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## ***Blind spots in language textbooks. The issue of colonialism***

The article presents the results of the analysis of over 80 English language textbooks published between 2000 and 2024. The aim of the study was to answer the question whether English textbooks contain elements of the discursive reproduction of colonialism as a practice of creating superior and subordinate identities, and what potential role textual absences and silence may play in this process. The study used the content analysis method with coding in the programme Atlas.ti and Critical Discourse Analysis to allow for qualitative examination of texts. As a result of the analysis, four main categories were distinguished which at the same time were dominant trends in textual references to colonialism (*Colonization without the colonized*, *The colonized in a folklore trap*, *Invisibility of colonization*, *A different approach*). The conclusions of the study show the textual absence of topics related to colonialism and the use of various types of silencing strategies to obfuscate the issue, whether in the form of backgrounding or exclusion of the colonized people, or by naturalizing the process of colonization itself. While critical research on textbooks, also in the context of blind spots, has had a long history, it has rarely focused on language textbooks, so the study aims to fill the gap in this area and contribute to further research.

**Keywords:** English textbooks, silence, colonialism, content analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis

**Słowa kluczowe:** podręczniki do nauki języka angielskiego, kolonializm, analiza treści, Krytyczna Analiza Dyskursu



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## 1. Introduction

Silence tends to be treated as a domain of social interaction, a sphere of nonverbal communication contrasting or complementing verbal expression. In social communication, also in the school context, silence, or more precisely silencing, may have an exclusionary character when not all entities feel treated equally in terms of the possibility of full existence and expression of their identity. In the scientific literature examples of research can be found on the relationship between silencing (for example, by not allowing a voice, interrupting, omitting mention of the experiences of marginalized groups, presenting the reality only through the perspective of the dominant group, or the invisibility of particular groups in a language), power and privilege based class, race or sexuality (Francis, 2011; Hanna, 2021; Jaworski, Sachdev, 1998; Mazzei, 2008, 2011).

However, silence in the form of silencing, or the absence of certain voices, can also be analyzed with reference to the content of written texts, including these present in school textbooks. As Czech-Włodarczyk notes, silence is not neutral, because “what is not said is more important than what is said. (...) what has been said is only a camouflage covering the real ideological premises on which the discourse is created (...)” (2012: 176).

Textual silence is often associated with blind spots in historical narratives, but this article argues that language textbooks are not free from them either. For textual silence in relation to this kind of textbook, the term PARSNIP (from the words: politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms, pork) was coined, referring to topics that are avoided, as potentially controversial, on their pages. Different authors have broadened this catalogue of taboo topics with references to ethical problems (abortion, euthanasia, divorce), various forms of discrimination and violence, non-heteronormativity, conflicts or death (Akbari, 2008; Banegas, 2010; Gray, 2002; Majer, 2018; Thornbury, 2010).

In the case of the presented study, the explored area of silence concerns a topic that is directly related to the process of spreading English around the world, namely colonization. One of the important inspirations for this were Pennycook’s words:

There are many ways in which the current spread of English, teaching methods, and textbooks can be seen as a recapitulation, if not an intensification, of (neo-)colonial relations. (...) ELT and colonialism has had long-lasting effects on the theories, practices, and beliefs of ELT. From classroom practices to beliefs about the cultural makeup of our students, many aspects of ELT reproduce cultural constructs of colonialism (2007: 13).

Equally important, when constructing the main research question, was the notion of colonialism as a process which “perpetuates a set of discourses and practices that produce a submissive or dependent culture (the ignored culture) while increasing their own set of cultural values (the valid culture)” (Soto-Molina, Méndez, 2020: 14). Following on from research on history and geography textbooks which demonstrated discursive erasure of some topics and groups of people, e.g. Native Americans (Gellman, 2023; Müller, 2018), and studies focused on the role of silence in discourse (Pogorzelska, 2023; Schroeter, Taylor, 2018), the aim of this research was to answer the question whether English textbooks contribute to reproduction of cultural constructs of colonialism, viewed as a practice of creating superior and subordinate identities, and to consider the potential role textual silence may play in this process. Whereas critical research on textbooks, also in the context of blind spots, has had a long history (Pogorzelska, 2023), it has relatively rarely focused on language textbooks. Thus, this study aims to fill the gap in this area and, hopefully, contribute to further research.

