

'Requires proofing by a native speaker' – colonization and scholarship

Many academic scholars have encountered some variation of the phrase: 'This manuscript could benefit from proofing by a native English speaker'. They may have received this feedback or given it. This article aims to use peer review as a prism through which to explore aspects of linguistic power and privilege. In unpacking some of the language of peer review we may question some assumptions we hold about 'native' English speakers. Although making reference to other written works, this commentary is foregrounded in personal testimony. It does this to contextualize the issues. It is written from the perspective of a storyteller. It draws upon the stories of languages and how we use them, of where they come from and where they are going. Running throughout is the idea and the very dark reality of colonization.

Keywords

Colonialism; scholarly communication; peer review; decolonization; scholarly discourse; academic labour

'I know people, I know towns, farms, hills and rivers and rocks, I know how the sun at sunset in autumn falls on the side of a certain plowland in the hills; but what is the sense of giving a boundary to all that, of giving it a name and ceasing to love where the name ceases to apply? What is love of one's country; is it hate of one's uncountry?'

Ursula K Le Guin¹

Introduction

This article attempts to explore language and the language we use about language. It draws upon certain academic scholarship and research, but of necessity is foregrounded in personal testimony. The anecdotal parts should be considered with due caution. Narrators can be untrustworthy. They sometimes have a stronger fidelity to the telling than to the tale. It is hoped that the narrative will, however, serve to contextualize the discussion and remind the reader that a particular person, who is of a particular place, is writing. I will attempt to look at facets of linguistic power – power born of particular places, the product of particular histories. These places and histories are mine, for better or for worse. I want to talk about the darkness of colonialism, about our ominous capacity for cruelty to each other and our world. If I strike the wrong tone, as I choose and use my words to these ends, I beg the reader's forbearance. However, if the writing fails to weave a coherent argument and narrative, that is still okay. For if there is one thing that this piece seeks to do, it is to challenge assumptions we may hold: assumptions about who owns a language and who has the power, the privilege and the right to wield it to greatest effect.



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'I want to talk about
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Privilege

More than once I have received anonymous peer-review feedback recommending that a 'native English speaker' contribute to proofing a revised version of my submitted manuscript. Yet, I was born in an English-speaking country. English is my first language. My mother began to teach me to read when I was three, before I started school. A deep reverence for reading and writing was instilled in me. Our house was piled with books; television conspicuous by its absence. I studied English Literature at university, received top scores in my examinations. So, when I first got this feedback, I was shocked and confused. How did this happen to me? Who are these anonymous peer reviewers and what do they mean?

Time passed. Once again, I got this feedback. This time I was more confident, more arrogant. I may have laughed it off over coffee with colleagues, dropping my degree in English Literature from an august university into the conversation. Maybe I pointed to the irony of how the reviewers themselves were clearly non-native English speakers. Perhaps I mentioned the broken English of their feedback.

'Review is power'

Rejection is tough. Scholars don't take it well, especially newer kids on the block. Many scholars see writing as core to their identity and threats to it as existential. That was a younger me. I still don't claim to deal with rejection well, but I see the system more clearly now, and hopefully the people in and of it.

The phrase 'native speaker' warrants consideration at this juncture. I have received feedback using this phrase from reviewers who did not themselves show a strong competence in written English. There were telltale signs. I could infer from their writing that they operate mainly in another language. The language of their feedback was not the language they go home and speak to their families in; not the one in which they describe the foods of their celebrations; not the one in which they sing songs to their ancestors.

These distant scholars, unknown and anonymous to me, may consider 'native speaker' as just another part of the formal academic discourse of peer review. They may recognize it from the dismissive rejections they have received from English-speaking reviewers, as part of the ritual; 'native speaker' as just another idiom of the lexicon, the toolbox, upon which reviewers have been conditioned to draw when handing down their written judgements: 'Insufficient data', 'Hard to see what is novel here', 'No citation of person X', 'Needs proofing by a native speaker'.

Review is power. We have tools for that – you have felt them, bear their stripes, hence you are now qualified to use them.

My next clumsy step was to start thinking, in my editing and reviewing work, about phraseology that would speak more about actionable ways to improve writing. I tried to avoid language that presupposed competency in English as a birthright. After all, not all 'natives' have high competence in English, just as 'non-natives' do not necessarily lack this competence. I had the pleasure to work once with a colleague from China, whose ability to proofread an English language manuscript was, in some ways, better than mine. It was a humbling experience that afforded me a glimpse into preconceptions I hold but rarely notice: a reminder that we love to generalize, to abstract, to other.

