



## *The Emperor's New Words* Language and Colonization

David Gonzalez Nieto

*University of Massachusetts Boston*

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david.nieto@umb.edu

**Abstract:** Language is not normally considered a substantial element of policy-making. Through Frantz Fanon's work the importance of language in the human spirit is explored and historical evidence of the use of language as a "weapon for colonization" is given. From Antonio de Nebrija, who in 1492 wrote the first Grammar Book of the Castilian Language—later known as Spanish—to the English invasion of Ireland, colonizers have understood the essential role of language in the process of "re-naming." Such a process of "linguistic dispossession" causes what Frantz Fanon describes in his work *Black Skin, White Masks* as feelings of dependency and inadequacy. Those individuals have been deposed of their feelings, of their worlds, of their language, and without a language it is twice as hard to resist the occupation and re-build one's identity. Nowadays, the US English movement advocates for a total colonization of every individual who does not belong to their standard and mainstream allocation of values and rewards.

### 1. LANGUAGE AND THE HUMAN SPIRIT

It is no coincidence that Frantz Fanon (1967) starts his work *Black Skin, White Masks* talking about language. Having experienced what it means to be left voiceless, he immediately learnt that "to speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (p. 17). The fundamental role of language in the development of human identity has been sufficiently documented. In fact, the human being cannot exist without communicating; eliminating the possibility of communication from the human spirit entails removing its humanity.

Language has such a vital incidence in the human being and is so omnipresent in

our lives that we are generally unaware of its influence. The psychologist Daniel Coleman (1995) in his work *Emotional Intelligence* argues that when an individual is able to put a name to one's feelings, it is a sign that one has mastered them. Equally, Frantz Fanon recognized that being able to name the world around in one's own words provides the individual with a sense of possession, a sense of belonging. To name is to own. In Fanon's words,

To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization [...] A man

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David González Nieto is a Ph.D. candidate in Public Policy in the University of Massachusetts Boston. His research interests are principally education and language policy.

who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. (p. 17-18)

In that respect, language cannot be reduced to a mechanic device with which objects and subjects are neutrally transformed into words and arranged as disinterested social conventions. Precisely, the bridge between the individual and the world is built through the meaning-making process that communication entails. That meaning, which comes embedded in language, serves as the conceptual material with which human beings construct and deconstruct their representations of the world. As Donaldo Macedo (2003) indicates, such meaning can never be interpreted in isolation, or exclusively restricted to the positivist paradigms of science, as if language could exist without its speakers.

Stuart Hall (1997) defined the process of meaning making as the interaction of two different '*systems of representation.*' One system connects 'things,' which includes people, objects, events, abstract ideas, and so on, with concepts, and the other system relates our conceptual maps with language. The main implication of this argument is that meaning is continuously negotiated, and every object in the world is always being—or at least is subject to being—redefined, or relocated according to our own cultural conceptual maps.

Aware of all these elements, and as part of the process of colonization, the colonizer endeavours to redefine the world and present it as a fixed reality to which the oppressed must adapt. It is at that moment that the conceptual maps of the colonized must be modified, where the myths about the colonizer's superiority must be ingrained in their representation of the world. It is absolutely necessary, in order to complete such extensive invasion, to be in command of the bridges of meaning-making.

The dominant language then becomes

the criterion against which the level of civilization of the colonized is going to be measured. "The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards" (Fanon 1967, p. 18), in proportion to their mastery of the dominant language, and their adherence to the "new ways with words."

Having learnt that the existence and dialect of the dark-skinned is the incarnation of the bad, and that one can only hate it, the colonized then has to face the fact that "I am dark-skinned, I have an accent." At this crossroads there seems to be only one possible solution, namely, becoming part of the superior, being one of them, speak their language. Nevertheless, that solution is hopeless, therefore the oppressed faces alienation for the first time, the sense that one has lost one's place in the world, our words are meaningless, our spirits are powerless. Fanon beautifully describes such realization as,

Yesterday, awakening to the world,  
I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly  
and wholly. I wanted to rise, but  
the disembowelled silence fell back  
upon me, its wings paralysed.  
Without responsibility, straddling  
Nothingness and Infinity, I began  
to weep. (p. 140)

Such invasion of the human spirit, such painful process of forced adherence and identification with the oppressor's version of the world, causes two indelible marks in the spirits of the colonised according to Fanon (1967). On the one hand, the feeling of inferiority, for the reason that even once assimilated, the colonized are never considered equals, and they are continuously reminded of their lack of capabilities; on the other hand, the dependency complex, which assaults those who have traded all their values in the attempt to treasure proof of their humanity, those who have learnt to

despise their origins, and later find themselves without a home.

