The Heart of the Matter: Moving on from the Settler’s Narrative

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1. Introduction

> From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. (Smith 2012, p. 1)

Contemporary moves towards the decolonising of linguistics and related fields take multiple forms and ask a variety of questions that get to the heart of the matter. This paper focuses on one such question: ‘Who is telling the story?’ In other words, to whom does the narrative belong? Addressing the settler’s narrative, the phenomenon of all aspects of formal First Nations discourse being determined by non-First Nations people, is merely one aspect of the decolonisation process, however it provides an insight into the attitudes surrounding language that must be acknowledged and avoided in order to develop a more robustly decolonised approach to language work. This paper explores the settler's narrative within the Australian context as an academic and non-academic paradigm, its history and evolution, and the recent and emerging approaches that challenge and seek to replace this narrative.

An approach to history, culture, language, and related research areas has existed and has been dominant in these areas in Australia and abroad for several centuries, which can be referred to as ‘the settler’s narrative’. The settler’s narrative can be broadly seen as a presupposition that the prevailing colonial counterparts to these areas of inquiry are the standard from which others are to be approached and judged. The outcome of such an approach can often be the assumption that the linguistic, historic, or cultural feature being analysed is peculiar merely by virtue of its difference to the researcher's own. A language can be denigrated and considered not worthy of survival or study, or alternately can be seen as a commodity that can be exploited. All of these potential outcomes emanate or at least are justified by their proponents through the adoption of the settler’s narrative, and the gradual disassembly of this position is underway in contemporary academia and broader society.

2. The Settler’s Narrative in History

> The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity. (Smith 2012, p. 1)

The settler’s narrative has been the dominant linguistic mindset for much of linguistic history, prior to the beginning of its disassembly over the last few generations (Deumert & Storch 2020). It can be argued that it is not a single mentality; no dominant paradigms are monolithic and instead generally progress through various stages until their eventual overturning, and that we can identify three key overlapping phases of the narrative settler concept leading up to the present. I will call these the superiority phase, the exoticisation phase, and the commodification phase, although these co-occur and are by no means discrete.

2.1. The Superiority Phase

> Just knowing that someone measured our 'faculties' by filling the skulls of our ancestors with millet seeds and compared the amount of millet seed to the capacity for mental thought offends our sense of who and what we are. (Smith 2012, p. 1)

Concepts that one’s own language is the pinnacle of human communication or even sacred have been held by people for as long as humans have been describing language. For example, the name *Sanskrit* itself means ‘perfected’ (Renou 2004), while even contemporary pseudo-linguists continue the claim that Sanskrit is the ‘perfect language’ (Biderman 2008, p. 90). As late as the twentieth century authors in much of the world regularly positioned a classical European language such as Classical Latin or Greek as a standard by which other languages were to be measured (Zwartjes 2018). Classical languages such as these were lauded for their purported ‘refinement’, ‘complexity’, or ‘expressiveness’(Campbell 1968). Such mindsets of course have the effect that other languages are devalued and considered less worthy of survival or research, to the degree that they are actively suppressed, as was the case in many countries, including Australia. These ideas are naturally anathema to the contemporary linguistic discipline, but their outcomes can still be felt today. The settler's narrative is embedded within non-academic mindsets and is understandable as a naive position (for an example, see Marc 2021): My culture and language are normal, yours is strange and exotic. As researchers and people doing language work however, these ideas are patently a hindrance to accurate and meaningful analysis, as they are empirically and analytically indefensible.

2.2. What’s civilisation got to do with it?

Some authors within the anthropological and historical fields have attempted to create working models which allow a specification of what civilisation is (Duiker & Spielvogel 2013). This also creates a negative framework by which a checklist can determine whether a group is ‘civilised’ or not, and position the author’s culture as the ‘more civilised’, further justifying colonial endeavours (Smithers 2009, p. 247). In one model, society is deemed ‘civilised’ based on the presence of seven characteristics: urban settings, political and military structures, economically-based social structures, material complexity, distinct religious structures, written language, and artistic and intellectual activity (Duiker & Spielvogel 2013). Models like this are clearly determined from a European perspective, and seem almost by design to disregard traditional Australian society. Of course not all of these factors apply in every colonial situation, with the colonisation of Mexico and India being examples of First Nations already practising many or all of these cultural practices. Models such as these nevertheless assist individuals in justifying colonialism through an explicitly European settler’s narrative.

