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Article

Soft Coloniality of English: Linguistic Justice and Epistemic Pluralism in Comparative and International Education

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Abstract

This article examines how English-language dominance shapes epistemic hierarchies in Comparative and International Education (CIE), focusing on 'semi-peripheral' European higher education. It asks how internationalization policies and English-medium instruction (EMI) affect whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate and what this means for linguistic justice and epistemic pluralism. Methodologically, the study combines qualitative document analysis of national and institutional policy texts with a small-scale qualitative questionnaire among university instructors teaching in English at Polish higher education institutions, with particular attention to the University of Warsaw. Policy documents are read for how English is discursively linked to quality, prestige, and competitiveness, while instructor narratives illuminate everyday experiences of EMI and internationalization. Findings show that English operates as a gatekeeper to academic legitimacy not through overt exclusion, but via subtle forms of epistemic filtering embedded in rankings, publishing expectations, and EMI policies. Instructors report institutional ambiguity, limited pedagogical support, and tensions between local linguistic commitments and Anglophone performance demands. The article argues that these dynamics constitute a 'soft coloniality' of English, which risks marginalizing local languages and intellectual traditions while reproducing global prestige economies. It calls for reimagining internationalization through plurilingual, context-sensitive practices that treat linguistic justice as integral to epistemic justice. By foregrounding a Central and Eastern European case, the study extends CIE debates on coloniality beyond a simple North–South binary and speaks directly to NJCIE's focus on critical, context-aware analyses of education, language, and power in and beyond the Nordic and European regions.

Keywords: Linguistic justice, epistemic pluralism, Poland, comparative and international education

Introduction

Language is not merely a vehicle for communication; it creates meaning and shapes epistemic realities. Language also encodes cultural memory, frames perception, and determines the expression of knowledge, thereby creating limits as to what can and cannot be communicated and understood (Takahashi, 2025). In Comparative and International Education (CIE), a field that, according to Takayama et al. (2017, p. S1), has "rarely acknowledged [its] colonial entanglements of knowledge," the predominance of English and the dominance of Western academic norms have far-reaching implications, such as the marginalization of non-Western knowledge systems and the disadvantage faced by scholars who must publish in a second language to gain international recognition. Such linguistic hierarchies and Western-defined professional standards ultimately shape whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate, how it circulates, and what forms of expertise are considered legitimate within global academia. Language, as a site of epistemic and symbolic power, functions both overtly and covertly to reproduce colonial hierarchies within global knowledge systems (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

English, as the global academic lingua franca, arguably serves as a gatekeeper, regulating access to academic prestige, institutional opportunities, and epistemic legitimacy (Becker, in press). This is especially salient in the field of CIE, where cross-national comparisons and international collaborations are expected to occur within a shared linguistic, cultural, and conceptual framework. However, the imposition of English, along with its cultural entrenchment, is not a neutral choice. It privileges certain forms of knowledge, particularly those that conform to Anglo-American ways of thinking, logics, and epistemologies, and marginalizes or disadvantages others. Scholars from the Global South, especially those conducting research in or through Indigenous or local languages, face systemic barriers to participation in the field. These include linguistic limitations in publishing, limited access to international networks, and institutional pressures to conform to Western academic conventions (Becker, in press). The pressure to publish in high-impact English-language journals, for example, can lead to self-censorship, epistemic translation, or undermining of local knowledge systems (R'boul, 2022). Furthermore, Western theories and methodologies are frequently treated as universally applicable, while non-Western frameworks are regarded as context-bound or supplementary (de Sousa Santos, 2021; Wang, 2011;). This reflects an enduring coloniality of knowledge that continues to shape the field of CIE (Silova et al., 2017).

The epistemic violence enacted through language, understood as the process by which dominant linguistic and cultural norms invalidate or marginalize other forms of knowledge, also has pedagogical and curricular implications. In many contexts, CIE programs taught in English become inaccessible to students from

different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As a result, these students may feel pressured to adopt the language of coloniality, further deepening the epistemic divide. This dynamic creates a ranking or hierarchy of languages as well as of ways of knowing, being, and relating to the world (Langthaler et al., 2012). Similarly, scholarship in decolonial theory, sociolinguistics, and critical education studies has called attention to the need for epistemic disobedience, that is, the refusal to conform to hegemonic structures of knowledge production and dissemination (Domínguez, 2020; Mignolo, 2011; Ndhlovu, 2021). Within CIE, this involves challenging the assumption that English should serve as the sole medium of scholarly practices. It also means interrogating the underlying ideologies that legitimize Western epistemological superiority and pathologize linguistic and epistemic difference.

