


# Future design narratives: an interdisciplinary approach to a decolonial glossary

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## Abstract

As design evolves, language serves as a bridge between envisioned futures and the ontological elements of design that shape them. This manuscript presents an alternative glossary that gathers words from diverse disciplines and practices intersected by a decolonial lens that challenges hegemonical narratives. The glossary of the world to come results from a three-day workshop that focused on language as a formal, normative, and subversive tool capable of defining future behaviour and destabilizing the present. The terms are some among the many that exist to form this decolonial world.

**Keywords:** *glossary, design futures, pluriversality, ontology, co-design*

## 1. Introduction

At the intersection of design's evolution lies the profound influence of language, a catalyst that shapes our collective futures by concretizing and giving ideas a more-or-less defined etymological shape (Gee, 1993; Jonas, 2009). Just as design's agency to shape the future through the modification and definition of consumption habits by indicating the correct use of a product, the navigation of a webpage, or any problem-solving proposal that defines needs that leave a limited number of pre-determined options for citizen-consumers to choose from (Dunne and Raby, 2013). The connection between the anticipatory characteristic ontologically intrinsic to design (Simon, 1969; Margolin, 2007; Marenko and Brassett, 2015) will be expressed in this manuscript by analyzing trends. Trend research provides valuable insights into possible directions of change in consuming patterns, social and cultural values, and behaviours (Celi and Colombi, 2020), crucial requirements for design practice.

Stating the premises on design's and trends' future shaping agency and language's fundamental role in shaping and communicating ideas (Gee, 1993), this is where design displays itself as a potent tool. Leading users' experiences and purchase decisions is always part of carefully crafted characteristics that express diverse values related to efficient and adequate use, enhancing users' journeys, and, in many cases, promoting consumption. For the most part, design's narrative has historically been hegemonical in academia and scientific research, methodological processes, and practice (Schultz et al., 2018).

The need for a glossary that considers the concepts overlapping design and trends' future shaping agency, intersected by a decolonial lens, stems from a design PhD that researches the execution of a pluriversal practice of design (Escobar, 2018), located between the present world, and a world-to-be. The relevancy behind the juxtaposition of design and decoloniality lies in applying a perspective that questions hegemonical visions in design. This way, we may guarantee a more responsible practice, inspiring the participation of multiple perspectives (Rodriguez Schon and Celi, 2023). A workshop was proposed as a stage for co-creating a glossary through the individuation of language trends. These set of terms are the initial part of a journey towards the unravelling of colonial structures that are deeply

embedded in design, by redefining the way we speak about it. The decolonization of design calls to challenge and question the perceived universal cannons of what is considered good design, decentring the colonial gaze in pursuit of the emergence of non-hegemonical subjectivities from where to do design, sharing our local community's values (Schultz et al., 2018).

The need to create an updated definition and selection of terms representing these concepts was substantiated by the realization that everyone involved in the research so far (participants and interviewees) used specific words to define their work and profession. These words were carefully chosen to fit how they identified, with strong meaning and reasoning behind choosing one word instead of another. Some called themselves creators instead of designers, others called themselves experimenters instead of artists, and others described their work with different terms related to decolonial thought. This not only evidenced the need to introduce horizontal collaborative methods in the creation of the glossary, making it clear that it would lead to a result that was constructive and descriptive while not definitory and limiting, but it also justified the importance of establishing an updated alternative lexicon to speak about the research.

The present manuscript begins with a methodological introduction to the workshop, followed by the theoretical framework that supported the activities, where terms and concepts are analysed in depth. Next, we present the results and a preview of the glossary with insights and feedback on the didactics of the workshop. Lastly, a conclusion to sum up main learnings, limitations, and further steps.

## 2. A workshop methodology

Defined as a list of unusual or difficult words that fall under an overarching theme and their explanatory definitions (Dictionary.com, 2023, Definition 1 and 2), the creation of the glossary would enable the consolidation of the framework for the research (Redström, 2011) thanks to the general understanding of a pluralized practice through the selection of the words that define it. An interdisciplinary workshop discussed decolonial practices, centring the conversation on the necessity to deconstruct hegemonic views.

The workshop, titled Trends in Language [originally in Spanish: Tendencias del Lenguaje], focused on language as a formal, normative, and subversive tool, capable of defining future behaviour and destabilizing the present, just as design. The three-day online workshop mixed lectures and conversations centred on the creation of the glossary by using brainstorming techniques on a common and collaborative online board. This pilot test of the Trends in Language workshop was carried out with Sabrina Ellmann, who graduated from literature and culture studies and specialized in translation. Her participation was vital in curating the contents and facilitating the conversations at every stage.

