Language and Politics: On the Cultural Basis of Colonialism.
Monsieur L. Adele Jinadu

Résumé
L. Adèle Jinadu — Langue et politique : sur les bases culturelles du colonialisme. Aux yeux de F. Fanon, parler la langue du colonisateur c'était accepter, voire assumer, sa culture. Cette affirmation présuppose une assimilation totale de la langue à la culture, qui paraît exagérée même si, effectivement, la politique linguistique coloniale comporte toujours un aspect d'assimilationnisme autoritaire. Le problème ne change que partiellement après l'indépendance, dans la mesure notamment où l'usage de la langue coloniale reste un des principaux privilèges économico-sociaux de la classe dominante.

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This paper offers a critical yet sympathetic discussion of the claim, most powerfully made by Frantz Fanon in a number of his political writings, that language was and still is a potent vehicle for cultural and political domination in a colonial situation. The claim itself is a version of the cultural relativist position which is to be found in the writings of such black social thinkers as Edward Blyden, René Maran and Aimé Césaire. The paper argues that, although there is something in the claim that the structure and lexicon of one’s language affects or influences one’s perception of the world, it is a completely different thing to say either that those perceptions would be different were one to speak another language or that to speak another language was *ipso facto* to subscribe to a different world view or culture. This is to argue in effect that language is not primarily an agent or vehicle of racial and cultural imposition in the colonial situation.

The paper also examines the contemporary relevance of the language question to the politics of post-colonial Africa. In this respect, emphasis is placed upon the implications of Fanon’s discussion of the language question for our understanding of African politics and the place of Africa in the wider world community.

**The Colonial Situation**

The notion of the colonial situation is fundamental to an understanding of the alleged relationship between culture, race and language that is the subject of this paper. What, then, is the colonial situation?


*Cahiers d’Études africaines, 63-64, XVI (3-4), pp. 603-614.*
Fanon's and Césaire's delineation of the characteristics of the colonial situation bears a striking resemblance to that of a group of French and British sociologists and social anthropologists, among whom are E. A. Walker, H. Laurentie, R. Maunier, L. Wirth and Georges Balandier. Basic to this delineation is the conception of colonization as involving a contact of races and cultures. The contact occurs in such a way that the numerically inferior alien race is actually the sociologically (i.e. politically and economically) superior race. This is so because of its access to, and monopolistic control of, socio-economic and political sources of power. This control is made possible and facilitated by the sheer weight of the military superiority and material wealth of the alien race. Other mechanisms of control used by the alien race include the superimposition of the culture and civilization of the alien race on that of the indigenous race, racist rationalizations of the presence and actions of the alien race, and legal and constitutional arrangements that primarily serve to promote and protect the interests of the alien race.

Fanon and Césaire, however, look upon the colonial situation as a perverse form of race and culture contact; Fanon, in particular, sternly condemns what he describes as the manichean nature of the colonial situation. It is perverse in the sense that the overwhelming advantage in this particular contact is with the numerically inferior albeit sociologically superior race:

'When you examine at close quarter the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species. In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are White, you are White because you are rich.'

It must be emphasized that Fanon is not opposed to race and culture contacts as such. Césaire also argues that a castigation of colonization and the colonial situation should not be taken to mean a rejection of race contact as such. In Césaire's words,

'...it is a good thing to place different civilizations in contact with each other [...] whatever its own particular genius may be, a civilization that withdraws into itself atrophies [...] But then [...] has colonization really placed civilizations in contact? Or, if you prefer, of all the ways of establishing contact, was it the best? I answer no. And I say that between colonization and civilization there is an infinite distance.'


5. Ibid., p. 40.

A similar sentiment is expressed by the Tunisian Jew, Albert Memmi when he observes that ‘... domination is not the only possible method of influence and exchange among people.’

In what sense is this delineation of the colonial situation illuminating? On the credit side, it offers interesting and challenging perspectives on the nature of colonialism, of the colonial situation in particular. First, its focus on the relations between a colonizing race and a colonized race as a variety of culture contact enables us to distinguish between colonial rule and other forms of foreign or alien rule. Secondly, as used by Fanon, it avoids the equation of colonization and colonial relationships with merely territorial expansion and annexation. Thus some analysts have borrowed Fanon’s concept of the colonial situation in describing Black-White relationships in the United States of America. On this view, therefore, any conception of colonization rooted primarily in terms of territorial expansion and settlement is likely to ignore such cases of internal colonialism as South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia and the United States of America. Thirdly, its chief merit lies in its attempt to construct a general sociology or, more appropriately, a social psychology of colonial relationships. For example, the proposition that we look upon colonialism as a clash of races and cultures is an intriguing one. If we accept its appropriateness, it becomes interesting to study how, in the colonial context, this clash is managed or resolved; how the process of cultural diffusion takes place; and how the diffusion affects indigenous political institutions and systems.

