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Decolonization and Linguistics: A Conversation on Opportunities and Challenges

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1. Introduction

This article is a reproduction of the roundtable discussion “Decolonization and linguistics – opportunities and challenges” held during the 57th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea (SLE) at the University of Helsinki in August 2024. Our aim was to present and debate the relationships between linguistics, ethics in research and decolonial thought (as by Smith 1999, Quijano 2000, Mignolo 2000, Mbembe 2013). Decolonization can be understood as the undoing of colonization, in the political and historical form, or the dismantling of the power structures, rules, and hierarchies imposed by a colonizing entity. It is not only a political concept, but central to knowledge creation including academic power structures. However, in our understanding, decolonization does not mean a total rejection of previous knowledge production and research but setting a focus on and being sensitive to alternative ways that could offer new insights to linguistic theorizing and methodologies more generally.

The discussion in the round table was organized around two main topics. The first tackled the importance of decolonization of research at the present time. The second looked at ways of advancing our field by adding a decolonial perspective and discussed the goal of decolonizing linguistics. The discussants’ commentaries are here reproduced in the original form, with minor editing for clarity on some occasions and adding references when necessary.

2. Why is decolonization important for linguistic research at the present time?

Hanna-Máret Outakoski:

My Sámi name is Niillasáš-Ándarasa Ásllat-Niila Hanna-Máret and it ties me to a certain context and to the language and the lands of my ancestors. I come from a village that bears my family name and is located at the border of Finland and Norway.

My research experiences reside in the national minority contexts of the Indigenous Sámi learners in three Nordic countries and in Russia. Many linguists know very little or nothing about the still surviving 9, or perhaps 10, Sámi languages. Many Europeans do not even know that there are Indigenous people living in Europe. Those who know might still be using the pejorative names Lapps and Lappish in the same way as they

might still use pejorative, outdated, or too general names for Indigenous languages that have their own names, speakers, and dialects, or they might not even know which language their data originates from.

Most aspects involving the conditions and opportunities for language learning in the Indigenous Sámi languages are connected to power relations, ideologies, and hegemonies (Kroik 2023: 14–15). Often the outsider linguist is unaware of those aspects or ignores them once the extraction of the linguistic data is successful. The minority group members are sometimes aware of some of these aspects, but there are also matters that are so deeply imprinted in the people, that the language community accepts them without further scrutiny. For me, as an Indigenous scholar and linguist, it is important to unravel some of these beliefs and imprinted perceptions of a language that belongs to the oral tradition and is therefore thought to be difficult to write. This mission is directed toward at least two participating audiences, the language communities and the academic community. Although it is important to decolonize the academic traditions, I am more concerned with the language communities who are also in need of decolonization.

Since most of the Sámi learners in the present day master the majority language better than the heritage language, it is very important that the everyday language use and shift is studied in its immediate context with a decolonizing perspective.

For example, my own native language North Sámi, the largest of the Sámi languages, is changing at a rapid pace and in different directions in the three countries where it is spoken. Overall, Sámi languages change much faster than do the larger majority languages with numerous language use opportunities. The future speakers and language bearers of Sámi languages think, study, and work using mostly the majority language. There is also a clash of language traditions and language knowledge between the youngest and the oldest language bearer generations. When the cultural knowledge and interests shift between the generations, some of the stronger and more traditional speakers sometimes act as gatekeepers or so-called language police creating internal conflicts and pressure on the young (Johansen 2019: 41). Beliefs and ideologies as well as language use opportunities are still very much impacted by the way the Indigenous minorities view themselves and their languages through the lens of a colonized people, as something sacred, unchangeable, and as something anchored in the past.

That lens actualizes in different ways in Indigenous contexts around the world. In our studies we have found that many speakers and learners of Sámi have a compartmentalizing view on their heritage language, but not on the majority language that is used daily. Today, many mother tongue speakers view Sámi language as difficult to write and use for literate purposes (Hornberger & Outakoski 2015). I feel the need to understand the effects of the colonial processes of the past and the present, as well as the reality of the multilingual language contexts to be able to understand the data that I gather to support Sámi languages to survive. For me the decolonial

perspectives are an important support in understanding the present language situation and offer me tools to convey my findings to the language communities as well as to the academic community.