2.3. The Exoticisation Phase

> It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. (Smith 2012, p. 1)

Adjacent to the pseudo-linguistic notion of the relative superiority of a language is the conceptualisation of language which emerged more dominantly in the nineteenth century of the ‘exotic’ language (Chandler & Reid 2020). Rather than categorising classical and otherwise European languages as ‘more refined’, the exoticised mindset instead categorises languages as more or less ‘exotic’. This concept became most prominent as serious linguist science began to emerge in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, during the period that also saw the expansion of anthropology and many other humanity and hard sciences. In this paradigm, languages such as English, German, French, or Italian are straightforward in their phonologies, morphologies, etc, while the languages of Africa, Asia, and Australia for example are seen as ‘exotic’, ‘peculiar’, or ‘other-worldly’ (Chandler & Reid 2020). This concept, although more forgiving and less harmfully prejudiced than the superiority model, is nevertheless an unscientific idea, still positioning the colonial linguist’s language as the centre-point from which other languages are to be valued. Features barely present or completely unknown in Western Europe such as ergative-absolutive alignments, contrastive tone, or click consonants are presented as something unusual or alien, rather than simply a feature of some languages and not others. Although arguably gentler than the superiority model, proponents of the exotic model are nevertheless guilty of seeing linguistic enquiry into these languages as something simply to display to others in the home country, much as their contemporaries might have with a stuffed, brightly coloured Amazonian bird.

3. The Commodification Phase

> Many indigenous responses to Western 'trading' practices have generally been framed by the Western juridical system and have had to argue claims on the basis of proven theft, or of outrageously unjust rates of exchange (one hundred blankets and fifty beads do not buy one hundred million hectares of land for the rest of eternity). (Smith 2012, p. 89)

The Settler's Narrative lastly embraces a conceptualisation which sees essentially every aspect of the colonised space as a commodity (Smith 2012, p. 90). On one concrete level, the colonised landscape has in many 'New World' colonial contexts been seen as an untapped repository of natural resources. Commodities such as fossil fuels, precious minerals, or simply arable or habitable land are the most prominent cases of commodified objects which have been claimed not to be currently used to their greatest advantage. The argument and justification are as follows: when colonisers arrive in an area, they find no permanent structures composed of metal or stone, no agriculture as understood by the coloniser, no evidence of mining, etc. To the European mind in Australia, the relatively small population of Australia prior to 1788 suggested that the overwhelming majority of the continent was not even inhabited. The term *terra nullius* is a legal expression that has been used in popular discourse with great frequency in Australia over the last few decades, and stands as a prominent example of the settler's narrative both in the context of broader Australian social consciousness, emanating from and subsequently reinforcing legislation. Although the term is not recorded as being used by any British colonial figure at the outset of colonisation, the concept is argued to be the driving justification of British colonialism in Australia (Partington 2007). The first recorded description of the concept (but not the exact phrasing) in the Australian context is in a document by the British Attorney General in 1819 in which the colonisation of New South Wales is described not as invasion or conquest, but as simple possession of an uninhabited area (Banner 2005). Although the term 'Terra Nullius' was not applied in the Australian context prior to the late-twentieth century, the concept was undeniably the dominant legal idea that was used to justify the confiscation of land and resources by colonial groups (Partington 2007).

On a less tangible and more human level, colonial powers have a long history of seeing the people of a colonised territory and their intangible cultural artefacts and language as a resource from which to profit (Schwartz 2022). At its most savage extreme this emerges as slavery, but on a more abstract level, the intangible cultural and societal elements of a colonised people became a commodity to be taken and profited from once the richness of these resource is discovered (Dobrin, Austin & Nathan 2007, p.4-5). A salient example is the commodification of First Nations' spirituality, adopted, adapted, and packaged for a fee-paying Western audience (Smith 2012, p. 102), likewise the exploitative practices undertaken by 'carpetbaggers' in the Australian First Nations arts industry (Le Roux 2014). Beginning in the late 19th century but emerging at its peak by the mid 20th century well-meaning but with hindsight exploitative individuals established academic standards which saw First Nations people as a rich 'subject' to be studied, from which to withdraw data on which to create purely scientific publications on the academic's return to the city. Some may argue indeed, that the early 20th century linguist arriving in an area, collecting bags of data and then disappearing to later be to later place the language on display in a dusty published paper, is no different to the early anthropologists who took sacred artefacts to place in the museums of Europe.

4. Who's Narrative is it Anyway?

> It appals us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations. (Smith 2012, p.1)

The shift that emerged in the latter quarter of the twentieth century and that is still unfolding today is of the disassembling of the settler's narrative. This has been driven primarily by the emergence of First Nations-led research and language work: essentially a shift away from the settler's narrative recording the story to that of First Nations people themselves.

