

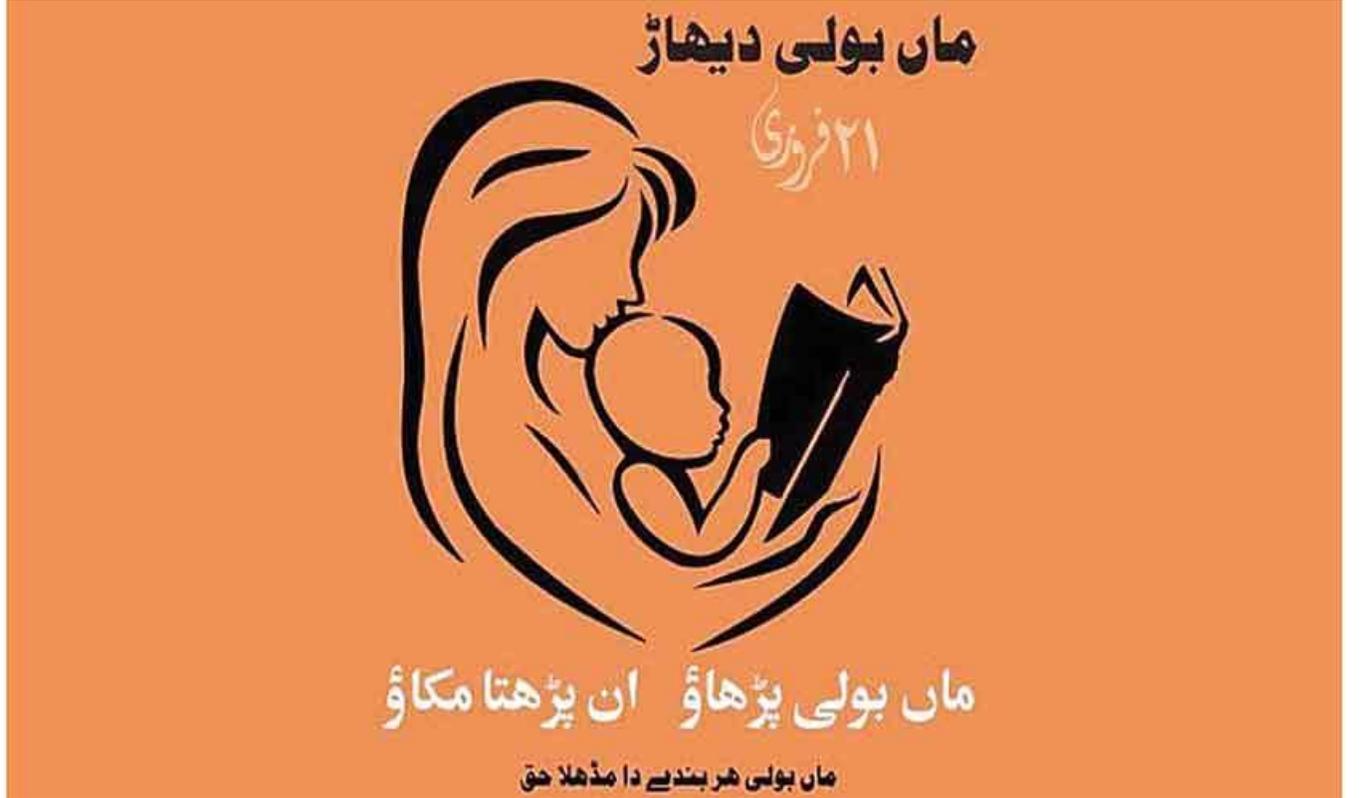
Decolonising speech

Dr M Rafique Wassan

Dialogue

June 22, 2025

Colonialism, imperialism and capitalism have undermined the development of indigenous languages



A history of colonisation, the dynamics of power and the psychology behind colonialism as well as the homogenisation of nation-states in post-colonial times, have all contributed to the tensions referring to social justice and equity for indigenous peoples and communities. Among other things, this tension particularly concerns the protection of their languages, oral traditions, cultural expressions and diverse ways of knowing and being.

The forces of colonialism, imperialism and capitalism have often undermined the development of indigenous languages and the knowledge associated with them.

Furthermore, the social production of languages has been adversely affected by hegemony and dominance of coloniality, which has harmed the promotion of the diversity of indigenous epistemologies. This has contributed to the erasure of indigenous languages and educational practices. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the critical scholar, introduced the concept of *epistemic violence*, which highlights the systematic denial and erasure of indigenous knowledge in favour of colonial forms of knowledge, which are typically regarded as superior.

