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Towards a Decolonial Syntax

Research, Teaching, Publishing

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Introduction: A Background to Decolonising Syntax

In this chapter, we argue that syntacticians should do more to work against the colonial legacies which have shaped our field. We focus on three core academic activities, teaching, research, and citation practices. We give examples of how colonialist constructs and practices have shaped conventions in these areas, grounding our discussion in our own disciplinary, geographic, and institutional contexts. In order to encourage movement from reflection to action, we present a series of provocations in each section which address conceptual and practical steps syntacticians can take. Finally, while we grapple with the issue, we conclude that there can and must be a decolonial syntax in order for the field to move forward.

Decolonisation in Our Local Contexts

Recent years have seen the growth of movements calling on educational and research institutions around the world to acknowledge their role in shaping assumptions about racial and global hierarchies. Following the

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#RhodesMustFall movement in South Africa, the imperative to "decolonise" has become associated with a call to reimagine, transform, and disrupt the role played by universities as sites and producers of knowledge (Bhambra et al., 2018; Jansen, 2019). This process includes acknowledging and calling into question how academic disciplines have shaped thinking about the world, as well as what constitutes legitimate topics of study and appropriate methodological approaches. Our contribution to this volume draws on our experiences of teaching syntax in the parts of the world in which we are based—the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Africa—and our experiences of doing research on languages spoken in colonised contexts. We situate this discussion within the larger discourse on "decoloniality" and "transformation" as it is playing out in North America, South Africa, and the UK, drawing on our own experiences and insights. Through these three focus areas, the chapter represents a critical engagement with the methodologies and practices involved in syntax.

In the UK, decolonising discourses at higher education institutions tend to focus on the curriculum and teaching, although there is a varied response to the topic, both within and between institutions (cf. for example, Andrews, 2018; Bhambra et al., 2018; Gebrial, 2018). In South Africa, the discourse tends to centre around the term "transformation" (cf. du Preez et al., 2016), which necessarily engages with racial inequalities and processes of erasure, but also links to broader intersecting social justice issues including, for example, misogyny and transphobia. In North America, scholars of critical race and Indigenous studies have argued that "decolonise" should not be used as a metaphor (cf. Tuck & Yang, 2012), but rather that it should only be used in relation to movements for Indigenous land rights, access, and repatriation. Though our thinking is informed by all of these traditions, we do not follow any one of these approaches here. Instead, we find it critical to situate notions of "decolonisation" and "transformation" within our local contexts, histories, and daily lived realities.

While there are parallels between the three locations we inhabit, there are also important differences with respect to the educational systems, the research context, and positionality with respect to the decolonial discourse. As scholars working in these contexts, we draw on our own perspectives as well as our experiences of the contexts in which we are operating. We are aware of the need for context-specific responses to these challenges, as well as the strength that comes from forging international allegiances and collaborations. We are also aware that in many ways, the issues we discuss here in relation to knowledge production transcend national boundaries. In this chapter, we aim to identify the ways in which syntax as a field of research has fallen short of

engaging with decolonisation, and we aim to provoke discussion and ongoing discourse around how to bring decolonial dialogue into syntax research, teaching, and citation practice.

The approach developed here is influenced by the idea that decolonising efforts are united by two key political and methodological considerations. Firstly, decolonisation proceeds from a shared way of thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire, and racism as its empirical and discursive objects of study; and seeks to resituate these phenomena as key shaping forces in the contemporary world where their role has systematically and perpetually been hidden and erased from majority discourses. Secondly, in so doing, decolonisation purports to offer alternative ways of thinking about the world and an alternative form of praxis (Bhambra et al., 2018). Crucially, a decolonial approach requires us to first recognize how dominant and "unmarked" ways of understanding and interacting with the world have been shaped by these historical forces. Then, we must reimagine and reinvent these practices, while also addressing material and epistemological harms. In the context of syntax, this paper aims to show some ways that colonialisation, colonial histories, and empire have shaped current research and teaching practices, and provides first steps to creating an alternative framework of approaching teaching, research, and attribution in syntax.

Decolonising and (Re)Contextualising Syntax

Syntax is concerned with the internal organisation of language. From the classification of words to the ordering of words within phrases and sentences, syntax examines the structure of language. The study of syntax has been positioned as a central component of present-day linguistics, driven in large part by notions of generative grammar following Noam Chomsky (1965) and work following; this prioritisation can be seen in terms of which classes are part of the "core" linguistics curricula, introductory textbooks, and publication patterns in flagship journals. At the same time, the history of syntax is intrinsically connected with broader positivist movements in linguistics which have valued moves towards scientism (see also Clemons, this volume) and away from studying language-in-context (Goldsmith & Laks, 2019; Sankoff, 1988). While these theoretical moves are most closely associated with "Mainstream Generative Grammar" (Cullicover & Jackendoff, 2006), there have been knock-on effects across linguistic subdisciplines, where many assumptions about structuralism and generative grammar are taken for granted (Bell et al., 2016; Flores & Rosa, 2022).

