UNIVERSALIST CLAIMS VS. LOCAL PERSPECTIVES: DECOLONISING "ACADEMIC WRITING IN ENGLISH"

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Abstract: Many scholars and university students whose first language is not English need to write in English to publish in international journals and to attend international conferences. Gatekeepers — editors and conference organizers — screen submissions for linguistic competence but also for adherence to certain internationally accepted norms, such as writing that is argument-driven rather than descriptive or data-driven.
Courses and training sessions I have taught under the general rubric "Academic Writing in English" (AWE) sought to improve students' chances with international publications and conferences by encouraging them to strengthen their central arguments.
While confident of the benefits of AWE instruction, I had an uneasy conscience about its not so hidden universalist claim that forms of Anglo-American academic inquiry are superior to others. Such claims, coupled with the presumption of their universal applicability, are today being challenged by decolonising critiques. Bluntly put, is Academic Writing in English guilty of neo-colonialism because it recommends norms developed in the global (north)west?
There is more to academic writing in English, of course, than attention to an argument-driven structure. However, it is the promotion of such standards that makes AWE instruction vulnerable to the decolonising critique. To apply the critique to AWE pedagogy, this article reviews the impact of the decoloniality literature on education and research in Belarus and

Ukraine, and highlights resistance in those countries against Russian cultural hegemony.
After framing the topic and reviewing the cultural struggle in Belarus and Ukraine, I argue that for Academic Writing in English to be truly beneficial, instruction must be self-critical, allowing and encouraging participants to engage in collective self-reflection to enable informed decisions regarding cultural norms.
The focus on Academic Writing in English as taught in Eastern Europe suggests broader comparisons regarding the clash between universalist claims and local perspectives in other regions of the world.

Keywords: Academic writing in English, decolonisation, decoloniality, universalist claims, education and research in Belarus and Ukraine.

Introduction

What could be more beneficial — and, therefore, more ethical — than providing scholars whose first language is not English with access to English-language international publications and conferences? They are experiencing mounting pressure to publish. Their university departments and promotion committees place a high value on the publication of articles in English-language journals. English as the linguistic medium for doctoral and MA theses is increasingly encouraged worldwide. If skills in academic writing in English are Promethean fire, is it right to withhold it?

Numerous books, articles, websites, and YouTube videos offer advice on how to write academic prose in English. Even talented self-learners, however, benefit from academic courses in which instructors coach them in reading (and video surfing), organize group discussions, and lead practical exercises. Universities in many countries whose main national language is not English provide such training to their students.

The proliferation of instruction for writing in English poses the question of positionality. The decolonisation/decoloniality literature raises the issue of power dynamics by exploring historical origins and centre-margin relations. What are the guiding assumptions? Whose standards, values, and norms are used to assess quality? Which ways of knowing are validated, and which marginalized?

As a prolegomenon to a decolonising critique of Academic Writing in English, this article reviews recent attempts at decolonising education and research in Belarus and Ukraine. Doing so reveals underlying assumptions and examines to what extent, if at all, the decolonisation

literature helps illuminate the region's struggle against Russian cultural hegemony. This, in turn, forms the theoretical background for investigating the positionality of Academic Writing in English.

Scholars in Belarus and Ukraine are well familiar with the pressure to write and publish in English. They are also acutely aware of the domination exerted by Russian culture. They are caught in a decolonising scissors: they face pressure from the East, which they are resisting with increasing determination, and pressure from the West, which aligns with their geopolitical aspirations, but whose universalist claims might stifle the emergence and flourishing of local perspectives.

Decolonising critiques, and the subset of the field calling for de-coloniality, seek to give voice to societies and cultures dominated by external centres of power and to chart strategies for resistance by creating authentic, local epistemologies. Although the decolonisation discourse as such targets the entire gamut of hegemonic practices in politics, economics, and society, this article focuses on *cultural* hegemony, more specifically, on the ways in which a centre of knowledge/power dominates other academic cultures. [*Caveat*: the term "hegemony" is deployed here in the expressly Gramscian sense of cultural struggle, not the way it is used elsewhere, e.g., in International Relations theory.]

Walter Mignolo's historically and geographically situated definition of coloniality as the darker side of modernity serves in this article as a useful point of departure (Mignolo 2007). It challenges the positionality of values and practices that assert objective universality, claiming thereby to be unfettered to any particular time, place, culture, and language. A Mignolo-inspired analysis would ask: *Whose* epistemology rules? *Where* did it originate? *At whose cost* was it able to develop over time? *Whose* standards adjudicate admissible topics and assess the quality of analysis?

There are several reasons for considering decolonisation in Belarus and Ukraine first before moving on to the AWE *casus*. First, decolonisation as a cultural critique has only recently appeared in Eastern Europe (Bill 2014). Studying its successes and pitfalls, therefore, might yield insights into the applicability of the term "decolonisation" even further afield. Because the critique was developed in the global south, some have objected that it is not appropriate for analysis in Eastern Europe (Riabczuk 2013). Arguably, the application of decolonisation to instruction in academic writing might be subject to the same criticism.

With these reservations in mind, this article seeks to understand the rationale of AWE in Eastern Europe (in Belarus and Ukraine, though I have also taught AWE at the University of Warsaw for over ten years) with a special emphasis on the role played by language.

