Conceptualising Linguistic Injustice as a Form of Epistemic Injustice

Clement Mayambala

1. Introducing the problem

The following thought experiment shall aid our understanding of the phenomenon of linguistic injustice, after which I shall define and analyse linguistic injustice in detail.

Imagine a multi-ethnic global south country C that is home to several indigenous languages.[1] Imagine also that C was colonised by one of the western superpowers that was involved in the colonization of the global southern countries. Given this colonial history, a western colonial master's language was imposed on the indigenous people of C as their only academic and official language: that is, as their only legitimized language of scientific communication.[2] Imagine too that the dominance of a western language in C's social and scientific discourses occurs at the expense of all the indigenous languages inherent in C. In fact, all the official doc-

1 I use the terms "indigenous language," "mother tongue," and "local language" synonymously.

2 During colonial periods, colonisers imposed their European language onto the people in colonies forbidding them to speak their indigenous languages especially in academic and scientific discourses. Elsewhere, for example, I indicate how European languages that came as a result of colonialism are still dominating the academic and administrative spheres at the expense of indigenous African languages. For instance, there are more than 20 Anglophone countries in Africa. For some of these countries English is an official language and for others it is a *de facto* working language, instead of an indigenous language. There are also about 29 so called "French-speaking countries in Africa", more than 15 of them are known as Francophone countries (countries that use French as an official language instead of an indigenous language). Moreover, Portuguese is considered a national language in more than five African countries, not to mention Spanish-speaking African countries. See Mayambala, Clement: On the Epistemology of Excluded Voices, *forthcoming* in: Mahlert, Bettina et al. (eds.): Decolonizing Knowledge and Learning Systems in the Global South, New York 2024.

uments, schools, courts of law, research institutes, etc., in C operate using only the legitimized western language.[3]

There exists also a social-epistemic hierarchy in C that is predicated upon one's proficiency in the legitimized western language. That is, individuals in C who possess fluency in the legitimized western language often view themselves as epistemically superior and good at knowledge production. On the other hand, individuals in C who solely speak indigenous languages are often negatively stereotyped, and perceived as epistemically inferior and less good at knowledge production.[4] This negative stereotyping of non-speakers of a legitimized western language is often epistemically harmful to their epistemic agency: they are often excluded from contributing to meaningful epistemic interactions in C due to their non-proficiency in the legitimized colonial masters' language.[5] For example, speakers of only indigenous languages have their testimonies disregarded or viewed as insufficient in the courts of law due to their lack of proficiency in the legitimatized western language. In schools, teachers silence, police or penalise students when they communicate in their mother tongues in classrooms. In summary, students and speakers of only local languages in C are often forced to reject practicing their local language and culture[6] by acquiring a colonial master's language and culture.

In what follows, I shall draw on this imagined scenario to define and analyse the phenomenon of linguistic injustice and to situate it into Frickers' framework of epistemic injustice.

2. Linguistic Injustice

Linguistic injustice occurs when an individual or a group of people is excluded, silenced or hindered from contributing to meaningful social-epistemic interactions due to their non-proficiency in a legitimized (Western) language. For example,

3 Take Uganda for instance, where English was introduced as an official and academic language during colonial periods. It is still used as the official language despite Uganda being a home to more than 10 local languages.

4 Sometimes, due to stereotype internalisation, non-speakers of a legitimized western language perceive themselves as epistemically inferior. For example, an individual shies away from meaningful epistemic discourses simply because she believes she is less good at knowledge production given her non-proficiency in the legitimized language.

5 Note that the unifying element of individuals perceived as epistemically inferior is, not their gender, race, class or religion as one might think, but rather their non-proficiency in the legitimized western language.

6 I use "language and culture" because there is often an interplay between one's language and culture. For example, "Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture." See Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi: Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in Africa Literature, London 1986, 13 f.