Fanon (1967) portrays the deep psychological impact that someone suffers who must artificially adopt a language different from the one of the group he was born in as an "absolute mutation" (p. 19). A psychological mutation that must be directed from schools, where kids are taught to "scorn the dialect," "avoid creolism" (p. 20), and ridicule those who use it.

Nevertheless, the oppressors do not walk away free. Their own chains also imprison them, they will always have to distrust the oppressed, and they will have to live fearing freedom. They know that renouncing to oppress challenges their own identity, as Fanon puts it, "*It is the racist who creates his inferior*" (p. 93). And in this context of violence and suspicion, Fanon finds himself "in a world where words wrap themselves in silence; in a world where the other endlessly hardens himself" (p. 229).

Historical evidence of the importance of language in the colonization process can be found as early as 1492, a year that the then recently established Spanish Crown labelled as "annus mirabilis." Granada's reconquest, which meant the reunification of the Spanish territory, and the discovery of America were two of the most significant historical events that year.

While Columbus was sailing the Atlantic Ocean in search of what he believed to be a new route through the west to the Indies, back in Spain Antonio de Nebrija, a grammar professor in Salamanca, was inscribing what he believed was meant to be one the most powerful weapons for the fresh emerging Empire: the grammar of the Castilian Language, which was published in August 1492 as the first grammatical compendium of an European modern language.

Nebrija had no way to know at that point the end result of Columbus's trip, and he could not possibly discern the yet to come extension of the Spanish Empire. But

he strongly believed that language was a major element in the structure and development of a powerful empire. He associated the cultural rising of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin as clear signs of the intensifying prevalence of their nations, and thus he affirmed,

Siempre la lengua fue compañera del Imperio, y de tal manera lo siguió que junta mente començaron, crecieron y florecieron, y después junta fue la caída de ambos.<sup>1</sup> (p. 109)

The second reason why Nebrija wrote the grammar of the Castilian language relates to the function he attributed to language in society: a symbol of national unity and a vehicle for the transmission of the national historical glory. It could be argued that Nebrija openly identified the relationship between power, culture, and language in his work. He offered a precise weapon to the hands of an expanding empire, and he recommended to Isabel, the Catholic, Queen of Spain,

Después de que vuestra Alteza metiese bajo su yugo muchos pueblos bárbaros naciones de peregrinas lenguas, con el vencimiento aquellos tendrían necesidad de recibir las leyes que el vencedor pone al vencido, con ellas nuestra lengua.<sup>2</sup> (p. 113)

When Columbus finally arrived in the

<sup>1</sup> Adapted to modern Spanish. Trans.: "Always the language has been the companion of the empire, and in such a way one followed the other that together they started, grew up and flourished, and then together they both fell."

<sup>2</sup> Adapted to modern Spanish. Trans.: "Upon Your Highness putting the many barbaric peoples, nations of transient languages, under your subjugation, with the defeat those would have the need to receive the laws that the victor imposes on the defeated, among them our language."

Coast of the New World and Spain established its authority over all territories, Nebrija's recommendations were implemented and the policy of language was inflexible, only the use of Spanish was to be allowed, and all those native inhabitants were to learn it if they wanted to be considered civilized citizens.

As in this example, language has been historically used to confer or retrieve individuals with different social access or privileges. Language has been blended in two types of usages with regard to policy.

## 2. LANGUAGE IN POLICY

Language is more often than not relegated to a second place when deliberating about policy contents. The role of language is strategically regarded merely as an instrument that enables communication between different actors involved in the policy-making process, namely, the instrument of delivery. In doing so, language is relegated to the consideration of "*shiny wrapping*" of policies deprived of all its significance. Nevertheless, as John Forester argues, policy-planning organizations "selectively channel information and attention, systematically shape participation, services, and (often problematic) promises. Every organization reproduces a world of promise, hope, expectation, frustration, dependence, and trust, just as it may shape the natural or material world" (1989, p. 20).