Note: Capitals will be used — Academic Writing in English — for the courses and workshops that formed the basis for the participatory observation on which this article is based. The concept "academic writing in English," in lower case, will broadly apply to the project of modernizing any academic culture by promotion of these norms of academic writing.

This article critically examines the teaching of academic skills developed in Anglo-American academic cultures to scholars in other parts of the world, by someone who has many years' experience teaching Academic Writing in English. It argues against reducing the issue to a binary choice between the universalist claims of superiority of western norms and the righteous authenticity of indigenous knowledge. A hybrid framing, perhaps even an eclectic one, is more likely to offer a reasonable way forward than insistence on an either-or choice.

Individual scholars, as well as the research communities of inquiry within which they work, must choose in which language to write and which approaches to employ: argument-driven, descriptive, aimed at collecting and cataloguing objects, close readings such as philological commentaries, policy-recommendation driven, or others. Decoloniality's call for alternative ways of knowing will be most well-informed and therefore most ethical after a thorough self-examination of the assumptions framing the research process and of the appropriate writing genres for reporting on them. Moreover, in pedagogy, the recommended self-examination should be shared by instructors and students who form a community of inquiry.

The article opens with a concise overview of the basic principles of Academic Writing in English, which underpin its claim to improve chances for publication and acceptance to international conferences. Key to success is the recognition of the need to structure the written presentation of research results by means of an argument, stated clearly and cogently in the paper's title, abstract, and introduction, and restated more forcefully in the paper's conclusion. One of AWE's principal recommendations for style is that the author meet the reader's structural expectations regarding *where* important information is located and *how* it is highlighted. For this, the author should have a firm grasp of the ways English syntax (e.g., the relative position of subjects, verbs, and other elements in a sentence) helps the reader understand the author's intention (Gopen and Swan).

The next step outlines some general theoretical principles of the literature on colonisation and coloniality to help determine the relevance of these approaches to Belarus and Ukraine on the one hand, and Russia on the other.

Finally, the article's conclusion describes the kind of self-reflection by instructors and students concerning principles and practices of academic writing in English that can address decolonising critiques.

Assumptions

I approach "decolonisation" phenomenologically, both in the popular sense of "experientially" and in the technical sense of "bracketing," that is, suspending judgment and prior opinion to reach the core meaning. My investigation of whether and how to decolonise Academic Writing in English (AWE) begins with a detailed exploration of "decolonisation" as a concept. I carry out this analysis by examining the events in recent resistance of Ukrainian and Belarusian scholars to Russian cultural domination.

My data come from participant observation — teaching AWE courses (primarily at the University of Warsaw's Faculty of *Artes Liberales*) and conducting workshops in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, and from joining a decolonisation project with Belarusian and Ukrainian colleagues that resulted in a special issue of *Topos*. My inquiries provide a useful basis, I hope, for future research.

Academic Writing in English (AWE)

My AWE courses and workshops took place over the first two decades of the twenty-first century. I developed their principles and practices over time as I sifted through scholarly literature and handbooks (for example, the numerous excellent publications of the University of Chicago Press: Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing, 2024) for ideas that could help participants, who were, for the most part, advanced students and young PhDs, embarking on academic careers (sources frequently used in AWE sessions: Booth, et. al. 2016; Lanham 2013). I led many training sessions in association with competitions for foundation research grants I administered as the Director of International Programs of the American Council of Learned Societies.

I began with basic premises:

1) Writing clearly depends on thinking clearly (the two processes correct one another by identifying contradictions, gaps, and repetitions).

2) A well-organized scholarly text has an argument as its backbone, strong enough for the body of the text to stand tall yet remain flexible

enough to deftly dance. The argument asserts a central claim, which the article must support with evidence and analysis.

As time went on, AWE training sessions concentrated on preparing papers for publication and conference presentation. Throughout, I stressed that success in international scholarship depends less on fluency in English grammar and style than on framing one's narrative according to accepted international norms.

I observed several reactions to the promotion of writing academic texts in a foreign language.

1) It is widely accepted that academics who study cultures other than their own need to understand the relevant languages. Some achieve proficiency in their research languages to write effectively in them. Their advanced mastery allows them to engage scholars who use that language within their own research communities. Most of my AWE students, however, were not studying Anglophone cultures, but sought to improve their writing in English, the *lingua franca* of world scholarship, to present their research on local topics to as wide an audience as possible.

2) AWE promised to improve writing, but it was not basic language training. Participants were admitted only if they could already write serviceable English prose. This disappointed those who desired to sharpen general skills by sitting in on "something in English." However, it enabled practical discussion on rewriting and copyediting.

3) Participants readily accepted my call for the need to concentrate on structural rather than linguistic competence, because they understood that editors and conference organizers have expectations that submissions should meet.

4) However, their pragmatic acceptance was tinged with disquiet, especially regarding the normative advice. Why did international gatekeepers demand research that was argument-driven rather than data-driven? Some AWE participants protested that this was at odds with "the way we write." To state a main claim clearly and early seemed too much like business prose. Why spoil the reader's delight in slowly discovering the point of the story by revealing it on the first page?