Pius Akumbu:

I was born half a century ago and raised in Babanki Tungo, a remote village of approximately 30,000 people in Cameroon, a country that had interested the Portuguese in the 15th Century but was first colonized by Germany in 1884 and later by France and Britain after World War I. In this big village, we survived on subsistence farming and there was no potable water, roads, electricity, and very few health and educational facilities existed. The mission school I attended was 7 kilometers away from home and I trekked both ways on bare feet.

As a little boy, and even before I started school in the late 1970s, something unusual happened. One day, some white men came to my community. There was commotion all over the place. Children like myself ran around in excitement. We had never seen people of that color before. On the orders of our King my people showed great hospitality, giving the white men the best of our food, drinks and eventually craft and decorations. The white men stayed for several weeks and all they did was talk with some Babanki people through an interpreter and write down things in their notebooks. You must have guessed by now that they were researchers (probably linguists... collecting data).

Despite all the odds mentioned above, I eventually went through school and obtained a PhD in linguistics (one of two among my 72 elementary school mates to have made it to university and the only one to obtain a PhD). As a linguist, I also go back to my community for field work, like the white men I told you about.

What is sad about my story is that several decades down the line, the situation in my community has not improved significantly. The population has increased tremendously but we still lack electricity, potable water, roads, schools, hospitals; 3–5-year-old kids still trek 7 kilometers to school, and so on. On the other hand, linguists including myself working on Babanki and related Grassfields Bantu languages have published enormously, advanced linguistic theory, and some have even become famous. This situation is true of many communities and languages in Cameroon, Africa and worldwide. While language speakers and communities have provided data for linguistic work, the field of linguistics and by extension linguists have not contributed equally to the development of the speakers and/or their communities. This could be said of other Western (social) sciences that depend on data from minority/minoritized communities around the world.

I concur with Hanna-Máret that one way to decolonize linguistics and in particular data collection and analyses is to be aware and integrate the complex colonial experiences and history of speakers. If the colonial experience has led speakers to think less-highly of their heritage, non-dominant language(s) than the majority language(s), this attitude is likely to impact the kinds of data produced. Linguists need

to be constantly aware that indigenous, non-dominant speakers'/signers' minds have been colonized and need to be decolonized progressively over time.

I believe that there have been substantial decolonization efforts, and we see these in some methodological and terminological adjustments. However, ways of obtaining and treating the real object of study, i.e., data have not evolved significantly. Field linguists still collect, take over, extract, or mine data for analyses without equal compensation (Kadanya 2006, Akumbu 2020, 2024). Linguists, and the linguistic world, i.e., those who have colonized the data have and continue to generate and retain all kinds of benefits from the data while the natural owners, creators, producers (not consultants) of the data, as well as their communities are left in unfavorable conditions. This unfair and imbalanced situation will continue with the data in the (colonialists) archives and advances in AI models. I think that any meaningful effort to decolonize linguistics (and science that builds on data from minority/minoritized communities) should start with and center on the object of study, i.e., the data. I ask two pertinent questions:

(1) How do I get my data?

(2) How do I treat the data?

If the data I work with is the property of the owners and producers, then I must be conscious that I am exploiting what belongs to someone or some community. This should lead me to adjust my attitude towards the data. I must decolonize the way I collect and analyze language data of all sorts, be it raw, primary or secondary (Himmelmann 2012).