"when a Black witness, like Rachel Jeantel, have their testimonies disregarded or viewed as insufficient in the criminal justice system due to their use of Black Language.[7]" This form of injustice is commonly prevalent in global south countries where colonial master's languages are still given undue preference as the sole legitimate means of scientific communication, often, at the expense of the indigenous languages. In our imagined case in C above, for instance, individuals who lack proficiency in the legitimized colonial masters' language are excluded from meaningful epistemic interactions that take place in schools and society. But let me use concrete examples from two global south authors to illustrate linguistic injustice. Mahatma Gandhi, for example, narrated a personal story of being punished at school for speaking Gujarati (local language), and at other times being rewarded whenever he spoke English.[8] Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, a prominent Kenyan writer, also narrates how he and other indigenous children growing up in his hometown were only allowed to speak Gikuyu (local language) at home, but at school, their language of education ceased to be the language of their culture and thoughts. He painfully recalls:

> … one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment – three to five canes on bare buttocks – or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money they could hardly afford.
> *[However]* The attitude to English was the exact opposite: any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded; prizes, prestige, applause; the ticket to higher realms. English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences, and all the other branches of learning. English became the main determinant of a child's progress up the ladder of formal education.[9]

What one learns from Gandhi and Wa Thiong'o's insights is that once the superpowers of the global north colonized global south countries, one of the first things they did was to impose their European languages as the languages of power on the natives of those countries they colonised. In this way, colonial masters' languages became the only languages of intelligence, academics and political interaction, and the opposite was with the colonised people's indigenous languages: colonised people's

7 Rachel Jeantel was a key prosecution witness when George Zimmerman was tried in 2013 for the murder of Trayvon Martin. However, because she spoke in *African American Vernacular English* (AAVE), her testimony was dismissed as incomprehensible and not credible. As I shall note below, non-speakers of legitimized western languages in the global south are familiar with the disdain shown toward Jeantel's testimony in the courtroom. See Baker-Bell, April: Linguistic Justice. Black Language, Literacy, Identity and Pedagogy, New York 2021, 20 f.

8 See Gandhi, Mahatma: Towards New Education, Ahmedabad 1956.

9 Wa Thiong'o: Decolonising the Mind, 11–12 f.

languages were, and at most today, considered good for speaking at home and in the fields, but not good for academic and scientific discourses.[10] The relegation of global south indigenous languages to realms outside scientific and academic discourses explains why Gandhi and Wa Thiong'o were punished at school whenever they expressed their thoughts in their local languages.

One might object to my citation of Gandhi and Wa Thiong'o by arguing that the world has fundamentally changed from what they experienced: to argue that linguistic injustice happens today as it happened in the early periods of the 20th century is false. I argue that this is a mistaken objection because linguistic injustice, as experienced by Gandhi and Wa Thiong'o, is not merely a relic of the past century. It is a reality that is still prevalent in many academic and learning systems of the countries of the global south. My personal linguistic experience at school, for example, is not much different from Gandhi's and Wa Thiong'o's. When I look back to my primary and secondary school days (a few years ago), I cannot fail to count the numerous times I was caned or subjected to corporal punishments at school for speaking Luganda – the local language of my tribe, Baganda, in central Uganda. Just as Gandhi and Wa Thiong'o were forbidden from speaking Gujarati and Gikuyu at their school premises during the colonial era, so was speaking Luganda in my case. Until today the Ugandan education curriculum for primary and secondary schools permits teachers not only to prohibit but also to punish pupils and students caught speaking local languages at school. In fact, indigenous languages in Uganda, and in Africa at large, are considered nonstandard academic languages i.e. languages inferior to English, French, German, Spanish, etc., the so-called "standard languages" of scientific discourses.[11]

Like in Gandhi's and Wa Thiong'o's testimony, my experience points to a linguistic injustice that systematically permeates the academic structures of global south nations since the colonial era, where global south indigenous languages are not accorded their due recognition in academia as they ought to be. Penalizing speakers of indigenous languages for communicating in their native tongues is an injustice that is inherently dehumanising, and it leads to other undesirable consequences, including negative epistemic consequences. In many global south schools and societies, for example, indigenous speakers especially children of school-going age are linguistically disadvantaged, faulted, punished and belittled if they speak their mother tongues in classrooms (recall my experience above). For these children, classrooms are often seen as linguistically violent and marginalising spaces to be shunned, and this contributes to early-children school dropouts. Moreover, punishing or prohibiting children from expressing their lived experiences in their local language occurs

10 See "Never Write In The Language of the Colonizer" https://www.ttbook.org/interview/never-write-language-colonizer (3/8/2023).