5) Indeed, why insist on an argument? There are other forms of scholarship, without an argument as a central axis. Are they less valuable, not genuine scholarship?

As I listened to such qualms, it became clear that they emerged from an academic culture at odds with the prioritization of argument-driven writing. To determine what would most effectively help young academics educated in such a culture to succeed beyond its boundaries, it seemed necessary first to survey alternative scholarly approaches.

For this reason, AWE sessions routinely opened with a group discussion of the types of research currently practiced by AWE participants and their colleagues. The research tended to fall into three categories: commenting (and explicating), collecting (and cataloguing), and uncovering hidden gems (and documenting them). All these efforts require well-trained, experienced scholars. Done well, such research contributes to the edifice of accumulated knowledge. [The following is not meant to be an exhaustive list of alternatives to argument-driven research, only a roundup of remarks offered by AWE participants.]

Commenting and explicating appear in analyses of texts, works of art and music, and archaeological finds, among others. Does this type of scholarly writing require an argument?

Collecting and cataloguing applies to systematizing and making available large sets of data such as ethnographic descriptions, linguistic forms, as well as works of material culture in many fields. Serious scholarship is required — field work, archival searches, or other collection methods. Cataloguing is not limited to selection and annotation of objects (as in the catalogue for a museum exhibition). Another, perhaps less obvious, example of cataloguing is an encyclopaedia article. The researcher collects data on a topic (e.g., "Iceland," "the ontological proof for the existence of God," "philately," etc.). The information gathered is sorted and then grouped together into major categories. For "Iceland" these might be geography, history, language, literature, agriculture, folk customs, forms of governance, industry, etc. A competently prepared encyclopaedia entry can be a magnificent work of scholarship. There are, no doubt, journals and conferences that would welcome such presentations as contributions to knowledge on the topics they pursue. But, as encyclopaedia articles, they contribute to knowledge as reference sources rather than through conceptual innovation.

Uncovering hidden gems and documenting them is well-known through the many efforts to rescue an unknown culture, through the preservation of a disappearing language, or through the illumination of a forgotten or understudied period of history. Positivist historiography falls into this category with its motivation to scour archives for something no one has noticed before or, at least, has not published before. This, too, is work that only well-trained and experienced scholars can do. However, unless its results are framed in a broader topical or disciplinary context, it will not likely be of significant interest beyond a small circle of scholars concerned with the particular person, object, or event being studied.

The types of research being called here "data-driven" most definitely qualify as scholarship. They are valuable in themselves. Their

practitioners insist that the store of world knowledge has been well-served, over time, by these building blocks of new information, and by the organization and analysis that underpin them.

However, the assertion of the value of commenting, collecting, and making available hitherto unknown information is rarely accompanied by a rationale for wider significance. Why is this particular contribution to the store of available information worth publishing? Whether the topic is already well-known or is being brought out of obscurity, the scholar working on it is convinced of its intrinsic importance. Explicating, cataloguing, and filling gaps are needed for the completeness of the edifice of knowledge, and, therefore, their authors maintain, require no special justification.

How would the editor of an international journal or the organizer of a conference react to a proposal for this sort of data-driven research? Most journals (and conferences) do not regard themselves as venues for the publication of works of a reference-like or descriptive character. They seek to engage in battle at the forefront of scholarship in the given field. They look for authors who make judgments on data they have collected, either newly discovered gems or newly analysed or re-analysed familiar material. Without such judgments, readers are left to wonder what questions might be posed to elicit broader implications. An editor prefers to have the author begin the discussion in the pages of the journal by articulating an argument clearly and early in the text. Doing so frames new information as a response to a problem or puzzle, staking out a position that invites positive or negative reactions from the journal's readership.

Defending the need for an article to have a "backbone," I suggested in AWE sessions that formulating an argument by means of the title and abstract, along with signals in the text, is a diagnostic device, allowing the author to evaluate the coherence of the work (Does the evidence support the argument?) and the effectiveness of presentation (Are there repetitions or tangents irrelevant to the central argumentative thread?). At minimum, the effort to state the significance of the research and to identify the analytical contribution it makes to knowledge in the field is a tool for developmental editing. An editor, or the author working alone, can use the tool to determine how successfully the body of evidence delivers on the promises embedded in the argument (For an introduction to the concept and practice of developmental editing, see: Norton 2023).

At AWE training sessions, as we listed various types of scholarship — argument-driven and data-driven — and discussed authors' perspectives on their intrinsic merits, I would issue a summary truth-in-packaging disclaimer concerning academic cultures. Academic Writing

in English, in the way I proposed to teach it, was developed in the Anglo-American academic culture, which could be regarded as an imposition, especially in a geopolitical context dominated by American culture and the economic and military forces driving it. Recognizing all this, I asked my students for their willing temporary suspension of disbelief. "Trust me for the length of this training," I would say. "Afterwards, you can judge for yourselves. All of us will then be better armed to assess the benefits of argument-driven vs. data-driven approaches."

This seemed to mollify the uneasiness of my participants. Nevertheless, I doubted my pragmatic relativism would long hold back the rising cultural discontent. There *is* a universalist claim imbedded in the norms proposed by Academic Writing in English. How soon will local perspectives challenge it?

Early Decolonisation in Belarus and Ukraine: MAG's Multi-language Policy?