On the debit side there are limitations to Fanon’s delineation of the colonial situation. First, it is doubtful whether it applies to the Asian community in East Africa and the Lebanese and Syrian communities in West Africa. In this respect, it does not adequately represent the nature of potential racial conflict in a colonial situation. This is because, for Fanon, there are two main racial protagonists in such a situation, namely Whites and Blacks. Yet as it has been pointed out with respect to East Africa, it makes more sense to talk of a caste system in which there are sociologically dominant racial minorities (Whites and Asians) and a sociologically inferior racial majority (Blacks). Secondly, the colonial situation is not a closed system from which are excluded Whites other than those from the colonizing society. Yet such Whites, often referred to as foreigners, ‘constitute a minority in the full sense of the word, both numerically and sociologically, though their economic status may be high, they are nevertheless subject to administrative

restrictions . . .’ 11 Thirdly, Fanon’s delineation assumes that each racial group in the colonial situation is a monolith. But this is not necessarily the case. Thus, in his portrait of the colonizer, Memmi distinguishes between ‘the colonizer who refuses’ and ‘the colonizer who accepts’. 12 As for the colonized, Balandier has pointed to the fact that a colonized society is both ‘ethnically split’ and ‘spiritually divided’; so much so that these divisions ‘determine not only the relations of the various peoples with the colonizing society [. . .] but also their attitude toward the imported culture’ 13.

If Fanon overlooks these considerations in his analysis of the colonial situation, he takes them into account in his analysis of post-colonial politics, of the post-colonial situation. He realizes that with the attainment of independence, the nationality question becomes crucial and that the problems of nation-building are not to be defined purely and exclusively in racial and ethnic terms. 14

The foregoing critical sketch of Fanon’s delineation of the colonial situation will be incomplete without mention of his claim that by definition the colonial situation is a violent and dehumanizing one. A reading of *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* suggests that Fanon makes a distinction, similar to that made by Galtung, 15 between physical, structural and psychological violence. This three-fold categorization underlies Fanon’s thesis that, given the nature of the colonial situation, both the colonized and the colonizer are alienated individuals. In the next section, Fanon’s argument that the language of the colonizer is one medium through which the colonized subject suffers psychological violence is discussed.

**Language and Culture in the Colonial Situation**

It was already suggested (above) that one merit of Fanon’s delineation of the colonial situation is that it offers us a model of the social psychology of colonial relationships. With such a model one can proceed to examine how, in the colonial context, the process of cultural diffusion takes place. One aspect of this process which is taken up by Fanon is that of the relationship between language and culture. What does Fanon take that relationship to be? How cogent or plausible is his analysis of the relationship? We shall attempt to answer these questions here.

Fanon’s discussion of the role of language in the colonial situation leads him to a hypothesis concerning the relationship of language to
culture. This hypothesis which asserts that in adopting and using the language of the colonizer, the colonized subject thereby not only assumes the culture of the colonizer but also rejects his own culture, is a variant of the linguistic Weltanschauung hypothesis. Linguistic relativists like Whorf and Sapir have argued that the diversity of languages in the world has led to a diversity of cultures — namely the totality of such institutions as religion, kinship, science, social stratification and ideology — that are tied to languages.

This identification of language with culture poses problems about the alleged relationship. If language is an expression of a particular culture, the implication is that, according to Fanon’s claim, the colonized subject who speaks the language of the colonizer is ipso facto assuming the latter’s culture. To say this is in effect to claim that a primary function of language in the colonial context is to facilitate and promote cultural and political domination. In Fanon’s words,

‘to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization [. . . ] Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards.’

Fanon’s observations derive in part from his experiences as a child and a young man growing up in Martinique where ‘the Negro [. . . ] will be proportionately whiter [. . . ] in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language’. But in what sense can one say, or what does it mean to assert that ‘to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture’? Part of the problem is that of assigning meanings to ‘language’ and ‘culture’. Vocabulary, i.e. the list of words to be found in a language, is one aspect of language that Fanon himself identifies. Another aspect he identifies is the mode of inflection as well as the syntax, that is the manner of sentence formation of a language: ‘to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language . . .’ The question of what constitutes a culture is, however, a much more vexed one. To raise it is to enter a thicket of anthropological and social psychological controversy. Although it may be easy

18. Ibid., p. 18.
19. Ibid., p. 17.
20. Leslie A. White and Beth Dillingham’s The Concept of Culture (Minneapolis, Minn., 1973: 1-31) reviews contending theories of culture in anthropology.
to study language and its structure with some precision, it is a much more formidable task to define culture, study its structure and delineate its content.