Thus, as this article argues, to decolonize language in CIE is not merely to advocate for more translation services at conferences, linguistic scaffolding for publishing, or broader inclusion initiatives; it is to call for a structural transformation and thinking of the field. This includes recognizing multilingualism and semiotic multimodality as a constitutive feature of knowledge diversity, valuing oral and Indigenous epistemologies as legitimate academic contributions, and creating institutional spaces where alternative ways of knowing can flourish. It also requires revolutionizing the neoliberal nature of academic publishing, which continues to prioritize English-language outputs and marginalize non-English-speaking voices. Importantly, these tensions are not confined to postcolonial or Global South contexts. They are increasingly visible in 'semi-peripheral' education systems such as Poland's, where the pressures of Europeanization, internationalization, and neoliberal competitiveness have reshaped the linguistic, cultural, and epistemic higher education (HE) landscape. Polish HEIs today are navigating a changing academic landscape in which English-medium instruction (EMI), multilingual classrooms, and new patterns of migration coexist with long-standing national language traditions (Becker & Zakharova, 2025c). These developments offer a unique site to examine how CIE's global language hierarchies are reproduced, negotiated, or resisted in a Central and Eastern European (CEE) context, an area often overlooked in decolonial scholarship (Müller, 2020).

Finally, this article is primarily a conceptual contribution that draws on the Polish HE context as an illustrative case to ground its theoretical argument. It advocates for a decolonial linguistic praxis within CIE, grounded in the principles of epistemic pluralism, language justice, and linguistic citizenship (May, 2017; Stroud & Kerfoot, 2020). By engaging CIE scholarship alongside examples from Polish HE practices, it contributes to ongoing efforts to reimagine CIE as a space of epistemic justice and decolonial futures.

Coloniality of language and epistemic hegemony in CIE

This article draws on a combination of policy document analysis and empirical data collected through a

qualitative questionnaire distributed among instructors at Polish HEIs, with particular attention to the University of Warsaw (UW). The research is situated within a broader project on new multilingual realities in Polish HE, with a focus on the intersection of language, academic governance, and epistemic authority.

The first component of the study involved a close reading of institutional and national documents, including UW's strategic plan (2023–2032), rectoral statements, and policy briefs related to internationalization, language policy, and academic evaluation. These texts were analyzed using qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009), with attention to how English is discursively positioned as a marker of academic quality, global competitiveness, and institutional prestige. This method allowed for the identification of policy mechanisms and symbolic hierarchies embedded in language and internationalization discourse at UW.

The second component consisted of a qualitative questionnaire1 circulated to university instructors across disciplines teaching in English. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions addressing participants' experiences with English-medium-instruction, perceptions of institutional support, language-related pedagogical challenges, and views on academic language norms. A total of 13 responses were received, with a majority of respondents affiliated with UW. Thematic analysis was employed to code and interpret the open-ended responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach enabled the emergence of key themes related to institutional ambiguity, linguistic identity, epistemic displacement, and pedagogical adaptation.

The study design is informed by scholarship on context-sensitive approaches in CIE (Crossley & Watson, 2009), emphasizing the need to examine global trends through the lens of local institutional practices and professional subjectivities. By incorporating document analysis and instructor narratives, this methodology captures both the symbolic and material dimensions of linguistic hierarchies in a semi-peripheral, under-researched academic context. It also aligns with qualitative research traditions in language policy and planning, which stress the interplay between policy, ideology, and classroom-level implementation (Hult & Johnson, 2015).

Finally, while the study does not aim for statistical generalizability, it offers an empirically grounded, interpretive account of how internationalization policies are internalized and negotiated by university instructors. It contributes to ongoing efforts to understand how global English operates as both an instrument of epistemic inclusion and exclusion in HEIs outside the Anglo-American core.