11 See also Mayambala: On the Epistemology of Excluded Voices.

not only at school, but also sometimes at home. For example, some parents (those who have internalised the inferiority of their indigenous languages and culture) often reproach their children when they (children) use their mother tongues at home. This directly and negatively signals to the children that their mother tongue is not intellectually proper and valuable like a legitimized western language, and this is a point where language and race intersect with each other as Baker-Bell neatly puts it,

> *[Indigenous]* people's language experiences are not separate from their racial experiences. Indeed, the way a Black child's language is devalued in school reflects how Black lives are devalued in the world. Similarly, the way a white child's language is privileged and deemed the norm in schools is directly connected to the invisible ways that white culture is deemed normal, neutral, and superior in the world.[12]

There is a personal story to exemplify Baker-Bell's insight: When I came to Europe, I was awe-struck seeing how European children are encouraged and protected by their home governments to learn about their own cultures in their own mother tongues until when they voluntarily choose to learn other foreign languages. In fact, I became jealous of the ease with which white children speak their local languages at school, not having to worry that (a) someone is policing them or that (b) they will be punished for doing so. Then I started asking myself questions I could hardly answer: why are British, German, Portuguese, Italian, French, or Spanish children in schools not forced to learn Luganda, Gikuyu, Gujarati or at least any other language of the indigenous people of the global south? Why were Gandhi, Wa Thiong'o and I forced with the power of a cane on bare buttocks to learn to express our thoughts in a foreign European language? Why do many Ugandan school-going children today have to bear what I experienced in school?[13] Although I had no satisfying answers to these questions, asking myself such questions was a crucial moment for me in making sense of my lived linguistic experience at school and thereby coming up with the idea of writing this chapter.

One might ask whether I construe the notion of linguistic injustice as distinctly epistemic. The answer is yes, because language and knowledge are inextricably bound together: one's language plays a significant epistemic role in the production and transmission of knowledge. Or as Anna Chamot and Michael O'Malley argue, "Language is used by teachers and students for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge and skills [...], imparting new information, describing abstract ideas, and

12 Baker-Bell: Linguistic Justice, 2 f.

13 See Mayambala: On the Epistemology of Excluded Voices.

developing students' conceptual understanding."[14] Let me expand the discussion about the distinctive epistemic nature of linguistic injustice by highlighting two ways in which linguistic injustice epistemically harms its targets.

First epistemic harm: individuals who exclusively speak an indigenous language are not taken seriously when they bear witness to their lived experiences, despite their ability to articulate their lived experiences in their local language (recall Rachel Jeantel's example). An explanation for this is that their local language is not regarded as a *bona fide* scientific language due to the legacy left by colonialism. As I noted above, since the colonial period colonial masters' languages became the only languages of intelligence and academics in many global southern countries, whereas colonised people's indigenous languages became relegated to the non-academic and non-scientific spheres. This therefore explains why testimonies of non-speakers of a legitimized western language are not taken seriously, especially in an academic setting.

Second epistemic harm: beliefs and bodies of knowledge produced or possessed by speakers of indigenous languages are not epistemically appreciated in academia as they should be. Wa Thiong'o offers us a perfect example here: once African scholars convened at a university in Uganda for a conference about 'What is African Literature?' Wa Thiong'o (a student of African Literature at the time) was shocked to learn that African scholars who had written and published their scholarly works in their indigenous languages were not invited to the conference. Invitations were given to other African scholars who had written and published their scholarly works in English. In his words,

> I, a student, could qualify for the meeting *[conference]* on the basis of only two published short stories, 'The Fig Tree' in a student journal, *Penpoint*, and 'The Return' in a new journal, *Transition*. But neither Shaban Robert, then the greatest living East African poet with several works of poetry and prose to his credit in Kiswahili, nor Chief Fagunwa, the greatest Nigerian writer with several published titles in Yoruba, could possibly qualify.[15]

According to this quotation, Shaban Robert's and Chief Fagunwa's bodies of knowledge (contained in their works in Kiswahili and Yoruba) were not welcomed and thereby not appreciated at a conference where they ought to have been given due credit; i.e. one being 'the greatest living East African poet' and the other 'the greatest Nigerian writer'. Unfortunately, the whole discussion about 'What is African literature?' was "based on extracts from works in English and hence they excluded

14 Chamot, Anna/O'Malley, Michael: The CALLA handbook. Implementing the cognitive academic language learning approach, New York 1994, 40 f.

15 Wa Thiong'o: Decolonising the Mind, 6 f.

the main body of work in Swahili, Zulu, Yoruba, Arabic, Amharic and other African languages."[16] The exclusion of that rich body of knowledge written in indigenous African languages, I argue, is an epistemic harm inherent in instances of linguistic injustice.

