

Language hegemony in decolonising global health conferences

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Abstract

Global health has been rightly critiqued for its colonial elements. In recent years, a student-led movement of *decolonising global health* conferences has stimulated global health practitioners to engage in collective self-analysis and a search for alternative practices. Contrary to the values of decolonisation, the activities of these conferences have occurred overwhelmingly in one imperial language: English.

Affiliated with McGill University's *Reimagining Global Health* group, we are well-positioned to discern the unnaturalness of English-only environments and identify alternatives to these. We posit that the language dynamics of decolonising global health conferences are hegemonic, shaped by a non-authoritarian form of power that is reproduced through ideology.

Inspired by goals of inclusion and diversity, we conducted a theoretical analysis of language hegemony and used this analysis to explore conference dynamics. The analyses allowed us to identify alternative approaches, both fundamental and operational, to inform more diverse and inclusive decolonising global health conferences.

Key words

Communication; Diversity; Epistemicide; Inclusion; Resistance.

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Introduction

Before beginning, I would just like to remind you something which seems obvious; that is to say that I will give my talk in English. But, as English is not my mother tongue, something relevant will certainly be lost. Why [do] I say that? What I would like to underline is that today, general domination of English in conferences, universities, and other places of that kind should not be considered so innocent.

Giorgio Agamben (2014)

As humans, we use language to structure thoughts and ideas and to communicate with one another (Bennett 2015). Language use involves interaction between people, creating an incentive to standardise its elements for mutual understanding and therefore the phenomenon that we refer to as *languages*. Examples of languages include those accepted by this journal for publication: English, isiZulu, and seSoto. There are currently an estimated 6000 languages in active use (Gordin 2019). Recognising this global linguistic diversity draws attention to the extent to which contemporary scholarship *is not* diverse: most scholarly communication happens in a handful of languages with one language - English - dominating.

As student and young professional global health leaders associated with McGill University, we are well-positioned to notice the lack of linguistic diversity in knowledge production and circulation while remaining open to the possibility that the situation could be otherwise. We were stimulated to deepen and sharpen our understanding of scholarly linguistic diversity through a practical task: the planning of a *decolonising* global health conference.¹ Accordingly, this article explicitly advances a collective self-reflection by exploring theoretical concerns around language use to support the deployment of practical strategies to promote more linguistic diversity in the context of student-led global health conferences.

In this article, we the authors describe our positionality relative to linguistic diversity and argue in favour of the concept of language hegemony to understand the dominance of English in scholarly communication. We then focus more directly on decolonising global health conferences, reviewing their approach to language thus far and identifying some foundational reasons that might explain why hegemonic approaches to language persist. Recognising that linguistic diversity is consistent with the idea of decolonising global health but not yet embraced by the decolonising global health conference movement, we propose an alternative set of foundational priorities for organisers and describe strategies that we are exploring to enable linguistic diversity in our upcoming activities. We conclude this article with a discussion of additional considerations and limitations to this project.

¹ The initiative at McGill University was inspired by a series of student-led conferences, specifically those held at Harvard University (February 2019), Duke University (January 2020), the University of Edinburgh (April 2020) and Karolinska Institute (May 2020).

Author positionality

Our collective and individual positions shape our understanding of the potential and the necessity of linguistic diversity. Importantly, we share the positionality of having been affiliated with McGill University, in Montreal, Québec, Canada. The legacy of this institution, and the historical, geographic and demographic context in which it operates, is important to our collective understanding.

We all live and study or work primarily in Montreal, a city with a contentious language dynamic. As a jurisdiction with a majority of French-speakers, Québec is a minority in North America (Government of Canada 2016). The struggle to continue to live in French has long been a core identity characteristic of the *Québécois* people: for the past 200 years North America has been dominated by English-speaking peoples and empires. Whereas the population of Québec is around 8 million people, the surrounding Canadian provinces and neighbouring United States of America comprise English-majority jurisdictions with a combined population of almost 360 million people (World Population Review, 2020). In North America outside of Québec, there are French-language communities (Centre de la francophonie des Amériques 2020), but these are often scattered, generally with small or minority populations, and an expectation of English-language proficiency among community members. Meanwhile, from our perspective in Québec, we know that resisting language domination requires attention and effort, but that it is possible.