In the course of channelling and reproducing information—and thus reproducing the world—language can never be a neutral tool. Political actors use several different languages in order to define a particular problem. The language selected in the representation of such problem is also a vehicle that expresses moral conflicts and values, and "there is no universal technical language of problem definition that yields morally correct answers" (Stone 2002, p. 134-135).

Language, as integral part of the policy-making process, can be used to encourage democratic participation and public dialogue, enabling "citizens [...] not only to find out about issues affecting their lives but also to communicate meaningfully with other citizens about problems, social needs, and alternative policy options" (Forester 1989, p. 22). It also can be employed as a means to restrict or exclude public understanding and participation. The exclusion is made through what Forester defines as 'noise and flak,' ingredients that are purposefully intended to confuse and intimidate.

Assuming that language is secondary in policy configuration and implementation implies that words are equally accessible to all parties who want to make a rational use of them out there in the linguistic market since all have equal access to the privileges that language concede. In addition, it also entails that language just works as an independent unbiased element, which is involved to represent the world univocally, unmistakably, and in a neutral-natural terminology (Bourdieu, taken from Macedo et al. 2003).

Language is the entry to participation in the social discourse, which leads to membership in society at large. By not having the possibility to participate plainly in and of the standard discourse, the individual is strategically excluded of the decision-making process and, secluded in silence, becomes an easy prey to be reduced to servitude, dehumanised, and blamed for the entire social blemishes.

The usage of language within law may represent a barrier that does not only reflect unequal distributions or asymmetrical relations of power, but also a gate that works to perpetuate unequal access to economic, social, and cultural resources.

### 3. LANGUAGE AS POLICY

It is generally assumed that language is not a policy. But it is not coincidence that most colonizers have established different policies either in the educational realm or explicitly linguistic limitations to the colonized peoples. In most instances, the first policies that are implemented by a colonizer refer to language either directly such as in the case of Ireland.

In the seventeenth century a royal English edict proclaimed,

His majestie taking notice of the barbarous and uncouth names, by which most of the towns and places in this Kingdom of Ireland are called, which hath occasioned much damage to diverse of his good subjects, and are very troublesome in the use thereof, and much retards the reformation of that Kingdom, for remedy thereof is pleased that it is enacted, and be it enacted by the authority aforesaid that the lord lieutenant and council shall and may advise of, settle, and direct in the passing of all letters patent in that kingdom for the future, how new and proper names more suitable to the English tongue may be inserted. (as quoted in Nash 1999, p. 461)

With this edict, the colonial English government, through the Ordnance Survey, started a process of land study with the purpose of constructing an accurate cartography that would help research and taxation in Ireland. In fact, such project initiated in 1825 entailed the social and cultural displacement of Irish people who had already been dispossessed of their own lands through centuries of invasion (Hamer 1989, as quoted in Nash 1999, p. 461). All the names of towns that were in Gaelic were

adapted to the English language complying with the aforementioned edict.

This on-going practice of colonial renaming was terribly painful among the natives of Ireland as the author Brian Friel faithfully describes in his work *Translations* in 1981. Irish people could feel how humiliating it was to have to name the places they inhabited for centuries in a language they hardly understood, the language of the invader. The English congratulated on the accuracy of the maps and their quality excellence. No reference was pronounced about language significance or about Irish feelings of identity until Douglas Hyde, one of the founders of the Gaelic League, declared in 1892:

On the whole, our place names have been treated with about the same respect as if they were the names of a savage tribe which had never before been reduced to writing, and with about the same intelligence and contempt as vulgar English squatters treat the topographical nomenclature of the Red Indians. (as quoted in Nash 1999, p. 462)

Although many British authors have extensively argued that these are examples of "myths of dispossession and oppression" in Ireland's post-colonial history and justified the legal limitations to the usage of Gaelic as "creative evolution of language and culture" (Nash 1999, p. 466-467), in fact the English since they invaded Ireland in the twelfth century move in between the thought that the Irish could be civilized by being acculturated into the Anglo-Saxon refinement and a belief that the Irish were savages innately inferior to them (Spring 1997).