[1] The online questionnaire can be found here: https://osf.io/tx4vr/overview.

Method

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Epistemic Filtering and Linguistic Hierarchies in Polish Higher Education: The Case of the University of Warsaw

The global dominance of English in academic knowledge production has long been recognized to reinforce epistemic inequality (Díaz, 2018). While much of the critical literature focuses on its effects in postcolonial contexts in the Global South, this dynamic also plays out with force in semi-peripheral regions such as Central and Eastern Europe. In Polish HE, and particularly at the UW, linguistic hierarchies have been institutionalized through internationalization policies, performance indicators, and academic publishing norms. The study's analysis of policies, documents, and questionnaire responses from university instructors at Polish HEIs teaching in English reveals that these do not necessarily operate through overt exclusion, but through more subtle forms of epistemic filtering and academic governance, that is, mechanisms that reshape which language is valued, which knowledge is disseminated, and who is recognized as an authoritative voice within academia (Becker & Zakharova, 2025a; Zakharova & Becker, 2025). In this light, this article contributes to existing CIE literature by examining how these dynamics unfold in a semi-peripheral, European setting, where colonial legacies are less overt, but linguistic hierarchies are still deeply embedded in academic practice.

According to UW's most recent strategic documents (2023–2032) and Rector Professor Alozy Z. Nowak, UW is a 'leading institution' and "we have done a lot in recent years to raise our recognition in Europe and internationally. However, we are aware that our needs are greater" (UW News, 2024), emphasizing the institutionalized efforts to internationalize HE, especially Poland's biggest university in the capital city. At the same time, there seems to be awareness that it is an ongoing process, and not all objectives have been met yet. As Becker et al. (forthcoming) show in a recent study, the operationalization of these goals is tightly linked to the expansion of EMI, international co-authorship, and output in indexed journals. English is not only the language of institutional prestige but the medium through which academic success is increasingly defined. Yet, while institutional discourse at UW positions English as a marker of internationalization and prestige, the everyday realities of English use in academic settings are often far more ambivalent. Luczaj et al. (2022) point out that despite sustained policy efforts to increase English-language output and expand EMI provision, English does not function as a shared communicative resource across the Polish academic system. As they write, "English does not guarantee smooth communication within the Polish higher education system" (p. 12). This has concrete consequences for faculty navigating pedagogical challenges in EMI classrooms, as well as international students and staff who may find themselves excluded from institutional life that continues to operate predominantly in Polish. The gap between symbolic and functional roles of English illustrates that linguistic hierarchies are not only about what language is used, but about how it is positioned within academic and institutional structures.

7 Soft Coloniality of English

The expansion of EMI in Polish HE, especially at institutions such as UW, indicates how global academic norms shape local pedagogical practices in uneven and often exclusionary ways. In this sense, EMI can be understood as part of the 'soft' coloniality of language, operating not through formal imposition, but through symbolic hierarchies and policy incentives that privilege English over local linguistic and epistemic traditions. Insights from a small-scale questionnaire study conducted reveal how instructors experience the institutionalization of EMI in actual university classrooms. Many respondents described the absence of any coherent university-wide policy, guidelines, or pedagogical support. Instead, they were left to navigate EMI individually, often with little or no formal preparation. As one instructor commented, "There is no support. We don't talk about our teaching." Another added, "It was just assumed when I was hired that I would teach in English, although the vast majority of the students are Polish-speaking and so am I." EMI, in this context, is implemented more as an institutional expectation than a pedagogically grounded practice. For some, their English competence was assumed based not on training or credentials but on institutional assumptions tied to their identity. This adds another layer of strain: "I'm seen as a 'native speaker' in my institution [and] I am asked to review other colleagues' works because of my 'native speaker' status (which I am not), and this actually causes tensions within me."