Our university, McGill, has roots that are firmly planted in multiple colonial projects (NDP McGill, Cassidy & Ramakrishnan 2018). Situated within a majority French-speaking Québec, McGill is a flagship English-language institution. Although there has been a shift in power since the *Quiet Revolution* of the 1960s, McGill University's prominence in Montreal is an echo of the long period during which the English-speaking mercantile class overtly controlled the politics and economics of Québec. Among many *Québécois*, McGill University has been a concrete representation of the English invasion (Warren 2008). Despite the validity of this perception, the institution has evolved to incorporate an administratively supported pro-French initiative (McGill University n.d.) and French-language student journalism (Le Délit 1977).

While the dynamics of English dominating French are well-recognised here in Québec - regardless as to whether these are known internationally - settlers of both English and French origin have allied in the larger project of European colonisation. In Canada and the colonies that preceded it, the colonial project has centred around the forced migration and cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2015). McGill University's long-standing institutional support for this project has largely evaded scrutiny, possibly because of Québec's focus on English-French relations (Harel, 2020). In recent months, observers have drawn attention to the fact that James McGill, the university's founder, was a merchant of the products of slavery and that he personally owned Indigenous and Black slaves (Trudel 1960). Among the many violent aspects of settler-colonialism, the one most relevant to this article is the suppression and subjugation of Indigenous languages in Canada and Québec. Whereas the

status of French in Montreal is the subject of live and active debate (Goudreault 2020), few think to question the status of Kanien'kéha (Kanienkeha.net 2020).

As global health students and young professionals, stimulated to engage with decolonisation, writing from Montreal, and connected to an institution that is responsible for language domination and subordination, we have good reason to think collectively about linguistic diversity.

As individuals, our ethno-linguistic backgrounds have elements of diversity and commonality. Our five authors were born and raised in six different countries. Our intra-team communication is in both English and French, languages that we each acquired through a distinct package of mechanisms: in some cases as first languages, in others through early childhood exposure, basic education learning or higher education imperatives. Although not used as shared languages within the group, individual team members conduct professional and personal activities in other languages in which they are fluent, including Haitian Creole, Arabic, Spanish, Italian and Mandarin Chinese. Individually, we each hold the value that our multilingualism has expanded our perspectives and made our lives richer. We also hold that it is neither necessary nor desirable to promote the use of a small number of dominant languages to the detriment of linguistic diversity. When initially conceiving this article, we intended to counter the prevailing tendency of writing in English. Our ultimate choice to write in English was not made to 'reach the largest audience' (e.g. Hirschbiel 2015); it was to reach audiences that are likely to be comfortable with, and contribute to, a dynamic of language domination and marginalisation.

Language hegemony

We support the statement by Agamben (2014) that the use of 'English in conferences, universities, and other places of that kind' might seem obvious yet that this practice 'should not be considered so innocent.' Through this statement, Agamben makes two important points, both of which are consistent to decolonising (Affun-Adegbulu & Adegbulu 2020; Büyüm, Kenny, Koris, Mkumba & Raveendran 2020; Gautier, Karambé, Dossou & Samb 2020) and critical (e.g., Benatar 2016) approaches to global health. Starting with his second point, about innocence, Agamben draws attention to the power relations that are inherent in the causes and the effects of one language dominating all others. Meanwhile, Agamben's first point is that the domination of English has become sufficiently widespread in academia to be taken-for-granted. When a belief or practice is taken-for-granted - for example, when it is supported by a dominant discourse - the belief or practice can be repeated without conscious consideration, potentially perpetuating harms without inducing reflection, critique or even notice (Eakin, Robertson, Poland, Coburn & Edwards 1996). Given this combination of power relations and taken-for-grantedness, we think that the overall domination of English in academia is a situation of language hegemony.

Our application of the concept of hegemony is informed by the Gramscian perspective (Ives, 2004) that identifies a form of power that is not overtly authoritarian. Stated in lay terms, this

form of power is produced by 'a dominant ideology which imposes or reinforces (through conditioned consent) a certain social order' (Oxford English Dictionary 2020). To be maintained, hegemonic orders require more than the will of the most powerful who reap the greatest benefits, they also require the support of others who are disadvantaged but come to believe that the given order is the best or only possibility.

