
the

Humanitarian Leader

The relationship between language and
neo-colonialism in the aid industry

CARLA VITANTONIO



THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER:

The relationship between language and neo-colonialism in the aid industry

WORKING PAPER 030

OCTOBER 2022

Author Details

Carla Vitantonio

Feminist, humanitarian professional and author Carla Vitantonio works as the Country Representative for an international NGO in Cuba. Over the last 10 years she has worked with governmental and non-governmental organisations in North Korea, China, Myanmar, Thailand and Cuba. She has written two books on the impact of patriarchy and postcolonialism on aid.

Acknowledgements

My gratitude goes to Dr Nazanin Zadeh-Cummings for her encouragement and support, to Simran Singh for the insights and the generosity in sharing her point of view, to Luna Cardilli for listening to this idea through its development.

Editorial Office

The Centre For Humanitarian Leadership
Deakin University
221 Burwood Highway
Burwood 3125 VIC
Australia

Editor in Chief: Dr Nazanin Zadeh-Cummings

Production Editor: Cara Schultz

ISSN: 2653-1011 (Online)

The Centre for Humanitarian Leadership acknowledges the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present.

Copyright

This paper was prepared for the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership. The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership. These papers are circulated for discussion and comment purposes. They have not been peer-reviewed.

© 2022 by Carla Vitantonio. All rights reserved.

Cover image: Nityananda, 5, uses slate and chalk to write words in Nepali using an alphabet card distributed as part of a project to support children to continue learning from home during the pandemic in Nepal © Save the Children

Abstract

Based both on research and on direct field experience, this article analyses the use of language as a tool of power within the aid industry. First, it underlines the deep relation between languages and cultures (or subcultures), then it presents historic examples on how language was purposefully used by colonisers to achieve dominance and, at times, to destroy pre-existing local practices. It then discusses more recent cases of language use by dominant groups, that stem from patriarchal and post-colonial relations. Finally, it analyses some of the practices related to language within the aid industry, showing how they mirror colonial and patriarchal beliefs, and suggests possible alternatives.

Leadership relevance

The historical link between the aid industry and neo-colonialism is the subject of an increasing amount of analysis. Numerous actors are requesting a shift of perspective and a change of paradigm, and humanitarian leaders must not only be prepared to answer, but take a stand, because from this change the new face of aid will emerge. Language is a tool, and as such it can be used for different purposes. In our sector, language is an especially relevant tool, as actors coming from different contexts, countries and cultures interact daily. For this reason, it is paramount that humanitarian leaders gain awareness on the topic and advocate for a use of language that challenges colonial and patriarchal norms. This article gives a point of view and provides some possible solutions for a change.

The views and the opinions expressed in this article represent those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of any of the organisations the author is affiliated with. This paper is an extended version of a shorter piece published by the [Development Policy Centre](#).

Background

Throughout our work on patriarchy, power and privilege, we intersectional feminists learn that the first step towards change is the acknowledgement and recognition of our own power and our own privilege (Batliwala, 2019). Only through this process can we analyse with lucidity the situation we are embedded in, and eventually propose strategies that can challenge the status quo. We also learn that most of the time there is no magnificent strategy in front of us, no sudden intuition, no eureka moment, but a series of small—and sometimes apparently meaningless—steps that could, together, solidly build the change. Following this encouraging insight, I propose this short article which brings attention to language as a tool of power in the aid industry. This idea is carved into my wider study on the link between international aid and neo-colonialism, and my experience as an international aid worker.

I will first provide some examples of how language around the world was used by colonising actors and the patriarchy to exert power and oppression. I will then bring this statement to the world of international aid through a few cases, and finally I will mention some actions that could challenge this practice and therefore contribute to break the neo-colonial pattern that too often lies below aid dynamics and practices. As Bourdieu (1977) reflects:

“Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power. A person speaks not only to be understood but also to be believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished. Hence the full definition of competence as the right to speech, i.e. to the legitimate language, the authorised language which is also the language of authority. Competence implies the power to impose reception”.

