Commentary

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Domesticated decoloniality: taming critique in language scholarship

Abstract: This article introduces "domesticated decoloniality", which refers to the process through which radical, material and explicit critiques of colonial structures, systems and logics are diluted into sanitised, apolitical, ahistorical, convenient and non-confrontational discourses and frameworks aligned with neoliberal academia, state agendas and institutional policies, not threatening group/personal interests of the supposed beneficiaries of (de)coloniality. It captures how decolonial premises, objectives and commitments are stripped of their political and material urgency, and absorbed into advertised rhetorics and practices that sustain the hierarchies they purport to dismantle, rather than being anchored in embodied struggles of marginalised communities. Three main interconnected categories constitute "domesticated decoloniality". First, the theoretical commodification of decoloniality by marketising decolonial critique and repackaging its core ideas as academic trends dissociated from material struggle. Second, depoliticising decoloniality as a diagnostic and interventional mechanism by reducing it to a mere analytical lens whose significance resides entirely in discursive critique of power relations in the abstract. Third, the co-optation of decoloniality by the elites (including Northern and Southern institutions, groups and individuals) to legitimise exclusionary hierarchies, e.g. nationalism, racism, nativism. These categories do not function independently, as they may be intersected and concurrently employed with varying degrees of influence within decolonial junctures.

Keywords: domesticated decoloniality; commodification; depoliticising; co-optation; language

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1 Positionality statement

For the first author, Hamza, a Moroccan scholar in Hong Kong educated in Morocco (through his MA) and Spain (for his PhD), decoloniality is not an option but an imperative. Yet, from his specific positionality, he recognises that the pursuit of decolonial narratives is inevitably constrained by the very conditions from which one speaks. He thus contends that we can only engage in decoloniality to the extent our circumstances permit. The second author, Othman, is a senior Saudi scholar (a full professor) educated in the UK and the US. Through his publications and editorial work, he has actively promoted alternative knowledge production. His commitment to decolonial work is premised on the understanding that subalternity exists in varying degrees; consequently, he views any decolonial effort not as an end in itself, but as a step in a continuous struggle for visibility. The third author, Fajer, articulates her perspective from her position as a Kuwaiti female assistant professor and published researcher. While operating within academic circles that often favour diluted critiques of (de)coloniality, she strives to centre perspectives marginalised by mainstream research conventions. Simultaneously, she is critically aware that her own geopolitical context and lived experiences impose authorial limits on her ability to represent realities beyond her own.

2 *Madkhal*:[1] defining "domesticated decoloniality"

"Domesticated decoloniality" refers to the process through which radical, material and explicit critiques of colonial structures, systems and logics are diluted into sanitised, apolitical, ahistorical, convenient and non-confrontational discourses and frameworks aligned with neoliberal academia, state agendas and institutional policies, not threatening group/personal interests of the supposed beneficiaries of (de) coloniality. It captures how decolonial premises, objectives and commitments are stripped of their political and material urgency, and, thus, absorbed into advertised rhetorics and practices that sustain the very hierarchies they purport to dismantle, rather than being anchored in embodied struggles of marginalised communities. Three main interconnected categories constitute the operation of "domesticated decoloniality". These categories are not assumed to function independently, as they may be intersected and concurrently employed with varying degrees of influence within decolonial junctures:

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1 *Madkhal* means 'introduction' in Arabic.

First, the theoretical commodification of decoloniality by marketising decolonial critique and repackaging its core ideas as academic trends that are dissociated from material struggle. For example, publications may choose to draw on particular "Southern epistemologies" that may again be compatible with mainstream narratives of what is admissible, rigorous, nuanced and effective, e.g. politics of inclusion. These publications may also not extensively incorporate perspectives that have been born in struggles, possibly amplifying voices that may lack lived experiences of colonial(ism)(ity). Second, depoliticising decoloniality as a diagnostic and interventional mechanism by reducing it to a mere analytical lens whose significance resides entirely in discursive critique of power relations in the abstract, or in theory, avoiding (the call for) concrete and actionable strategies, e.g. emphasising solidarity with grassroots movements. This renders decoloniality neutral, docile and palatable to maintaining the status quo. For instance, scholars may be casting aspersions on the use of dichotomies of South-North while ignoring how these binaries are inherently political, how they are used to explicitly expose imbalances and how they are strategically utilised in activism. Third, the co-optation of decoloniality by the elites (inclusive of Northern and Southern institutions, groups and individuals) to legitimise exclusionary hierarchies, e.g. nationalism, racism, nativism, replicating the very systems it claims to disrupt.