Hanna-Máret Outakoski:

It is striking to me how different the situations and contexts of our people are, and how the challenges therefore also come in different shapes. Whereas the community you (Pius) describe has the growth potential in which life standard as well as linguistic advancement seems possible at least in the future, it is a site of exploitation where the opportunities for language development are easily missed due to the use of the data for other than community purposes. That has been our history, too, but things have changed. Nowadays our language data is to a large part gathered by native scholars and is often processed in collaborative projects that bring the knowledge back to the Sámi community. We have high overall living standards, all children go to school and some even learn their heritage language there, we have Indigenous academics and language workers, and there are political organs that negotiate with the states on Sámi matters, albeit sometimes less successfully. However, the Nordic Sámi communities are so integrated and assimilated into the majority society that they are falling apart from within. In the minds of many Indigenous people, the hegemony of the dominating culture is still winning, and the assimilation process lures them away from their roots. It is such an irony that the good place in which my people are today is so

directly linked to the threat of language death. We have the data, but we are losing our speakers –you have a growing population of speakers, but less control over your data.

Maria Mazzoli:

I am a white, Western-based scholar and I have engaged with Indigenous and minoritized communities in both North America and sub-Saharan Africa, and, in the process, decoloniality has become central to my approach. This meant, and still means, a continued effort to unlearn the learned approach, which went along with some discomfort in the unlearning process, especially in relation to the understanding of my own positionality and the way my identity and role shape my research.

In the learned approach, as scientists, we are attributed the credentials to access a widely celebrated type of truth in Western circles, the scientific truth. And as linguists, it implies we have expertise on “language” and the “languages” which are the objects of our inquiries, so we can tell scientific truth about them. It is a common joke among linguists that you don’t have to speak languages to be able to tell how they work and function, and many of us do not speak the languages we work with. This anecdote tells what perspective we take in approaching languages. In academia, and not only in linguistics, it is a matter of picking an object of interest and mastering the tools to investigate it scientifically. Choose a subject and do science.

Here I would like to reflect on the “motivation” that drives and guides us (Western-based) linguists in doing linguistic work with Indigenous, endangered and minoritized communities. I like the word motivation because it is very broad, recalling both personal and academic spheres, and I think we have to reflect on that as a whole. For many, it is a matter of personal interest or “intellectual curiosity” (Ladefoged 1992), more often our interest and effort is motivated by its “scientific relevance” and our “expertise” (concepts deeply ingrained in Western culture). I’ll relate it to personal experience now. When I started working with Indigenous communities and languages, I experienced the cringe when my “intellectual curiosity” was obviously not a plausible motivation for doing my work, my “expertise” was not at all the obvious tool to address the important challenges communities were facing; the “scientific relevance” felt irrelevant. Centuries of harm and misconduct had preceded me; if not misconduct, then somehow useless, certainly extractive linguistics had preceded me (cf. Pius’ story above); dozens of linguists before me had done the same, or similar work I was doing; not much (or anything) had changed for the people who had “informed” that work. And to this day, very poignant, intolerable social inequalities put me and my research collaborators on a hierarchy, where economic privilege, safety, and freedom of mobility play a major role.

I have been the “lone wolf” (Crippen and Robinson 2013), just like many other young scholars like me who didn’t know better and/or didn’t have the resources to put together collaborative projects. I happened to despise my own work, and my -very present- intellectual motivation, as the contemporary counterpart of the boldness of colonial time. Honest question is: How do we *dare* go on with doing language work

in this context and condition? What kind of motivation can sustain our, ethically sound, work as linguists?

The linguist I want to be is someone who has a lot to offer to Indigenous communities, in support of endangered languages, but has to unlearn much of the above, and re-learn a new approach. And the new approach is human (“decolonize is to humanize” Hudley, Montoya, Mallinson 2024), intended as non-aggressive, intended as less focused on our priorities and the research priorities of our institutions and much more open and present to dialogue with communities. It is not even doing something for, it is in principle a matter of releasing control, being present and avoiding dominating the space. Which for people used to “pick a subject and do science” may be very challenging. This cannot start without a deep scan of our motivation, which starts with a reflection on some central aspects of our endeavors: positionality (our social position and identities, who we are and where we come from); subjectivity/reflexivity (assumptions, beliefs, and judgment systems, how these influence the research process), and intentionality (our goals and the goals of the institutions, funding agencies we work for).