Language as a tool of power and oppression in history

As a young humanitarian professional, I spent five years of my life in the Korean peninsula. In South Korea (Republic of Korea or ROK) and North Korea (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea or DPRK),¹ I had the pleasure to spend time with senior citizens who had a direct memory of the colonial experience. The Japanese occupation of Korea, which started in 1905, was still alive in those minds, and so was the difficult, violent, and debated liberation process, which led to the still existing division of Korea. All the people I met still recalled, among other things, how brutal it was to be obliged to renounce their native language—Korean—

1 The official and neutral names of the two Koreas is DPRK and ROK. Some Koreans find the labels ‘South Korea’ and ‘North Korea’ offensive, as it implicitly recognises a division that, to all effects, was never agreed upon. However, for the sake of readability, in this article I will use both terms.

in official realms, in favour of Japanese. In fact, during the 40 years of occupation of the Korean peninsula, the Japanese rulers implemented a meticulous plan for the progressive substitution of the Korean language with Japanese. Not only was every official conversation and document to be in Japanese, but all existing Korean printed material was destroyed. Teaching Korean folk songs, history and geography was forbidden in schools, and all Koreans were strongly invited to choose a Japanese name. The objective of the coloniser was clear: to destroy the idea of a Korean ethnicity and to make Koreans good subjects for the emperor. In the words of Hozumi Yatsuka (as cited in Shinomiya Burton, 1994, p. 35), who served as an advisor in the drafting of the First Korean Education Order², “Education in Korea can be considered a success if it simply and first of all plants the idea of respect for the Emperor; secondly, fosters the idea of maintaining order and sticking to the rules; and finally, imparts the knowledge and skills necessary in daily life and for the raising of one’s family”. The idea of language as a powerful tool for submission was patently very clear to the conquerors. And in fact, Korean language soon turned out to be the secret language of several insurrections that took place during colonial times. The pain and the outrage felt by the people I met—otherwise peaceful grandparents of my Korean friends and colleagues—was often still so strong and alive that they were startled and concerned by the fascination that young Koreans (especially South Koreans) felt and feel for Japan and its language. Japanese was, for those survivors, still the language of colonisers, those colonisers who had tried to systematically destroy part of their identity.

All the people I met still recalled, among other things, how brutal it was to be obliged to renounce their native language—Korean... in favour of Japanese.

Observing the different development of the Korean language between the North and the South was also an eye opener for me. The Southern part of the Peninsula has lived in cohabitation with US culture and people for 60 years—there are about 30,000 US soldiers living in ROK, many living there with families and children (USFK, 2022). ROK has experienced the long lasting economic and cultural support plan enforced by the US in Korea, which meant access to US mass production, scholarships to US universities, cultural exchanges, financial joint ventures and much more. As an obvious consequence, the Korean language in South Korea has changed, with many objects and concepts named after the English

2 The Korean Education order was promulgated by the Japanese in 1911. It is the first compendium of norms aiming at imposing the Japanese language and culture in Korea.

word. Examples include 볼펜 *bolpen* (ballpen), 에어컨 *eokeon* (air conditioning), and even more interestingly, 슈퍼마켓 *syupeomaket* (supermarket), usually pronounced in its Koreanised short version 슈퍼 (super), which sounds roughly like *syupeo*.³

In DPRK, where the US presence in the South was interpreted as a disguised colonisation bringing corruption and decadence to the original Korean customs, language was kept 'pure', and a Korean word was used for each one of the same concepts. The modification—in South Korea—of the language in favour of the American guests, was and is seen in the DPRK (and to be honest, in some parts of ROK society too) as a proof of the invasive nature of the US presence.

The direct experience I gained in the two parts of Korea was for me the first proof of the connection between language and power. Language is a tool, and as a tool it can be used in many different ways. Governments and international stakeholders play an important role in choosing how to use such a tool.

The countries in Latin America and the Caribbean that were, some five centuries ago, conquered by the Spanish Empire, further clarifies the power of language in international relations (including coercive occupation and colonisation).

The case of all the countries in Latin America and the Caribbean that were, some five centuries ago, conquered by the Spanish Empire, further clarifies the power of language in international relations (including coercive occupation and colonisation). The brutality of the Spanish colony and the destruction of indigenous cultures does not need to be proven in this essay. It is a fact that nowadays the official language in all these countries is Spanish. Yet it is a Spanish language that developed and flourished, whose accents and pronunciation changed because of the influence of indigenous cultures and of the habits of local phonatory organs, a Spanish language that got richer and richer with inputs from the vocabulary of native populations and of the many migrations that followed (Wong García, 2020). Still, it might surprise some to know that the institution regulating the language is the Real Academia Española (RAE), which has its main centre in continental Spain. Despite more than two centuries of successful liberation movements, the role and attitude of the

³ Disclaimer: I am not judging the appropriateness of this practice, nor I am saying—as some do—that it is the harvest of a disguised colonising process. I am simply stating a linguistic fact.