Before I proceed, let me make a recap of what I have discussed so far. I argued above that linguistic injustice or the domination of colonial masters' languages as the only languages of academic communication in the countries of the global south is epistemically harmful to the speakers of global south indigenous languages. The epistemic harm, as indicated above, is mainly twofold: firstly, individuals who exclusively speak indigenous languages are punished or not taken seriously when they bear witness to their lived experiences. An example given here is the policing and punishment of students who express their thoughts in their mother tongues at school. Secondly, beliefs and bodies of knowledge produced or possessed by indigenous language speakers are not epistemically appreciated in academia as they should be. An example given here was the exclusion of Shaban and Fagunwa's body of literature at a conference. If non-speakers of a legitimised western language are discredited as epistemically incompetent, and their testimonies or bodies of knowledge dismissed or never solicited in practices of knowledge production; then they are automatically wronged in their capacity as knowers something Miranda Fricker calls *epistemic injustice*. Below, I shall situate the notion of linguistic injustice into Fricker's framework of epistemic injustice.

3. Epistemic injustice

Typically, when a speaker S testifies that a given proposition *p* is true, the goal is for a hearer H to come to believe/know (given *that p* is true) that p. Otherwise, this testimonial exchange may go wrong as an epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice according to Fricker is the injustice that is inflicted on someone in their capacity as a knower. The person suffering epistemic injustice is not believed because they have a particular social identity a hearer prejudicially deems to be less credible.[17] An example is when a woman is not acknowledged when proposing an idea in a meeting, than when a man proposes the same idea later and gets recognised. Not acknowledging a woman, in this case, rests on the assumption that women generally propose less promising ideas than men do, and this *pace* Fricker is an epistemic injustice. Fricker cashes out two types of epistemic injustice: *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice*.

16 Ibid.

17 Fricker, Miranda: Epistemic Injustice. Power & the Ethics of Knowing, Oxford 2007, 1 f.

Testimonial injustice refers to the injustice done to an individual when others do not believe her testimony because she has a social identity associated with less credibility.[18] For example, when a (white) police officer disbelieves one's testimony because she is a person of colour. Women and people of colour (or sexism and racism cases) are the examples explicitly singled out by Fricker under testimonial injustice. However, Fricker also fleetingly hinted at the phenomenon of linguistic injustice when discussing testimonial injustice. She indicated how a person's *accent* carries not only *a social charge* but also *an epistemic charge* that affects how much credibility H affords S. She writes,

> Consider the immediate discursive impact of a speaker's accent, for instance. Not only does accent carry a social charge that affects how a hearer perceives a speaker (it may indicate a certain educational/class/regional background), but very often it also carries an epistemic charge. Accent can have a significant impact on how much credibility a hearer affords a speaker, especially in a one-off exchange. I do not mean that someone's accent is especially likely to lead a hearer, even an intensely prejudiced one, automatically to reject outright some manifestly believable assertions or, conversely, to firmly believe some otherwise incredible assertion. No doubt these things are possible, but given that for the most part it is generally in the interests of the hearers to believe what is true and not believe what is false, it would be a strong prejudice in an unusual context that would be singlehandedly powerful enough to have that sort of effect.[19]

Fricker does not develop further her notion of *one's accent* as carrying *social charge* and *epistemic charge* that affect how much credibility H affords S, nor will I do it here. But I shall expand her view by substituting *one's accent* with what I call *a speaker's non-proficiency in a legitimized western language.* Basing on what I have discussed in the previous sections, a speaker's non-proficiency in a legitimized western language carries a social charge upon which a hearer may rely to indicate a speaker's educational, class, or ethnic background. For example, Baker-Bells quotes a teacher at the "Black Language workshop" saying: "My assumption about people who speak this way *[Black Language]* is that they are from a lower-class and are uneducated."[20] On the other hand, however, a speaker's non-proficiency in a legitimized western language also carries an epistemic charge that affects how much credibility a hearer affords a speaker. Here Baker-Bell affords us another teacher saying, "I cringe when I hear my students speak in an indigenous language! It brings out the grammar nazi that lives in me."[21] Given this teacher's attitude, one might infer, she affords

18 See ibid.

19 Ibid., 17 f.

20 Baker-Bell: Linguistic Justice, 22 f.

21 Ibid.

the speaker (student) no or less epistemic credibility simply because of testifying in an indigenous language that 'brings out the grammar nazi that lives in her'.