As noted by Anne Charity Hudley, Christine Mallinson, and Mary Bucholtz (2020), linguistics lags behind a number of other humanities and social science disciplines in its engagement with race and racism. We, as researchers in topics within the field of syntax, believe that syntax is yet further behind other areas of linguistics in addressing these issues, as well as matters related to (de)coloniality. For example, work in language documentation and reclamation has called for the centring of linguistics around the lived experiences of the people who use the languages under study (Leonard, 2018); parallel issues remain underexplored in syntax. In part, this is due to an assumption, sometimes stated and sometimes unstated, that a language user's syntactic knowledge is in some way "deeper" than or impermeable to social—including racial—factors. Indeed, the degree to which social factors are included as part of an explanation often shapes whether that explanation gets to be called "syntactic" or even "linguistic" (Birkeland et al., 2022).

As such, *by design*, factors such as racism have been ruled out as being viable objects of study, labelled as extra-syntactic or extra-linguistic. Not only does this flawed assumption limit the empirical scope of the field, affecting what gets studied, it also affects who is seen as or self-identifies as a syntactician (again, see analogous arguments for all of linguistics from Charity Hudley et al., 2020; Charity Hudley & Flores, 2022; et alia). That is, ignoring factors such as racism and colonialism in syntactic inquiry enables these structural forces to cause harm to (potential) syntacticians. By naming these factors and their insidious reach, we seek to undo any lingering assumptions that the field of syntax is immune from racism, as we highlight, call into question, and disrupt the colonial histories and heritage embedded in our field.

About Our Team and Our Foci in this Chapter

The previous sections briefly laid out the intellectual contexts which have informed our approach to writing about decolonisation and syntax. This section gives some further context as to who we are and how our lived experiences and commitments, individually and as a group, have directed our focus in this chapter. In so doing, we keep with the reflective ethos of a decolonial approach, which asks all scholars to interrogate and name otherwise invisibilised subjectivities which shape how we ask and answer questions about the world. By briefly discussing who we are, why we are writing this chapter, and how the former informs the latter, we seek to push against colonial and positivist norms of inquiry which favour uninterrogated objectivity over contextualised subjectivities alongside motivating what we chose to talk about.

This chapter focuses on three areas where syntacticians need to adopt decolonial forms of thought and praxis, through what we see as some of the core areas of the academic profession: teaching, research, publishing, and engagement with the wider academic community. We identify practices rooted in colonialism and present alternative approaches via three case studies covering these areas.

In the second section we examine teaching practices and pedagogical approaches. The writing and conceptualisation of this section were led by Kristina Riedel. Kristina taught general linguistics and African linguistics at the University of the Free State, South Africa from 2016 to 2023. She has been teaching general linguistics at the University of the Witwatersrand since mid-2023. South Africa has seen large scale student protests in recent years that shut down campuses across the country, starting in 2015 with #RhodesMustFall. In response to this movement, the first workshop on Transformation in Linguistics by the linguistics associations of South Africa was held at Rhodes University in 2016, for which Kristina co-hosted a follow-up workshop at University of the Free State in 2018. She has been invited to speak about and has co-authored studies on transformation and decolonisation (de Vos & Riedel, 2023; Gibson et al., 2021). Kristina is co-authoring an Open Access syntax textbook for South African students that has a decolonial focus with Hlumela Mkabile (UFS) and Mark de Vos (Rhodes). As a white, German, "foreign national" in South Africa, and one of a small number of scholars in her area of African Linguistics in South Africa, she seeks to contribute to a meaningful transformation of this field from her own classes to her engagement with the linguistics association while staying mindful of the challenges and contradictions this involves.

In the third section, we identify insidious colonial constructs which are pervasive in research methods and entwined with central theoretical assumptions. Hannah Gibson and Savithry Namboodiripad took the lead on this section; Hannah, who is also the lead author of this chapter, works on language contact and linguistic variation, with a focus on the morphosyntax of languages of Eastern and Southern Africa and the link between multilingualism and equitable access to resources. Much of her collaborative research has been carried out with colleagues and academic partners based in Eastern and Southern Africa. Her ongoing work on decolonisation of teaching and research is informed by her own experiences as a Black academic of mixed Black Caribbean and white English heritage in a UK higher education institution, where she has found herself both hypervisible and invisible. This positionality, combined with ongoing interactions and discussions with

students and colleagues, continue to inform her views and work in relation to decolonising linguistics.

Savithry studies language contact and syntactic typology, and her research is informed by psycholinguistics and language evolution, disciplines which are underpinned by many un- or under-interrogated colonialist constructs. Relatedly, she has worked on collaborative projects investigating the role of "native speaker" in (psycho)linguistic methods and theory (Birkeland et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2021, Cheng et al., 2022), and she has personal and scholarly commitments to developing and advocating for approaches which address historical (epistemological) harms in (psycho)linguistics in order to improve both the process and outcomes of language research (Namboodiripad & Henner, 2022; Namboodiripad & Sedarous, 2020). Along with her interactions with family and research participants in diasporic and decolonial contexts, her collaborative work on experiences of harassment and bias among linguists and language researchers (Namboodiripad et al., 2019) and the ensuing discussions have informed her efforts in this area.