RAE towards the development of language in America did not change between the Literary Spanish Latin American Congress held in Madrid in 1892, and when these attitudes were reinforced one century later, at the congress held by the RAE and the Cervantes Institute⁴ in 1992. It's worth mentioning that the congresses took place on the anniversary of the arrival of Cristoforo Colombo to America, which was and is celebrated as a milestone for the Spanish empire even well after its dissolution (Miranda, 1994).

On both these occasions, the use of Spanish in America was clearly interpreted as a way to spread civilization against 'barbarity' (Vega Rey y Falcó, 1992, in Vasquez, 2008), and the only authority in terms of legitimacy was declared to be the RAE, with its newly created local offices—still existing in the 21st century. The main task of the RAE was and is to keep the integrity of Spanish, in order to avoid with language what had happened with the Spanish empire, that is to say its destruction and fractioning (Carrasco Labadia, 1992, in Vasquez, 2008).

A further proof of the colonial and patriarchal attitude of the RAE is its reaction towards the request of many Spanish speaking people and scholars to introduce more inclusive variants into the language, i.e., a 'neutral form' that could be equivalent to the English 'they' in order to allow persons identifying as non-binary to feel recognised and included. When asked to deliberate, the RAE wiped the topic away saying that the masculine should encompass all genders and that one should not confuse grammar with machismo (RAE, 2020).

It would take a whole other article to at least mention all the painful contradictions and power dynamics that lie beneath the use of *Castellano* in Spain's former colonies. Far more thorough research would be needed to analyse how and why the way towards recognition of the atrocities of the Spanish colonisers is still very distant. It would be challenging, as it should take into consideration several factors, including the fact that *Castellano*, once the language of the occupiers and of the wealthy, became, in more recent times in Northern America, the language of the poor, the exploited, the emarginated—that is to say, the language of the Latino communities in the United States of America. It would be challenging because due to the brutality of the Spanish colonisers in Latin America and the Caribbean, little is left of many indigenous cultures, and *Castellano* is today the native language of the vast majority of people in this part of the world. In Cuba for example, *Castellano* is the one and only official language, and basically all the

⁴ The Cervantes Institute (Instituto Cervantes) is—according to what is written on the website—"the institution created by Spain in 1991... to spread Spanish. It is the largest institution in the world dedicated to teaching Spanish—and to foster the cultures of Spanish-speaking countries". It is the equivalent of the Académie Française and of the Istituto Dante Alighieri.

population express themselves in this language, with the exception of groups using Haitian creole, spoken by a minority of descendants from Haiti, and Lucumí, the main language spoken in the practice of the Yoruba religion.⁵

Language as a tool of power in the aid industry

In this essay though, I am focusing on the use of language as a tool of power in the field of international aid, and I will therefore move on to mention some of the current practices that I consider deserving of observation and analysis in a logic of decolonisation. This is not in order to denounce, but because, as a writer and international aid professional, I consider that changing the way we use language to be an interesting and relatively easy way to trigger a change in some of the many colonial practices still in place in the sector. It is not my job to judge, but I feel I must observe and from experience and practice, propose possible solutions and alternatives.

Today, the fight for the rights of non-binary people is central in many places of the world. In several countries of the Global North, it is centred on the need to adapt language to the existence of people who do not identify themselves with the binary dichotomy he/she. As European languages are also spoken in several countries of the Global South, this becomes a global trend, which challenges the position of organisations working in aid. Moreover, an increasing number of studies link the binary interpretation of gender to colonialism, patriarchy, and Eurocentrism (Menon-Sen, 2021).

I am conscious that for some this could seem a minor problem, but it is not. Many know that people speaking Eskimo language have about 15 lexemes referring to what in English is simply known as *snow* (Woodbury, 1991). This means that where English speaking people simply see snow, others can see a full variety of different objects, and will therefore relate with this object in a different way, according to what they see. People speaking Eskimo experience snow differently and can refer to it differently. Would we dare tell them that they can choose just two of these lexemes as a set, and include all the others in one or the other, using an approximate criterion? I don't think we would, but it is what many suggest for the question of gender: according to some, LGBTQIA+ people should include themselves in one or the other category—male and female—according to what they feel the closest.

⁵ Some researchers also mention basins of Mandarin, English, Catalan, and other languages derived from minority African cultures. I did not find any official Cuban document stating the exact lists of those languages.

Besides the implicit violence of such a statement, one must recognise that, from a legal perspective, it is difficult to be a rights holder if there is not even a word that can identify us. Moreover, history has told us that when rights are limited to certain categories, they are not rights, but privileges. One should not underestimate the fact that, from the perspective of those who hold power, recognising a category means giving this category rights and duties, and that this is possibly one of the knots of the resistance for those who do not accept a moulding of language to make it more inclusive.