Against this backdrop, Rambukwella and Zavala's (2025) article may unwittingly exemplify this domestication, only in some aspects. It critiques the depoliticisation of decolonial discourse in language scholarship, exposing risks such as romanticised alterity and decontextualised research. However, this remains vague as it does not name specific narratives, and the entirety of the examples is limited to the authors' home countries. Possibly, the decision to focus on home countries may prove less risky. We corroborate the article's framing, but some of its arguments may crystallise the paradox of 'domesticated decoloniality'. While it argues that depoliticisation is a major issue within decoloniality, its analysis may perform a systemic taming of critique. Its reluctance to name specific scholars or movements for the sake of maintaining a "critical spirit" (p. 3) can mirror coloniality by anonymising power relations rather than openly uncovering and interrogating how Northern academia may extract Southern theories while sidelining their material contexts. This way, it privileges "overall views" (avoiding engagement with specific authors) over situated struggles precipitating decoloniality as a theoretical commodity.

Furthermore, the articles' caution against binaries (East/West) neglects their utility in validating Southern resistance, especially that they are not used as ends in themselves, but rather as approximations charting unequal power relations. Naming how some communities are benefiting from global systems while others are silenced is not completely inaccurate and/or colonial. In doing so, the article may (unintentionally) recycle the neoliberal academia it critiques, presenting decoloniality as a set

of "risks" to manage rather than a radical tradition to enact. To unsettle domesticated decoloniality, it is important to stress that decoloniality inherently repudiates neutrality and bridges epistemic critique with material redistribution.

3 Theoretical commodification

Rambukwella and Zavala's (2025) article critiques the "sanitized manifestations of decoloniality in academic discourse…distant from this history… feel a sense of disquiet about how the decolonial discourse appears to be concerned about 'epistemic' questions at the expense of the 'material'" (p. 2). They argue that decoloniality risks becoming a depoliticised buzzword stripped of its radical roots. While this concern is valid, the article's framing may inadvertently contribute to theoretical commodification by abstracting decoloniality into an "overall view" (p. 3) that avoids naming specific scholars, movements or institutional power dynamics. The authors noted that "rather than highlight the work of specific authors – which we feel undermines the critical spirit of our intervention" (p. 3). We maintain that the link between (not) discussing particular works and impinging on the criticality of a "decolonial" text is not clear and may be largely unfounded, unless the authors themselves justify such a claim. This decision might, of course, be underpinned by the authors' caution not to sustain any repercussions stemming from naming, but it remains equally valid to suggest that this works to anonymise power relations, particularly their beneficiaries. This way, the article may be reproducing what it critiques by rehearsing the logics of neoliberal academia and reducing decoloniality to an academic trend that is tamed, benign and non-confrontational.

We understand that the authors may be operating within the confines of academia, but our "decolonial" criticality may only legitimise itself when it is willing to protest and act otherwise within one's possibilities. "Decoloniality" as a Southern theory may, thus, be repackaged as a palatable intellectual commodity because the refusal to name obscures how Southern knowledges are extracted while sidelining its material contexts and grassroots struggles. We corroborate the article's statement that "theorizing decoloniality within academia is becoming an epistemological battleground where first world concerns shape the conversation rather than the concerns of on the ground struggles" (p. 16). It is worth noting how the "validated", "legitimised" and "popular" decolonial discourses that are widely cited and drawn upon mainly come from "Southern" scholars who have studied and worked in elite institutions in the Global North (see Demeter 2019; R'boul 2022a). This is problematic because it may convey the notion that Western education or/and affiliation are fundamental for speaking for and on the periphery (Demeter 2020). The authors made an interesting point indicating that "the problem with decolonization – as it is

being mainstreamed in academic and public discourse now – is that it offers an easy compromise to these inequalities" (p. 17). This begs the question of whether the (im)possibility of having decoloniality mainstreamed is bound by the flattening of its premises, as its modes of operation are necessarily non-mainstream.