In the fourth section, we present a case study of the citation of African researchers within the subfield of Bantu linguistics. Kyle Jerro led on this section. Kyle studies the syntax and semantics of argument realization and has explored these topics in Bantu languages, especially Kinyarwanda (Rwanda). As a white researcher based in the UK, they have been seeking to use their position to strengthen North–South collaborations and create a more collaborative environment that better promotes the research agendas set by African scholars. Having been recently criticized by a reviewer in a journal article submission for failing to cite "classic" works in African linguistics (i.e., grammars and papers by white colonial linguists), they have become interested in citation practices, and in particular, seek to disrupt traditions which position white researchers as experts by default.

Though we have crudely assigned ourselves to various sections, our thinking on each of these topics has grown through our personal interactions and scholarly collaborations. We form a team who have come together as a community of practice working on issues relating to decoloniality, race, and racism in higher education and linguistics. Our contributions here are also the result of a range of joint work and conversations amongst members of our team. Hannah, Savithry, and Kristina have worked jointly with Jacqueline Lück (Nelson Mandela University, South Africa) to conduct a survey of the views and experiences of students and instructors on the link between African languages and decolonisation. Hannah and Kyle have also co-taught a number of courses at the University of Essex and discussions around course content, presentation of ideas, and representation—both with each other

and with students—have informed their views on teaching and the conceptualisation of a decolonial syntax. Kristina and Hannah also co-organised a workshop entitled "Towards a Decolonial Linguistics" at the 8th International Conference on Bantu Languages held online in 2021 hosted by the University of Essex. This was to our knowledge the first workshop in this biennial conference series dedicated to the exploration of issues of (de)coloniality in Bantu linguistics, and citation and authorship were topics that arose in the course of the workshop.

This chapter draws on our own individual and shared positionalities, experiences, and ongoing work, and our shared view that the field of syntax has for too long avoided engaging with decoloniality and the inherent colonial and racist bias in our study of language. We issue a call for action which is based on a critical examination of the foundations of the field and theories that emerged therefrom. In an effort to facilitate this discussion, we provide "provocations" at the end of each section as ways to disrupt racist and/or colonial systems, practices, and assumptions in our field.

Teaching Practices and Pedagogical Approaches: The Classroom Context

We discuss three key aspects of a decolonial pedagogy: teaching materials need (1) to be richer, more representative, and locally relevant; (2) to provide broader coverage of languages and structures; and (3) to be embedded in an explicit pedagogy of inclusion and student-empowerment. Addressing these requirements is a necessary (though not sufficient) step towards allowing the study of syntax to play an important role in helping racialised learners interrogate and overcome negative hegemonic ideologies associated with their own language styles.

We are not aware of any accessible materials focused on teaching syntax through decolonising pedagogy but a number of scholars have developed models for other subfields of linguistics which we recommend as resources (Calhoun et al., 2021; Namboodiripad, 2020; Sanders, 2020; also Bowern & Dockum, this volume; Sanders et al., 2024; amongst others). In a webinar for the Linguistic Society of America, Savithry Namboodiripad (2020) notes two key aspects to meaningful application of the principles above to course design: firstly, including minoritized content in all lectures rather than leaving these for one or more dedicated session, and secondly, changing topics and their order from the perceived "norm" to recentre peripheralized contexts of language use. This model is put into practice in a textbook by Andrew Nevins

(2022), which describes how minoritized languages have changed linguistic theory. The book draws on typologically diverse languages from different parts of the world, and includes chapters on syntax, morphology, phonology, and semantics.

While syntax as a research area has broadened its empirical coverage of the world's languages over the past decades, the same trend is not as evident in syntax textbooks published in English, especially (but not only) those focused on generative theories, which continue to rely on English structures and examples. For example, Olaf Koeneman and Hedde Zeijlstra (2017) explicitly avoid non-English examples, while Maggie Tallerman's (2020) textbook, which does not focus on syntactic theory, aims for a diverse set of languages and structures but takes English as a starting point. This focus on English is often justified as a way to first present patterns in a language for which students have intuitions, but this problematically and incorrectly assumes monolingualism as the norm. This also consequently has an impact on which kind of structures are covered and to which extent. Commercial publishing may also play a role here, as presenting a one-size-fits-all approach with a focus on English is presumably viewed as ensuring a wider potential audience and cuts down on costs associated of multiple context-specific resources.

Exclusionary or biased example sentences, such as those predominantly featuring male agents or gender-stereotyping activities, represent another problem (Cépeda et al., 2021; Kotek et al., 2021). While we have not been able to locate any studies of racist and culturally stereotyping linguistic examples in general linguistics materials, these problems have been identified in a wide range of educational and testing materials in other disciplines (e.g., Dos Santos & Windle, 2021; Spiegelman, 2022). Since research has shown that there is gender bias and stereotyping in linguistic examples (Kotek et al., 2021) it seems likely that a systematic survey of linguistic examples may also reveal racial bias and/or racial stereotyping.