Hanna-Máret Outakoski:

Even as an Indigenous scholar I recognize most of the struggles that you (Maria) describe and especially the discomfort of feeling that I should be doing things in a different way than my colleagues or the academic community is used to doing. One of many personal blessings of being an insider has, however, been the almost instant access to large networks and connections in the language community. Not an effortless access, but access that has been granted after I have shown my will to work for and together with the communities. Language and culture knowledge are a huge advantage when one is pursuing that access, but I would not have been able to navigate and conduct my research without the support and work of my allied colleagues without the native background. They have also been my academic support when the critical voices have deemed my work as too subjective, counter positivist, and non-scientific only because of my membership in the language community that I do my research with.

Pius Akumbu:

Recognizing and setting aside community goals from linguistic and scientific ones and negotiating with communities how and why to do research on their languages are truly excellent ways of building relationships. These are pertinent ways of working towards a just course for all. If the reason we do all the wonderful linguistic work we do is for ourselves and the academia then we are taking success to an opposite direction from humanity.

2. How do we advance our field by adding a decolonial perspective?

Pius Akumbu:

To add a decolonial perspective to the field of linguistics, the two questions I raised earlier need to be addressed: (1) how do we get data, and (2) how do we treat the data? Regarding the first question, I think linguists must realize that collecting data the way it has been done until now is not so different from the colonial practice (colonial economics) of taking over raw materials like gold, coltan, diamond, cocoa, coffee, etc. from minority/minoritized communities without proper compensation and exploiting the data for their benefit while the real owners continue to suffer various ills.

What makes language data extraction worse is that language is in people's minds –it's not an (abstract) object of study, or something we should extract and dissect, removed from the people who speak or sign it (See Endangered Languages Project's A Linguist's Code of Conduct).

However, fellow humans manage to extract the data and make careers out of it, without contributing sufficiently to the transformation of the language communities involved. There are even scholars (e.g., Newman 2009) who argue that linguists are not social workers and should not care about speakers/signers and communities that own and produce the data. I think that this should change. Linguists, universities, research institutions, and funding agencies should think of appropriate ways of proper compensation to communities whose language data is collected and studied. I do not ignore the fact that many linguists, out of personal initiatives and goodwill, do good and render various kinds of services to communities where they work, but I think that concerted thought should be given to this issue and binding decisions made by linguists, universities, research institutions, and funding agencies about compensating data creators or producers and their respective language communities.

Regarding the second question of data treatment. I fear that linguists continue colonialism in data processing, grounded in European and Anglo-American theories. Many of us are here at SLE talking about data from various languages worldwide without the speakers/signers of those languages being here. We are talking on their behalf, like the colonial masters on behalf of their colonies at the League of Nations or the United Nations. We have data, some of which is based on questions we asked and answers we received. How representative is the data of the languages we are here representing? This raises two questions:

- (1) Can an outsider describe a language accurately?
- (2) Can a native speaker describe their language accurately?

I think that if a native speaker receives proper training similar to what Westerners get, that speaker will be able to work on their language satisfactorily. At the same time, I am in favor of collaboration. One way to decolonize is to create partnerships

between trained native speakers/signers and outsider linguists. If both work together, we may effectively manage the decolonization process.

This call has already been made, for example, Newman (1998: 17), and Ameka (2006: 70) insists that “unless the records of the languages being documented are the product of collaboration between trained native speaker and non-native speaker (anthropological) linguists, they will not be real, or optimal descriptions representing the realities of the languages.”

The low number of native-speaker linguists around the world raises practical issues about native speaker and non-native speaker collaboration. One way to overcome the problem is to invest in the training of native speakers/signers. It is possible that for each PhD funding awarded to a Westerner to work on a minority/minoritized language somewhere in the world, matching funds for a degree in linguistics for a native speaker of that language are also provided. This will eventually lead to fruitful collaboration.

If each one of us makes a small change in some way, it may be possible to transform linguistics into a true social science that meets the discipline's traditional goals, but also creates healthy relationships between linguists and the communities whose data inform linguistic work, thereby contributing to making the world a better and just place.