But if this comparison still looks too far away from international assistance, I will provide a different one. As of today, United Nations (UN) and international non-governmental organisations' (INGO) offices, as well as bilateral governmental offices, are places where the language of the country where these organisations work finds little space (and in many cases no space at all).

As of today, United Nations and international non-governmental organisations' offices, as well as bilateral governmental offices, are places where the language of the country where these organisations work finds little space (and in many cases no space at all).

More and more often, especially after the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, we speak about localisation. However, languages from the Global North, especially English and French, have become (for obvious reasons linked to the colonisation of Africa and Asia), the Esperanto⁶ of our sector—with one big difference. While Esperanto was originally built to unify the people of the world and destroy cultural barriers, the use of English and French divides and deepens the gap. It is basically impossible to work in the sector if we don't master at least one of these languages. In international recruitment processes, the language spoken by donors is 'a must', while proficiency of the local language is usually considered 'an asset'.

⁶ Esperanto is an "Artificial language constructed in 1887 by L.L. Zamenhof, a Polish oculist, and intended for use as an international second language. Zamenhof's *Fundamento de Esperanto*, published in 1905, lays down the basic principles of the language's structure and formation. Esperanto is relatively simple for Europeans to learn because its words are derived from roots commonly found in the European languages, particularly in the Romance languages. Orthography is phonetic, all words being spelled as pronounced. Grammar is simple and regular; there are characteristic word endings for nouns, adjectives, and verbs" (www.britannica.com).

Moreover, the personal experience of the author proves that most of those who master English or French with an accent typical of the Global North often show patronising and dismissive attitudes towards aid workers who speak English with a national accent, regardless of the fact that it could be their native language. I have directly witnessed Belgian colleagues complaining about the French accents of colleagues from Congo, and, even more surprisingly, about the Indian accents other colleagues have while speaking English—which is for many Indians a native language. More than once I have had to smile politely to colleagues who were joking about my “funny Italian accent *ué mammamia mafia bunga bunga*”. In such an environment, local languages are secretly whispered in the corridors of international offices located in the Global South, and promptly abandoned when international staff approach.

Local languages are secretly whispered in the corridors of international offices located in the Global South, and promptly abandoned when international staff approach.

Even more concerning is the fact that most of the donors engaged in both development and the humanitarian sector produce guidelines that are in their own language, usually a language spoken in the Global North. These guidelines are generally issued at the very last minute, they need to be applied as soon as possible (most of the time, a deep study of those documents is needed to apply for grants) and are the main point of reference for project design and implementation. Guidelines in the local language are not provided, money for translation is rarely considered among eligible costs, calls for proposals need to be answered in the donor’s preferred language and NGOs (both national and international ones) are left alone to deal with the impossible task of translating into a ‘neutral’ language issues that are not translatable.

No language is neutral, and all language is the expression of a culture. It is therefore almost impossible to perfectly translate one concept from one language to another, especially if complex issues like the ones usually tackled by this sector are involved. Back to our example with Eskimo, to even only vaguely translate the 15 lexemes used for ‘snow’ we must use wordy periphrases that often miss the point, because the direct link between the signifier and the signified (semiotologists would say the denotation) is broken.

The choice of one language over the other is not a neutral choice, as the story of the Japanese occupation of Korea teaches us, and it is part of an agenda setting mechanism which too often excludes, or leaves behind,

those who should be the subject of the action (we can clearly see the link with my previous example on the relation between law and recognition of inclusive pronouns). I am conscious of the many nuances of this statement. In the above-mentioned example of former Spanish colonies, for example, *Castellano* is often now the main language spoken by the population, and for this reason its use is not perceived as violent, while the use of English and French that some donors keep imposing in other countries is indeed widely considered a neo-colonial behaviour. Binary division does not apply to reality.

Actions that could challenge the current use of language

In this essay I gave various examples of how language is an important tool in the exertion of power in the colonial realm. This statement applies to the aid industry, as our sector is one of the products of colonisation and decolonisation. The deliberate choice of using the language of old and new colonisers in former colonies contributes to making the recipients of aid passive and voiceless, voiceless because even when speaking, they would not be understood. Obliging recipients to be passive is the same as not considering them as full right holders.

How can we change this?