This disconnect between institutional expectations and personal preparedness is compounded by the epistemic and affective pressures many instructors experience. For those trained in Polish or other languages, teaching in English involves a subtle but persistent sense of pedagogical constraint. As one respondent said, "If I could choose, I would teach in Polish." Another respondent added that "There is a lot of talk about internationalization, but I think if people could choose, they would rather teach in Polish-to-Polish students." A third participant noted that "[Teaching in English is] sometimes artificial because we're all Polish speakers." Rather than enhancing access or inclusivity, EMI often introduces new forms of inequality within the classroom. While some instructors acknowledged that students appreciate the opportunity to study in English, particularly international students, others pointed to the wide disparities in language proficiency among Polish students and instructors. This unevenness affects not only how instructors plan and deliver their lessons, but also how students engage with the material and each other. When asked about the students' language proficiency, one instructor noted, "To be honest, it's probably better than mine." Yet even instructors who felt linguistically competent described moments of hesitation, revision, or frustration, which reflect a broader pressure to align with Anglo-American academic norms, obfuscating discomfort or linguistic insecurity for the sake of institutional internationalization.

Despite these constraints, some respondents acknowledged EMI's potential to increase global competitiveness, institutional visibility, foster international collaboration, and enable students to participate in transnational academic conversations. As one participant noted, "I think Polish academia is well behind other countries, especially Western Europe and the US." One instructor further emphasized,

"More chances for publishing results, international links, cooperation with researchers from abroad." Another saw it as an opportunity for both teachers and students to "stay in linguistic shape." Yet these benefits were often framed in conditional terms, dependent on prior preparation, departmental culture, or students' and instructors' language abilities.

What emerges from this data is a complex portrait of EMI as both a policy imperative and a site of tension, where institutional objectives of internationalization clash with the practical, epistemic, and emotional realities of teaching. Instructors are caught between global performance metrics and local pedagogical commitments, navigating the multifaceted effects of linguistic hierarchies, professional expectations, and personal ideologies. While EMI is often promoted as a means of inclusion, its current implementation in Poland risks reproducing forms of linguistic and epistemic exclusion and marginalization that remain underexamined in policy discourse. The Polish case demonstrates that linguistic hierarchies in HE do not map neatly onto a Global North–South binary but operate through more context-specific structures of symbolic power. Recognizing and addressing these dynamics is crucial for developing more equitable and reflexive forms of internationalization in comparative and international education.

The Soft Coloniality of English in Academic Internationalization

The expansion of EMI in Polish HE reflects global pressures to internationalize. Yet from a decolonial perspective, it is essential to interrogate what such internationalization means, for whom, and at what cost (Leal, 2023). As Mufwene (2020) reminds us, language (and the scholarship about and produced through it) is never neutral. It functions both as a medium of knowledge and as a mechanism of epistemic authority. When English is perceived as the exclusive language of academic prestige, it reshapes pedagogical practice and determines which knowledge is legitimized. In the Polish context, this shift is not experienced as an abrupt policy change from Polish to English but more as a gradual reorientation of institutional values, professional norms, and academic expectations toward the symbolic and practical authority of English.

Findings from this study point to a consistent pattern of pedagogical uncertainty and institutional ambiguity surrounding EMI. Instructors often assume responsibility for teaching in English without formal training or structured policy support. This lack of institutional scaffolding hides the deeper epistemic implications of EMI, presenting it as a pragmatic tool for internationalization rather than a political and neoliberal project. As Meighan (2023) argues through the concept of *colonialingualism*, such language policies and practices are deeply embedded in colonial legacies and imperial mindsets that continue to shape HE. EMI becomes normalized through policy and other symbolic processes that position English as the unquestioned standard of academic legitimacy. The taken-for-granted status of English in HE reinforces hierarchies in which other

languages, along with the epistemologies they represent, are marginalized. This normalization obfuscates the inequitable dynamics at play, to wit: English provides access to prestige, publication, and professional advancement, while local languages and intellectual traditions are often devalued or silenced.

Meighan (2023) further highlights how these dynamics intersect with neoliberal rationalities, where educational value is increasingly measured through metrics of productivity, international visibility, and competitiveness. Within this logic, EMI manifests as a tool to signal institutional alignment with global academic norms. The term *soft coloniality* refers here to the subtle, normalized domination through which English gains symbolic and material authority in higher education, not by coercion but through consent and aspiration. The soft coloniality of EMI thus operates through seemingly implicit power mechanisms, for instance, rankings, publication expectations, and funding incentives, that construct English not simply as a means of communication, but as a substitute for epistemic worth. In such a context, institutions may overlook the material and pedagogical consequences of EMI, reinforcing linguistic hierarchies while absolving themselves of responsibility for the inequities these policies produce.

