

Whose English Counts? Linguistic Power and the Politics of Assessment

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Abstract:

Processes of globalisation have intensified linguistic diversity in higher education. However, assessment practices remain largely anchored in standardised and monolingual norms. This tension raises urgent questions of linguistic justice, social mobility and equity, particularly for students whose communicative repertoires fall outside dominant academic language expectations. This presentation examines how assessment practices in higher education operate as mechanisms of epistemic exclusion and encourages a rethink of decolonial alternatives that better account for the multilingual and superdiverse realities of contemporary student populations.

Drawing on decolonial scholarship and the notion of *superdiversity*, we argue that assessment functions as a key site where linguistic globalisation is unevenly recognised and valued. Although students routinely navigate multiple languages, dialects, accents, registers, scripts, and digital vernaculars across transnational and diasporic context, these practices are often rendered illegitimate within institutional norms that privilege standardised English. As a result, linguistic difference is framed as deficit, limiting access to recognition, progression, and academic credibility.

We propose that decolonising language in assessment involves two interconnected shifts: first: interrogating how student work in English is assessed, including the role of implicit bias and deficit discourses, and second: unpacking the ideological construction of academic language embedded in assessment task design and feedback practices that constrain creativity and student voices. Standardised assessment practices risk reinforcing linguistic injustice and limiting students' social mobility within and beyond the university.

The presentation calls for more socially just and inclusive approaches to assessment and evaluation, including the use of formative assessment, dialogic and developmental feedback, and criteria that recognise linguistic plurality and hybridity as legitimate academic resources. Such approaches challenge residual colonial logics and reposition language diversity as central to educational justice rather than peripheral to academic standards.

By foregrounding assessment as an ethical and political site of language governance, this contribution speaks directly to debates on language and educational justice, social mobility, and the future of equitable evaluation in a globalised higher education landscape.

Keywords: decolonising assessment, linguistic diversity, standard language ideologies, language and social justice