How does Fanon define culture? In a 1956 speech before the First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in France, he proposed that ‘... culture is a combination of motor and mental behavior patterns arising from the encounter of man with nature and with his fellow-man.’

This is a conception of culture similar to that held by anthropologists like Linton, Radcliffe-Brown, Kroeber and Kluchkohn, all of whom have argued that culture consists of learned behavior or abstractions from learned behavior.

What, then, can one say about the relationship between the various mechanisms of language (e.g. vocabulary, inflection, syntax, etc.) and culture, broadly defined as patterns of learned behavior?

‘To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.’ One problem with this claim is that it is unclear what aspects of culture one is to emphasize in establishing the alleged connection. One’s conception of one’s culture is not, as was pointed out above, as easily derived from written sources as are grammatical forms. A second problem relates to the content of culture. Fanon’s position implies that there is a distinction between learned behavior and unlearned behavior, with the latter presumably not being part of culture. But this is to leave ideas and beliefs, except in so far as they affect behavior, out of culture. It is also to overlook the fact that it is meaningful to say that inanimate objects, like works of art, are storehouses of culture.

A more fundamental objection is that it is not necessarily true, even within a colonial context, that to speak the colonizer’s language is to assume his culture or embrace his civilization. The colonizer’s language has many uses in the colonial situation. It may have been introduced for reasons of communications and efficiency. The colonizer probably found it easier to use, for instance, French as a lingua franca for administrative purposes in territories characterized by heterogeneity of languages. It was of course an example of cultural arrogance to have imposed, say, French and not to have developed one of a number of possible local languages. This is a generalization which must be qualified with the observation that there were instances where the British colonial administrators, for example, not only learnt but also encouraged the development of local languages as in parts of Nigeria. But it can be argued that such concessions stemmed from the racist belief that the colonized was incapable of mastering the colonizer’s language. Another use of the colonizer’s language was that of upward mobility. The educated colonial subject might have learned how to speak English or French not with a view to becoming ‘white’ or ‘whiter’, or to assuming the colonizer’s culture. He might have learnt it primarily for the opportunity it presented for personal advancement in the rigidly stratified

colonial situation. In Fanon's words, 'historically the Negro wants to speak French because it is the key that can open doors which were still barred to him fifty years ago' 23 The colonial administrator who learnt Hausa or Yoruba or Ibo might also have done so for efficiency purposes and Fanon himself would hesitate to call this a case of cultural imposition on the colonizer.

Language also served in the colonial context to protest colonial rule. As Caute has observed, '“apprentice” literature (respectful toward the colonizer) does not always involve assimilation of the occupying culture and language'. 24 The colonizer's language then becomes simultaneously a symbol of protest and rejection of Western culture. Fanon's discussion of the role played by radio and the French language in Algeria's independence struggle bears out this protest and symbolic function of the colonizer's language; 25 and this would seem to undercut his categorical assertion that 'to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture'.

Even if one were able to speak French or English as fluently as a Frenchman or an Englishman, objective conditions in the colonial situation precluded one's assimilation into the culture of the colonizer. Apart from contacts at work, there was little contact between the colonizer and the colonized. Each had his own circle of friends and clubs which he frequented and the colonial évolué hardly gained entrée into the world of the colonizer. This is why the notion of marginal or doubly-socialized colonial subjects becomes useful; as Smith points out, 'they remain, for all their cultural alienation from the traditional society into which they were born, part of that society'. 26 E. M. Forster's character, Dr. Aziz, in A Passage to India, and Okonkwo, the hero of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart both graphically illustrate the enormous dimensions of the existential problems of identity and acceptance — acceptance into traditional society and the world of the colonizer — that these doubly-socialized colonial individuals must face and resolve. What is worthy of note here is that merely to speak a language is not to be equated with belonging to the culture of the native speakers of the language, especially where the culture concerned is defined narrowly in racial or ethnic terms.