The article warns against imagining "an alterity unmarked by modernity" that is shaped by "romantic notions about indigenous peoples or societies that are not considered 'fully modern'…because it essentializes, otherizes, and, consequently, depoliticizes them" (Rambukwella and Zavala 2025: 3). That is, instead of making sense of decoloniality as the quest of "a radical alterity untainted by modernity," it is more useful to unpack "decolonization as a phenomenon where people encounter, interpret and recruit ideas and concepts that have "traveled" due to modernity and their local adoption and adaptation" (p. 8). This stance carries important insights, but it does not clearly establish its position regarding how indigenous/minority views of language can be unfairly mediated by Western ideologies. This critique also over-looks how marginalised communities may strategically essentialize identity to reclaim visibility and resources. We agree that "concepts like mother tongue, speech community, [and] minority language rights…have been historically emancipatory" (p. 13) even when they are essentialist. However, by dismissing essentialism as inherently problematic, the article may privilege mainstream narratives of what is admissible, which would silence movements that deploy essentialism tactically.

Illustrating an aspect that the authors of the article we are examining pointed out and which we agree with, state-sponsored Amazigh cultural festivals may reinforce and potentially commodify notions of "authentic" Berber heritage to attract tourism and international interest (Boum 2012). Some Amazigh activists and scholars calling for stronger influence of Berber in the Moroccan language policy and sociolinguistic situation may use essentialist rhetoric such as "Berbers are the indigenous pop-ulations of Morocco and have existed in North Africa since time immemorial" (Zouhir 2014: 37) to demand rights, but this can be co-opted by the state. Yet, this dynamic of conveying a singular notion of Amazigh identity and underscoring the status of the original inhabitants mobilises strategic essentialism, which means that marginalised groups project and promote a fixed identity to gain (legal) recognition, even if it entails simplifying their "rich and diverse Amazigh language and the multiple iden-tities it represents" (Alalou 2023: 165). It also helps leverage global discourses of indigenous rights. Amazigh scholars assert "authenticity" evoked by land, language and purity to argue for "Amazigh Indigenous post-coloniality" (El Guabli 2025) and to reaffirm the legitimacy of their demands, explaining that:

> Origins also connect us to place, thus giving us a sense of authenticity through an extended inhabitation of the land. Akāl (land in Amazigh) evokes rootedness in the place of origin. Whether used to reclaim a sense of being aït tmazirt (the rightful owners/citizens of the

homeland) or tarwa n-tmazight (the children of the land), akāl has entrenched a strong connection between cultural consciousness and Amazigh indigeneity to the land of North Africa. Through the various conceptions of akāl and laṣl, one can make claims for revamping the exclusive sociopolitical, juridical, and economic systems that have been put in place in North Africa. Tamṣlyt (indigeneity) has a rehabilitative power that allowed Imazighen to claim their akāl, and through the land a collective identity that state policies across the entire Maghreb have suppressed in search of an imaginary national unity.

El Guabli 2021: 3–4

These mechanisms are aligned with the reclamatory concept of strategic essentialism, which refers to the employment of essentialist positions of identity categories to achieve particular political ends (Spivak 1988), adopting particular "masterwords", e.g. nation, subaltern (Spivak 1993). It is a strategy of representation that advocates temporarily embracing essentialist foundations for identity to mobilise a collective consciousness and action, pursuing emancipatory politics while recognising that identity categories are fluid (Pande 2017). However, it is again conditioned by acknowledging how these essentialist notions can be used to oppress, divide, or dismiss subordinate groups, and how it is an appropriate political strategy when it embodies deconstructive politics that centres undoing the very category it invokes (Bell 2021).