Pedagogically, EMI can be seen to alter (to differing extents) how instructors design courses, choose materials, and engage with students. Some describe changing their way of speaking and thereby adjusting the content itself, that is, simplifying discussions, avoiding culturally embedded texts, or omitting material that is difficult to translate to accommodate international students. These decisions are not driven by pedagogical choice but by necessity due to the uneven language proficiency of students and instructors and the lack of institutional support. This process amounts to a form of epistemic filtering, where knowledge must conform to dominant linguistic and institutional norms to be recognized as valid or teachable. From a decolonial perspective, this filtering reflects the *coloniality of language*, where English operates not merely as a medium of communication but as a gatekeeper of epistemic legitimacy (Ndlangamandla, 2024). The norms associated with English-language academic discourse (e.g., clarity, abstraction, citation density, and rhetorical linearity) are treated as universal standards, although they reflect historically and culturally specific traditions rooted in Western academic conventions (Pennycook, 2010; Tupas, 2020). This can impose structural constraints on instructors, who must navigate not only the translation of content into English but also the adjustment of epistemic styles and curricula that advance institutional internationalization. As de Sousa Santos (2014) and O'Neill (2019) argue, such filtering contributes to a narrowing of the epistemic horizon, where only certain ways of knowing and teaching are institutionally supported or rewarded.

Moreover, EMI brings with it a range of emotional and professional pressures (Hillman et al., 2023). Instructors often feel required to demonstrate confidence and fluency, even when they are unsure or uncomfortable, and are expected to implement internationalization policies. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021)

argues, internationalization is not neutral but rather reflects a broader agenda rooted in the unfinished project of modernity, which privileges Eurocentric ways of knowing and reinforces global hierarchies under the slogan of academic excellence. Within this framework, English performs institutional modernity. For instructors, this can be professionally demanding and emotionally exhausting, and their efforts remain invisible within formal systems of evaluation. It highlights the uneven distribution of institutional expectations and recognition in the global academic landscape and raises important questions about whose knowledge, language, and efforts are valued.

The effects of EMI are not limited to instructors; they also manifest in the classroom through students' varying English language levels. Instructors reported differences in their students (and their own) language skills, which create ongoing pedagogical challenges. While EMI is often framed as a tool for international access and inclusion, in practice, it can be seen to exacerbate inequalities, benefiting students with high levels of English language skills while marginalizing others. Rather than fostering genuine intercultural engagement, English may reinforce hierarchies that mirror broader patterns of educational and epistemic exclusion (Becker, in press).

These findings resonate with research from other contexts. Ndlangamandla (2024), in his analysis of EMI in South African universities, highlights how English language proficiency requirements uphold Anglocentric academic norms within neoliberal frameworks. Likewise, Tejada-Sanchez and Molina-Naar (2021) observe in Colombia, and Sultana (2025) in South Asia, that EMI is often promoted as a tool for global competitiveness even as it continuously reproduces forms of exclusion. A comparative study by McKinley, Simie, and Mikołajewska (2025) examining EMI implementation in Ethiopia, Poland, and Japan further supports these concerns. Their research finds that EMI reproduces inequality, not only in the Global South but even in highly contrasting socioeconomic contexts such as Poland, Ethiopia, and Japan. Despite policy rhetoric suggesting that EMI expands opportunity, the study shows it often benefits already advantaged groups (e.g., urban, elite, or English-proficient students) while marginalizing others.

