

# Language and Violence: Teaching English Language during the Anthropocene

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## Abstract

In this article, I will be examining two aspects of language teaching that need to be addressed urgently. The first one involves the relationship between culture and language. I will be examining the role of cultural embedding involved in language teaching and learning and the need for decolonising materials. I will also be looking at the violence inherent in languages belonging to communities wielding power and hegemony – in this instance, English. In a sense, the second issue is an extension of the first problem. In this article, I argue that the violence towards nature which is the hallmark of the Anthropocene, is sustained and perpetuated through languages. While teaching English there is an urgent need to become aware of the insidious ways in which exploitative practices are sustained through language.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, Cultural Embedding, Decolonising Materials, Naming

## 1. Language and Culture

It is universally acknowledged that teaching a subject involves responsibilities that extend far beyond the subject that is taught. When one is teaching a language, that too, a language that belongs to a different country, people and culture, this responsibility increases manifold. As a teacher of the English language and as a teacher who teaches TESOL and PGDTE, that is, training students to become teachers of the language, this is an issue that is often foremost in my mind. Teaching a language is a complex process. A language teacher is not merely teaching language skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW); grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Teaching a language also involves exposing a student to other cultures and different ways of thinking. While, on one level, this can prove beneficial in encouraging multiculturalism and encouraging heterogeneity, it can also result in the displacement of indigenous cultures with the culture of the dominant language.

Replacement of cultural tropes and practices, and overwriting of language by the language of the dominant group is not something that happens with

merely Western languages associated with colonialism. It happens everywhere. Indigenous languages and dialects spoken by marginalised communities tend to disappear over time. These languages were able to survive as long as the intermingling of communities did not happen on a large scale. However, when economic and geopolitical compulsions resulted in the forced integration of communities, these marginalised languages and dialects started getting neglected and rapidly disappearing. According to the latest census on languages released by the Government of India, in 2018, more than 19,500 languages or dialects are spoken in India as mother tongues and 121 languages are spoken by 10,000 or more people. However, only 22 languages are recognised as Schedule I languages. It does not require a leap of imagination to comprehend that the rest of the languages will disappear in the near future if steps are not taken to support them. Dialects and languages spoken by demographical minorities, disappear or die, over a period of time. This is not merely because the people who speak these languages die out but because of the cumulative effect of a number of factors. The standardisation of language and spelling required for purposes of printing and for use by media

and the entertainment industry, for educational purposes – all these factors play a significant role in the death of marginalised languages. However, the biggest threat is probably social media and the penetration of the internet to even remote places on the globe. While one cannot argue with the contention that the internet brings myriad benefits to people and can act as a great leveller, it can also accelerate the death of languages. In fact, the situation is so dire that UNESCO has predicted that 90% of the world's languages will die out by the end of this century. When a language dies, with it a culture also dies because cultural knowledge and identity are inextricably linked with language.

“Every language reflects a unique worldview with its own value systems, philosophy and particular cultural features. The extinction of a language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural knowledge embodied in it for centuries, including historical, spiritual and ecological knowledge that may be essential for the survival of not only its speakers, but also countless others”<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Teaching English

Given this scenario, a teacher of the English language, especially one who trains future teachers of the language cannot but be sensitive to the power dynamics between languages. This is especially pertinent when we teach a European language associated with colonial power like English, Spanish, Portuguese or Dutch. Historically, Europeans not only conquered land, and renamed continents and countries, they also appropriated indigenous knowledge and renamed them. Amitav Ghosh in his remarkable book, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, points out the relationship between the Linnaeus system or the two-term nomenclature to name flora and fauna which was first introduced by Carl Linnaeus and colonialism. The use of Latin universalized these nomenclatures for Europeans but simultaneously disenfranchised the natives. Ghosh observes, “the power to name, or rather rename, was thus one of the greatest privileges of empire; because it created the scaffolding of what is now the dominant mode of relating to the living world”<sup>2</sup>. Just as colonial powers claim to have “discovered” land where people, societies and civilizations have thrived for centuries, thereby annulling the claim of the native population to their own land, renaming effectively wipes out the claim of the native population to their native flora

and fauna. ‘NAMES’, writes the Native American botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, “are” the way we humans build relationships, not only with each other but with the living world”. Blessed by empires, Linnaeus’s system became the foundation of a way of knowing that would claim, from very early on, a monopoly on truth, discounting all other knowledge systems and their methods<sup>2</sup>.

Geopolitical power politics, the ubiquitous use of English as the language of global business, social media and the internet, has led to a shift in the power dynamics between languages that is akin to the impact created by the spread of colonialism.

## 3. Teaching the English Language during the Anthropocene

With the naturalisation of English as the dominant lingua-franca in many countries, the culture which it encodes has penetrated deep into the psyche of diverse cultures. Capitalist economy, the bedrock on which Western democratic societies are founded, the fuel-intensive lifestyle that it promotes, the emphasis placed on consumption and the homocentric worldview it encapsulates naturally affect the language in which these societies think and speak. An instructor in this language has to become aware of aspects within language that have resulted in the current epoch being referred to as the Anthropocene because without understanding the role of words in creating and sustaining a thought process that destroys the very world we live in, we will also become complicit in sustaining this world view. Dipesh Chakrabarty in his essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses” says, “The geological hypothesis regarding the Anthropocene requires us to put global histories of capital in conversation with the species history humans and the cross-hatching of species history and the history of capital is a process of probing the limits of historical understanding”<sup>3</sup>.