Hanna-Máret Outakoski:

I could not agree more on this matter. Collaborations seem to be at the heart of this panel discussion. The way we collaborate with language communities and our colleagues from the research ideas to the design and execution of the project and finally to the dissemination of the project also reflects how we view decolonizing methodologies.

One matter has to do with the institutions that in different ways regulate our research. There are funders who expect that the research application is complete and done when it is sent in, while the Indigenous research methodologies emphasize the need of the researcher to be flexible since the community's needs and the orientation of the study may change during the project. The ethical board that usually inspects medical research applications, denies a line in the informed consent about knowledge sharing and about the choice of the knowledge source to be acknowledged by name. I often find myself in situations where the academic community and the institutions around me are stuck in traditions that stand opposite to decolonizing ideas.

Maria Mazzoli:

To manage the turn from extractive practices to building relationships can be seen as very abstract or vague, so concrete examples on how to make it real are helpful and the Endangered Languages Project's Code of Conduct is a great example of a non-definitive collection of thoughts that could be helpful.

I believe that the main goal of a decolonial linguistics is to come together with principles that will make our discipline ethically solid and fairer to the individuals and

communities involved across the globe. I assume issues related to informed consent, adequate remuneration of research collaborators, shared ownership and recognition of the authorship of our collaborators to be the very basics to start with. Here I would like to discuss one aspect that became crucial in my approach, in terms of the ethics of working with Indigenous communities, especially if their languages are endangered. This aspect is related to the need of involving heritage speakers in all research activities on an endangered language.

Heritage speakers are defined as individuals who grew up listening and speaking a local/Indigenous language –to an extent–, but are otherwise socialized in a language of wider communication or a colonial language.

As linguists today we know that in multilingual communities where one or more languages are losing vitality and there is a shift in place, we'll find a huge diversity in the competencies of heritage speakers (Grinevald & Bert 2011). We have a typology of this diversity, based on parameters such as proficiency level reached in the language, type of exposure, level of use, attitudes, and identity in relation to the language. In each community, there will be a continuum of uses and proficiencies of heritage speakers, which defines deeply the sociolinguistic dynamics and the vitality of the language. Due to these factors, sometimes heritage speakers are “true bilinguals”, sometimes they have limited or only passive competencies in their heritage language. Sometimes they are called silent speakers, sometimes they qualify as new speakers, sometimes they end up in the category of semi- or partial speakers. This composite group of young bilinguals is absolutely vital for the chances of survival of a language in a community, because their choices, attitudes and practices will determine whether a language will stay or go.

I'd like to mention here a short passage from an essay published by Leonard Bloomfield in 1927. The essay from which the quotation is taken is a reflection on “good” and “bad” language, where Bloomfield talks ultimately about the role of ideologies and literacy in defining our linguistic intuitions. There, he also describes quite vividly some of his collaborators and their linguistic skills. The following passage describes White Thunder.

“His Menomini is atrocious. His vocabulary is small; his inflections are often barbarous; he constructs sentences of a few threadbare models. He may be said to speak no language tolerably.” (Bloomfield 1987: 91)

White Thunder was most probably a heritage speaker, as we have defined the term above, and one could also question what kind of authority Bloomfield had as a non-native to understand and judge linguistic skills so sharply. That said, one can see what kind of ideologies were guiding Bloomfield in his perspective on White Thunder. We understand it because we share some of his ideologies ourselves, we may even have done similar thoughts about people we have collaborated with, and unpacking this set of assumptions –for example about who is a “good speaker”, or “what is language”–

is some concrete work that each of us should embark on before going into communities, some concrete work on our positionality and subjectivity that I mentioned above.

My point here is that if we *dare* do linguistics on endangered and minoritized languages, in the context that we have been describing so far, we have the imperative to involve heritage speakers in some way. Focusing on the fluent, possibly monolingual, speakers in a community, even if for the sake of documentation, will weaken the chances of a language to stay.