The importance of contextually appropriate syntax teaching materials is especially clear in South African linguistics programmes. Most programmes use English as the language of instruction. This is despite the fact that less than 10% of South Africans speak English as their first language; just over 10% speak Afrikaans, and about 75% of the South African population speak a Bantu language as their first language (Statistics South Africa, 2012). Universities differ significantly in terms of student racial demographics, but across South African higher education, over 90% of students are South African (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020), while around 70% of international students come from the predominately also Bantu-language speaking countries in the Southern African Development

Community (SADC) region (IEASA, 2019). In 2015, 49% of academic staff at South Africa universities identified as white, 35% as Black African (Breetzke & Hedding, 2018), and while race is not directly correlated to languages spoken or research and teaching expertise, in reality, and because access to language courses at university is determined by secondary school languages taken, this often means a lack of expertise in Bantu languages by white staff.

While some instructors or programmes avoid commercially published textbooks and use their own materials instead, this approach may be difficult for small departments. In South Africa, few departments that offer linguistics degrees have more than three permanent academic staff members, and linguistics programmes are often found in English departments or form part of broader language and translation studies units. Moreover, a significant number of academic staff at South African universities do not hold PhDs, meaning that they might not yet have received the type of training where creating their own research-based teaching tools is feasible, especially given time constraints. Another issue is that many African languages, especially from "Khoisan"[1] families, remain underdocumented and underresearched, so instructors have less access to journal articles. Even in cases where relevant research has been published, these publications may not be accessible given that many South African university library systems are underfunded and underresourced.

Nearly all public universities in South Africa use English as the sole medium of instruction for most subjects, including linguistics. There are no textbooks in English on the syntax of Bantu or Khoisan languages (although see Bock & Mheta, 2019 for a general introduction to linguistics for South African students, and Bock, 2021 for a reflection on the creation of this textbook as a decolonising effort). Grammars and textbooks that could be used to enhance the visibility and coverage of African languages in the curriculum often stem from the colonial and apartheid eras and use racist language (and/or language names). Some widely used sources include racist example sentences which encode colonial, white supremacist hierarchies, asking students to translate sentences such as "Have the bwana's shirts been ironed?" (*bwana* here could be translated as "master") or "This food was cooked by Ali the European"s cook" (Ashton, 1944, p. 224). While academics continue to use such sources in teaching and research, the racism therein is rarely if ever explicitly addressed. In addition to appropriately covering African language data, the inclusion of theoretical approaches to linguistic analysis is important in African higher education contexts because many African universities require a theoretical lens to be applied to a MA or PhD research project. Students who are not able to apply a theoretical model to syntactic data are therefore not allowed to

write their MA or PhD dissertations on a syntactic topic. Context-appropriate textbooks for Southern Africa should cover all of these needs and thematic areas, and explicitly address issues such as racism or the perpetuation of racist worldviews which may appear in resources on African languages.

How well can a textbook that focuses on English language syntax work in the South African context? Bantu languages have a rich agreement system that includes subjects, objects, relative clauses and often locatives, as well as morphosyntactic properties which are not found in other language families such as augments and conjoint-disjoint alternations. While examples from Bantu languages are frequently found in textbooks of phonology (especially for tone) and morphology, very few examples from Bantu languages appear in syntax teaching materials. While Khoisan click consonants feature in phonetics materials, little if any discussion of the morphosyntactic structures, such as linkers, can be found in syntax or morphology textbooks. The problems associated with focusing on standardized forms of language that do not reflect South African students' own speech are also part of the larger challenge here. A syntax textbook featuring primarily (or exclusively) data from English and analyses based on English does not adequately prepare South African students to analyse the languages of the region, nor will it necessarily enable a student to develop appropriate insights into these languages for personal and/or professional purposes. This gap is left to instructors and departments to fill.

Mark de Vos and Kristina Riedel (2023) surveyed South African linguistics and language instructors and departments and showed that many self-reported being involved in curriculum transformation. Their study also showed, however, that the efforts to transform remain partial and shallow, as the majority of instructors appeared not to consider including Khoisan languages in their curricula, but simply added some Bantu language examples to existing (generally English-centric) materials. This finding suggested that when trying to adequately accommodate the diversity of students' linguistic repertoires, it is also crucial to reflect deeply on what is added to the curriculum, as well as when and how.

A study conducted by Hannah Gibson, Kristina Riedel, Jacqueline Luck, and Savithry Namboodiripad has shown that students feel that African language data is added in a tokenistic way in at least some of their classes (Gibson et al., 2021). This does little to shift the colonial paradigm of linguistics and can ultimately negatively impact communities by devaluing both them and their languages. In such instances, community members, rather than seeing themselves represented and reflected in class materials, find their language practices "exoticised" or presented out of context. We must ask: What is

communicated and what is left out about these language communities? How can we do better to engage with this linguistic diversity in a meaningful way?

In addition to the potential impact on individual learners, (whether from the communities that are the subject of study or not), there are very real benefits of using a diversity of languages and varieties for teaching and learning purposes. Doing so allows for the broadest spectrum of linguistic structures and realities to be covered in a given teaching context and to be considered in theoretical systems and analyses.