The linguistic relativity thesis is a variant of ethical and cultural relativism and it could be objected against it that there would always be a human basis and background which all cultures held in common. Fanon's own desire 'to discover and to love man, wherever he may be' 27 is an attempt to establish a universal morality. His emphasis on the particular therefore raises problems for his desire for the universal in human relations. Other objections to Fanon's linguistic relativity

23. Fanon 1967a: 38.
25. Fanon 1967b: 89-90.
27. Fanon 1967a: 231; Id. 1968: 311-316.
thesis can be raised. It could be objected that the causal chain was unclear. Is it language that influences culture, or is it the other way round? To one who attributes a causal power to language, it can be objected that language is the effect and expression of a certain world view or cultural milieu. It could also be objected that culture could exist without a language, as we know it. For example, on the definition of culture as learned behavior, it could be asserted that some non-human species, e.g. bees, had a culture. It could also be objected that it was not enough of Fanon to have asserted that language was an agent of cultural imposition. He also needed to say and assess how successfully it performed that function.

Fanon’s discussion of the role of language in the colonial situation should be placed within the perspective of the general nature of colonialism — its utter disregard for local institutions even where, as in the case of indirect rule, taken concessions are made to these institutions. It was argued above that, although language serves an ideological function within a colonial context, that may not be its only or even primary function. What is deplorable about the imposition of the colonizer’s language on the colonized is, as Fanon rightly points out, the assumption that ‘it is the intervention of the foreign nation that puts order into the original anarchy of the colonized country. Under these conditions, the French language, the language of the occupier, was given the role of Logos, with ontological implications within Algerian society’.28

The criticism of position offered in this section is not a denial of the force of Gendzier’s observation that ‘not only does Fanon explode the myth of the neutrality of language, he offers an astute elaboration of what it means to speak the language of the dominant class’.29 It is, however, to point to limitations in his linguistic relativity thesis. While it may be true that one’s language influences one’s world-view or thought-patterns,30 it is not necessarily true that, were one to learn or speak other languages, one’s world-view or thought-patterns would automatically change. To hold otherwise is to confer a false autonomy on each culture, to assume that it constitutes a closed system and to deny that there is something called cultural diffusion or interdependence. Thus in his classic study of Indian intellectuals, Shils clearly shows that, in spite of his mastery of the English language and literature, the Indian intellectual is ‘quite firmly rooted in India, in its past and its present’.31

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon discussed the question of language in the context of a colonial society. He did not pursue the question further in his analysis of post-colonial African societies. Yet the discussion of that question in *Black Skin, White Masks* has bearing on post-colonial Africa; in this section it is intended to explore some of the implications of that discussion for our understanding of contemporary African politics. The language question has not been a critical issue in post-colonial African politics in the sense in which it has been in, for example, India. It is nevertheless one about which concern has been expressed by African politicians of varying shades of ideological orientations.

If there is one glaring legacy of colonial rule in contemporary Africa, it is, perhaps, the continued role of the colonizers’ languages, particularly French and English, as *lingua franca*. In North Africa, where Arabic is widely spoken, French is also widely spoken and, in most cases, it is the *lingua franca* as well as the language of the intelligentsia. For example, in Tunisia and Algeria there is an uneasy experiment in bilingualism (Arabic and French). During a visit to Algiers in May 1973, I talked to a number of students at the university on the language question. The general view was that French had come to stay and that it would take more than two generations before Arabic could, if at all, supplant French as the language of the intelligentsia. It was further pointed out that bilingualism was creating problems at the university since few faculty members and students were fluent in both Arabic and French. In East Africa where Swahili is widely spoken, English is still the *lingua franca*. In West Africa where, perhaps with the exception of Hausa, there is no language to compare with the status of Arabic in North Africa and Swahili in East Africa, French or English is the *lingua franca*.

The resilience of English and French in post-colonial Africa, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, is partly due to the ethnic factor. The point is that particularly with respect to tropical Africa, Balandier’s claim that Africa is ‘ethnically split’ is an apt description of Africa’s ethnic mosaic. Since ethnicity is often drawn along linguistic lines in Africa, there is bound to be little agreement on which language should replace either French or English. The selection of an ethnic group’s

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language is likely to be interpreted as another form of colonialism by the other ethnic groups; the potential of such a selection for civil strife and unrest is amply illustrated by the controversy over the choice of Hindi as the *lingua franca* in India. African countries like Rwanda, Burundi, Botswana, Somalia, Lesotho, Tanzania and Central African Republic which are ethnically homogeneous, or almost so, have with some degree of success attempted to adopt African languages as their *lingua franca*. Yet in all of them French or English is the principal medium of higher education and contact with the outside world.

To say, however, that language has not been a critical issue in post-colonial African politics is not to say that Fanon’s thesis about the function of language as a subtle form of colonialism is irrelevant to an analysis of political processes on the continent. Fanon’s thesis is relevant and illuminating in at least three ways.