Our argument here is that while we acknowledge that essentialism is epistemically problematic, it is not inherently negative considering its political affordances. That is why declining a movement or a scholar's projection of an "alterity" in its entirety might perpetuate a broader pattern of disregarding the pragmatic realities of decolonial praxis. Decoloniality needs to engage with these perspectives rather than dropping them as "romanticised" as the article describes. We also need to consider how this interaction with modernity may have been largely unequal and unidirectional, resulting in imbalanced "travel" and local adoption and adaptation, as the article argues. Thus, the rigid critique of essentialism is valid, but we disagree with its mode of functioning when the intellectual deconstruction of certain rhetorics is used to invalidate their political mobilisation.

Rambukwella and Zavala (2025) also evaluate "the risks of the inflated appeal to decoloniality" (p. 2) in sociolinguistics, feeling "a sense of discomfort in how the use of decoloniality in applied/sociolinguistics has grown exponentially over the last few years" (p. 2). Yet again, the appraisal of these "risks" is not (at least partially) grounded in interrogating how Northern academia may commodify Southern theories. We suppose that focusing on the authors' home countries, to exemplify these "risks" may be a protective practice to elude any confrontation with the very Northern academic system structures within which we (the authors included) are trying to survive and speak back within our possibilities (see Barnawi and R'boul

2025; R'boul and Dervin 2025). This inward focus is not only valuable in showcasing the internal contradictions and/or misapplications of decolonial thought, but also the intricacies that decolonial scholars are required to navigate in articulating and practising their critiques. Decolonial frameworks can be selectively adopted and foregrounded depending on the Northern academies' tolerability of their "overt" and "radical" political intent. Critiques that are "safe", while unlikely to provoke institutional backlash from the Northern academies, remain effective and performative, particularly in fields dominated by Northern epistemologies such as sociolinguistics. The authors' discomfort with decoloniality's "exponential growth" might be read as a hesitation to explicitly unravel how Northern academies may absorb and neutralise decolonial critiques, when they may claim to champion them.

4 Depoliticised tool: abstraction over action

Rambukwella and Zavala (2025) explain, "For decolonization to actually matter it cannot be primarily about an epistemic struggle but about material issues such as race and economics, as many critical sociolinguists have been pointing out for decades" (p. 17). The article's claim that decolonial discourses prioritise epistemic concerns over the material premises is valid, but it may bifurcate struggles that are inherently intertwined. We argue, thus, that the epistemic-material dichotomy is false because such an analytic separation frames the epistemic and material struggles as competing priorities. In particular, epistemic violence (e.g. erasing Arabic and Amazigh in Moroccan education during the French protectorate (R'boul and El Amrani 2024) is inseparable from material harm (e.g. land dispossession). Epistemic struggles are themselves material. Colonialism/coloniality operates not only through racial hierarchies and economic exploitation but also through imposing knowledge regimes that naturalise these material conditions in the minds of the beneficiaries as well as the victims. The extractive logic of capitalism and the racialisation of labour (Mabasa 2021) is sustained through epistemic frameworks such as the categories of "rationality", "development", "progress" or "value". The definitions and operationalisations of these categories work to justify and reproduce material dispossession.

On the other hand, material conditions, e.g. land dispossession, wage theft/ disparities have been lived, expressed, exposed and resisted through epistemic acts including literature (Egya 2024), arts (R'boul 2022b), monuments (Sanni and Phiri 2024) and counter-narratives (Mishra 2024), etc. The decolonial projects that may seem entirely and exclusively epistemic, such as language revitalisation or publications critiquing Euro-American canons, are indeed material interventions. They allow for unsettling (although might be indirect) the epistemic infrastructure of colonial power by reclaiming the means of thinking, knowing and meaning making.

The first step in material struggles is to ascertain decolonial epistemic readings of their rationale and the conditions that have brought them about. The 'epistemic' cannot be dismissed as secondary to 'real' material struggle because this view ignores how coloniali(sm)(ty) interweaves control over resources with control over thought for a tighter grip. It is, therefore, crucial not to privilege one over the other but rather to unpack their mutual constitution. We acknowledge that the authors may have referred to the replacement of material struggles with epistemic questions in their entirety, which is a valid concern.