While no single model can meet the needs of instructors and students in all contexts (cf. Namboodiripad, 2020), there are significant opportunities in online and Open Access publishing for better meeting the needs of students and instructors, including the possibility of multilingual publishing and the provision of accompanying online materials. However, while these options may not require funding or the same kind of market as commercially published textbooks, they require significant expertise and labour by expert instructors as authors, reviewers, editors, and copyeditors. In South Africa, and in the academic systems in many other countries, authoring textbooks is not weighted in the same manner as research-based journal articles or books in hiring, promotion, funding, and (where relevant) tenure, creating a disincentive for addressing the problem of inadequate textbooks. For a more detailed discussion of this, see Daniel Villarreal and Lauren Collister (this volume) on some of the colonial complexities of Open Access and Open Science.

In order to identify and put needed changes into practice, a helpful next step would be the development of supportive communities of practice across institutions and the wider region, where instructors and postgraduate students can pool resources and knowledge. We also encourage peer-to-peer training and exchange (for discussion of faculty working groups see de Cuba et al., this volume). In addition to taking place within departments, these activities could happen in online spaces. Thematic workshops at regional or subdiscipline-specific conferences can also provide spaces for raising and discussing these issues (see also Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2018).

It is against this backdrop that we offer a number of reflective questions below for instructors of syntax courses who are developing or otherwise sourcing example sentences and topics.

1. Which languages, dialects, or linguistic varieties that form part of the students' (and my own) linguistic repertoires are included/excluded from my course materials and classroom examples? Which are excluded, and why?

2. What does the choice of names in my examples communicate to students?
3. What do the verbs, nouns and other semantic choices in my examples communicate as a worldview or normative behaviour to students (e.g., who is doing what kind of activity)?
4. How well do the syntactic phenomena discussed in my classes fit the range of linguistic structures found in the linguistic repertoires of those in the classroom and the broader society? Are my students acquiring the tools to analyse their own language use and that of the wider community/country/region? Is the diversity of structures represented appropriate for the specific context of my classroom and students? Are linguistic structures which are common in the languages/varieties in my local context treated as being exotic, unruly, or exceptional in my teaching materials?
5. What is a good balance of structures and related theories for my particular context? (e.g., to what extent should the course material be driven by theoretical considerations and the structure of the teaching materials, and to what extent should I make room for phenomena which are specifically relevant to the languages and varieties represented in the classroom?)
6. Does my department, programme, or university have a publicly stated vision of locally relevant and affirming syntax for our students? If not, why not, and how can I help develop one?

Research Methodologies: Conceptual and Practical Issues

Taking a simplistic "diversity and inclusion" approach to evaluating the state of syntax might lead one to think there are no problems to address: after all, there are syntactic analyses and descriptions of a wide range of languages, so one could survey major publications, note that a diverse set of languages is included, and stop there. This is where questioning and rejecting commonly held assumptions underlying the work in mainstream approaches to syntax, in line with decolonial or transformational approaches, is critical not only for a true assessment of the field, but also for finding ways forward. This section connects critiques from decolonial perspectives with research practices in syntax: firstly, in line with the decolonial call to recontextualize, denaturalize, and reject constructs with roots in colonialist hierarchies, we address problematic conceptual underpinnings of widely adopted theoretical approaches

to the study of syntax. Building on this, we ask how rethinking these theoretical assumptions might have an effect on practical considerations involved in syntactic research.

In describing or analysing particular phenomena, syntacticians often default to factoring out influences from other languages (Bowern, 2010), from other levels of linguistic analysis, and from factors considered to be "extra-linguistic" (Geeraerts, 2010). By basing both our research and our formal models on the idealised "speaker-hearer," the "disembodied language" remains the central object of study in many dominant approaches to syntax. This perspective overlooks core and widespread linguistic practices such as multilingualism, which far outnumbers monolingualism globally. Either as a deliberate standpoint or as a theoretically informed view, engagements with both individual-level and community-level variation, interaction, and language use have been peripheralized or labelled as extra-syntactic, as opposed to being seen as central to the object of study (Charity Hudley & Flores, 2022; DeGraff, 2020; Ferguson & Gumperz, 1960; Stanlaw, 2020).

There have been major critiques of this decontextualized approach within linguistics, such as critiques of modularity (e.g., Croft, 2001) and calls for embodied and situated approaches to language documentation, description, and analysis (e.g., Enfield, 2013), but these have been motivated by a variety of factors which do not include connections to the colonialist underpinnings of traditional theories and methods. However, these critiques resonate with long-held critiques from adjacent fields such as linguistic anthropology and educational linguistics that call for linguists to question colonialist constructs such as bounded languages (Otheguy et al., 2015). Such work has shown that approaches which do not take the subjectivities of language users into account, impose etic or outsiders' categories onto domains where they may not be appropriate (Leonard, 2018). While isolating phenomena to some degree is important for practical purposes, these scholars scrutinize the way that this isolation is done. Whose categories are used? What type of data is collected and analysed? Who decides what belongs in a particular language, and what counts as "linguistics" to begin with? When linguists' labels do not align with those of language-users, whose labels are given precedence? By failing to critically consider these questions many syntactic theories have further embedded dominant thought in the field and excluded other, often less visible, modes of thought and knowledge production, perpetuating the epistemicide of European colonialism (De Sousa Santos, 2016).