The Polish case presented in this study exemplifies this contradiction, manifest in the literature. EMI has been embedded in university strategies and evaluation systems, but often without institutional investment in linguistic inclusivity or pedagogical support. Faculty are expected to deliver in English without professional training, while students' language skills are uneven and may create barriers to academic success. These structural gaps contribute to what can be described as *soft coloniality* or the normalization of English as a substitute for academic excellence, despite its uneven accessibility. Ndlangamandla's framework, which emphasizes multilingual scaffolding, curricular plurality, and solidarity-based pedagogies, offers an innovative perspective through which to interpret Polish instructors' EMI strategies. These would advocate for code-switching, critical reflection on language use, and the incorporation of Polish texts and

references even in EMI-based classrooms. While they often remain invisible in institutional discourse, especially when it comes to internationalization, such practices can foster strategies that resist epistemic filtering and reimagine HE through a more equitable, pluriversal, and context-sensitive approach.

Toward Linguistic Justice and Epistemic Pluralism

If CIE is to meaningfully engage in decolonial transformation, it must place linguistic justice at the center of its practice. As earlier sections have shown, English continues to function as a gatekeeper to epistemic legitimacy in research, publishing, pedagogy, and institutional prestige. This dynamic is often discussed in relation to postcolonial or Global South contexts. Yet, as the case of Polish HE illustrates, the coloniality of language also structures academic life in European contexts historically positioned outside the core Anglo-American West. Linguistic hierarchies do not map neatly onto geographic binaries such as North and South. Rather, they are embedded in the political economies of knowledge production, institutional evaluation systems, and the everyday practices of scholars working within the field of CIE. As Piller and Cho (2013) argue in the context of South Korea, English-language dominance in HE is not simply a linguistic trend but a product of neoliberal ideology, where institutional competitiveness and global rankings function as covert mechanisms of language policy. In this framework, English functions as a marker of value, legitimacy, and modernity. As this study has shown, these are pressures that are increasingly evident in Polish HE as well. Here, the internationalization agenda often aligns with performance metrics that privilege English, subtly reinforcing epistemic hierarchies and narrowing the scope of legitimate knowledge production.

The Polish case presented here offers a clear example of how internationalization in HE can reinforce existing linguistic hierarchies. Rather than creating a more inclusive academic environment, the growing emphasis on EMI, the institutional preference for English-language publishing, and the association of English fluency with academic prestige have collectively contributed to the marginalization of the Polish language within its own universities. As Cierpich-Kozieł and Mańczak-Wohlfeld (2021) point out, Englishization is evident not only in teaching but also in recruitment, internal communication, and the everyday functioning of academic institutions. The result is a shift in which English increasingly dominates the academic landscape, often at the expense of local language use and the visibility of Polish scholarly traditions. These trends mirror global prestige economies, where English-language scholarship is granted higher value, visibility, and circulation, regardless of context or content (de Wit, 2019). Polish HE finds itself pressured to align with Anglo-American norms to gain recognition within the international academic marketplace. Problematically, such policy decisions threaten local epistemologies, detach research from community involvement, and narrow the field of knowledge.

Yet Poland is also a site of possibility, as its transitional status between post-socialist legacies, EU

integration, and emerging multilingual realities (Becker & Salajan, forthcoming) provides a conducive environment for rethinking how internationalization could be detached from Anglophone standards and pressure. A more multilingual, locally responsive, and epistemically plural academic model is imaginable and, in some contexts, already emergent. Experimental pedagogy, translanguaging in classrooms, and researcher networks working across linguistic borders are early signs of such a shift (Becker & Zakharova, 2025b). What is needed now is structural support: institutional policies, funding models, and publishing platforms that recognize and reward knowledge work conducted in multiple languages, especially in an effort to revitalize minority languages and those promoting local scholarly traditions.

To move toward linguistic justice, CIE must first acknowledge its own complicity in maintaining linguistic hierarchies. Journals, conferences, and graduate programs often (implicitly or explicitly) reward fluency in English as equivalent to intellectual quality, thereby discouraging alternative forms of scholarly expression (Curry & Lillis, 2018). Addressing this requires a shift from inclusion to structural transformation, that is, from symbolic gestures to institutional change. This includes multilingual publishing, inclusive citation practices, support for language learning and maintenance, and the legitimation of alternative forms of academic communication, such as storytelling, oral testimony, other multimodal formats (Becker, 2024) or 'language gardens' (Phipps et al., 2025).