## **2. Theoretical and methodological framework**

The research presented here is embedded in critical applied linguistics. Introducing a critical orientation into applied linguistics is defined as “reflection on the inextricable connection of language and power” (Curd-Christian, Weninger, 2018: 2), where power means, among other things, having the capacity to exclude and silence (*ibidem*). The scope of critical applied linguistics includes issues of privilege, inequality, oppression and resistance in the teaching process, also in the context of the expansion of the English language and colonialism (Phillipson, 1992). In his meta-analysis, concentrated on textbooks and their colonialism-related contents, Müller distinguished three theoretical research perspectives applicable in such studies: “the Self and Other, memory, and knowledge” (2018: 285). The presented analysis fits within the second of these perspectives, memory, in the sense of “exploring colonialism in cultural memory” (*ibidem*) and answering the question “how the colonial past is represented and (...) what is considered worthy of remembrance and therefore assigned significance in the present” (*ibidem*). This perspective corresponds to the description of colonialism from Soto-Molina and Méndez, (2020), mentioned earlier, and sets the methodological framework for the present study, which is focused on examining absences and silence. This approach results from the assumption that the topic of colonialism is subject to erasure in textbook narratives.

Textual silencing is related to tracking the absence of certain topics, and it is worth noting that “as linguists and discourse analysts, we only need to be concerned with meaningful absences and that for absences to be meaningful, they require an arguable alternative of presence” (Schroeter, Taylor, 2018: 6). Stibbe explains this issue in a similar way: “The concept of discursive erasure is frequently used in social science to denote the absence of something important – something that is present in reality but is overlooked or deliberately ignored in a particular discourse” (Stibbe, 2014: 3). Schroeter and Taylor explain further:

Absences can be as multi-layered as discourses themselves, in terms of the levels of language use at which they can manifest and include phenomena dealt with by different approaches to linguistic description. They can manifest, for example, as vague terms, ellipsis, implication and presupposition. They can arise from the interplay of highlighting and hiding or foregrounding and backgrounding in the framing of topics, use of the passive voice or in metaphorical conceptualisation (Schroeter, Taylor, 2018: 11).

This quote serves to introduce the methodology adopted in the presented study, which is derived from Critical Discourse Analysis. For the study the categories of foregrounding and backgrounding, as explained by von Münchow (2018) and van Leeuwen (2008), were found particularly relevant. Backgrounding is one of the less radical forms of absence implemented by, for example, mentioning key characters not directly, but at some point in the text, as Van Leeuwen puts it “They are not so much excluded as deemphasized, pushed into the background” (2008: 29). More radical forms of absence, such as suppression or exclusion, manifested through the use of passive voice or nominalizations, were also explored (ibidem: 29–30). Additionally, the analysis involved searching for presuppositions, understood as statements of certainty that require no justification and which present phenomena as natural, causeless, and permanent, thus positioning them as unquestionable aspects of reality (Fairclough 2001; Pogorzelska, 2023). Finally, attention was paid to vocabulary and the use of euphemisms which can contribute to the softening of a possibly disturbing message.

The research sample consisted of texts from 83 English language textbooks at levels A2-C1, most of which represented the B1/B2 level, published between 2000–2024. The study analyzed texts that formed a coherent and logical whole, each consisting of over 50 words. In the initial phase of the research, selection of texts was guided by a list of codes, which were subsequently saved in the Atlas.ti data coding program for use throughout the analysis process. The list included key words (e.g. colonialism, colonists,

indigenous people, migration, Native Americans, Pilgrims, slavery, Thanksgiving), but during the iterative reading of the texts, those that did not explicitly contain the key words yet clearly referred to colonization were also included. In the first coding cycle, using the initial list of codes, texts were assigned to the relevant codes and the data were initially categorized. During this cycle, 73 texts were isolated, and this sample was further coded using an additional set of codes derived from Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. backgrounding, foregrounding, presuppositions, the use of passive voice, nominalizations, euphemisms). Finally, all the excerpts were subjected to axial coding, which meant combining fragmented data, reorganizing them, grouping similar codes, reducing their number, selecting dominant codes and creating analytical categories (Saldaña, 2013).

### 3. Research results

The analysis of the collected data led to the identification of four distinct categories, which were at the same time dominant trends in the textual references to colonialism, i.e. Colonization without the colonized, The colonized in a folklore trap, Invisibility of colonization, and Another approach. The following section presents these categories, accompanied by representative examples.