The core meaning of the term "decolonisation" is clear: expelling the invader and removing the institutional structures and symbols of control over the indigenous population. Is this definition relevant to "decolonising AWE"?

For clues, I turned to the lessons I learned from my recent activities in Belarus and Ukraine. In the last decade, both these countries have demonstratively resisted Russian/Soviet political power and its cultural influence, albeit in different ways and intensities.

There is an obvious difference between physical fighting back against an invader/coloniser and resistance to cultural hegemony. In the region, these two forms of domination and opposition to them are intertwined, but it is worth separating them analytically. This article reserves the term "decolonisation" for the action of expelling the invader and removing the physical signs of domination (monuments, place names, etc.). Decolonisation in this sense corresponds to the popular understanding of de-Russification. In contrast, "decoloniality" refers to resistance against cultural hegemony, especially as it has appeared in the institutions and practices of education and research. There is a good bit of overlap between these two concepts but distinguishing them will illuminate the effect on the academic sphere.

My experience in the region began with travel for the Carnegie Humanities Program in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine (1998–2013). I directed annual competitions for research grants and publication subventions on behalf of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS). (See the ACLS website for the Humanities Program in Belarus, Russia,

and Ukraine and for the International Association for the Humanities, https://www.acls.org/past-programs/hp-belarus-russia-ukraine/ 2024). After the conclusion of the Humanities Program in BRU, I remained active in the International Association for the Humanities (transliterated Slavic acronym: MAG), a scholarly forum organized by advisers and grant recipients of the Humanities Program (MAG website: http://mag-iah.com/ 2024). MAG encouraged and facilitated collegial relations among individuals and scholarly communities in the three countries, and between them and other areas of the world, primarily Europe and North America.

I was well aware of the region's history of violent conflict and cultural animosity. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of new nation states presented an opportunity for local perspectives to flourish but also posed the danger of invidious nationalisms. In this volatile geopolitical scrum, the Humanities Program's director and advisers held fast to the possibility of mutual understanding, hoping that humanities scholars could dispel historical misunderstandings and lead productive dialogue on difficult questions.

From its first grant competition in 1999, the Humanities Program promoted the use of the three regional languages in all its activities. Grant applications were welcome in any of the three languages, as were the products of grant-supported research. Meetings of advisers, held every year in a different country, invited locally-based grant recipients to present their work — in the language of preference. At first, the rationale for language choice affirmed cultural autonomy and validation of local scholarship. Later, this rationale was bolstered by the recognition that local languages provided unique access and diverse perspectives to the study of histories, literatures, and cultures.

These gestures of linguistic collegiality required effort, despite the cognate closeness of the East Slavic languages. On the one hand, speakers of Russian (Russians as well as Slavic scholars from Europe and North America) had difficulty understanding Belarusian and Ukrainian. Speakers of Belarusian and Ukrainian, on the other hand, because they had used Russian in scholarship and daily life during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, easily understood Russian. (This is a benefit common to all speakers of local languages — they know the dominant language; the inverse is usually not the case.) Often in MAG-sponsored activities, it proved easier to utilize a lingua franca — earlier on this was almost always Russian, later it increasingly became English). Despite difficulties, however, there was an authentic commitment in the MAG community to allow each person to speak the language of choice, with the expectation that the speaker would make an effort to be understood. For their part, hearers made the

corresponding commitment to improve their understanding of other languages.

MAG's promotion of language-of-choice constituted an early form of decolonisation, because it explicitly validated local languages for scholarship. This broke with the Soviet practice of nominally honouring the brotherhood of peoples, while at the same time enforcing the use of Russian in all aspects of public life, including, of course, education and research.

The MAG community's respect for multiple languages and their cultures remained strong even after the ominous acts of Russian aggression in 2014. The Revolution of Dignity on the Euromaidan raised Ukrainian hopes of reform and a turn toward Europe by forcing the abdication of President Yanukovich. However, the Russian annexation of Crimea and its instigation of proxy wars in Donetsk and Luhansk vitiated these hopes.

While war clouds were overspreading Ukraine, MAG organized a public seminar on "Humanities and Democratization in Post-Soviet Lands: What worked, what did not work, and what do we do now?" The event took place at the historic Budynok Vchenykh ("Scholars' Home") in Kyiv, with participants from Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, and North America. The public life of the city had been visibly disrupted by the military conflict in eastern and southern Ukraine, though Kyiv itself had not been bombed. Spontaneous street memorials to victims of Russian aggression had appeared on Kyiv streets and the city was clearly suffering privations because of the war. The Budynok Vchenykh was unheated, an unsubtle reminder of the war's looming proximity.

Nevertheless, the seminar conducted its panels and roundtables on schedule and in earnest. The results were catalytic for the MAG community, strengthening international collegial solidarity and stimulating ambitious plans for expansion of activities. The seminar opened with a roundtable on the "Challenges of the Euromaidan for the humanities today," followed by a passionate talk on "Intellectuals and war" by a Russian scholar, declaring the obligation of public intellectuals, including Russians, to protest against the war. A central theme of the two-day meeting was "Civil society in the post-Soviet academic community," in which representatives of non-governmental organizations from all three countries discussed good progress (and some regress) of new curricula such as gender studies, and of new initiatives such as an online oral history archive in Minsk. (For the full program of the public seminar, see the MAG website: http://mag-iah.com/resources/news/Seminar_30-31-10_14.pdf).