This shift may not have occurred were it not for the major changes made through the work of First Nations people in the second half of the twentieth century that empowered their communities to genuinely take control of their own lives. At the cusp of the second half of the twentieth century, 1949 saw the passing of legislation which for the first time allowed First Nations Australians the right to vote in Commonwealth elections (provided they were enrolled to vote in their state's elections or had served in the armed forces) (Australian Citizenship Act 1949). Thirteen years later First Nations Australia were given full suffrage in Commonwealth elections (Commonwealth Electoral Act 1962), followed in 1967 by the most significant legislative change for First Nations people at that point. The 1967 referendum (Constitution Alteration (Aboriginals) 1967) successfully changed the Australian Commonwealth constitution to both transfer the legislative right to make laws about First Nations Australians from the states and territories to the federal government, and to count First Nations people in the census. This legislation was a symbolic turning point that led to the gradual legal empowerment of First Nations in the land rights movement, leading to the historic Mabo decision (Mabo v Queensland (No 2) 1992) and subsequent legislation which established the legal framework for native title in the Commonwealth (Native Title Act 1993). These symbolic and legislative steps were the outcomes of the deeper push from Australian First Nations people to have a genuine say in their own lives and environments. It was necessary that broader Australian society needed to go through these steps before being ready for genuinely First-Nations led decisions regarding their own lives, and saliently, research involving their language and culture. Thus the decades leading into the twenty-first century saw increasing moves to not only consult with First Nations Australians on linguistic work rather than see them purely as containers for knowledge that is to be collected, but increasingly to actively have the course of linguistic work determined by them (Rodríguez Louro & Collard 2021). With this shift towards community-led research, areas of research such as language are losing their position as subjects to be simply written *about*, and are instead recognised through First Nations-led approaches as multifaceted features of Australia that can be as celebrated as Uluru or olympic gold medals. Thus has emerged models of linguistic research which place the voice and especially narrative of the First Nations people at the centre, rather than at the periphery with the foreign academic at the centre.

5. The Pen is Mightier

The most powerful tool in the disassembly of the settler's narrative over recent decades has been the emergence of text written *by* First Nations authors. Whereas for the first two centuries or so of Australian colonialism books and tracts were regularly published by non-First Nations authors and organisations *on the subject of* First Nations Australian people, language, and culture, it is now increasingly common for First Nations authors to be published (Pidgeon & Riely 2021). Through exposure to these stories and ideas told directly by those they describe, the academic and broader areas of society have been forced to look at their own approaches and depictions of these topics. The gradual recognition that even epistemological approaches are culturally-determined and that First Nations epistemologies are often distinct from standard European models has opened up new possibilities in research, while also enriching research when the two systems are combined (Bolton, J, Remedios, L, & Andrews 2023). Academic research on Australian languages is increasingly conducted through a combination of trained linguists of any cultural and ethnic background, with speech community members, working jointly and with a shared set of goals determined mutually

(Rodríguez Louro & Collard 2021). The linguist provides academic rigour and standardised methods of representing language and analysis, while the community member provides internal insight, resource to the community, and decision making from an informed community perspective.

This contrasts significantly from the older research methods in which the speech community had little to no input into the goals and methods that the research would involve. Academic research focusing on First Nations topics that are solely the work of a qualified community member is becoming more common, and is a complete reversal of the settler's narrative-led style of previous generations. One celebrated example of this is Peruvian academic Roxana Quispe Collantes' writing, submitting, and defending her PhD thesis **Yawar Para** (Blood Rain) entirely in Quechua, the traditional language of the Incas (2019). Despite dozens of theses in Australia being written on an Australian language, there is yet to be one written in Language.

6. Conclusion: Reports of the settler's narrative's death have been greatly exaggerated

It is of course premature to assume that the decolonisation and disassembly of the settler's narrative begun in the second half of the 20th century is complete. The modern descendant of the colonialist settler's narrative is still to be found in popular discourse: a cursory perusal of an online forum discussing colonisation in Australia will quickly reveal colonial justifications that claim that it was solely European immigrants who 'built this country', having arrived to a completely underdeveloped landmass and created the cities and roads, infrastructure, and networks used daily by the descendants of the original population (Veracini 2007). Patently, the shift away from the settler's narrative is nowhere near complete. The important factor is that this process is in motion, and with the joint work of non-First Nations authors supporting and amplifying the voices of First Nations authors, the narrative will become a shared story that gets to the heart of the matter.

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