'not all 'natives' have high competence in English, just as 'non-natives' do not necessarily lack this competence'

Origin

The idea that natives have particular competences has intuitive appeal but is problematic. For example, a particular *bête noire* of digital learning research discourse is the notion of 'digital natives', and their corollary, 'digital immigrants'.² Educational researchers and commentators spend a lot of time trying to dispel, or at least challenge, the oversimplified idea that there are gulfs in digital and technical competence between entire generations³. Digital natives are supposedly born into a digital age in which they effortlessly pick up

3 certain technical skills and competences. One useful framework takes a more nuanced approach to how we interact and learn with technology in our lives where the narrative of 'natives' and 'immigrants' is swapped for one of 'residents' and 'visitors'.⁴

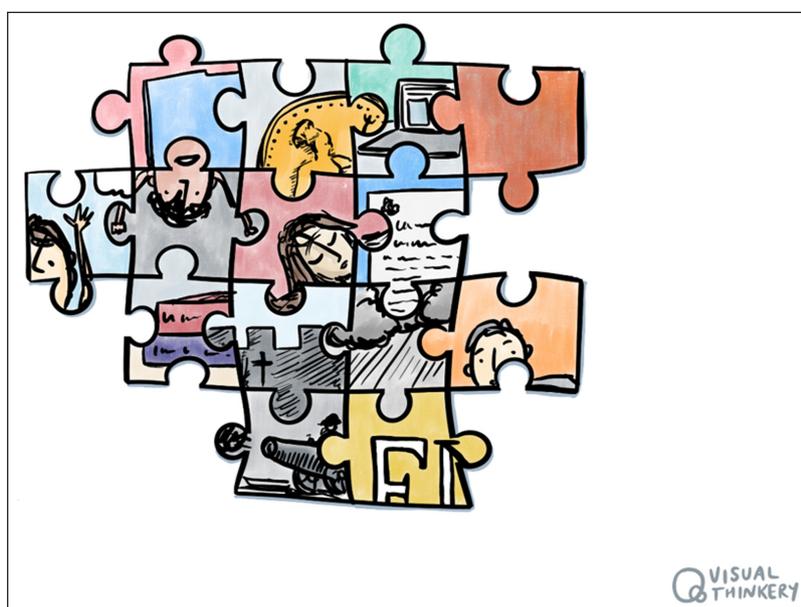
It is interesting to note how loaded the term immigrant is; how it jumps off the page more eagerly than native. Immigrants and immigration are keywords of a hot political topic. We hear less about natives. In some contexts, natives are marginalized, under-represented groups. They are indigenous peoples, displaced and muted by colonization. Conversely, English-language natives may be a dominant group in their society, at least on a linguistic spectrum. As such, their native status is no big deal. It is just there, part of normal business, 'Nothing to see here'. In these societies, non-native issues, issues of the other, such as immigration, will instead make the headlines and dominate the discourse. This invisibility accords native English speakers some of the hall-marks of MacIntosh's conception of privilege:⁵ unseen, unearned and unacknowledged.

'The dominance of the English language is an enduring colonization'

The dominance of the English language is an enduring colonization. It looms large in academic research, where it is represented in an ever-increasing number of the most 'prestigious' research outlets.⁶ Authors who move from publishing in their native language to publishing in English may see an increase in their impact, as measured by citations.⁷ The pre-eminence of English hence appears to be edging out other languages in an increasing trend. It is assembling an unassailable claim to be the language of legitimation, the language of science and scholarship – the language of knowledge and ultimately, of truth.

There are counterpoints, such as the Ibero-american publishing ecosystems built on open access principles,⁸ publicly funded and expressed in Spanish and Portuguese languages.⁹ These attempt to avoid a system of a purely colonial shape (eschewing entrenched prestiges and privileges, where the rich get richer), of universities stuck in lockstep with oligopolistic publishers,¹⁰ where English rules. But can we escape the colonial system and its logics?¹¹ This is a system characterized by metrics, its people dehumanized to data, where imperial thumbs hover over research as they once did in the death-match, and blood sacrifice of the Colosseum. The system decides whether research will live or die, whether its authors will be rejected, or accepted, into the colonial fold.

Researchers have told us of the barriers encountered by those scholars in the Academe for whom English is not a first language.¹² They labour not just under the yoke of the pressure to write, but in an alien tongue. We have been told how some resort to practices of copying and pasting fragments of English text, before then attempting to edit and refactor these reproductions to new ends: trying to build a picture, but with pieces drawn from different jigsaws.



Trying to build a picture, but with pieces drawn from different jigsaws

4 All knowledge, language, is a teeming confluence of the words of countless people, constantly being rebuilt upon a relentless outpouring of ideas; is co-creation. Not a single word is truly one's own. But we have strict rules for how one should cut a language up and present it. There is a particular way to hold the scissors, grave censures for those who misstep or who stray outside the blurred lines we have decreed between building ideas and stealing them. If you cannot use this language properly, you may be cast as a thief.