A working definition of "civil society in the academic community" emerged from the seminar: the need for humanities scholars 1) to

speak in the public sphere, 2) to conduct cooperative research across borders, and 3) to support informal, voluntary associations. Public intellectuals were called to address the increasingly lethal war on Ukrainian territory.

Guided by these principles, in the next few years MAG organized a number of international events, chief among them two large-scale summer congresses. The first, in cooperation with the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), took place in Lviv at Ukrainian Catholic University in June 2016. Gathering two constituencies — north American ASEEES members and East European MAG scholars — the congress was a quantitative and qualitative success, attracting over 500 participants from all over the globe. The MAG website provides a video and written record of this optimistic joint summer convention. (See news of the 2016 joint ASEEES-MAG convention at UCU: http://mag-iah.com/news/62. Video of the 2016 convention: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOB_2P73FKg. Video of keynote address at the 2016 convention by Bishop Borys Gudziak: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trEAFLBQ48E&t=118s. All these webpages were accessed 5 October 2024.)

Though travel to Ukraine from Russia was becoming increasingly difficult for Russian scholars, many still attended and made outstanding contributions. A similar summer congress was organized two years later, in 2018, by MAG. (News of the 2018 MAG congress: http://mag-iah.com/news/61. Video of the 2018 MAG congress: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2uysPCKoos. These two webpages were accessed 5 October 2024.) The 2018 congress was slightly smaller in size (400 participants) but also attended by Russian scholars. In both these congresses organizers and attendees were clearly committed to solidarity with Ukraine in its struggle against Russian aggression.

As the military attacks on Ukraine intensified, MAG continued to organize a variety of conferences and lectures, striving as much as possible to maintain the multi-language policy. The goal was both to maintain high standards in research and to manifest collegial solidarity across borders and cultures. The MAG website provides a rich record of events, all in four-language format.

Then came the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Buoyed by MAG's determined efforts to bridge divides, my initial response was that an international, multilingual association of humanists could — and should — maintain productive dialogue even as lethal warfare raged. Humanities scholars, I was convinced, had a special vocation to nurture and sustain communication.

My colleagues in all three countries quickly deflated my wishful thinking. They protested that my hopeful intentions were at best

naïve. Ukrainians flatly refused to participate in any project that conjoined "Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine." It was agreed by colleagues from all three countries that the Association's activity be suspended, "for an indefinite period." (Press release on the MAG website http://mag-iah.com/news/97. Accessed 5 October 2024.) In the early months after the invasion, as a gesture of solidarity with Ukraine, some members of MAG, in cooperation with European and U.S. universities, organized an "Anti-war Marathon," a series of online public seminars. (Descriptions of the seminars on the MAG website: http://mag-iah.com/news/102; http://mag-iah.com/news/101; http://mag-iah.com/news/100; http://mag-iah.com/news/99. All four accessed on 5 October 2024.)

The military invasion demanded new scrutiny of relations among MAG's three nations. Despite the years of MAG's fostering of amicable and productive cross-border interchange, the underlying asymmetry of cultures now became excruciatingly apparent. Russian culture was the powerful, imperial centre, while Ukrainian and Belarusian cultures — its filial peripheries. Russian cultural hegemony, never hidden, now became a subject of intense self-examination for MAG communities in Ukraine and Belarus. Communication with Russian members of MAG ceased, except with colleagues living and working outside the Russian Federation.

A full year had to pass before a serious, focused, collegial discussion could take place on Russian hegemony over education and research in Belarus and Ukraine. The occasion was a seminal workshop at Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU) in Lviv in February 2023 "A decolonial approach to education and research: Challenges and tasks in wartime." It was a breakthrough, because it took place at all and also because it stimulated new directions for analysis. It was noteworthy for the frankness of conversation and for its working languages — Belarusian, Ukrainian, and English.

During the UCU discussion, all were united in the conviction that Russia was the aggressor and Ukraine the victim, while the Belarusian state was actively aiding and abetting the invasion. There was no clear consensus, however, on how to analyse the situation. Was this simply a war, with Russia the occupying power? How then does the history of the tsarist empire's and the Soviet Union's domination of Ukrainian lands affect our understanding of the conflict? What are the implications of the terms — occupation, colonialism, imperialism — entangled as they are in political agendas and rival theoretical perspectives?

Because the topic of the UCU workshop was the domination of education and research, the discussion quickly moved away from political and military power to focus on *cultural* domination — specifically, control over mentalities and habits. Scholars described their

lived experience of pressure from the imperial centre. Belarusians and Ukrainians began to clarify their relations to each other as well as to the hegemon. Listening to them inspired me to draw comparative implications for "decolonising AWE."

Ukrainians understand the Russian invasion as part of a long history of domination by the Russian state. In their resistance, they assert symbols of autonomous Ukrainian identity and political statehood. Putin's aggression has driven large numbers of people for whom Russian was the comfortable language of daily life, to regularly speak Ukrainian now. (President Zelensky is an example of someone used to speaking Russian at home, but who now speaks Ukrainian, especially in public.) Under attack, Ukrainians closed ranks and have been systematically removing tangible reminders of tsarist, Soviet, and Putinist rule — from language use to statues and monuments, place names, television programs, and school curricula.