There has been lively discussion of language hegemony in the wider academic sphere (Gordin 2015; Plo Alastrué & Pérez-Llantada 2015), among practitioners of specific research approaches (Alasuutari 2004) and specific fields such as geography (Germes & Hussein de Araújo 2016; Whitehand 2005). For the purposes of conceptual clarity, these discussions of language hegemony have overwhelmingly been discussions of *English-language* hegemony or *Anglo-American* hegemony (e.g. Stiffler & Mukhopadhyay 2007) when labeled according to the underlying imperial forces. For our purposes, we refer primarily to 'language hegemony' to focus attention on the issue of narrowed linguistic diversity, an issue that would not be effectively addressed if communication were to happen in three dominant languages, for example, rather than only one. Despite this focus, we do refer to English-language hegemony (or domination) when this specification is accurate and intended.

Turning the attention to our shared world of global health academia, we see language hegemony perpetuated with little or no conscious consideration. Whereas there are at least examples of French-speaking global health colleagues directly challenging the situation of English-language dominance (Jones, Gautier, Kadio, Mac-Seing, Miranda, Omenka, Ouédraogo, Pérez, M, Turcotte-Tremblay & Tiné 2018; Ouédraogo et al. 2019; Roca, Boum & Wachsmuth 2019), these examples have been few in number and difficult to find. Seemingly more common are acknowledgments of English-language dominance presented alongside other concerns (Büyüm et al. 2020), suggestions about how to slightly reduce the injustice of English-dominant practices (Smith, Hunt & Master 2014) and - as we can attest from our lived experiences - informal conversations among colleagues. Amid these trends we see calls to address global health hegemony that are negligent of language issues (e.g. Holst 2020) or, exactly as one would anticipate in a situation of hegemony, defence of the status quo (Kamadjeu 2019).

#DecolonizingGH Conferences: Fertile yet Untouched Terrain to Contest Language Hegemony

The situation to date

Since at least February 2019, there has been a movement of student-led decolonising global health conferences. These conferences have been identified as #DecolonizingGH on social media and can be understood as a series, with the earlier events informing and inspiring those that followed. In this series, we note the conferences in 2019 at Harvard University (USA) and in 2020 at Duke University (USA), the University of Edinburgh (UK) and the Karolinska Institute (Sweden). All events had online components with those hosted by Edinburgh and Karolinska

being primarily virtual because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, these conferences are not the entirety of the decolonisation movement in global health. Nonetheless, as compared to the mainstream ideological foundation of our universities – that is to say, an ideology of globalised neoliberalism with imperial domination as its geopolitical foundation – we could anticipate that this conference series might be a locus of alternative, progressive and radical approaches to global health.

With respect to language hegemony, the decolonising conference series has not yet lived up to its name. Whereas conference panelists and keynote speakers have rightly drawn attention to the documented problems and weaknesses of the Western-centric academic system (Hedt-Gauthier, Airhihenbuwa, Bawah, Cherian, Connelly, Hibberd, Ivers, Jerome, Kateera, Manabe, Maru, Murray, Shankar, Shuchman & Volmink 2018), we remain surprised at the lack of explicit acknowledgement of hegemonic language use. In our review of the conference materials, we were unable to identify any session content that critiqued the dominant use of English in the global health field. Moving beyond content to consider process, we were unable to identify a single session that was delivered in a language besides English, nor were we able to identify any mention of translation activities. While we detected and appreciated the ceremonial use of ‘other’ languages in #DecolonizingGH conference sessions, we lamented that speakers immediately returned to English after completing their salutation (e.g. Kumalo 2020). Even in those rare situations where the existence of linguistic diversity was acknowledged, it was left unchallenged that the entirety of substantive communication occur in the language of the British and American empires.

The logics of the status quo

Without active intervention, hegemonic arrangements are self-perpetuating. Decolonising global health conferences have been organised primarily by institutions in countries that perpetuate and benefit from English-language hegemony (Lemberg 2018). Similar to scientific journals, organisers who function in English invite participants who communicate in English. Even if English is not the preferred language of most involved, certain levels of proficiency and engagement with the language are required as conditions of entry (Pérez-Llantada 2018). In the process, the use of other languages is further marginalised and the imperative for English even stronger. Given the imperatives, the hegemonic dynamic extends beyond the boundaries of English-speaking countries and even work activities, totalising other places and facets of life. As recommended by a native Catalan/Spanish-speaking academic based in France, ‘Read books and watch television in English. Write all lab reports and conduct meetings in English’ (Bosch Grau 2019).