#### 3.1. Colonization without the colonized

One of the most common strategies used in the examined texts is backgrounding of the colonized groups, which is particularly visible in texts devoted to the history of North America. The example below comes from an article entitled *Who really discovered America?*:

**Technically, the Native Americans were the first people to discover America<sup>1</sup>** when they travelled across from Asia about 12,000 years ago. **But who was the first European to discover the Americas?** The most common answer is Christopher Columbus [...] (Mitchell, Malkogianni, 2022: 150).

Apart from the mention that Native Americans were “technically”, and therefore nominally rather than actually, the first on the continent, the rest of the text, devoted entirely to European explorers, leaves no doubt that

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<sup>1</sup> Bolded fragments of quoted texts indicate parts considered particularly important in the context of the interpretation of the collected material.

the *real* discovery belongs to Europeans. In some cases, short references to Native Americans appear sporadically in texts about US history, for example being placed among information about the construction of a railroad crossing the continent, or about the introduction of prohibition (Harris et al., 2002: 76). A special case of being pushed to the background can be found in texts about Thanksgiving:

It dates back all the way to the arrival of the Pilgrims, the first people from Europe to permanently settle in what they called the New World. A small group of these people **had arrived** in Plymouth, Massachusetts, but had had a very difficult winter. So hard was it in fact, that without the help of the local Native American tribe, the Wampanoags, it is likely that they would not have survived. **With their help too**, the Pilgrims **planted** their crops in spring. By autumn **they had grown** a great quantity of food, enough to ensure their survival through the following winter. They **wasted no time in inviting** their Native American friends to join them in a huge feast giving thanks for this wonderful harvest (Dobb et al., 2022: 120).

In the quoted text, the Pilgrims are the ones who have the agency, which is well illustrated by the active verbs used in reference to them (*arrived, planted, had grown, wasted no time in inviting*), while Native Americans appear in association with the nominalized forms (*with their help*) as providers of help or passive objects of thanks.

However, in most texts that refer in any way to the history of North America, the presence of Native Americans is completely erased. The following excerpts, the first of which concerns the celebration of Independence Day, and others which refer to historical events, illustrate this erasure:

You would be pushed to find another country where people come from such diverse origins (**Irish, Africans, Poles, Mexicans**), yet share such a strong sense of national and cultural identity (Dummet, 2011a: 110).

The first people who “discovered” America came from Asia 25,000 years ago. Then the Norse explored the country in the ninth century. When Columbus came to America in 1492 there were over **500 nations** with agricultural systems and different languages, religion, and culture. After the “discovery” people from the old continent started to come (Andryszczyk, Jaźwiec, 2002: 28).

In 1620 the **Pilgrim Fathers sailed** in the *Mayflower* from Plymouth in England to New England in America. [...] After over a month of searching for a suitable place to establish a colony, the Puritan **Pilgrim fathers eventually landed** in Plymouth [...]. **This was the first American colony** [...] [although] Puri-

tan political influence had greatly disappeared after the 17<sup>th</sup> century, many of the ethics of the day have remained. **Attitudes such as self-reliance, frugality, industry, energy, and a focus on education** are still current priorities of American life (Andryszczuk et al., 2004: 94).

The revolutionary war gave birth to the United States, which still stands as a great example of **a nation created by a colonial people**, free and governed by its own people (ibidem:136).

In the first of the cited texts, the indigenous people do not appear among the “diverse origins” of those who create the modern USA, just as in the other three pieces. The mention of “500 nations” in the second text does not have to be synonymous, for an average student, with the presence of Native Americans. These texts, like many others in the research sample, ignore the existence of indigenous people altogether, together with their contribution to the system of the ethical values of contemporary society.

### 3.2. The colonized in a folklore trap

The images of Native Americans, although backgrounded in most cases, do appear on the pages of textbooks. Yet, these indigenous people of North America are described in terms of historical or ethnographic curiosity, and virtually all the descriptions somehow refer to the past. Typical examples are the following texts about places of residence, the Grand Canyon and the Rocky Mountains:

**Native Americans have lived here for thousands of years in settlements and caves.** For them, the Grand Canyon is a sacred place and in their language it is called ‘Ongtupqa’ which means holy site (Evans, Dooley, 2019: 135).

**Many Indian tribes used to live there** when Europeans first arrived in North America (Evans, Dooley, 2002a: 49).

The folklore trap also applies to evoking Native Americans in the context of traditional way of life or beliefs:

For centuries, different cultures have recorded visitors from other planets. Native Americans, like the **Hopi or the Cherokee, called these visitors ‘the star people’** (Harris et al., 2001: 118).

