in the field of language and society needs to adopt a methodological posture that brings together diverse cultures and traditions of knowing to mediate pathways for producing interconnected forms of knowledge in order to transcend the limits of current monolingual and mono-epistemic ways of seeing (Ndhlovu and Stephen 2020).

Third, perhaps it is about time we go back to the foundational questions that gave birth to language and society (sociolinguistics) as a field of research. Sociolinguistics emerged out of an environment of interdisciplinary conversations among linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, dialectologists and psychologists, among many others whose locus of enunciation in language research was three-fold: (i) they shunned disciplinary provincialism and adopted an interdisciplinary approach that emphasised social problems; (ii) they believed that a combination of fieldwork in complex multilingual settings needed to guide theory building; and (iii) they were of the view that new theorisation and methodological innovations were to be developed in tandem. A specific case in point here is the ethnographic approach that was introduced into language research as both a new method and a new theory “concerned not simply with language structure, but with language use, with rules of speaking [...] the ways in which speakers associate particular modes of speaking, topics, or message forms, with particular settings and activities” (Coulthard 2014: 34).

The following are among key questions that prompted the founding of sociolinguistics in the 1960s: How are political and economic problems of inequality, exclusion et cetera reflected in the complex relations between language and society? What is the role of language in facilitating/hindering access to education? How does real language of real people work in everyday real life? These questions are still relevant today. Joshua Fishman is reported have complained at the 1964 Summer Linguistics Institute conference in Bloomington that the social, economic and political problems implicated in these questions were not emphasised; instead, they were completely overlooked in mainstream theoretical and methodological models of that time (Spolsky 2010).

For us today, these complex questions require that we draw on and leverage what Francis Nyamnjoh (2015, 2017) calls convivial scholarship; a type of scholarship underpinned by the deep power of collective imagination and the importance of interconnections. This entails adopting a methodological orientation in which interconnections, interrelationships, interdependencies, collaboration, and coproduction, as well as the recognition of diversity, tolerance, trust, and equality – among other forms of sociality – take centre stage in our research agendas. Convivial scholarship is, *ipso facto*, “a scholarship that questions assumptions of a priori locations and bounded ideas of power and all other forms of relationships that shape and are shaped by the socio-cultural, political and economic circumstances of social actors” (Nyamnjoh 2017: 5). Our project designs must rest on a methodological posture that recognises that every body of thought is partial, incomplete and cannot – on its own – fully address the myriad language and society questions. We must bring together diverse global knowledge traditions into informed conversations that recognize and value the messiness and complexity of encounters and relationships while simultaneously foreclosing endemic obsession with binaries, dichotomies and dualisms in our project designs.

This necessarily entails developing methodological approaches devoted to finding connections, points of confluence, and opportunities for transfer of concepts, among members of academic communities, and between them and the non-academic communities they serve. A major goal should be to push forward alternative social science research paradigms – in ways that mitigate the limitations of current conventional approaches that tend to marginalise (at best) and erase (at worst) other traditions of knowing. One way of doing so is forging collaborative research with non-academic communities as equal partners, whereby social scientists are willing to learn at the feet of ordinary members of formerly colonised communities – the subaltern so to speak – by listening to their stories, and using such stories to generate concept notes to inform new methodological approaches.

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**Supplementary Material:** The online version of this article offers supplementary material (<https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2020-0063>).