With the status quo of language hegemony in effect, *it is easy* for conference organisers to reproduce the existing dynamics while it is challenging to do things differently. Beyond the phenomenon of ‘doing things in a given way because that is the way that they are done,’ we are cognisant of the logics that reward conformity and punish alternatives. We think that it is necessary to address these logics directly and critically in order to best consider when and how to do differently. Of these logics, we see the mutually reinforcing considerations of ‘audience size’ and of ‘English as a lingua franca’ as the most deeply entrenched.

Conducting decolonising global health conference activities in languages besides English will remove language barriers for speakers and participants who are currently excluded. Of course, this activity will also create barriers for some who have previously enjoyed language barrier-free access. Given that this is inherently a dynamic in which some will win while others will lose, our impression is that conference organisers default to a position of numerical supremacy, consistently choosing to favour the language choice that allows the largest audience size. While seemingly equal-opportunity in its rationale, this logic systematically leads to the selection of a dominant language, or in more specific terms, the entrenchment of English as the default.

Even global health scholars have lauded the use of English as a lingua franca, or common language, comparing its contemporary use to that of Latin in medieval and renaissance Europe (Kamadjeu 2019). While the value of a common language to facilitate connectivity is undeniable, the comparison with Latin is faulty: Latin was not in active colloquial use during the referent periods, meaning that it belonged equally to many *precisely because* it belonged to no one. Esperanto, a constructed language which aimed to become the global lingua franca, is largely remembered as a failed attempt quickly surpassed by English. While reasons for its lack of success are still debated, a prominent argument is that, precisely because it was constructed - and thus, had no specific cultural grounding - it had no cultural weight, while English did (Patterson & Huff 1999). Indeed, by contrast to both late Latin and Esperanto, the English language is tied to ethno-cultural groups, national projects and geo-political ambitions (Lemberg 2018). Importantly, at the level of individuals, the distribution of English proficiency is patterned, often mirroring the inequitable distribution of access to economic and social capital.

Although *it is accurate* that English is being used as a lingua franca and because of this, in part, it allows access to a larger audience, these logics must be contrasted against other concerns. Bearing in mind that the #DecolonizingGH movement has developed amid an optimism toward the possibility of things being otherwise, we think that this movement might have the energy and drive needed to elevate these other concerns. With respect to the conference we are organising, we have made the commitment to think about the theoretical and practical issues of challenging language hegemony for our own contribution to the decolonising global health conference series.²

Applying decolonising logics to language hegemony

We propose that successful contestation of language hegemony requires a change in priorities. In opposition to the hegemonic approach to language founded upon the apparent efficiency of the largest audience size enabled by a lingua franca, we support an approach that is based on equity and diversity, values that are consistent with the decolonising movement. In more specific

² According to **Tuck and Yang (2012)**, 'decolonisation' occurs when settlers return stolen land to Indigenous peoples. Given that the nation-state of Canada is a settler-colonist creation, the McGill group has opted to avoid a conflation of meaning and re-named its initiative *Reimagining Global Health (RGH)*. The RGH initiative remains generally aligned with the #DecolonizingGH movement.

terms, we identify the mutually-reinforcing logics of equitable inclusion and epistemic pluralism. We present reflections on each of these logics in-turn.

As previously stated, inclusion based solely on audience size reinforces existing patterns of distribution of social and economic capital, providing the easiest access to those who were raised in the dominant language, a more laborious form of access to those who are able to gain proficiency later in life and no access to those who lack proficiency in that dominant language (Pérez-Llantada 2018). In applying this logic to the substance of this article, the operations of decolonising global health conferences, 'access' refers to a given person's ability to participate according to language proficiency. Easy access entails communication with few challenges, laborious access involves communication that is difficult but possible while no access is a situation in which a person can neither understand nor express themselves because of the language in which the dialogue occurs. In contrast to inclusion based solely on audience size, a logic of equitable inclusion is concerned with challenging and countering the existing patterns of distribution, privileging access to people from language groups that are more marginalised.