Personally, this has translated for me into a focus on learners; in the need to involve, in all research activities, community members irrespective of their language competency (Leonard & Haynes 2010). For example, in 2017 the Institute for the Humanities of the University of Manitoba, Nicole Rosen and I funded a Mentor Apprentice program for two elders (Verna DeMontigny and Harvey Pelletier) and two learners (Kai Pyle and Jaqueline Pelland) (Mazzoli 2019, 2020). At the time this was possible with the funding of my postdoc, certainly those of us who have bigger funding at disposal could find even more creative ways of involving heritage speakers in research.

Pius Akumbu:

The idea of involving language users with varying degrees of competence and performance in the data collection process is a wonderful way to have a true representation of language use. It enables the researcher to capture language(s) in use in the community rather than some ancestral code (Woodbury 2011) used perfectly well by some select community members only.

Hanna-Máret Outakoski:

I am glad that you (Maria) bring up the concept of heritage speakers and the new language situations of most of the Indigenous language communities around the world. As Kathryn Woolard (1985) pointed out already for many decades ago, all language communities, even the so-called monolingual ones, comprise of a considerable natural variation. Many times the differences in prestige have to do with status, power relations, and language attitudes. This also connects to my first comment on the situation of the Sámi people where the languages are changing at a rapid pace and each speaker generation reflects a different phase of that change. One of the reasons why I changed my research focus toward literacy and language education has to do with the linguistic changes that I started noticing already when I myself went to school. I see that the changes are inevitable, at least in the Sámi languages. Negative comments on bad language and purist views on how the language should be kills the interest of the youngest generation to speak and study the language. Many members of the generation before mine came from monolingual Sámi families. They were not so worried about the survival of the language since they could not comprehend what bilingualism and assimilation policies could do in a very short period of time. And

they still cannot. That is why they condemn the new speakers' language. According to them, the new generation of speakers is always speaking wrong or does not know the old words although they know so many new things. My job as the researcher of multilingualism is to support the future elders, the speakers who one day will be the ones who know the language even if they are so heavily criticized by the language bearers of today and not seen as the good speakers by linguists.

I have a background in the formal linguistics research tradition. For a long time, I sat in my office dissecting and analyzing elicited data for the purposes of understanding anaphoric constructions in my native language. No one had done exactly that before and it was exciting work. I gathered my own data or used earlier produced data. Out in the field my research participants often asked me why I was gathering this specific data, but I could not give them other answers than that it was an interest of mine and would result in some academic papers. I was given many suggestions of how to study the language and participate in the revitalization, but the suggestions did not really coincide with the methodology of traditional linguistics that I had adopted at the time. My participants did not ask many questions about what would happen with the data after I was done with my study. People were used to having visitors come and collect their stories and their language knowledge, and never getting back to them. My work was written in English and not easily accessible or usable in my native language community. I was very much following the Western linguistic tradition, producing pieces of important knowledge about my language but targeting audiences external to the language community, not really listening to the needs of the language community and only very indirectly, if at all, participating in the language revitalization and development process. Kuokkanen (2003, 271) describes this kind of behavior as the reluctance, hesitancy, and disinclination "to engage in new relations with Indigenous epistemes". And indeed, I did feel reluctant to lift my gaze and look for a more holistic understanding of the language situation.

You heard many I, my and mine in this description, and it took me a good while before I got in touch with the concept of decolonization. That process has changed the course of my research quite drastically. Our most recent research projects cross the borders of different research fields and traditions (e.g., Outakoski 2022). Today, and in addition to the purely linguistic matters, our research community is interested in the context in which multilingual language learners encounter literacy and in the actual language use in those complex situations. We are especially interested in multilingual writing and any language use that involves literacy practices in contexts where Indigenous Sámi learners take part. The research is mostly carried out as field study in collaboration with participating language communities and one of the main goals of all the projects is to give back to the communities already during the research visit period of the project. This kind of linguistic research is done at the interface of linguistics, education, revitalization, and sociology –all fields that can gain from the decolonizing methodologies (cf. Smith 1999).