When Europeans first arrived in North America, they found **Native Americans using sassafras roots** in various drinks (Dobb et al., 2022: 109).

Sometimes Native Americans are invoked as depositories of knowledge and wisdom, as in a poem about environmental disaster (the text is illustrated with the image of a Native American in traditional colourful costume with a feather, warning against the dangerous carelessness of “the white man” (Evans, Dooley, 2002b: 104).

The past is actually the only context in which Native Americans are visible in the textbooks. Although they still exist and are the members of contemporary society, in the textbooks they have been petrified in past times and traditions. Such depiction is a particular kind of erasure; the indigenous people, trapped in a folkloristic set of images, resemble rather creatures in an ethnographic museum than human beings living, active and present in the here and now.

### 3.3. Invisibility of colonization

Colonization, wherever it takes place, is a process of imposing control, carried out using more or less coercive methods and this was no different in North America. Meanwhile in the studied textbooks colonization itself is shown as an innocent, natural and neutral phenomenon. Such an effect is achieved in two ways. Firstly, by using presuppositions, the application of which makes it possible to present even the most negative events as having occurred naturally, as *just the way it is/was*. This can be seen in the fragments below, where colonization appears as a neutral historical event that simply took place and that requires no justification:

[...] at the start of the 20th century, when **Britain had an empire that stretched** from Canada to India, British society was very different (Spencer, 2025: 101).

During the second part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, **the English were colonizing lands in America**. From this time comes the story of the Roanoke Colony, established by John White (McBeth et al., 2022: 46).

People speak English in many parts of the Caribbean **because it was colonised by the British, who grew sugar there** (Naunton, Polit, 2011: 153).

The effect of invisibility and the naturalness of colonization can be also achieved in another way, namely by using specific vocabulary:

In the 16th and 17th centuries, **British sailors started to travel outside Europe. They were looking for profitable trade in exotic products**. They began colonising many different countries for many different reasons. Many



British people **went to these colonies to settle and start a new life** (Cornford, 2014: 114).

[...] we do know when and where sports were first organized [...] in the nineteenth century the **British sent their soldiers, engineers and businessmen across their Empire** and the rest of the world learnt to play by British rules (McKinley et al., 2016: 131).

In the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries [...] London was undergoing dramatic changes. **It was growing rapidly [...]** undergoing an economic revolution as **a centre of commerce with ships from London going all over the world** (Harris et al., 2002, 103).

Similar examples of naturalizing or obscuring the actual process of colonization through the use of euphemisms are found in other texts. In this way, colonizing becomes just a journey, not related to any conquest, as in the phrases: “pioneers moved west” (Casey, Szuwart, 2019: 102), “Europeans first arrived...” (Dobb et al., 2022: 109), “For three centuries immigrants have flocked to New York City” (Dummetet al., 2011a: 27).

The topic of slavery and its consequences, such as discrimination and racial segregation, as related to colonization, was also analysed in the study. Unfortunately, in the whole research sample the issue appeared only in 14 texts. In most cases, this appearance was barely a mention, and even then suppression, either through the use of the passive voice, or nominalization which was clearly visible in the texts:

Today, the southern state of Alabama is known for its modern aerospace industry as well as its cotton. Yet two hundred years ago **African Americans were used as slaves** on its cotton farms. Even though **they had been given** their freedom in 1863 by President Abraham Lincoln, fifty years later black people **were still treated** as second-class citizens (Naunton, Polit, 2011: 160). Martin Luther King [...] a civil rights activist who fought against **racial discrimination** in the USA in the 1950s and 60s. (Dummet et al., 2011b: 65).

### 3.4. A different approach

Across the entire research sample, three texts were identified that challenge the universal invisibility of colonialism and work to restore the memory of erased groups or historical processes. The first example concerns historical monuments and protests related to them:

The summer 2020 brought protests over racial injustice in the USA and in other countries. The supporters of Black Lives Matter movement started vandal-

izing the statues of those historical figures who represent racism. In Boston, Massachusetts, **the protesters damaged the monument of Christopher Columbus whose discovery of America brought the death and suffering of many Native Americans**. In Richmond, Virginia they graffiti-painted the statue of Robert E. Lee, the confederate general during the American Civil war who fought to keep slavery (Bowell, Sałandyk, 2022: 127).