Belarusian scholars at the UCU workshop expressed full solidarity with Ukrainian resistance. They had themselves engaged in political struggle using cultural symbols. In the 2020 protests against the elections that President Lukashenka falsified, many protestors embraced symbols of Belarusian national traditions — songs in Belarusian, traditional clothing, and the historic white-red-white flag. After nationwide demonstrations were crushed, many scholars and their fellow citizens went into exile. Lukashenka's sycophantic support for Putin drew a clear line between the Belarusian state and the Belarusian people who oppose the war. After the invasion, several Belarusian scholars present at the workshop organized an anti-war marathon of online seminars, in cooperation with Ukrainian, European, and North American colleagues, and their universities.

The UCU workshop's Belarusian participants, along with thousands of their fellow oppositionists to Lukashenka, are now *personae non gratae* in Belarus.

At the UCU workshop, speakers developed a common perspective (in several languages) as they described their formative years during the Soviet period and in their subsequent professional careers. The similarities of academic life under Soviet/Russian hegemony hove into clear view. Status, standards, and practices all emanated from the centre of Great Russian culture, along with political approval of topics and language use.

The historical details of university practices in the two countries were not identical, but the essential hierarchical imposition of status was the same. The Russian language was prioritized, while vernacular languages were relegated to village and family life. Pursuing research and writing on topics preferred (or dictated) by the centre were

the obvious keys to career success. Finally, the norms of what counts for scholarship and the standards of quality were promulgated by, and judged by, elites in Russian centres of culture.

The workshop's phenomenological description of academic daily life began to lay the groundwork for a deeper analytical turn, a shift from observing *actions* (decolonising by removing symbols of oppression) to interrogating *mentalities* (examining how decades of living in the Soviet system, even among those who resisted it, shaped attitudes and identities).

Coloniality and universalist claims

Decolonising Academic Writing in English, however we choose to understand it, shares with the UCU workshop a focus on mentalities and cultural norms. The workshop distinguished between the imposition of political power and the culturally hegemonic pressure for internalization of certain mentalities and habits of mind. The latter, of course, is more relevant to a study of colonising/decolonising the academic sphere of education and research. The personal stories told at UCU of experiences in the Soviet and early post-Soviet period revealed how deeply rooted cultural domination had become in the daily lives of Ukrainian and Belarusian academics.

Resisting the coloniser and removing symbols of colonisation such as monuments is conceptually easy to understand. But how do we formulate strategies of resistance against political-social assimilation? How do we resist externally imposed mentalities and habits of mind?

In this effort, the literature on decolonisation is too broad to be helpful, because it ranges over a wide range of history, geography, and theoretical perspectives. Some participants of the UCU workshop, including me, chose to look closely at the decolonisation literature focusing on the term "decoloniality," because it emphasizes cultural domination through assimilation forced upon subject populations.

Walter D. Mignolo, a prominent writer on decoloniality, defines resistance as "delinking." Although Mignolo draws upon South American experience and addresses a Global South audience, his analysis of universalist claims is relevant, in my view, to similar claims imbedded in Russian domination of Belarus and Ukraine and, in a comparative perspective, to the same claims in the promotion of western standards through the teaching of academic writing in English.

Mignolo's analytical distinction between colonisation, on the one hand, and coloniality on the other, helped the organizers of the UCU workshop design a follow-up conference, which took place at European

Humanities University in Vilnius, Lithuania, in September 2023: "Decolonisation of Education and Research in Belarus and Ukraine: Theoretical Challenges and Practical Tasks." Following Mignolo's impetus, the Vilnius conference had two themes: first, dismantling the effects of the hegemonic legacy on education and research and, second, searching for practical ways to create new, decentred, and plural epistemologies in the space cleared by the dismantling.

For Mignolo, *colonisation* consists in a) a military takeover (with installation of administrative/legal institutions), b) the imposition of culture, values, and standards of quality through symbols, language, etc., and c) manufacturing consent, enforcing compliant behaviours in the population.

Coloniality, according to Mignolo, is a broader concept that provides a rationale for colonisation. He calls it "the dark side of modernity," because the historical-cultural context of colonialism is the early modern period, beginning with the explosive juggernauts of the "Age of Exploration" in the 15th century. The extraction of natural and human resources from the colonies, and the enslavement and cultural subjugation of peoples (the dark side) fuelled the expansion of European economic, military, and political power. Modernity as a world-historic movement justified its rapacity by a rhetoric of human progress in science, education, and culture, and in the standard of living. Masking the suffering and humiliation of colonised populations, the rationale extended the repressive apparatus by targeting the souls rather than the bodies of the colonised.

Considered this way, modernity makes a totalizing, universalist claim: practical success of its goals justifies the brutal means used to achieve them. The only hope of the colonised is to internalize the rationale into their own thinking and to reproduce it as best they can in their own attitudes and practices, so that they can partake in whatever share of the spoils is permitted them. The universality consists in the assertion that the European form of modernization is superior to any other model of progress and will necessarily suppress and surpass all others.