### 3.1 What is Anthropocene?

The term Anthropocene is a combination of anthropo- from the Ancient Greek (anthropos) meaning ‘human’ and -cene meaning ‘new’ or ‘recent’. The Italian geologist Antonio Stoppani acknowledged the increasing power and effect of humanity on the Earth’s systems as early as 1873, and referred to the current period as the “anthropozoic

era". While the biologist Eugene F. Stoermer is credited with coining the term Anthropocene, it was Paul J. Crutzen the Nobel Prize winner, who is credited with re-inventing and popularising it. Crutzen, laid a compelling case for the present period of Earth's history to be named as the Anthropocene, arguing that the impact of human action in the last few decades has affected the natural world as totally as other epoch-making events. In this, he was articulating a departure from geological practices that named geological periods based on natural events. Anthropocene acknowledges the human role in atmospheric warming.

Anthropocene indicates that atmospheric warming is not merely a theory, but a phenomenon that has already been measured and verified across scientific disciplines and conclusively linked to human emissions of fossil fuels. Thus, Anthropocene productively shifts the emphasis from individual thoughts, beliefs, and choices to a human process that has occurred across distinct social groups, countries, economies, and generations: the wholesale emission of fossil fuels that began in the Victorian period and has intensified through the present day<sup>4</sup>.

Scientists differ on the period of time referred to as the Anthropocene, especially when it began. However, there is a broad consensus that in the current period, the world has been indelibly impacted by human activity and therefore should be referred to as the Anthropocene.

## 4. Language and Violence

The impact of climate change and the concerns it raises have been articulated in literature, especially fiction. This loose body of fiction has been variously referred to as ecological fiction, environmental fiction, and climate change fiction. Adam Trexler in his seminal work *Anthropocene Fiction* makes a case for an alternate term: "In its preference for Anthropocene over climate change, this book emphasizes the emergence of its subject from a scientific theory (contained in models and brains) to a geological process reflected in the atmosphere"<sup>5</sup>. Arguing that the term circumvents the contentions and futile polemic inherent in the terms "climate change" and "global warming" Trexler insists: "Both climate change and global warming are easily bracketed as prognostications that might yet be deferred, but the Anthropocene names a world-historical phenomenon that has arrived"<sup>4</sup>.

However, the effect of language sustaining and augmenting climate change has received very little attention. For example, when we use the term "natural resources" to refer to land, we are immediately reducing it to the level of a raw material – something which is not valued by itself but based on its utilitarian value. Contrast the term with those used by other languages and cultures and one can immediately recognize the difference. While indigenous communities refer to the earth as a living breathing creature, more "sophisticated" languages have terms that are more abstract. However, very few languages reduce the earth to mere resources. From referring to the earth as a "resource" to prioritising human needs, even greed, above the rights of all other creatures including tribals who occupy these lands, is just one step away. This is just an example to illustrate how language can shift our ways of thinking and perceiving things. This was also the reason why James Lovelock chose the term Gaia when he wanted a name "that would do justice to his idea of the Earth as a living entity, in which atmospheric, oceanic, and many other systems interacted dynamically"<sup>2</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

It is obvious that the cultural underpinning of a language should not be ignored. While learning a global language like English can open doors and can make knowledge accessible, it can also result in unconscious internalisation of attitudes that belong to cultures which own the language. Awareness of this danger can go a long way in neutralizing this effect. The other solution is for different cultures to generate their own material and translations in English. This will effectively decolonize materials used to teach English and ensure the survival of cultures that are increasingly threatened by globalization. Kyle Whyte<sup>3</sup>, the Potawatomi scholar-activist working on issues Indigenous people face within the U.S. points out three key themes reflected across the field that suggest distinct approaches to inquiries into climate change:

Anthropogenic (human-caused) climate change is an intensification of environmental change imposed on Indigenous peoples by colonialism.

Renewing Indigenous knowledge, such as traditional ecological knowledge, can bring together Indigenous communities to strengthen their own self-determined planning for climate change.

Indigenous peoples often imagine climate change futures from their perspectives (a) as societies with deep collective histories of having to be well-organized to adapt to environmental change and (b) as societies who must reckon with the disruptions of historic and ongoing practices of colonialism, capitalism, and industrialization.

The survival of the human race is predicated on the choices we make today. At one level, the term “Anthropocene” is a neutral term which merely acknowledges the impact of human activity on the Earth. However, the scientific records of the rise in temperature, the increasing occurrences of hurricanes, cyclones, excessive rains and drought, extinction of flora and fauna, depleting water resources, and environmental degradation – have firmly placed the effect of human activity in the red. Given the urgency of the situation, we have no other option but to become cognizant of the devastation caused

by the current ways of thinking and living and the role of language in sustaining it.

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