Although after the fragment about protests there are references to the history of these events, which significantly neutralize the message and place contemporary protests in ordinary, even routine practices carried out regularly in the history of humanity, this does not deprive the text of its uniqueness compared to others in the research sample.

The next text, titled *Iroquois Constitution*, describes the sophisticated Native American legislation that allowed for a stable confederation of various indigenous groups. As it is emphasized:

**The Iroquois constitution [...] would then become the model** that developers of the U. S. Constitution would use when designing a nation that was, in theory, a set of independent nations: The United States (Andryszczyk et al., 2004: 149–150).

The text contains a detailed description of the solutions that the creators of the American constitution borrowed from The Iroquois constitution. This way of including the cultural heritage of indigenous people in textbooks is an absolute exception, especially since it is presented in the form of a long text, not a short mention. The same applies to another text about Cahokia Mounds in Illinois: “America’s first city and arguably the American Indians’ finest achievement”, “[the] apogee, and perhaps the origin, of what anthropologists call Mississippian culture” (Dummet et al., 2011b: 21). Not only does the author express regret for the neglect and forgetting of this heritage, but they also explain it in the following way:

**The idea that American Indians could have built something resembling a city was so foreign to European settlers**, that when they encountered the mounds of Cahokia, they commonly thought they must have been the work of a foreign civilization [...] (ibidem).

The story of Henry Brackenridge is then introduced, detailing his 19th-century attempts to engage the press and high-ranking politicians, including Thomas Jefferson, with his extraordinary discovery. However, his efforts were ultimately unsuccessful:

Unfortunately, **it was not word most Americans, including Presidents, were very interested in hearing.** The United States was trying to get Indians out of the way, not appreciate their history. Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830, which ordered the relocation of eastern Indians to land west of the Mississippi, was based on the idea that Indians were nomadic peoples who couldn't make good use of land anyway. **Evidence of an ancient Indian city [...] would have mucked up the story line** (ibidem).

The pieces cited are, as mentioned, exceptions, but it is worth noting their presence because they are an example of a decolonizing attitude, filling in blank spots and restoring historical events and processes to their rightful place.

#### 4. Conclusions

Answering the research question related to the depiction of colonialism on the pages of English textbooks, the first conclusion that can be drawn from the study is of the textual absence of this topic in the research sample. The connection between colonialism and the spread of the English language is obvious, so one would expect more significant presence of the issue in language textbooks. However, only a subtle trace of the presence of colonialism is found, with 73 texts selected from more than 80 textbooks. Moreover, when the examined topic appears, various silencing strategies are applied to obfuscate it, whether in the form of backgrounding, or by use of the foregrounding of colonizers to the exclusion of the colonized people, or by making the process of colonization itself seem natural. In the textbook narrations superiority and significance is definitely given to the colonizers. This is accompanied by equipping the colonized with rather passive and subordinate identities, subject to *inevitable* colonization.

The conclusions from this study correspond to those presented by other researchers analyzing textbooks (Gellman, 2023; Müller, 2018; Popow, 2015). As one of the authors noted, with regard to history textbooks used in the USA:

Socially dominant groups have a monopoly on crafting the historical record. History's victors ingrain specific narratives in social consciousness. [...] this means that the recounting of history is mostly through a lens of White settler glorification that supports the colonization of land and people, and the drawing of borders to keep others out. Such practices are standard in contexts of nation-building and nationalism, but the long-term effects are corrosive on pluriethnic, multicultural democratic coexistence (Gellman, 2023: 91–92).

The process of “crafting the historical record”, “whitening” or “reinventing” the history of colonization (Gellman, 2023; Soto-Molina, Méndez, 2020) are also visible in English textbooks. Features of their narration include presenting history from the point of view of the colonizers, with a dominant tale of a land whose history began after the arrival of Europeans, avoiding any references to violence, and reinforcing the stereotypical image of Native Americans immobilized in traditional images of the past. What is missing from this story are the indigenous inhabitants of the continent, the colonized victims of European violence.

As Soto-Molina and Méndez note, “An alternative way to respond to this, from a decolonial viewpoint, is to design an emancipatory and decolonizing curriculum” (2020: 14). The examples of some of the texts cited, although unique, show that a postcolonial approach, which not only reminds us of the achievements of marginalized groups, but also deconstructs the process of the appropriation of the narrative by dominant groups, is possible. Adopting this approach would support language education by fostering the development of communication skills which are rooted in profound intercultural sensitivity.

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