The selected language for the workshop was Spanish for various reasons, the first being that all participants and lecturers spoke Spanish. This was mainly because topics related to plural and decolonial practices are very relevant among Latin American professionals. Second, this activity preceded a research period abroad in Argentina, for which it was beneficial to count with a list of terms that would enable future workshops and activities in this territory.

In this pilot test we invited six panellists dedicated to different disciplines, proposing ways of thinking about their objects of study. Two speakers per day presented diverse topics related to the research and sparking debate upon questions such as: What words emerge from a decolonial practice in each discipline? How do they come to be understood? What form do they take? Every speaker brought different topics and questions to the table, using examples, cases, and visual content. (Ellmann and Rodríguez Schon, 2023). The glossary of the world-to-come considers that the terms that could comprise it are some among many that exist to form this decolonial world. This is why the meetings included panellists from different disciplines (Figure 1), diverse ways of seeing and understanding the world, their practices, or disciplines (Ellmann and Rodríguez Schon, 2023).

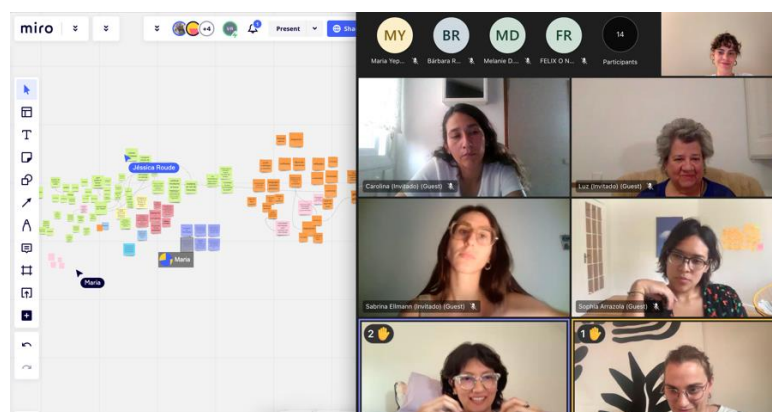
Throughout the workshop we evidenced a high presence of female speakers (5 out of 6 were women) and participants (75% were women). Speakers recruited ranged the ages of 28 to 33 years old, among them we counted with: Sophia Arrazola, multidisciplinary artist, and futures design researcher. Carolina González, coordinator of artistic, games, educational, social, and community-based projects. Juan Fernandez Zaragoza, computing philosopher, writer, and researcher. Sabrina Ellmann, who was also facilitator, educator and researcher focused on translation and comparative literature. Bárbara

Rousseaux, researcher, contemporary art writer, and founder of a literary agency. And Elisa Lutteral, textile artist and researcher. The profiles of the speakers display a rich background that included different expertise and interests, activist work, entrepreneurship, NGO collaboration, among other. The confluence of voices aimed to map emergent words, explore their meanings and forms, and contemplate how these influences will redefine the design discipline of tomorrow in a world where the centre is deliberately off-centre (Ellmann and Rodriguez Schon, 2023).

June 5th 18.00 – 20.00 hs CET	Sophia Arrazola Pausing as much as possible Carolina González How can we think ourselves?
June 6th 18.00 – 20.00 hs CET	Juan Fernández Zaragoza Emotion, Morality, Design Sabrina Ellmann Translating (in) anyway
June 8th 18.00 – 20.00 hs CET	Bárbara Rousseaux Buildings that speak, streets that cry Elisa Lutteral From other landscapes

**Figure 1. Trends in language agenda with speakers and lecture titles**

The collaborative aspect of this activity was fostered using the online board (Figure 2), which was used by the participants freely. Nevertheless, a concluding filter and clustering were made by the researcher and facilitator, making sense of the results obtained using criteria such as frequency, relevancy, conceptual depth, interdisciplinarity, and research potential (Section 4).



**Figure 2. Screenshot of workshop day 1**

An essential component of collaborative and participatory design was needed to bind the methodology behind the workshop. This is ever more relevant since we are living in a current landscape of increasing participatory culture, an era of participation (Smith, Bossen and Kanstrup, 2017; Meroni et al., 2018). The primary motivation behind this growth is not only the influences of the internet and other evolving technological and communicational utilities (Bannon and Ehn, 2012; Meroni et al., 2018), but the essence behind participatory actions is also an expression of contemporary culture that resonates with the aspirations of present research.