Since the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, donors have emphasised the importance of an inclusive project cycle. As most donor guidelines stress, project *beneficiaries* (the italics are mine, I think that the word *beneficiary* itself transforms project participants into passive and voiceless objects of action) should be included in all phases of the project, including design. Some donors arrive at the point of asking about the number of participant consultations held for the creation of the project. This legitimate request is however contradicted by the examples mentioned in the previous paragraphs. I am conscious that a radical and structural change in the paradigm of the sector needs to take place, but at the same time it’s difficult for this to happen all at once. There are however some actions that could bring an effective shift with no major risk (apart from the loss of a power monopoly for certain stakeholders).

One possibility would be for donors to seriously examine and foresee more flexible processes, thus relieving aid agencies from completely bearing the burden of strict financial cycles, and only issuing calls when guidelines in local languages are available. Including time for translation in the editing time, rather than adding translation to the already very long list of tasks that applicants face when entering a relationship with a donor, is something not only feasible but realistic.

There is in fact no real need to restrict funding cycles to a single fiscal year, and in general, donors have all the power to decide their own cycles. For example, the Belgian Development Cooperation (DGD) issues a strategic framework for funding every five years. A couple of months for adequate translation could easily be spared in this timeframe.

I am aware that this would be a significant undertaking for a few transitional years, but change is an essential part of international assistance, all actors would quickly adapt, and the quality of the proposals would increase.

Donors and international agencies could also start to more broadly accept documents (mainly proposals and reports) produced in local languages; this would trigger a positive effect on recruitment, as knowing the donor's language would not be so important anymore. Educated and expert people that have been excluded from the industry because they haven't mastered English or French could find their place in the sector, and with them, new forms of expertise and ownership could be introduced. Aid agencies would likely soon stop using their spaceless Esperanto or, more realistically, English and French would coexist in a non-hierarchical fashion in the offices of international agencies.

A further, quicker, and perhaps more intermediate possibility, is to provide aid agencies with time and budget for appropriate translations. This would allow stakeholders to share the supposed burden of making

things more accessible in the chain of international assistance (although I am convinced that accessibility and inclusion should be considered a duty by all stakeholders).

This would not sort out the power imbalance but could at least mitigate it.

But before taking any step, a deep, honest, internal analysis on methodologies, power and privilege needs to take place within the Global North's actors.

A deep, honest, internal analysis on methodologies, power and privilege needs to take place within the Global North's actors.

Language is one of the core elements that determine identity and culture, and as such it is an extremely complex matter. For this reason, the author acknowledges that there is no perfect solution to the issue of language use and abuse in the aid sector. However, as aid professionals, all stakeholders have the duty and the opportunity to search for imperfect solutions that, although precarious and fragile, could break through and open new possibilities of communication outside the colonial pattern.

References

- Batliwala, S. (2019). *All about power*. Crea. <https://www.creaworld.org>
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). The economics of linguistic exchange. *Theory and Methods*. 16(6): 645-668
- Caprio, M.E. (2009). *Japanese assimilation policies in colonial Korea 1910 – 1945*. University of Washington Press
- Encyclopedia Britannica. (2022). Esperanto. *Encyclopedia Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Esperanto>
- Instituto Cervantes. (2022). *Informacion*. https://www.cervantes.es/sobre_instituto_cervantes/informacion.htm
- Menon-Sen, K. (2021). Challenging Patriarchal Binaries: Infusing Feminist Politics Into Learning Spaces. *Gender at work*. <https://genderatwork.org/portfolio-item/challenging-patriarchal-binaries-infusing-feminist-politics-into-learning-spaces/>
- Miranda, L. (2014). *El Discurso Neocolonialista de la RAE, el Instituto Cervantes y otras Instituciones Españolas*, Lima
- Rahman, A. (2022). Accent and language diversity within international aid workplaces. *Devpolicy*. <https://devpolicy.org/accident-and-language-diversity-within-international-aid-workplaces-20220309/>
- Real Academia Española. (2021). Informe lenguaje inclusivo. https://www.rae.es/sites/default/files/Informe_lenguaje_inclusivo.pdf
- Shinomiya Burton, A. (1994). *Japanese Language Planning in Korea 1905-1945*, Simon Fraser University
- United States Forces Korea. (2022). <https://www.usfk.mil>
- Vasquez, G. (2008). Spanish language, cultural legacy or political-economical project? *Revista Signos*. Buenos Aires
- Wong García, E. (2020). *Para darle a la lengua* (audio podcast). <https://podtail.com/en/podcast/para-darle-a-la-lengua/>
- Woodbury, A.C. (1991). *Counting Eskimo words for snow: A citizen's guide*. University of Texas at Austin