

Book Review

Writings on Subaltern Practice, by Ahmar Mahboob.
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Yecid Ortega * 
ARTEM Research Collective

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In 2022, I had the privilege of attending the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) conference, where I first encountered Dr. Ahmar Mahboob, the author of *Writings on Subaltern Practice*. Following his plenary speech, which resonated deeply with many in attendance, we engaged in conversations that spanned language, education, criticality, and the growing relevance of decolonial thinking in contemporary academia. Central to our dialogue was the notion of the “subaltern”—a term that, in the context of language learning, teaching, and writing, takes on profound significance. Our discussions probed into the term’s evolving meaning, especially in postcolonial theory, and its implications for language learners and educators today.

Traditionally, the subaltern refers to a subordinate officer, particularly in the British army, denoting one who occupies a lower rank. However, in the context of critical applied linguistics, subalternity is better understood as a condition of sociolinguistic marginalization. A subaltern is linguistically, culturally, or socially subordinated—excluded from hegemonic language practices, particularly those linked to the global dominance of English. Dr. Mahboob’s book extends this understanding by articulating how the subaltern’s position is enmeshed in power relations that silence certain voices while privileging others. Reading this work conjured memories of Spivak’s (2015) argument, where she famously asserts that the subaltern cannot speak, highlighting the ways in which the most marginalized in society lack a platform to voice their concerns or participate meaningfully in policy debates. In *Writings on Subaltern Practice*, Mahboob effectively hands the subaltern a metaphorical megaphone, amplifying voices that are often silenced by dominant linguistic regimes.

Dr. Mahboob’s book is not a conventional academic monograph. It stands as an evocative blend of poetry and critical thought, offering a fresh perspective on knowledge creation and dissemination. For the academic reader rooted in sociolinguistics, this work provides more than theoretical reflection—it offers healing through its poetic prose. Mahboob disrupts the expectations of academic writing, challenging the hegemony of English as both the subject and the medium of scholarship. His poetic form invites readers to reconsider how knowledge is produced, shared, and consumed, especially within the constraints of Western academic conventions.

* Yecid Ortega, ARTEM Research Collective, Toronto, M4K1R1, Canada, yecidortega@gmail.com

Drawing upon Kalan's (2021) observations, Mahboob's work exemplifies how academic writing can—and perhaps must—reflect the writer's sociocultural, political, and personal histories. Through his integration of poetry with academic discourse, he demonstrates that our lived experiences, including the impact of colonialism on language and identity, deeply shape how we engage with and produce knowledge. In this sense, *Writings on Subaltern Practice* stands as an anti-canon text, resisting the pull of Eurocentric norms in academic writing and providing a model for those seeking to move beyond the sterile jargon that often characterizes scholarly work in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics.

As a poet myself, I found particular resonance with Ahmar's choice to structure his book as a collection of poems that oscillate between the personal and the sociopolitical. His opening poem sets the tone for a deeply intellectual yet emotive journey, one that continually punctuates dense academic passages with moments of poetic clarity and reflection. These poems serve as breathing spaces—moments of respite that allow the reader to pause and reflect on the deeper meanings of the text. One poem that attracted my attention, *I Stand on Solid Ground*, exemplifies Ahmar's critical interrogation of the English language. Through this work, he invites readers to question why English has become such a dominant force in the contemporary world and, more crucially, why its hegemony should be challenged. His critique speaks directly to the linguistic imperialism that positions English as a gatekeeper to social mobility, intellectual engagement, and global participation, while simultaneously alienating and erasing the wisdom embedded in other languages and traditions.

I, too, share Ahmar's sentiments as I reflect on my own experiences of linguistic subalternity. Like him, I feel as though I have been "robbed of the wisdom of my ancestors" (p.47), a powerful statement that encapsulates the disconnection many of us feel from our linguistic and cultural heritages due to colonial legacies. Through his work, Mahboob charts a path toward reclaiming that which has been lost—an effort to not only recover our languages but also to reshape the global linguistic order that has relegated so many to the margins.

The structure of *Writings on Subaltern Practice* also plays a pivotal role in its message. Through various sections, Mahboob emphasizes the need to continually engage with "the other" and to centre the experiences of those who have been victims of linguistic and cultural oppression. His acrostic poem (p. 34) serves as an invitation to engage in a praxis-oriented form of subaltern linguistics. Here, Mahboob challenges us to move beyond theory into action, urging readers to consider the plurality of beings—human, non-human, and more-than-human—in our cosmological and linguistic lives. In doing so, Mahboob calls for a fundamental rethinking of the researcher's or educator's role in resisting the hegemonic structures of the English language. His poetic voice reminds us that our work must not simply be theoretical; it must engage actively in the decolonization of language.

The section titled *Unmarking of Paradise: Literacy as a Trojan Horse*, in particular, offers a critical meditation on the implications of English literacy. Ahmar invites readers

to embark on a three-part journey that interrogates why English has become the linguistic Trojan horse of the global era, subtly infiltrating and dominating cultural and intellectual spaces. His writing encourages us to “unlearn” the past—to shed the internalized colonial structures that shape our thinking about language and knowledge.

In essence, *Writings on Subaltern Practice* serves as a profound example of how to subvert the rigid, monolithic structures of academic writing. Ahmar's integration of poetry into an academic text presents a counter-narrative to colonial mentalities, challenging the very foundations of what is considered “proper” academic discourse. By doing so, he opens up new possibilities for how we can engage with and produce knowledge in a way that honors the complexity and beauty of language itself.

Readers who approach this book expecting a text steeped in the traditions of the Western academic canon will be surprised. This book disrupts those expectations, offering instead a piece of writing that invites readers to step outside of their comfort zones and engage with a form of scholarship that is as much about emotional and intellectual healing as it is about critical analysis. For those of us navigating a world fraught with linguistic and cultural tensions, Mahboob's work offers both solace and a call to action. This book is an invaluable resource for diverse academic scholars who might want to invest in rethinking the boundaries of academic writing and knowledge production. Scholars and researchers, particularly those in the fields of applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and postcolonial studies, will find it to be a groundbreaking example of how academic discourse can challenge hegemonic norms while embracing poetic and personal narratives.

Educators, especially those engaged in multilingual or decolonial pedagogy, can draw inspiration from its innovative structure, which serves as a model for integrating lived experiences and diverse cultural perspectives into teaching methodologies. The text also resonates with students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) who are grappling with questions of identity, language, and power in their academic journeys, offering them both a framework and encouragement to explore non-traditional forms of expression.

Furthermore, poets, writers, and creatives seeking to bridge the gap between artistic and academic expression will discover a compelling example of how the two domains can coexist and enrich each other. Activists and advocates for linguistic and cultural equity may also find the book's insights and critiques of linguistic imperialism to be deeply relevant to their work, empowering them to envision and contribute to alternative frameworks for global communication.

Ultimately, my view of *Writings on Subaltern Practice* extends its relevance beyond academia, reaching anyone who is curious about the transformative potential of language and the possibilities of resisting exclusionary systems of knowledge. It invites a conversation that is as much about intellectual inquiry as it is about emotional and cultural healing, making it a text of profound significance for a wide and diverse audience.

THE AUTHOR

Yecid Ortega is a researcher with the Artem Research Collective. For over two decades, he has pursued critical, anti-racist, and decolonial approaches to language education. His work explores the cultural and linguistic pluriversality of marginalized communities (immigrants, refugees, 2S/LGBTQI+, neurodivergent, and older adults) through ethnographic, arts-based, and community-oriented methodologies. He currently explores creative, collaborative and alternative forms of research in education.

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