Ultimately, the essence of collective creativity behind participatory and collaborative methodologies is progressively seen as a guide to navigating complex social issues that need the assimilation of varied stakeholders (Meroni et al., 2018). This inclusionary approach was one of the main guidelines of the

workshop. The methodological inclination towards co-design and participatory design stems from the belief that those impacted by design outcomes should inherently have a participatory stake in the design journey (Ehn, 1989; Meroni et al., 2018).

The evolution of participatory design, which shifted from enhancing expertise within organizations to empowering broader communities (Ehn, 2008; Meroni et al., 2018), underlines such an approach's political and democratising potential. Meanwhile, co-design confluences user-centred design and participatory practices, combining observation and partnership characteristics (Sanders and Stappers, 2008; Meroni et al., 2018). In a space as complex and multifaceted as decoloniality, co-design emerges not only as a methodology but as a social conversation that embraces its contradictions, recognizing the value of each stakeholder's unique skills, experiences, and cultural contributions (Manzini, 2016; Meroni et al., 2018).

### 3. Epistemological frame

Exploring the intersections between language, design, and futures', we shed light on its complex layers through pluriversality. Sousa Santos (2016, p. 23) emphasizes, *"language enables certain ideas to be explained and not others"*, highlighting language's crucial role in design discourse. Hall (1980) acknowledges the polysemy of texts invites numerous interpretations, showing the importance of critically engaging with and often moving beyond standard linguistic structures. Pangaro (2010: 21:30–22:30) suggests, *"[c]reating new languages is the most important task that people do to design,"* urging an ongoing evolution of our linguistic tools in design and futurism.

Considering language's role in manifesting future visions, it's important to recognize its varied definitions and uses across disciplines. Fitch, Hauser, and Chomsky (2005) view language as a uniquely human trait with spoken forms (dialects or idioms) being arbitrary manifestations of this trait. Linguists see the faculty of language as a set of computational operations, while biologists and physicists regard it as a communicative system. Fitch, Hauser, and Chomsky (2005) argue against a uniform treatment of language, emphasizing its dependency on recursivity (Ellmann and Rodriguez Schon, 2023).

The concept of recursivity suggests the property that what is being manifested is contained within itself an indefinite number of times. This is particularly interesting since it also comes close to the ontological definition of design and trends. Willis (2006) states that when we design, we prefigure our actions, and *"in turn, we are designed by our designing and by that which we have designed"*. Similarly, trends also show this recursive quality, *"they are always shaping that which they attempt to describe"* (Powers, 2019:16). Similarly, what Fitch, Hauser, and Chomsky (2005) intend with the recursive quality of language is that it may produce an unlimited number of sentences within its sentences. (Ellmann and Rodriguez Schon, 2023).

We could then state that recursivity is a trend in language. Nevertheless, within this recursivity, it is not homogeneous or the same in itself, but shows specific differences, or as coined by Derrida (1985), *différance*. This concept is foundational in Derrida's poststructuralist thought, challenging the stability of meaning in language, suggesting that meaning perpetually defers to other words and is always in flux. The configuration of difference is the condition of possibility in sense and language, where he worked with the act of writing and speaking and their irreducible property. This concept was central for the creation of the theoretical framework of the workshop as a pluriversal exercise that could undo Western logos.

The transversal value of pluriversality (Escobar, 2018) was the departing point of the proposed glossary and the workshop activity. Based on the decolonial concept of pluriverse and cultural and social studies, a pluriversal vision includes the coexistence of countless intersecting options of knowledge, being, and perception, critiquing the idea of universal norms (Tlostanova, 2017). It emphasizes the embrace of ontological and epistemological differences, describing a world where many worlds fit (EZLN, 1994). The call to pluralize our conceptions of what makes up our understanding of the world is a political project that combats the colonial tendency to presume that one framework can be marshalled to account for all the others (Tuin and Nocek, 2019), just as the various meanings behind words (and language), or as stated by Bakhtin (1934), heteroglossia.

Bakhtin (1981) introduced heteroglossia as the coexistence of multiple expressions within a single language, highlighting that language is not merely a collection of words but includes various *"points of*



*view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its objects, meanings and values".* Language goes beyond diverse vocabularies; it is a complex web of experiences, collective judgments, and perspectives, continuously evolving. Recognizing that languages reflect distinct worldviews is crucial, as context shapes the meaning of utterances, tied to specific times and places (Bakhtin, 1981). Pluriversality in language includes the variances of dialects, jargon, demographic language, and trending terms, each carrying values ascribed by users, considering the speech styles variable (Bakhtin, 1993).