The article strongly warns that "the way decoloniality is invoked in the field can reinforce a number of binaries, despite trying to undermine them" (p. 2). That is, some decolonial narratives may be creating "new problematic binaries, such as indigenous versus western thought, Global South versus Global North or even colonial versus decolonial; although these are not the only binarisms that can occur" (p. 9). The authors further contend that while decolonial thinking does not see "the 'non-West' or 'non-modern' not as inferior", it "remains prisoner to an East-West binary… reinforced by a non-western alterity conceivable through an ahistorical imagination of a world where certain cultures or social realities have remained isolated and static" (p. 9). This critique overlooks how binaries can be strategic political tools, and not merely abstract risks. It is inherently an example of discourses (unravelled in the previous paragraph) separating the epistemic (e.g. binaries) and the material (e.g. reinforcing legitimacy for political activism). Southern scholars and grassroots movements strategically make use of binaries to expose inequities and power imbalances. Besides this perspective, we cannot completely overrule that binaries may often feature some truth despite their contention.

Dismissing binaries as inherently colonial may be evidence that we fall again for the same colonial logics telling us how to think and what to do, claiming that these binaries are colonial. While these binaries may not reveal the instability of the power structure itself, they serve the crucial function of designating beneficiaries and victims. Therefore, rejecting them risks obscuring the very inequalities they expose. These binaries are not the products of intellectual laziness but rather functional approximations of world affairs through the lens of the peripheries. We can problematize whether privileging theoretical purity (undoing binaries to avoid essentialism) over pragmatic resistance (deploying them within political narratives) is aligned with the neoliberal academia that the article critiques. Binaries are provisional tools that legitimise some people's struggles because they establish a fairly clear diagnosis of how the potency of some spaces, due to colonial structures and systems, reproduces poverty and oppression somewhere else. We reiterate that dichotomies are not always accurate, and we, here, focus on their political utility, not their epistemic accuracy in representing realities in their entirety. Binaries illustrate

colonial contradictions because they assert incommensurable difference, and they enable some communities to develop collective political imaginaries.

Rambukwella and Zavala (2025) further caution that "research on language and decoloniality sometimes make claims that are detached from on-the-ground situations in highly complex circumstances" (p. 12) and that "coloniality and decoloniality can acquire different meanings depending on the geopolitical context, and colonial logics can also be used for decolonial interventions" (p. 13). Critiquing abstract decolonial claims is crucial, especially in sociolinguistics, where material conditions shape language practices. Nevertheless, this framing may involve two oversights. First, insisting that decolonial research must always be grounded in immediate and observable realities may recycle colonial empiricism (Furtado 2008) because it downplays epistemic struggles, such as the revival of indigenous knowledge in understanding (the nature of) language. What is important is to examine how our perception of "on-the-ground" relies on Western temporal and spatial logics. Second, while the meanings of (de)coloniality shift geopolitically depending on the context, e.g. settler colonialism versus postcoloniality, the article's suggestion that colonial logics can be "repurposed" for decoloniality can be an act of neoliberal co-optation, such as when NGOs capitalise on decolonial rhetorics for their development projects (Roepstorff and Maitra 2025). Decolonial sociolinguistics need to be rooted in material struggles (Kenfield 2020), but it is equally fundamental to confront how coloniality frames the very categories (e.g. the "ground," "context") we use to measure relevance. The 'ground' will remain a contested construct (Byrd 2019), and we need to interrogate who gets to define what counts as 'real' struggle.