Resistance to colonisation/coloniality, Mignolo argues, proceeds on two tracks. Resistance to colonisation (the first notion) manifests itself in the active refusal of cooperation and in the violent or non-violent expulsion of the invader. Along with these actions comes the dismantling and removal of external signs of domination — symbols, monuments, language use, and other behaviours enforced by the coloniser.

Resistance to coloniality (the second notion) Mignolo calls "de-linking," which is the opposite of assimilation. It consists of two fundamental moves which must be accomplished in sequence. The first step

is a negative action: unmasking the rhetoric of modernity's colonial brutality by exposing the geo-location of "universal" knowledge, values, and standards. The universal progress claimed by coloniality to be valid everywhere must be exposed as originating in, and serving the interests of, Europe and Anglo North America. The second step, is a positive action: the affirmation of plural sources of knowledge hitherto denigrated and suppressed. The affirmation entails identifying local ways of knowing that have not been allowed to develop freely, and their active promotion.

The aim of this two-step strategy is delinking from the centre of hegemonic power that claims to be the bearer of universal progress but in reality emanates from a specific historical-geographic source. Delinking encourages and enables a diversity or, better, a *pluriversity* of epistemologies and cultural practices.

The application of this framework to relations between Russia, on the one side, and Belarus and Ukraine, on the other, has obvious explanatory value but also raises questions.

The history of the East Slavic region meets Mignolo's criteria for colonisation: military domination, imposition of culture, and manufacturing consent through enforcing compliant behaviour. Decolonisation — resistance — appears most obviously in the form of Ukrainian armed response to the invasion. In the cultural sphere, as Ukrainians remove monuments, place names, and other tangible symbols of Russian power in Ukraine, they reject Russian cultural domination and refuse assimilation.

Decolonisation may also be seen, in a very different way, in Belarusian anti-Lukashenka protests, which deployed Belarusian cultural symbols as signs of defiance (Belarusian songs, traditional clothing, and the traditional white-red-white flag). Lukashenka prefers Russian as the language of state and for his personal use; he sees himself as a close ally of Putin.

When UCU workshop organizers began to plan the Vilnius conference, they applied Mignolo's warning about the dark side of modernity to Russian hegemony over Belarus and Ukraine. They proposed to examine the effects of Russian hegemony on mentalities, identities, and the academic habitus, and then ask: "What should we do now?"

The conference took place at European Humanities University (EHU) in Vilnius, September 2023. Its program restated Mignolo's two steps for delinking (to unmask the rhetoric of universality and to assert the local pluriversity of knowledge). The first day of the EHU conference was devoted to "learning to unlearn" by de-assimilating from forcibly learned patterns of thought. The second day turned attention to recommendations for changes in curricula and pedagogical practices.

At the end of the conference, organizers announced that the search for strategies to reject Russian cultural hegemony, which began at the UCU workshop and was followed in Vilnius, would continue in the form of a network of Belarusian and Ukrainian colleagues in the region and in Europe and North America. Firstly, this continuation will seek to unmask the dark side of Russia's hegemony over Belarus and Ukraine. Secondly, it will explore local perspectives on teaching and knowledge production that can flourish only after undoing the grip of Russian cultural domination.

Conclusion: How then, to decolonise Academic Writing in English?

This article began by defining the inquiry into whether and how to decolonise AWE as a phenomenological examination of the experience of teaching academic writing in English in Eastern Europe. I have led AWE trainings in a variety of situations, including the Manuscript Development Workshops of the Carnegie/ACLS African Humanities Program of which I was director. My objective in this article is to apply the decolonisation approach to assess AWE's universalist claims vis-à-vis the rise and flourishing of local perspectives. In addition, I hope to stimulate comparative studies in other regions.

Offering a description of AWE courses, the opening section of the article outlined the cultural expectations for academic writing in Eastern Europe. Anticipating student qualms about externally developed norms, I asked them to suspend their disbelief (and disquiet) for the duration of the training. Afterwards, they would be well enough informed to assess for themselves the value of AWE practices.

Turning to definitions, the next section noted that, in Eastern Europe, decolonisation can be experientially understood by both the coloniser and colonised without the need for complex theory. To decolonise means to expel the coloniser and to remove the symbols of colonial domination, including imposed language use and other academic practices. However, it is not so readily obvious whether "decolonisation" is the most accurate and intellectually productive term as opposed to, say, defence against invasion or de-Russification.

Whichever term might be chosen, it seems clear that defining decolonisation as primarily resistance to physical power, political administration, and control by the police and military, leaves unresolved the intransigent problem of *cultural* hegemony, which is key to "decolonising education and research." Speakers at the 2023 Lviv workshop underscored the salience of cultural domination by describing how an

imposed academic culture severely burdened their own lives and professional careers. It became evident that de-Russification in politics and administration was not enough. How should we analyse the long history of cultural domination and how should it be overcome?

The Vilnius conference in September 2023 examined these questions through the matrix of decoloniality literature. Though similar to decolonisation, the decoloniality approach offers a rationale for decolonisation by grounding it in a broader historical-theoretical analysis. The first half of the conference asked what steps are needed to begin dismantling the imperial legacy by "learning to unlearn" the mentalities and practices of Soviet/post-Soviet scholarship. The second half of the conference called for suggestions for creating new epistemologies to replace the rejected hegemonic norms and practices. Both steps are fundamental to decolonial analysis: first, identifying the deleterious effects of domination in the cultural sphere and, second, taking practical steps to identify and give voice to vernacular perspectives.