In design practice, writing often takes a backseat to drawing and visualization, yet its significance emerges when presenting ideas to stakeholders (Nilsson, 2009). Here, language adopts a persuasive role, outlining project visions and specifics. As Didion (2021) asserts, writing is assertively persuasive, an *"imposing [of] oneself upon other[s]"*. Writing in socially-driven design practices must be mindful to avoid exclusion, as it conveys the intended perception and usage of a product.

Words, in essence, can be a means of imposition, paralleling how design signals the right or erroneous way to use an object or service. The user experience is meticulously crafted, directing individuals to engage with elements and insinuating them to consume specific content at designated moments. However, it's crucial to highlight the role of the user, who interprets these words or objects, retaining the agency to decide their interaction. Through this lens, both language and objects possess a degree of agency; on the one hand, they suggest their intended use, and on the other, subject to the user's self-perception and interpretation. At this intersection, language, much like design trends, helps envision a future, shaping the potential trajectories of tomorrow. (Nilsson, 2009).

In the intersection of pluriversality and design, ontological design suggests transitioning *"from the hegemony of modernity's one-world ontology to a pluriverse of socio-natural configurations"* (Escobar, 2018). Escobar critiques the modern era's singular worldview, rooted in Western thought and Enlightenment values. Traditional design has often sidelined local cultures and traditions. However, design can be repurposed as a means for a more inclusive practice, embracing various ways of understanding and engaging with the world, including through language.

As stated, the relationship between design and futures will be held using trend research. The interpretation of trends by design practitioners evidences the overlapping of trends and design studies, where trend research remains a pivotal piece between design and the creation of the future, *"[t]rends shape our futures, just as we shape trends"* (Raymond, 2019:10). Not only does trend research influence what and how we design, shaping society's behaviours (Celi and Colombi, 2020), it is also one of the initial research methodologies used when outlining the conceptual bases and values of a fore-coming project (Celi and Rudkin, 2016). On a theoretical level, trend research defines design's ontological characteristics, where the power entailed in design and trend research lies in the possibility to shape future behaviours and, thus, reality.

The initial stage of trend research is based on detecting weak signals of change that hint that a more significant shift might be coming (Raymond, 2019; Vjelgaard, 2008). Designers interpret these findings on a socio-cultural level, envisioning new possible directions and behavioural changes over time (Celi and Colombi, 2020; Raymond, 2019) that will construct a deep understanding of the values and behaviours of the collective worldview that then inspire the symbolic look and feel of experiences, generating numerous design directions (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Celi and Colombi, 2020). A key component is understanding how trends behave among groups of people, giving it a sociological and anthropological dimension to which trend forecasters stand as cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984). Trends summarise visions of the futures, codified by interpreting *"impermanant cultural changes"* (Powers, 2019:7).

Language, inherently dynamic and ever-evolving, serves as a lens through which we understand the nuances of the future. Under the perspective of Vieira Pinto (2005), our perceptions of the past and future are sculpted by a continuously transforming present. Using language to envision, describe, and debate potential scenarios becomes an instrumental tool in moulding the narratives of what lies ahead. *"Each moment offers [...] the opportunity to design the future they imagine, and the past they believe has transpired,"* states Gonzatto et al. (2013). By critically examining how we articulate futures through language, we capture the zeitgeist and direct our collective focus towards specific trajectories.

New linguistic terms and concepts reflect societal, technological, and cultural shifts, underpinning trend research that connects past, present, and potential futures. The present's continuous evolution, noted by Vieira Pinto, is key to recognizing and forecasting trends (Dator, 2019). These trends, grounded in history, guide current choices and future predictions (Masini, 2010), highlighting our role in molding the future and challenging us to consider our imaginative limits. This interplay also prompts reflection on our ability to alter pre-existing norms, as Gonzatto et al. (2013) discuss.

## 4. Results

This section presents the results of the Trends in Language workshop as a collaborative formulation of terms that elucidate design as a projectable practice. This action is sliced across by a set of values the researchers prioritised, offering a comprehensive insight into the principles that steer our design perspective. Since the workshop was in Spanish, the facilitator and researcher translated the content into English and analysed the outputs of the communal board for all three days of the workshop. A first clustering of topics organized the post-it notes and textboxes that ranged from literature references, keywords, sentences explaining topics, practical examples, opinions, and feelings. While the lecture occurred, participants were encouraged to take notes for the rest to see. The methodological approach included three main steps: classifying topics into overarching topics, identifying connecting nexuses, and creating the glossary from selected keywords.

