A student's guide to decolonising linguistics: Enabling teaching staff to empower students

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Special session: Directions in linguistics and social justice

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The student experience

- Think about a time when you've felt like what you were learning at university reflected your experience
- Reflections on expectations and reality of first year – Uni of Manchester MOOC
- Lack of languages beyond IE, creole studies, sign languages
- Using texts that discuss African languages disparagingly
- Recognize that knowledge is inevitably marked by power relations

Diversification is crucial but slow…

Student populations are much more ethnically diverse than teaching staff

- In 2017/18, only 16% of all academic staff with a known ethnicity were 'BAME' (UUK and NUS, 2019)
- 27% of students entering university in 2019/2020 were from Asian, Black, Mixed or 'other' ethnic groups (HESA)
- Curricula & reading lists are even less ethnically diverse (and are often 100% white)

Change is slow

- Lack of confidence
- Systemic issues (precarity etc.)
- Lack of cohesiveness
- Lack of resources

Students can make it happen faster!

Question 1: Is decolonisation possible?

- Free Black University:
  - ‘After years of campaigning for the ‘decolonisation’ of curricula we found that the response institutions were able to offer would never be enough. You cannot decolonise something that is built on colonisation itself… we exist to build a space that can produce decolonial knowledge, untethered from a colonial space.’
- Our subject (linguistics) is grounded in Global North (and systems such as the publishing and acquisitions process perpetuate this bias)
- Fallacy of the ‘neutrality’ of theory; often contested by scholars from other backgrounds

Laura's intro modules: lessons learnt

Grammar for everyone

- First year optional module (in practice, taken by most students)
- Designed inclusively bottom-up
- Explicit discussion of social justice throughout
- Explicit discussion of why certain ideas aren't 'neutral' or the implications of some of the content that is taught
- Assessment explicitly addressing reading list diversity (lasting impact)
- Strong student engagement during *and after* the module

Structure

- Intro MA syntax (no prior background)
- 'Traditional' syntax module, explicit diversity content added later
- Lack of student engagement with this aspect
- Didn't 'click' till much, much later

Why focus on first year?

Intro topics may be last to be diversified

- Supposedly 'neutral' content (basic theory)
- Practical reasons such as team-teaching, precarity, short-termism

First year sets the tone for involvement vs alienation – if students don't learn about it in first year, they are unlikely to pick modules on it in further years

Everyone has to take core modules, not just those who care about inclusion and diversity

Diverse content/modules are usually 'extras' which people would rather not do when faced with the choice of more work or other activities

Question 2: What do students need?

- To feel safe
- To feel equally valid (cf. Gabriel et al.'s 3D pedagogy: Decolonise, Democratise, Diversify)
- Space explicitly for discussion of these issues
- More involvement in the curriculum (to be asked directly what we want to learn about and see that reflected)
- Transparency from educators when they don't know something or aren't sure + a desire to find out
- More input from a diverse range of educators (guest lecturers (and preferably not White ones or ones who are experts in the classical topics as that is what usually happens))
- A space to feedback
- An expanded variety of literature to reference

Question 3: What do lecturers need?

- Guidance in leading 'difficult conversations'
- Reassurance in students' ability to contribute
- Understanding how to work with students – who can help?
- Sustain collaboration, discussion and experimentation among groups of teachers and students
- Knowledge of linguistic fields and theories beyond our own specialism
- Other things that are crucial but also not our focus in this talk:
  - Expectation from the University that they will do the work (leading from above)
  - Time and space to do it (precarity, short-term contracts, planning, under-staffing, etc.)

What do you need?

Reflect again on your own experiences.

How could you empower the students in your classes?

What do you need to succeed?