I see this at first hand in my teaching when students struggle to grasp the convolutions of academic referencing. They grapple with ageing referencing styles and practices from a bygone print era, archaic in an age of hypermedia. I see this in 'non-native' students for whom English is one more thing they need to learn, on top of the rules, idioms and conventions of higher education that are both tacit, and writ large in red ink. There are students who have English but struggle under the weight of study, work and caring for others. There are students born into another English, just a stone's throw from the walls of the academy but a world away, unexposed to the cultural heritage of the socio-economic class that designs and perpetuates the system. In the other part of town. There are yet more students, perhaps born into everything but seeing a different world, where symbols and letters will not sit still on a page. All of these students struggle to pass the tests of language that we set them.

'If you cannot use this language properly, you may be cast as a thief'

Crossing

At the outset, I asked the reader to treat my personal narrative with due caution: beware of storytelling. In the service of the word, I may have glossed, or smoothed, over certain details – such as my heritage. Was it true to say that English is my native language, my mother tongue? This hints at deeper omissions, such as: Where I am from? And who are my people? In answer, all I can tell you is another story. It is long, but it repeats itself, so I can start anywhere. It starts with the footfall of soldiers. Roman soldiers. In their long march across a continent, they reached the westernmost shores of Britain, and there they paused. Places are formed by the waters that wash over them, by waves carrying people who have new words to give the land. Hibernia, Land of Winter, was the name they gave the island they saw across the sea to their west. A land, it seemed, that was enveloped in a shroud of perpetual rain.

Later still, waves of soldiers did make the crossing, pierced the veil of rain, bringing with them the language I now speak. The native Irish language was pushed away, scraped to the coastal peripheries of the island. Slowly, over generations, in front of the slow relentless grind of colonization, an ancient language – that sings songs of our native sports, dance, music, plants and stones; of myths and gods, devils and faeries; a language of the tales of our ancestors – began to fade. Clinging to the coastal rocks, however, it flickered and survived. Indeed, in many places it now burns. In the eastern city of Dublin, for so long the most visible and visceral mark and locus of colonization, the Irish language has re-emerged – thrives and grows brightly. In new spaces too: *Ar an talamh agus ar líne*¹³ (on land and online), calling out to its diaspora, pushed ever westward.

'Our feelings towards our native language still divide us'

But is it *my* language? I have a broken form of it (*gaelige briste*) but it is not my mother tongue. Its words never washed over me, to soothe me in the cradle. It was not the language of my teachers. It is a wonderful, confusing piece of my heritage. I wear it like a broken badge.

Our feelings towards our native language still divide us. To some, Irish is a dead language that one is forced to learn in school, one of words stained by their entanglement with the darkest parts of our history. It is a reminder of poverty, destruction, sickness, death, subjugation, starvation; of how we internalized oppression and brought darkness upon ourselves; of how we swapped one set of masters for another, and their regime of taboos.¹⁴ We do not want to remember the blood we spilled in insurrection against our colonizers,

- 5 nor the blood we spilled when we next turned on each other. No longer able to discern the enemy, unable to see through the rain, to tell tribe from other. We all seemed the same, confounded because we now all spoke the same language; the language of colonialism, which is war.

The table



The colonial table

Someone from India, living in Ireland, recently told me that they sometimes forget that Ireland is a post-colonial country. In some ways, this did not surprise me. What gives me – a white well-educated man, living in a country now rich, an ‘invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions’¹⁵ slung across my back – the right to speak of post-colonialism, of decolonization? Walking around in the skin of the conqueror, his words falling effortlessly from my tongue, I stroll past the gleaming offices of the scions of Silicon Valley. They are the homes of the tech giants who have set up their European headquarters in Dublin. They are new fortresses in our oldest colonial locus, lured by tax breaks and English-speaking labour back to their old lair. The payment that our own Great Emancipators promised us centuries ago: the kingdom ever after, for the simple price of a language. All we needed to be was ‘sufficiently utilitarian not to regret the gradual abandonment of it’.¹⁶ And thus, although ‘the history of the Irish people can be traced like a wounded man through a crowd – by the blood’,¹⁷ we would reach a promised land. We would find an end to the perpetual story, an end to the rain, and a seat at the great colonial table.

End and eternity

And here we are. Here to help build wave machines for new digital conquests, to sing silicon songs to honour the conqueror in languages wrought of filigree platinum, with pulses of sharpened light, ‘piecing together a photo-electric jigsaw, a phosphor-dot mosaic of his divine countenance that we shall worship and adore ‘til all the suns are cinders’.¹⁸

And so we toil, in the work of reproduction. Carefully transcribing the forms of dominion, into faithful digital representations, that they may live forever. Assembling the thumb – the *pollice verso*; the *turned thumb* – that hovers, as the imperial eagle, over everything. Deciding all. Such as: who should be acclaimed or shamed? Who shall live or die?

- 6 The title of this piece contained crude if not cruel words. It does not contain a call to action, just offers reflections. I did not promise to end with a prescription. All I have given you, dear reader, are words – borrowed, stolen or conscripted from various quarters, and marshalled to the page. Whose words they are, or are not, is all I have attempted to say.



Colonization and scholarship

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

Competing Interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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