De-colonial thinkers from the Global South, particularly those culturally located in Latin America – like Aníbal Quijano, María Lugones and Walter D Mignolo – are at the forefront of a radical critical intellectual movement to counter the dangers of epistemic violence. This movement challenges the coloniality of power, dominance and the superiority of knowledge rooted in the history of European colonialism, imperialism and modernity.

Walter D Mignolo advocates for the decolonisation of knowledge by recognising and validating the modes and practices of knowledge that have been marginalised by the power dynamics of coloniality and modernity. According to Mignolo, coloniality and modernity are connected, not separate. Thus, the framework of decolonisation of knowledge serves as a critical epistemic resource aimed at dismantling the historical narratives of coloniality/ modernity that have consistently denied the legitimacy of indigenous modes and practices of knowledge. In many parts of the world, mother languages have been relegated to the status of local or regional identity and denied as an educational practice. This phenomenon is also evident in multilingual nation-states, such as Pakistan, where most mother languages are marginalised as merely local or regional languages.

The current state of indigenous mother languages in Pakistan highlights their subcultural status and marginalisation. In the Punjab, for instance, many speakers of the Punjabi language refer to *paindu* (rustic) as a pejorative, implying a lack of culture. In Sindh, however, ownership and pride are associated with the Sindhi language in post-colonial Pakistan. The Sindhi language is supported as a medium of instruction in schools and promoted as a form of public literacy through various cultural productions, including newspapers, magazines, music, television channels and establishment of institutions.

Amidst the challenges faced by mother languages in Pakistan, Sindh's commitment to promoting Sindhi (and other indigenous languages) reflects a momentum towards the decolonisation of knowledge perspective and challenging the legacy of colonial dominance. A notable example of this effort is the third annual International Conference on Sindhi Language, Indus Script and the Socio-cultural Perspectives of Mother Languages that took place on May 26-27 at the Pakistan Arts Council in Karachi. It was organised by the Sindhi Language Authority.

In the context of colonial power, the conference hosted by the SLA fostered intellectual and epistemic potential in support of native languages. The conference aimed to mobilise epistemic activism and create public space by inviting and engaging national and international academics, young researchers and civil society actors.

In her keynote speech, Professor Shaila Sultana, the director of the BRAC Institute of Languages in Dhaka, Bangladesh, emphasised the concept of epistemic activism. She addressed the issues in colonisation and decolonisation, specifically focusing on English language education and issues of social justice and equity in South Asia. She underscored the necessity of decolonising national perspectives in order to effectively address social justice and equity for mother languages in the region. She offered a critical viewpoint on colonial and post-colonial history, as well as the ideologies and attitudes linked to the English language in South Asia.

Professor Hani Yulindrasari, an esteemed international speaker and keynote presenter at the inaugural session of the SLA conference, shared significant insights regarding cultural homogenisation and nationalism in the context of Indonesia's linguistic diversity. Professor Yulindrasari focused her keynote speech on the Sundanese people of West Java, the second-largest ethnic group in Indonesia. She emphasised the policy shifts and developments that have favoured the promotion of Sundanese language and culture, particularly since 2012, when the mayor of Bandung, the capital city of West Java, issued a decree aimed at promoting the use, preservation and growth of the Sundanese language, literature and script. A policy program she highlighted was Rebo Nyunda. It mandates that officials at all schools and government agencies wear Sundanese outfits and speak the Sundanese language on Wednesdays. In her talk, Professor Yulindrasari presented an alternative perspective on promoting linguistic diversity in Indonesia.

The conference featured a diverse range of talks in its technical sessions. The event brought together a number of speakers representing various universities and mother languages from across Pakistan. On the second day of the conference, two international speakers delivered insightful online presentations. Dr Maya Khemlani David, an honorary professor at the Asia Europe Institute at the University of Malaya, and Pei-ling Huang, an assistant professor at the Centre for General Education at National Taiwan University, shared their expertise through scholarly talks.

One of the sessions tackled the topic of gender and mother languages, showcasing the voices of women in the cultural and literary expressions associated with marginalised languages.

The conference provided a platform for public dialogue and knowledge creation in indigenous languages. It fostered academic research engagement with these languages and advocated the importance of linguistic diversity and education. It also cultivated a sense of social bond and belonging among the youth. Over fifty students volunteered from various universities in Karachi.

As a producer of knowledge, the Sindhi Language Authority is committed to an epistemic activism that will contribute to the development of linguistic awareness and help foster an environment that supports the promotion of indigenous mother languages, knowledge and cultures. To this end, Mignolo's de-colonial approach needs to be recognised and adopted to reclaim the knowledge and cultural identity of indigenous languages in Pakistan.

The writer is a faculty member in the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro. He has a PhD from Bern University, Switzerland. Email: rafique.wassan@usindh.edu.pk