Paulo Freire (1970) expresses how to deny other people's ability to communicate, to prevent them from making sense, understanding, and questioning the world

in which they live in, is one of the cruellest forms of violence that can be harnessed on a human being. Limiting the usage of an individual's language through laws or other coercive means fulfils two main purposes.

The first one is to obliterate the possibility of any response. In the course of colonization, the colonizer, the oppressor, becomes aware that it is not only enough to control, to be able to manage the productive processes of the colonized, or oppressed, lives. They realize that it is necessary to exert domination over every aspect of the individual's life. They must be re-civilized, and in order to do so effectively, they must lose their own identity, impeding this way any possibility or attempt to develop into anything different from what the colonizer expects. Fanon defined such state as the impossibility of expansion: the colonized has been dispossessed of their culture, of their civilization, of their history; thus they lack the power to create and transform.

From Rene Menil, Frantz Fanon borrowed the idea that the lack of an identifiable language generates the empty space necessary in the spirit of the colonized so that a symbol of authority can be established as a garrison to maintain control of the consciousness of the slave.

The second purpose of limiting the usage of language is to create a vacuum in order to make possible the internalisation of their subordination, or what Frantz Fanon defines as "the *epidermalization*" of the inferiority. As Paulo Freire emphasizes, "for cultural invasion to succeed, it is essential that those invaded become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority" (p. 153), not that they feel ashamed because they are slaves, but as Fanon clarifies, they are ashamed of their own appearance. They can feel nothing but shame and self-contempt.

## LANGUAGE AND COLONIZATION TODAY

English is today the fourth language in the world in terms of number of speakers. If we add to that number the people who use English as a second language, it would be without hesitation the first language. English is considered the language of science, technology and business, and serves as a reference operational language for many multinational organizations in the world.

In spite of this real picture, there is a growing movement, commanded by the organization US English, in the United States who strongly believe that English is threatened by other languages in the U.S., mainly Spanish. This organization advocates for the implementation of different language policies to secure that English is threatened no more as the common language in the United States.

Supporters of this movement use arguments in line with Nebrija's reasoning: language as the representation of national unity and the language that enables progress in society. However, as Donaldo Macedo (2000) unveils, in fact speaking English fluently or as a native language is not a guarantee for success; therefore linking both concepts is nothing but a misleading association. And in any case, no language can be considered a secure passport for success and prosperity.

The real reasons for such inexplicable promotion and protection of an evidently strong, healthy, and beautiful language such as English in the United States and everywhere else, have to be found in an inherent racist discourse that strives to qualify white Anglo-protestant values as the only American culture, defined in terms of a "unifying, dynamic, cosmopolitan culture," in opposition to the supposed invasion of ethnic groups, which are "separatist, atavistic, changeless, and exclusive"

(Imhoff 1990, p. 55).

An irrational fear of freedom is the other reason for such blatant defence of English; fear of an ever-changing society, which defies any preconception or fixed directions. This fear of freedom, as Freire (1970) argues, results in the advocacy, or adoption of oppressive measures, as is the case of US English. Freire (1970) already knew that the only true words are those that enable human beings “to transform the world” (p. 87). In that sense “the world—no longer something to be described with deceptive words—becomes the object of that transforming action by men and women which results in their humanization” (p. 86).

It is obvious that “to glorify democracy and to silence the people is a farce; to discourse on humanism and to negate people is a lie” (Freire 1970, p. 91). It is the time to supersede a model that looks down, rejects, oppresses, or condemns any cultural deviance from the mainstream, and to engage in an emancipating, humanizing dialogue in which all subjects have a voice in creating and critically interpreting reality.

Language might be a tool, but never a neutral tool. The election of words brings to life a specific representation of reality, therefore we should envision a language usage that promotes different points of view and encourages dialogue in order to ensure “That the tool never possess the man. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever. That is, of one by another. That it be possible for me to discover and to love man, wherever he may be” (p. 231 Fanon 1967).

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