A notable example of this process is the "native speaker," a term which is inextricable from the colonialist project and has been widely critiqued and theorised outside of syntax (e.g., Paikeday, 1985; Rajagopalan, 1997; Love

& Ansaldo, 2010). From a historical perspective, Stephanie Hackert (2012) traces how the notion of the "English native speaker" developed alongside English nationalism and overtly white supremacist movements such as Anglo-Saxonism. Despite these critiques, the native speaker remains a central yet undertheorised construct across syntactic frameworks (Birkeland et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2021; Dewaele et al., 2021). By instead centring multilingual and otherwise underexamined contexts of language use and including more languages, varieties, practices, and communities in syntactic research, we will improve our research methods and our view of syntax itself (Costley & Reilly, 2021; Henner & Robinson, 2021; see also Henner, 2024). While the field of syntax includes some work on a wide range of languages, there is still a very high level of overrepresentation of what Yourdanis Sedarous and Savithry Namboodiripad have called "WISPy languages," that is, languages or varieties of languages which are Written, Institutionally supported, Standardised, and/or Prestigious (Sedarous & Namboodiripad, 2020). This shift in focus will require a destabilisation of disciplinary norms, moving from static to dynamic, from homogenous to heterogenous, and from categorical to emergent. But it is this very disruption that is needed to develop a decolonial syntax.

A reasonable question, one with which we ourselves are still grappling, is whether decoloniality is possible for scholars who are situated within spaces which have emerged directly from colonial traditions—such as syntax, linguistics, and academia more broadly (Jobson, 2020; Mayorga et al., 2019). Rather than reject the enterprise altogether, we believe that syntax makes a crucial contribution to our understanding of language and the world. We argue that a decolonial syntax is possible and that developing the subfield in this direction and exploring what this might look like should constitute a key theoretical concern for syntacticians. Though a questioning of disciplinary assumptions and boundaries is necessary, syntacticians need not and should not leave such critiques or investigations to other fields and subfields, but rather these questions must also be a central part of syntactic inquiry.

Such a set of moves has precedence within theoretical approaches to syntax, namely, in approaches which focus on individual differences and emergent grammar (e.g., Dąbrowska, 2013), and those which incorporate language users' subjectivities into linguistic representations (e.g., Höder, 2012). In the generative tradition, this approach can be seen in the focus on i-languages as the object of study (Chomsky, 1986). Related approaches which seek to explain syntactic phenomena from historical or contact perspectives have also developed theoretical machinery to address relevant empirical issues related to the dynamics of syntax, such as competing grammars (Kroch, 1989) or hybrid grammars (Aboh, 2015). We do not suggest that the existence

of these approaches means that the problem is solved, nor do these represent decolonial approaches. We consider transformation of the field a process rather than an end goal which can be fully attained. Instead, these approaches provide examples of local solutions to certain analytic problems that could provide a way forward in addressing as yet untheoretical or untheorized conceptual and representational issues in the discipline.

We encourage readers to reflect on how colonialist constructs and the centring of colonial languages in syntax have led to the assumptions about how (all) language(s) are structured. For example, analyses of languages with flexible word order have been central to debates within and across syntactic frameworks, with languages exhibiting flexibility being exoticised, labelled as exceptional, or seen as requiring a fundamentally different set of analytic tools (Levshina, Namboodiripad et al., 2023). How has starting with a particular set of assumptions, rooted in hegemonic languages and ways of thinking, contributed to the exoticisation of flexible word order and how it is framed? Rather than providing an alternative analysis or set of instructions, we ask readers to imagine how syntactic analyses and descriptions of their specific phenomena might look different if variation were treated a priori as being relevant from a theoretical and descriptive perspective. In other words, the starting point often determines not only the analysis but the very questions that are asked.

We offer the following questions for reflection, whether by individual researchers, in research groups, or by reviewing scholarly work and research proposals (see also Chetty et al., this volume, for more on research funding).

1. Whose language use is analysed and modelled? Who is given authority to provide judgements or have their language use analysed? Who is excluded from these research processes? How do the answers to these questions map onto structures of oppression, either in the language community or, more broadly speaking, in the unequal relationship between language users and the analyst?
2. Are normative modes of language use centred or given precedence over others? Is a hegemonic mode of language learning and/or use treated as unmarked, or as a proxy for how a given language works in all cases? (See Figueroa, this volume; Henner & Robinson, 2021.)
3. How is description of the particularities of a language balanced with comparison across languages? Are locally relevant categories elided in descriptions and comparisons?
4. How are different modalities treated? Are embodied language use, gestures, and prosody treated as nuisance variables or even ignored?

What are points of (mis)alignment between researchers' perspectives and how the phenomenon under investigation is produced and understood by language users?

