

Who takes action in a (post)colonial relationship? Discursive representations of former colonial powers and former colonies in royal speeches and social media discourse

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The history of European colonization cannot be separated from that of colonial discourse, that is, from a discourse which conceptualized the coloniser and the colonised as fundamentally different, in such a way that the former would be naturally superior to the latter (Elaref 2023, Botero Camacho 2011). While this discourse justified the atrocities committed during the colonial period, it nowadays still interacts with current representations of former colonial powers – FCPs – and former colonies – FCs – (e.g. Riverda Pichardo, Jost & Benet-Martínez 2022, Khakee 2022, etc.). This study precisely investigates the discursive construction of these representations for three postcolonial pairs (Belgium/Democratic Republic of Congo, United Kingdom/Kenya and Spain/Puerto Rico) in a corpus of discourses produced on the occasion of recent official visits by the monarchs of these three FCPs to these FCs (i.e. official speeches pronounced by these monarchs and reactions on the social media by people in the three FCs). Methodologically, it is based on the linguistic concept of agentivity, which refers to the relation between the groups described in a discourse (here: FCPs and FCs) and the actions mentioned (which they can initiate or undergo) (De Cock & Michaud Maturana 2014). Through an analysis of three parameters related to agentivity (i.e. semantic roles, syntactic functions and syntactic position), it aims to compare: i) the representations of the FCs and FCPs (i.e. are they represented with a similar degree of agentivity and for what kind of actions or situations?), ii) the representations in the official speeches vs. in the social media discourse, iii) the representations when discussing the colonial past vs. later periods of time, and iv) the representations to be found in the three postcolonial pairs.

According to our findings, the three monarchs construct a discourse where the FCs are represented with a much lower degree of agentivity compared to the FCPs, despite some efforts by the Belgian and the British kings to display the DRC and Kenya as agentive countries. By contrast, the FCPS' agentivity is silenced when the monarchs refer to negative actions committed during the colonial periods. In the social media discourse, by contrast, the FCPs and the FCs are represented with a more equal degree of agentivity, although this agentivity concerns to a large extent specific groups within the countries whose actions are denounced (political leaders in the case of the DRC and Kenya, demonstrators against the Spanish king's venue in the case of Puerto Rico). The colonial history is displayed in an ambiguous way, with some commentators acknowledging negative actions occurred during the colonial times and others transmitting a discourse with traces of colonialism. These results suggest both a general willingness to address issues related to the (post)colonial history and a difficulty in clearly attributing responsibility for the actions associated with it.

References

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