In proposing that there be conference programming in other languages for the purpose of equitable inclusion, we anticipate the critique that this logic is mistaken and unnecessary, a critique that is supported by the claim that there are linguistic communities in which 'every individual is just as comfortable communicating in English as they are in their native language.' While we acknowledge that there is a theoretical possibility of universal English fluency among all members of a not-yet-extinct language somewhere, we think that it is more common that this description is applied mistakenly to another scenario, the one in which 'individuals who have advanced education are *more* comfortable discussing academic and professional matters in English.' This scenario of linguistic homogenisation is a problem for reasons of epistemic pluralism, as we describe below. Nonetheless, for the purposes of equitable inclusion we want to draw attention to the conflation of 'those with advanced education' and 'everyone.' A logic of equitable inclusion proactively identifies and counters this conflation, intentionally identifying linguistic communities that are being marginalised and finding ways to be more welcoming on those marginalised communities' terms.

Equitable inclusion requires intentionality and effort on the part of organisers, necessitating adaptations towards the margins rather than the centre. Among those who were raised in dominant languages and those who worked hard to join those dominant linguistic communities, we recognise that this change in focus is likely to feel strange and uncomfortable in addition to sometimes requiring investments of time and dedication. We propose that these dynamics and the accompanying sentiments are wholly consistent to the larger decolonising project.

We acknowledge the possibility that equitable inclusion could occur - eventually - through more homogenisation. In fact, we see this pro-inclusion logic used to support calls for English-focused higher education for scientists (Bosch Grau 2019) and even propositions that English become the language of education for everyone (Kamadjeu 2019). Although we see linguistic diversity as a better - and definitely more immediate - strategy to achieve equitable inclusion, this is not

the only reason to promote diversity. Beyond issues of inclusion, linguistic diversity promotes a diversity of knowledge systems or *epistemes* (Bennett 2015; Smith 2013; Verran 2001).

Beyond being neutral descriptors of an objective and singular reality, languages shape the ways that humans make sense of the world and then act within it (Bennett 2015). English, in particular, has developed alongside positivist scientific understandings of the world in ways that benefit both positivist science and the English language (Bennett 2015). Meanwhile, a different understanding of science can be enabled through the use of a different language (Verran 2001) and Indigenous languages have supported diverse social and economic orders (Smith 2013). As languages are no longer used to create and carry knowledge, a process of *epistemicide*, or a killing of knowledge systems, ensues (Bennett 2015).

Given the urgent crises faced by humanity, we need diverse knowledge systems to propose novel solutions (Raygorodetsky 2011). Beyond pragmatism, this need for diversity should be particularly poignant to decolonising movements: the global knowledge and socio-economic order responsible for our most pressing crises emerged from European colonisation (Weiss, Lebrón & Chase 2018), a movement premised on the destruction and elimination of Indigenous knowledge systems (Inani 2018; Smith 2013). Whereas we are arguing for the initiation of the most basic forms of linguistic diversity in the face of a powerful language hegemony, there are for more formidable efforts being mounted to revitalise endangered Indigenous languages in our part of the world (Coronel-Molina & McCarthy 2016) and resurrect these languages as instruments of knowledge elsewhere (Smith 2013). Comparatively speaking, it is a relatively straightforward task for decolonising global health conferences to move beyond English-only operations and commit to operating in languages that are otherwise in active use.

Practical actions for linguistic diversity in #DecolonizingGH conferences

The preparation of this article included a collective effort to identify and advance practical strategies to enable linguistic diversity in decolonising global health conference activities. The process of identifying strategies included two group meetings (three months apart) complemented by a collective online dialogue and internet search activities. The strategies identified in this article are intended to be propositional rather than definitive; after all, we are global health leaders collaborating to problem-solve and not experts in fields of language or communication. We note that we have written this article during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period during which there has been a rapid transformation from in-person interactions to virtual communication via video and audio conferencing (Spagnulo, Gauthier, Seppey & D'souza 2020).