5. How is language contact treated? Is the full linguistic repertoire of language users given serious attention? Whose conceptualization of languages boundaries are considered relevant, and why?
6. How does this work connect with the needs and goals of the language communities and relevant stakeholders, and if it does not why is that the case?
7. How is funding conceived of and disbursed? For example, do funding schemes require or preclude applicants from certain parts of the world? Do the ways in which the schemes are set up perpetuate colonial and inequitable relations (cf. Chetty et al., this volume)? Do grant applications include substantive funding to support language communities?
8. How are the positionality and commitments of the researcher(s) addressed? Are there subjectivities which have gone unnamed and therefore been mischaracterised as objectivities? What additional opportunities might there be for integrating reflection into the research process?

Visibility and Inclusion In Citation Practices and Publishing

For citation practices we take the subfield of Bantu linguistics, a research interest of three of the authors, as a case study of the power dynamics of race. We show that there is a striking overrepresentation of non-African researchers publishing about African languages, and an underrecognition of work by African linguists. These factors are intricately related to who is conceived of as an "expert" (see also Dockum & Green, 2024), and we note the many intersecting hierarchies that factor into this, such as being based at an institution in the Minority World versus Majority World, enduring colonialist frames, anti-Blackness, and community membership. We use the phrase "Minority World" here to denote those countries which despite their small proportion of the global population have disproportionate wealth and influence over global affairs, including European and North American countries; this contrasts with the term "Majority World" (a term attributed to Bangladeshi photographer Shahidul Alam) which denotes the global majority, who come from countries in Africa, South America, and Latin America.

To briefly illustrate the issue, we used the search term "African Languages" in Google Scholar which lists works in order of the number of citations. On 5 October 2022, the top search returns (looking at the first three pages returned by Google Scholar) are almost exclusively white scholars from Minority World institutions, with only one African author showing in the top ten searches, Professor Emeritus Ayọ̀ Bámgbósé of the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, who appears third. In a search for "Bantu languages," the top three pages of results returned only two African scholars: Professor Emeritus Eyamba Bokamba of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who appears eleventh (Bokamba, 1988) and thirteenth (Bokamba, 1976) and Professor Sam Mchombo at the University of Berkeley, who is twenty-fifth (Mchombo, 2017). Of note is that none of the African authors are women.

It is cause for concern that in this field, African scholars are not the most-cited experts. This imbalance is especially concerning given the point made by Emmanuel Ngué Um (2020) that many of the white scholars who are viewed as authorities were or are agents of colonial regimes. Similar issues have been observed with the lack of representation of women across different academic disciplines (Leslie et al., 2016) as well as the preponderance of white authors conducting research on African American English (Charity Hudley et al., 2020; Rickford, 1997). A range of potential explanations have been offered, including those which are sexist and make reference to putative cognitive differences between women and men; see Leslie et al., 2016 for discussion). Possible explanations for the undercitation of African academics include racism, Western-dominated research paradigms, and the impact of colonialism (Mufwene, 2017; 2020). Furthermore, stemming from the concentration of global wealth in Minority World countries, academics outside Africa often have better resources for research, such as more expansive libraries and facilities as well as more access to research funding. This is in addition to the more fundamental infrastructural challenges that are present for many, such as reliable electricity and internet access.

It is worth noting that comparable searches for "African Languages" and "Bantu Languages" in Scopus and Web of Science pull up a range of papers from many other, unrelated fields, due to a difference in how the results are calculated from the search terms. Given that our aim here is to illustrate the overcitation of white (male) scholars from the Minority World, we restrict our discussion to the convenience survey using Google Scholar and leave a more detailed analysis of citation patterns to future work.

Resolving this issue by giving research by African scholars its appropriate recognition (here, via citation practices as a case study) is a crucial task in decolonizing syntactic research in this area. However, there is no simple fix.

The problems around citation practices reflect broader issues of representation and agenda-setting within the field, and citations have been shown to be an imperfect reflection of impact, relevance, and research quality (Aksnes et al., 2019). Nevertheless, identifying these issues is an important first step, as is a broad call for cultivating a research culture which requires critical thinking around citation and publication practices, particularly with regard to racial inclusion (Charity Hudley et al., 2020; Villarreal & Collister, this volume; Chetty et al., this volume). In addition, Wesley Leonard (2018) calls for research on Indigenous languages to be grounded in the experiences of users of the language; in the context of African linguistics, then centring work on African languages around the experiences and expertise of African scholars is paramount. Beyond this recentring, we suggest that authors and publishers act to ensure that African scholars who have published on a given topic are appropriately cited. A culture of decolonial research relies on scholars who are not users of the languages they research to reflect critically on their position in the field and on how their particular own research links to other research and researchers in terms of who is conceptualized as an expert in this body of scholarship. Although this reflective exercise may take place in some scholars' private discussions and reflections, it has not yet been implemented more broadly or publicly as a central practice of African linguistics or beyond. And yet reflection is simply the first step. This reflection needs to then translate into decisive action, by individuals *and* scholarly communities, to ensure that citation and attribution of knowledge is appropriately directed, and with special focus on those whose languages are being studied.