The field must also adopt a broader and more nuanced comparative approach. Rather than mapping linguistic domination solely through a postcolonial framework, language scholars in CIE should explore how linguistic hegemony operates in semi-peripheral contexts such as Poland—contexts shaped not by classical colonialism, but by geopolitical repositioning, policy borrowing, and the logics of neoliberal global governance (Shahjahan & Morgan, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Doing so contributes to a richer understanding of how coloniality mutates and adapts to different institutional ecologies, and how resistance can and should take multiple forms depending on historical, cultural, and linguistic specificities. As Phillipson and Meighan (2025, p. 147) recently pointed out, "there has been an agreement between five Nordic countries, Iceland included, which says that all HE institutions have a duty to maintain the national language as well as being proficient in an international language, which currently means English." Thus, by comparing academic language practices and policies in other contexts, we can learn from and advance with each other and help decolonize education. In this sense, decolonial linguistic justice and diversity cannot be simply about translation or multilingualism as such; it is about epistemic pluralism. It calls for a de-centering of Anglo-American norms, a recognition of situated knowledge practices, and a reimagining of what counts as legitimate scholarship in the field and beyond. For CIE to engage in decolonial praxis, it must make space for truly heteroglossic academic, professional, and epistemic practices, that is, a multiplicity of voices, languages, and ways of knowing, not only as objects of study but as the foundation of its epistemological and institutional design. We, as scholars and educators in the field, should strive for "a

decolonial, multilingual world in which language is not merely spoken, but lived, tended, and revered" (Meighan & Lin, 2025).

Conclusion

This article has argued that language is not a neutral medium of communication within CIE, but rather a site where global epistemic hierarchies are enacted, contested, and potentially transformed. Drawing on decolonial theory and the emerging multilingual realities in Polish HE, the analysis has shown how the dominance of English in publishing, classroom practices, and institutional policy acts as a form of epistemic control that shapes whose knowledge is visible, legitimate, and valued within the field. While much of the literature on linguistic coloniality has rightly focused on postcolonial contexts in the Global South, this paper has demonstrated that similar dynamics are playing out in 'semi-peripheral' regions such as Central and Eastern Europe, albeit through different historical and geopolitical developments.

The Polish case adds important nuance to ongoing debates about language, coloniality, and internationalization. It illustrates how pressures through EMI, bibliometric incentives, and global ranking systems to align with Anglo-American norms can marginalize local languages and intellectual traditions, even in countries with no direct colonial past. This form of 'soft coloniality' does not manifest in overt domination but is embedded in symbolic and structural processes within global academic prestige economies. At the same time, Poland's shifting multilingual landscape, shaped by regional migration and changing student demographics, offers new possibilities for more inclusive and multilingual educational practices. These tensions make Polish HE a valuable site for comparative inquiry into how linguistic and epistemic justice might be achieved even within constantly changing geopolitical tensions. The article thus contributes to CIE by advancing a relational and situated approach to decolonial critique; one that resists dichotomous North–South binaries and instead asks how *colonialingualism* functions across a spectrum of contexts. In doing so, it encourages the field to interrogate its own norms: how language hierarchies are reproduced through academic publishing, institutional evaluation, and pedagogical practice; how 'internationalization' is too often equated with Englishization; and how scholarly legitimacy is unevenly distributed based on linguistic and geopolitical location.

Moving forward, as has been argued here, the field must embrace concrete strategies for transformation. These include supporting multilingual publishing practices; revising academic evaluation criteria to value work in non-English languages; investing in translation as dialogue; and fostering classroom spaces where multiple linguistic and epistemic traditions are actively encouraged to shape inquiry. Institutions in countries like Poland, situated at the intersection of multiple linguistic, historical, and political forces, are particularly well-placed to lead these innovations if they choose to reimagine internationalization as

something more than English-language adoption.

Ultimately, the pursuit of linguistic justice in CIE is inseparable from the pursuit of epistemic justice. At a time of overlapping global crises, from climate change to educational inequity and the resurgence of authoritarian nationalism, there is a growing need for diverse ways of knowing, being, and communicating. For CIE to respond effectively, it must move beyond the epistemic monoculture that linguistic coloniality has created. This demands not only epistemic inclusion but the dismantling of hierarchies that have long dictated who speaks, who listens, and whose knowledge is considered legitimate.

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