The move I am making (from Fricker's idea of *accent* to *a speaker's non-proficiency in a legitimized western language*) is meant to highlight how linguistic injustice fits in Fricker's framework of epistemic injustice on the testimonial injustice interpretation. Recall what we saw in the previous section whereby testimonies of non-speakers of a legitimised western language are often deemed less credible than the testimonies of their counterparts – those possessing proficiency in a legitimized western language. In this way, therefore, linguistic injustice is epistemically harmful on Fricker's account not only because it is fundamentally unjust, but also because it victimises its targets to the extent of seeing themselves as someone who has less of a right to contribute to the common pool of knowledge.

Fricker also describes a structural form of epistemic injustice called *hermeneutical injustice* which happens "when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences."[22] In other words, hermeneutical injustice happens when a dominant social group of people "colonise the knowing field's schemata by assigning meaning to the phenomenon in ways that reflect their understandings and their experiences of the world, leaving the rest of us to work awkwardly with the conceptual vocabulary they have crafted."[23] This is because "the powerful have an unfair advantage in structuring collective social understandings."[24] Non-speakers of a legitimised western language can be said to be among certain social groups that often encounter inequality in hermeneutical participation. Given the collective social understanding of our imagined country C, for example, experiences of those individuals proficient in a legitimised western language are highly visible and plausible whereas the experiences of those individuals who are non-proficient in a legitimised western language are often rendered invisible and implausible. This is because where linguistic injustice prevails, there are often some hermeneutical gaps, for example, when teachers believe that there is something inherently wrong with a child who expresses her thoughts in her indigenous language at school. Another hermeneutical

22 Fricker: Epistemic Injustice, 1 f.

23 Bailey, Alison: The Unlevel Knowing Field. An Engagement with Dotson's Third-Order Epistemic Oppression, in: Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective 3 (2014) 10, 64 f.

24 Fricker: Epistemic Injustice, 147 f. Moreover, Fricker uses Carmita Wood's experience to illustrate hermeneutical injustice. Wood systematically suffered from unwanted sexual advances from her boss. She later leaves her job and applies for unemployment insurance. At the insurance offices, Wood was asked why she left her job. Unfortunately, she was unable to describe what had occurred because of there being a lacuna in the collective epistemic resources to make sense of what she had experienced. As a result, she was denied compensation. Later she shared her experience with other women who had also had unwanted sexual advances from their bosses, and the term 'sexual harassment' emerged, ibid., 150 f.

gap, drawn from Baker-Bell's study of the intersection between language and race among students of colour, is that: "While many of the students suspected that their language was oftentimes disregarded due to them being Black, they had a difficult time trying to explain and make sense of how one could experience racism through language."[25] Black students' "difficult time" here is a hermeneutical gap that rendered them incapable of making sense of what Baker-Bell later termed as *linguistic racism*—racism that is at the intersection of black people's language and racial experiences. The existence of those two hermeneutical gaps signifies what Fricker calls *hermeneutical marginalization*, which occurs: "When there is unequal hermeneutical participation with respect to some significant area(s) of social experience, members of the disadvantaged group are hermeneutically marginalized."[26] In many social situations, members of disadvantaged groups are unable to generate "meanings about some areas of *[their lived experience and]* the social world.[27] This is almost what we saw in our imagined country C: i.e. although non-speakers of a legitimized western language (like Gandhi, Wa Thiong'o and I) could express their lived experiences in their own mother tongues, their indigenous languages did not count as standard mediums of communicating knowledge. It is only when they disregard expressing their lived experiences in their local languages and possess fluency in the dominant legitimized language of scientific discourses that their voices can be afforded credibility and intelligibility.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore a social problem I call *linguistic injustice*, and to situate it into Frickers' framework of epistemic injustice. Firstly, I have defined what linguistic injustice is; and argued that the domination of European colonial masters' languages as the only languages of academic communication in the countries of the global south is epistemically harmful to the speakers of global south indigenous languages. Secondly, I have situated and defended the claim that linguistic injustice is a form of epistemic injustice on both Fricker's testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice accounts.

25 Baker-Bell: Linguistic Justice, 28 f.

26 Fricker: Epistemic Injustice, 153 f.

27 Ibid., 153 ff.