To this end, we suggest the provocations below to aid in the disruption of assumptions around expertise, to contribute to the dialogue about best practice, and to increase and improve the recognition of knowledge held by users of African languages, as well as linguists based on the continent:

1. Does my publication cite research by experts and scholars from the community? Does my paper cite people of colour and especially women of colour? (See, e.g., the Cite Black Women Collective, citeblackwomencollective.org.)
2. Do I include work that might not be otherwise be read by scholars in my home context?
3. Are there works from the community whose language is being discussed, including works in other languages that I can cite? (See Charity Hudley Rule for Liberatory Linguistics.)[2]
4. Do I acknowledge local sources of knowledge, including nonacademic sources?

5. Do I cite existing work in a variety of theoretical veins or traditions, including theories developed or centred across the Majority World?
6. Is my work accessible to all audiences, including those outside of academic spaces, for example by being published Open Access? (See Villarreal & Collister, this volume.)

Steps Forward: Can There Be a Decolonial Syntax?

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted an increase in online seminars, reading groups, workshops, lectures, and conferences, sometimes including free versions of formerly paid events. Taking seriously the need for material solutions to material inequities caused by colonialism, we think about opportunities to disrupt the status quo in favour of new norms which could prioritise decolonial values. For example, having more free online scholarly events allows for the creation of new collaborations and forums for exchange for linguists who strive to decolonise our classrooms and our research practices. There is scope for regional collaborations to meet local needs and create local content together, such as Open Access and/or online textbooks and learning materials created by larger teams, which reduces the burden on individual instructors. However, we are also cognisant of the ways in which these changes may lead to surface-level change, or worse, further entrench inequalities. For example, with the move to online conferences, it became clear that not all participants around the world have access to fast, reliable, and affordable internet access. This disparity impacts both individuals and institutions. While removing the costs associated with international conference travel, for example, can be seen as a pathway to inclusion and equality, insufficient attention is paid to other forms of unequal access. Similarly, Open Access resources are often presented as inherently equitable, providing the opportunity for a broader range of people to access resources. However, critiques suggest that Open Access publishing may create further inequality (see also, Kramer & Bosman, 2018; Villarreal & Collister, this volume; Wellmon & Piper, 2017).

These inherent tensions and contradictions are illustrative of the challenges central to the broader question we ask in this chapter: Can there be a decolonial syntax? We believe so. We argue that viewing syntax as an observable object of enquiry and critical analysis which is separable from syntax as a field of study may represent a useful path forward. As we argue here, the field of syntax has its origins in colonial approaches, inaccurate worldviews, and racist, sexist, and other biased assumptions rooted in

inequitable power dynamics and social hierarchies. We have presented three areas of focus where we believe initial steps to decolonising syntax can and should be taken.

This chapter is a call to action to those working in syntax, including ourselves. The goal has been to highlight the imperative for the field of syntax to reflect a wider range of knowledge, perspectives and peoples into its basic assumptions and theoretical models, as well as to explore how it can contribute to a more equitable, inclusive, and collaborative linguistics.

Rather than providing a diagnostic of what to do or what steps to follow—a prescriptive trap that could end up as a tick-box exercise—we have presented a series of provocations designed to aid reflection and action. As linguists reckon with the colonialist past and present of our field and its ways of knowing, we must think about practical, action-based changes and identify steps for use in our classrooms, our research, and in our writing. We must explore avenues for resource development, including the co-construction of radical anti-racist syntax resources, similar to the initiatives that have been taking place in other disciplines and other subfields of linguistics.

As syntacticians, our field has been constructed as being central in linguistics. As such, we have the responsibility to also be at the centre of a move towards a decolonial syntax, with all of the work and resistance that that might bring with it. We must acknowledge that current modes of thinking, teaching, writing, and conducting research are steeped in colonial legacies from which linguistics as a discipline has arisen. We must acknowledge that neither syntacticians nor syntax are immune from racism, in our thoughts, in our actions, or in our theorisations.

Perhaps most importantly, we must engage with our decolonial imaginations (Egido & De Costa, 2022): we must believe that a decolonial syntax is possible. It is. It has to be. Because without it, we continue to only teach to, characterise the language use of, and acknowledge the contributions of the mythical monolingual, hearing individual using a WISPy language. In doing so we not only miss a central goal of syntax—explaining human language—but we also dehumanise our students, those who use the languages we study, our academic community, and ourselves.

Notes

1. The so-called Khoisan group of languages spoken in (Southern) Africa is not a genetic group (Güldemann 2014 among others) and the term itself is also contested. Alena Witzlack-Makarevich and Hirosi Nakagawa (2017) provide a short overview of the terminology that

has been employed to refer to this group of languages. We use the term here for ease of reference and due to its ongoing use in the South African context. However, we recognise that its use is not without problem.

2. Charity Hudley Rule for Liberatory Linguistics: any published research that you conduct in a community that you do not consider yourself a part of should include an explicit discussion of the meaningful inclusion of members from that community in your research process and your efforts to increase the participation of community members at your university, in your department, and in your research area.

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