Is Academic Writing in English, then, a neocolonial form of external domination of local cultures? It would seem so, despite the potential defence that it is a service to those who wish to publish their research internationally, because English is now the *lingua franca* of world scholarship. Despite this practical justification, training East European scholars and students in (north)western norms and practices, whatever their transactional value for globalized careers, certainly *appears* as an imposition, especially in the context of the post-Cold War struggle for western soft-power domination of the region.

If there are two cultures contending for attention in scholarly milieux, perhaps an eclectic solution might prove the best way forward. This would seem the case whether the paired languages (and their cultures) are both *linguae francae* (such as English and Russian) or whether the paired languages consist of a *lingua franca* and a vernacular language (e.g., Russian and Ukrainian, or English and Ukrainian). Faced with competing cultures, why cannot individuals be free to pick and choose the elements of each culture that best suit their purposes? Indeed, in the post-Soviet period before the 2024 full-scale invasion, significant proportions of Belarusian and Ukrainian societies opted for the use of two languages. (In Ukraine the legal mandate for using Ukrainian in schools and research made it all but certain that eventually Ukrainian would be the dominant academic language.) In the 1990s, the *lingua franca* in Ukraine used for international scholarship was still primarily Russian; by 2024, the international language is increasingly English.

From the forgoing analysis, a hybrid option must meet two conditions.

First, the (geo)political situation must allow individuals an uncompelled choice between contending academic cultures. Such genuinely free choice is rare enough in history. Today, it is impossible due to the ruthless Russian invasion and to Lukashenka's domestic depredations. For academic communities in both Belarus and Ukraine, the question of language choice has become a "which-side-are-you-on" shibboleth that cleaves communities. Choosing to use the vernacular language and/or a *lingua franca* (and which one!) for academic work is a political decision. The rejection of the Russian language by those opposed to the invasion has decolonising force. A MAG-style multi-language policy including Russian, as it existed prior to 2024, is today impossible. Significantly, both the UCU workshop and the Vilnius conference chose as their working languages Belarusian, Ukrainian, and English.

Second, the choices must result from open-ended dialogue in a scholarly community of inquiry. A microcosm of such discussion has been the group self-reflection at the opening of an AWE session, in which the instructor asked students for their willing suspension of disbelief regarding the principles and practices of an external academic culture.

This experience suggests that extricating AWE from its decolonisation quandary could begin by making the quandary itself a teaching moment. A serious, social self-reflection could and should be a required initiation to every AWE training. "Willing suspension of disbelief" should be re-coded as "mutual agreement to dialogic reflection, whose openness would be convincing to the extent that *each* member *accepts the possibility* of modifying, or even abandoning, initial foundational principles and practices." To engage in the training, the instructor as well as the students should put at risk their prior assumptions. All available options, even if they appear hostile to individuals' own initial assumptions, should be discussed without preconditions. Self-reflection is a necessary first step, but it must be followed by a resolute openness to follow the inquiry wherever it leads. No predetermined outcomes. Moreover, to be effective, the commitment to dialogue needs to be ongoing. Initial assumptions, as well as potential outcomes, should remain ever subject to debate.

Although the proposed open-ended inquiry might methodologically begin with a provisional suspension of disbelief, it can be convincing only if it becomes permanently imbedded in pedagogical and research practice.

Such practice will explicitly impugn universalist claims, such as those that made AWE vulnerable to the charge of western cultural domination. Importantly, the call for acknowledging local perspectives

must be wary of not only universalist claims but also exclusivist ones, such as those made by obdurate, insular nationalisms.

Larger issues raised by the decoloniality approach remain to be confronted — the seeming equivalence of decolonisation and de-Russification, the implications of coloniality for the region as the darker side of modernity, and the potential danger that the demand for new vernacular epistemologies might lead to a resurgence of exclusivist nationalisms. Whatever the implications, and whatever the hope that open dialogue might release a new, decentred, pluriversity of pedagogy and research, it is irrefutable that war conditions preclude their implementation. Nevertheless, efforts for open-ended dialogue should be revived as soon as post-war reconstruction begins.

As a coda, this path of open collective inquiry requires humility on the part of what we can now call "*lingua franca* cultures," the cultures for whom a language of international scholarship is the natural language of everyday life. They are no longer able to claim universality for their cultural assumptions, standards of quality, or practices. They must *earn* acceptance for these norms by engaging in open-ended intellectual inquiry, employing as weapons only reason and dialogue. This means, further, that they must explicitly reject the dominance afforded them by economic power and by the sheer volume of their academic production. The weapons of political, economic, or military force have no place in the contention among academic cultures.

In the midst of the devastating war, so debilitating to scholars, education, and research, open dialogue is admittedly an idealistic scenario. In the worst of times, but also in better times, it will take a determined vision to conceive and implement such open-ended dialogue. Yet, for the sake of humanity, as well as for the sake of humanistic scholarship, we must steadfastly champion this ideal.

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