Live translation³ of conference activities

The opportunities to offer conference activities in multiple languages has expanded dramatically with the transition to virtual communication. Among these opportunities, video conferencing applications allow for separate audio channels to permit simultaneous translation (Zoom Help Center n.d), conducted by a person identified for this role. This remote simultaneous interpretation can now be incorporated into both in-person and online events, extending its application from current virtual circumstances to future in-person conferences (Interprefy n.d.). On other platforms, translators are included in the service package, diversifying the language options available (Kudo n.d.; Voiceboxer n.d.). Of course, these strategies require skilled translators - whether paid or volunteer, identified by organisers or by the technology platform - and the appropriate licences of the applications. Nonetheless, in the wake of recent technological shifts, simultaneous translation is far more affordable and accessible, remarkably so when compared to the specialised equipment such as soundproof booths and participant headsets that were formerly required for in-person events.

In addition to translation conducted by humans, there are increasingly artificial intelligence (AI) applications that translate spoken word into another language in the form of translated captions and/or translated spoken language. Admittedly, these AI applications have not yet been perfected, are available primarily in dominant languages and could be inappropriately presented as the single solution to all language barriers (Lemberg 2018). Despite these limitations, the increased availability and reduced cost of translation creates many possibilities for simultaneous participation in multiple languages.

Post-hoc translation

Just as the transition to virtual communication has changed communication across space and distance, this transition has also changed approaches to time: in addition to 'synchronous' or real-time conference participation, it is now more common to ascribe similar value to 'asynchronous' participation. With the increased use of recorded content, organisers could translate material after the original recording. This strategy - which has been successfully tested in other global health conferences, including the latest virtual Global Symposium on Health Systems Research (#HSR2020) - could allow for a higher quality translation that is available on similar terms as compared to the source language.

Strategic thoughtfulness regarding translation

It is acknowledged that translations fundamentally modify communications (Bennett 2015) such that 'the products of translation are hybrid texts, born of the inevitable shifts in meaning involved in the translation process' (Germes & Hussein de Araújo 2016:4). With this understanding, the goal of translation should not be exact replication but instead the opportunity to produce new, related works. Through this process, it would be possible to effectively promote epistemic

³ We use the term 'translation' as a signifier for all activities that involve the transposition of one language to another, regardless as to the medium of communication or the extent of inference involved in the transposition. Accordingly, we use the term 'translator' to denote a person doing translation, inclusive of 'interpreters.'

diversity and counter the trends of homogenisation and epistemicide. Consistent to these considerations, organisers could think strategically about the language use and translation practices they wish to foster. One example of a strategic decision would be to intentionally privilege both original content and translations that are in languages besides English, proactively avoiding the centring 'of the hegemonic language of academia as a key reference point' (Germes & Hussein de Araújo 2016:5).

Strategic thoughtfulness regarding programming

The strategic thoughtfulness of regarding translation can be optimised through upstream considerations about the speakers and the source languages. These considerations include the specific recruitment of speakers *because* they will deliver their content in non-dominant languages. Speakers who tend to communicate in English could be provided with support to improve their delivery in second or third languages so that they can maintain their eligibility as speakers, presuming that these speakers are willing to engage in the process.⁴ Organisers could seek to identify decolonising global health discussions that are already circulating in other languages in order to provide an additional platform to these discussions and further increase their prominence.

Clearly, this is a time when there are tremendous opportunities to contest language hegemony in decolonising global health conferences. We consider our preliminary list of practical propositions to be the beginning of the creation of a much larger set of tools.

Conclusion

While we feel optimism with the development of new opportunities to contest language hegemony, we are equally realistic about the challenges; it is not an easy task to reverse trends that are so deeply entrenched and perpetuated by other forces. In this respect, contesting language hegemony is a clear reflection of decolonising: it is easy to identify the problem and stimulating to critique it, but *actually doing things differently* goes against many instincts, especially when supporting the status quo is rewarded and so many are unable to see the problem.

Our project to think, write and act to counter language hegemony and promote linguistic diversity is ongoing. As members of the Reimagining Global Health group at McGill University, our authorship group is active but our vision is non-dominant - and this within a Montreal-based group where members are equally exposed to the viability of resisting language domination.

