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Posthumanist Language Assemblages, Large Language Models and Digital Empires

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In 1492, the Castilian grammarian Antonio Nebrija observed that "la lengua fue siempre compañera del imperio". Languages and their materializations – what posthumanists refer to as *language assemblages* (Pennycook 2024) – are central to discourses of power and play a crucial role in legitimising political structures that legislate human difference (Deumert & Storch 2020, Errington 2008). Western colonialist and nationalist epistemes framed global sociolinguistic order along territorial and national-ethnic lines and transformed speech into standardized writing in printed text. How are languages discursively and materially constructed in the context of machine-learning culture? Based on insights into the technical operations of large language models, interviews with designers of such tools and observations on discourses in tech industries, I argue that large language models contribute to new language assemblages, which entail new possibilities for global social order but also new forms of imperial exploitation (Couldry & Mejias 2024).

References

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