First, it can be argued that the acquisition and mastery of the languages of the colonizing powers have created a form of social stratification or class system based on one’s ability to communicate in French or English. Thus it can be argued from a Fanonian standpoint that a crucial criterion used by the colonizing powers in deciding which group of Africans to hand over power to, was fluency in English or French. This is probably one reason why Fanon looks upon the process of decolonization in much of tropical Africa as a conspiracy between a national bourgeoisie and a colonizing bourgeoisie to perpetuate colonial rule. It may be objected that, given the state of the modern world, its scientific know-how, etc., the colonizing powers had no choice but to hand over power to a national bourgeoisie fluent in English or French. But this is precisely Fanon’s point: his position is that English and French have been used to co-opt the national bourgeoisie of hitherto colonial territories into a world-wide imperialist network whose primary aim is the cultural, economic, social and political exploitation of these territories. According to him, this was the sole purpose of the colonial educational set up.

Secondly, Fanon’s discussion of language can be placed in the context of his discussion of center-periphery relations in post-colonial Africa. Thus it can be argued that there is a communications gap between the national center and the local periphery. In the one French or English is used to conduct business, while in the other various local languages are used. This communications gap may undermine the processes of incorporating the periphery into the national political system and of transmitting instructions from the center to the periphery. It also tends to create suspicion of the center’s purpose by the periphery. In the words of Fanon, ‘the country people are suspicious of the townsman. The latter dresses likes a European; he speaks the European’s language, works with him, sometimes even lives in the same district.’

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34. On this aspect of Fanon’s political writings, see Jinadu 1974.
35. Fanon 1968: 112.
Thirdly, it can be argued that much of Africa is in the grip of neo-colonialism and that both French and English are subtle forms of cultural imperialism. From this, the argument would maintain, it follows that Africa is not really free. In post-colonial Africa, the implications of this argument are being worked out and confronted in Zaire (the former Congo-Kinshasa) where the politics of ‘authenticity’ reflect an attempt by the regime of President Mobutu Sese-Seko to do away with the French language and other cultural relics of colonial rule.

This paper has examined one aspect of Fanon’s interesting analysis of the process of cultural diffusion in the colonial situation. Although that analysis derived in large part from Martinique and Algeria, it is the view of the present writer that, in spite of contextual variations, there is a basis for such an analysis. But is a social psychological model an appropriate one for analysing colonial rule? Fanon himself realized the weaknesses inherent in such a model and, in The Wretched of the Earth, his emphasis was more on the economic and political basis of colonial rule.

To come back to the question of language and politics, one should, perhaps, mention that for the négritude school the French language is more of a positive than negative cultural force. Senghor, for example, welcomes the French language as a positive medium through which the black race can enter into the mainstream of world culture: ‘It is a fact that French has made it possible for us to communicate to our brothers and to the world that unheard of message which only we could write. It has allowed us to bring to Universal Civilization a contribution without which the civilization of the twentieth century would not have been universal.’36 This is why Senghor looks upon the colonial experience as contributing to the psychological and cultural liberation of the colonized African.

Senghor’s position however has ideological or political implications, brought out clearly in his advocacy of a French community, similar to the British Commonwealth of Nations, held together by the common bond of the French language. It is because of this reluctance or refusal to disturb the status quo that Fanon, in spite of his firm belief in the relevance of culture to politics, eventually rejected négritude as preached by Senghor. Yet there is another troubling dimension to Senghor’s thesis that the French language ‘made it possible for us to communicate to our brothers and to the world’. What the thesis implies, in effect, is that without the colonizer’s language it would have been impossible for the colonized to communicate with his ‘brothers and the world’: no doubt Senghor is referring to the Western-educated Black African; the vast

majority of Black Africans are literate in neither French nor English. That is besides the point, however. For surely Black Africans communicated with each other before the arrival of the colonizer; as for contact with the world, there was an exchange of ideas and institutions between, for example, West Africa and the Maghreb — an exchange which was certainly not conducted in English or French. Moreover, it can be asserted that it is probably on account of the nature of colonial rule on the continent that no African language has been accepted as a medium of international communication. Had Africa been left to develop on her own, the case might have been different. Thus, as against the assimilationist or colonial apologist claim that colonialism conferred benefits on Africa and led to the substitution of ‘civilized’ institutions for ‘barbarous’ ones, it has been asserted by radical critics of colonial rule such as Aghani, Kouyaté, Césaire and Fanon that colonialism led to the destruction of authentic African institutions and civilizations, thereby holding back Africa’s progress and preventing her from making her own contributions to ‘Universal Civilization’. In the final analysis, this is an understandable indictment of colonial rule and the imposition of the colonizer’s language on colonized peoples.


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