While we, the authors, draw inspiration from the struggle in Québec, we would also note with interest the work of Indigenous communities in Canada. Unlike English and French, languages

⁴ It is common practice for international conferences in English to provide some support to participants who are weak or uncomfortable with the language. If this process - of participant labour enhanced through organiser-support - can be done to facilitate participation in English, it can also be done for other languages.

that gained their initial prominence through colonial violence, Indigenous languages are signs of resilience and improbable success by their mere continued existence despite centuries of relentless violent subjugation. One example of many in Canada's history is the active and deliberate stifling of Indigenous languages in children through residential schools. Children were often physically punished for speaking in their native tongue and were forced to learn English and French to 'integrate' into settler culture and erase Indigenous identity (Wolochatiuk & Sherman 2012).

Today, movements of Indigenous language revitalisation are underway; however, given the historical and present harms of colonial cultural genocide (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015), several groups involved in this movement prefer that the initiatives remain exclusively Indigenous (Faisca Richer, as quoted in Gautier & Samb 2020). As of the time of writing, the Reimagining Global Health group - and therefore this authorship sub-group - is without a member who is Indigenous. Accordingly, we see it as appropriate to only engage with the Indigenous language revitalisation movement carefully and from a distance. Indeed, the issue of a decolonising global health group having a membership exclusively composed of settlers has been a parallel concern to language hegemony since the founding of Reimagining Global Health, especially since both concerns are rooted in the irony of decolonising movements relying on colonising patterns. Thus far, we have had slightly more success in advancing our position against language hegemony and towards linguistic diversity, in large part because of our positionalities. While linguistic diversity and Indigenisation appear to us as being generally aligned, we recognise that this is not always the case. We are working towards a system of appropriately seeking counsel from Indigenous people with respect to individual decisions in planning events. We hope that we are able to advance with respect to both linguistic diversity and Indigenisation even though the precise pathway forward is not entirely clear.

Limitations

We acknowledge that our decisions to focus on certain key elements of language hegemony in decolonising global health conferences required that we pay less attention to others. One instance of this is our conceptualisation of the issue as *academic*, or more specifically, as associated with universities. This conceptualisation is consistent to the student-led nature of the conference series but could mistakenly give the impression that we perceive this context as isolated from others. We know that academia is intertwined with economic and geo-political forces and have reason to believe that language hegemony is equally rampant in policy and diplomacy spheres (Piller, Zhang & Li 2020). Like decolonisation more broadly, linguistic diversity occurs in an ecosystem in which there are nodes of support amid swaths of inertia. We propose that it is possible to expand the context in which we discuss language hegemony and hope that this line of inquiry is pursued. In the meantime, we maintain that focusing on alternative, progressive and radical student organising is a good starting point.

We equally acknowledge our focus on ethno-cultural language to the exclusion of the rich considerations of language and disability, broadly understood. In recent years, the fruits of disability advocacy and technological advances have transformed the accessibility of

communication for people who do not use the dominant modes of expressing or absorbing language. We foresee that much can be learned from our colleagues with disabilities and recognise that issues of ethno-cultural diversity extend into this world as well, for example the imperative to respect sign language diversity.

Finally, we acknowledge the irony of composing this article in the most hegemonic language. As mentioned above, we opted to use this language, in part, because we want to reach colleagues who are most likely to be unaware of the phenomenon of language hegemony and most interested in its continuation. English is the optimal language to use for this purpose. In addition, the language policy of the *Journal of Decolonising Disciplines* was influential: if the journal had an English-only policy, we would have likely pressed to write in French and taken our project elsewhere in the case of refusal. The fact that the journal is opening to publishing work in other South African languages directly influenced our posture towards this journal. Moving forward, we foresee a strategic use of language to communicate internally and externally.

Last words

Whereas there is a hegemonic approach to language in student-led decolonising global health conferences, we see both the need and the opportunity for change. By re-centring the ways that organisers think about language, prioritising equitable inclusion and epistemic diversity, we see a solid foundation upon which to build different practices. We also see technical and practical opportunities have emerged in the changed communicative dynamic enabled by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to strengthening and deepening our understanding of these issues, we are also working practically to stimulate change, through the Reimagining Global Health initiative at McGill University. We recognise that transforming conference practices from language hegemony to linguistic diversity will be a challenging task, one that is on par with, and supportive of, decolonisation more generally.

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