For me, one of the ways to advance Sámi linguistics has been a step toward a more holistic research approach. I advocate for a field of linguistics that encourages the inclusion of decolonial perspectives in the methodologies of our field no matter which kind of language community we are working with. Apart from following the general research principles and research ethics, there is a need to add guidelines that help us understand how certain aspects of colonization still influence our research field, and to suggest ways to counteract their effects. The addition of such guidelines can advance our field when it comes to data gathering methods, choice of research approaches, data management agreements, collaboration goals, community engagement, privileging and acknowledging Indigenous knowledge, and many more aspects of research that involve attitudes and reciprocity.

I think that the question of what the objective of the decolonization of linguistics should be is somewhat misleading or at least restricting since it presupposes one definite and common objective for decolonization of linguistics. It is, perhaps, better to talk about goals or objectives of decolonization in plural. Also, linguistics is a multi-strand research field, and the objectives of decolonization may not be the same for each strand. For example, I do not expect that the decolonizing perspectives and research principles are as central for theoretical semanticists as they can be for sociolinguists or other linguists who work directly with participants and collaborate with language communities.

Since I work with Indigenous and endangered languages, decolonial perspectives offer me the important tools of reflexivity and criticality and suggest methodologies that increase the language communities' ownership, access, control, and possession of language data crucial for revitalization and survival. Increasing the involvement of the language communities is an important goal for me personally.

A more general goal for the field of linguistics is to become more aware of how colonization has influenced our research field, our methodologies, and our view of the language communities that we until now have done our research on. It is time to move the field forward by adding research that is done together with and for the language communities. This demands a great deal of us academics, but I am confident that inclusion of reflexivity, power sharing, and criticality in our research methodology is rewarding to all parties involved.

Pius Akumbu:

The point about understanding, describing, theorizing language to foster the aspirations of language users to knowledge through education is essential and should be a driving force in the work we do if we intend to contribute to the decolonization process. Methodologies that increase the language community's ownership, access, control, and possession of language data for revitalization and survival are pertinent. This is best achieved by involving communities in linguistic research.

Maria Mazzoli:

The description of your journey resonates with me, and it is heartwarming to hear that Indigenous scholars and European/white scholars have gone through very similar experiences and processes of decolonization of our minds and research practices, so thank you very much for sharing your stories.

3. Afterword

This conversation about the challenges and opportunities of decolonizing linguistics has touched on various aspects of linguistic work. Our discussants took very personal approaches to the questions making evident the positionality of subjects in linguistic research. Linguistics, although sometimes seen as an “objective” natural science that predicts and explains, is at the same time a human field of inquiry that has ethnographic methods and interpretation of results as a guiding principle.

Sociolinguistic, anthropological and historical research has made it evident how deeply colonization has influenced linguistics, its methods and theory building. The abstraction of language away from the language communities is a prime example of this, in addition to the judgements made on authentic and less authentic speakers as sources of data. All the discussants call for a critical view and reflection of our work in order to build new models of research where the power is shared more equally. From this discussion, it has become clear that collaborative methodologies and research practices are central for decolonial approaches to linguistics (see also Charity Hudley, Mallinson & Bucholtz. 2024). Our field can best advance in cooperation with the speakers of the languages that we want to study.

The round table discussion continued with comments from the SLE audience in Helsinki, with questions ranging from ethical considerations, open data and practical matters in the field. The positionality of researchers and their relationship with the speakers, minoritized communities, and research institutions located in different parts of the world was central for many members of the audience. Many comments touched upon the limitations and possibilities offered by open science and open data solutions that serve the needs of the speaker communities. Other comments mentioned theoretical issues related to decolonization and linguistics as a field. In addition, a need for a discussion about best practices in fieldwork and in cooperation with minoritized communities and concrete advice was central in many questions posed. We welcomed the SLE executive committee’s openness to the discussion also with regard to the Society’s role and tasks regarding decolonization within linguistics. We would like to thank the SLE for making this discussion possible and the audience for their interest in critically examining the field of linguistics.

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