5 Elite co-optation and exclusionary politics

Rambukwella and Zavala's (2025) article delivers an important critique of how Southern elites instrumentalise decolonial rhetorics for exclusionary agendas, citing the Hindutva movement in India, Sinhala majoritarian ideology in Sri Lanka and Pachamamista NGOs romanticising Andean indigeneity. The authors clarified that "decolonization can be appropriated in Southern contexts to promote racist, classist and other kinds of exclusionary discourses under the guise of a return to indigeneity, trapping indigenous populations in romanticized and essentialist imaginaries" (p. 18). The authors addressed the appropriation of decoloniality in the Global South(s), explaining how decolonisation may still be apprehended naively in these spaces. They further noted that:

> The Northern appropriation of decoloniality… depoliticizes the discourse in at least two ways; [first] it allows for the comforting illusion that progressive change is being achieved in Northern

societies where micro changes leave larger institutional structures intact. [Second] this depoliticized decoloniality when re-exported to the Global South is instrumentalized to romanticize indigeneity/minoritized populations and exploit this for insidious political purposes.

(p. 18)

This framing is fundamental in understanding how the co-optation of decoloniality is enabled by Northern institutions, and that the appropriation of decoloniality for alternative political ends is not entirely a Southern problem. We should not again sidestep this transnational complicity because elite capture cannot be reduced to a local pathology, instead of emphasising a structural effect of global knowledge hierarchies. Such a process of appropriating the epistemic mechanisms defining the rationale and objectives of decoloniality illustrates how the elite co-opt decolonial discourses for validating exclusionary politics. However, we are wondering whether the article's reluctance to name specific authors, frameworks and/or works (p. 3) may contribute to the anonymisation of Northern academia's role in enabling elite capture. We may ask whether scholars theorising decolonial (socio)(applied)linguistics confront how their work is appropriated for nativist politics. It is indeed valid to highlight how decolonial scholars may inadvertently sanction Southern elite distortions. This might be due to academic extractivism (Grosfoguel 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021) by turning struggles into theories that are easily malleable.

The article concludes that critical applied/sociolinguistics should not "abandon or denounce existing concepts and frameworks which are seen as tainted by coloniality or modernity, but to see how they operate in specific contexts and to develop a decolonial praxis that can be empowering for struggles" (p. 17). This is an interesting perspective because it can be repurposed to critique how the authors dismiss binaries, which are argued to be "tainted" by colonial structures and systems. Furthermore, the article stresses that it is not "about the origins of knowledge and who owns it, but which knowledge is empowering and emancipatory to whom, under which conditions, in which particular moment and why in terms of the political economy at stake" (p. 15). This emphasis is incomplete without naming beneficiaries and victims. Overall, the article's most vehement critique was more focused on the Global South(s) rather than the structures and systems that have created the need to theorise decoloniality in the first place.

6 Conclusions

The framework of "domesticated decoloniality" clarifies the pervasive processes through which the radical critique of decoloniality is diluted and absorbed into structures it claims to disrupt. This article illustrates the operation of "domesticated

decoloniality" in language scholarship through three interconnected categories: the theoretical commodification of decoloniality, depoliticising decoloniality as a diagnostic/interventional mechanism and the co-optation of decoloniality by the elites. Our engagement with Rambukwella and Zavala (2025) underscores the paradoxical nature of this domestication in the sense that while their work rightly critiques depoliticisation and romanticised alterity, its own framing, dismissal of binaries, and reluctance to name specific beneficiaries, structures, and institutions risks anonymising power relations and inadvertently rehearsing the neoliberal academia it challenges. Our arguments highlight a fundamental tension that decolonial critique compromises and even loses its transformative potential when it avoids exposition and confrontation by refusing to designate the material and institutional beneficiaries of coloniality.

We instead contend that unsettling domesticated decoloniality can be achieved by rendering epistemic critique and material struggle mutually inclusive, refusing their artificial separation. It also stipulates naming the very mechanisms of power and their beneficiaries and victims, including Northern academic extractivism and Southern elite distortions. Of course, we acknowledge that such decisions may be due to legitimate concerns about professional repercussions, which we have as well. Binaries cannot be entirely dismissed because they offer substantial political utility in validating grassroots movements' demands. While they remain epistemically problematic, they help expose power imbalances. It is not easy to push back within the constraints of academia, but we can continue to resist the comfort of sanitised frameworks and connect critique to tangible redistribution and the dismantling of global knowledge hierarchies. This may be done by ascertaining more collective imaginaries, especially those that are anchored in South-South solidarity. The Global South(s) can only speak back through collective support.

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