### 4.1. Clustering and classifying the topics into overarching topics

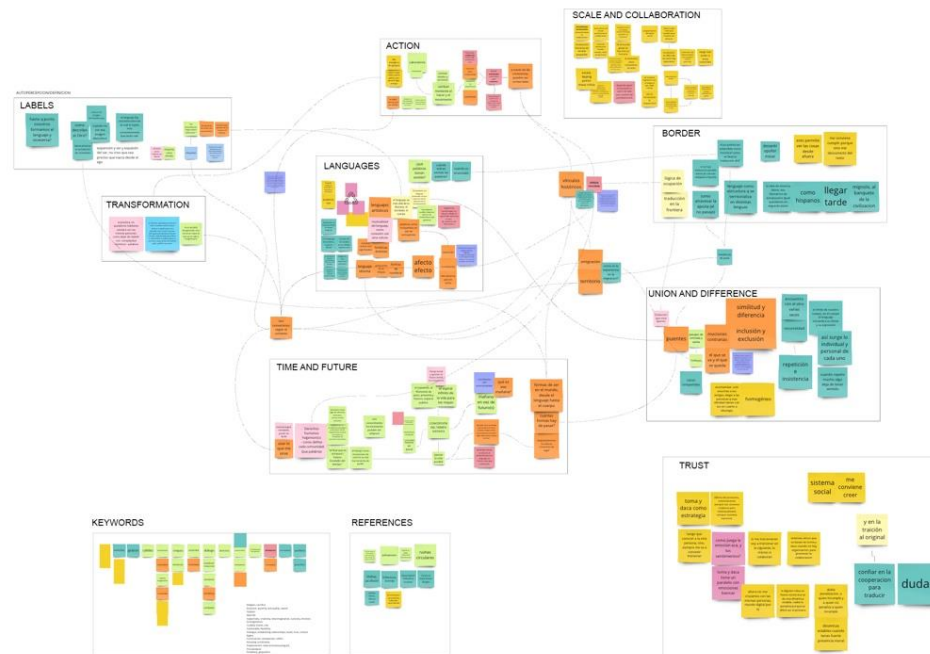
Going from a macro to a micro scale, all content was first categorised in topics once the workshop was finished (Figure 3). We could observe that each speaker emphasised two or three topics, with some overlapping between speakers. The fact that specialists from different disciplines had common areas was the first finding that corroborated the hypothesis behind the experiment; these different perspectives still had things in common: transversal values and concepts that could be comparable using criteria such as overlapping between disciplines and themes, the frequency the topic was addressed, and depth and time spent in debating upon the topic. Each cluster contained varied content; some were much more popular than others (frequency and depth). This may have also been the case because of the brief and the workshop proposal, e.g.: the cluster for language was much popular than the one on transformation. These overarching topics classify the workshop's content:

- Labels: Discussion on auto perception, describing oneself and others. Emphasis on how language forms and confines us, presenting barriers that might be linguistic or physical. The changing nature of labels, like in feminist movements, is explored.
- Transformation: Centered on broadening horizons and the importance of interactions. It touches on the human tendency to follow familiar paths and the need to build upon what's known.
- Time and Future: Contrasts futurism's corporate origins with the essence of time, emphasizing the importance of understanding our current position to shape the future.
- Union and Difference: Focuses on translation as a bridge, highlighting the duality of similarity and difference. The phenomenon of "echo chambers"<sup>1</sup> is addressed, along with the role of the body in defining language barriers.
- Trust: Explores the dynamics of trust through game theory, particularly the give and take strategy. The challenges of maintaining trust in today's digital age are discussed, emphasizing its importance in collaboration and translation.
- Border: Goes beyond mere geographical divisions to delve into identity, translation, and language as territorial boundaries. Latin America's position relative to Europe and translation challenges is discussed.
- Scale and Collaboration: Examines the mechanisms that drive collaboration on different scales. Emphasizes the complexities introduced by globalization and the changing dynamics in an age of rapid communication.

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<sup>1</sup> A setting where an individual is exclusively exposed to information or viewpoints that mirror their own. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023, Definition 2).

- **Action:** Highlights the power of group synergies and the role of initiatives like the Laboratoria Comunitaria [Community Laboratory] from Mi calle nuestra calle [My street our street] (2023) in driving change. The importance of design, art, and physical interactions in fostering connections is discussed.
- **Languages:** The role of languages in shaping perception is explored, stressing their connection to history and other disciplines. The multifaceted nature of communication, from spoken words to artistic expressions, is emphasised, highlighting the need for clear definitions.



**Figure 3. Collaborative board with overarching themes clustered and keywords selected**

## 4.2. Connecting nexus

Exploring the nexus between the overarching topics, specific themes consistently resonate, concepts were recurrent along the debates and presentations, and evidenced a graphical connection between topics through the amount of arrows present (Figure 3). Firstly, identity is malleable, influenced by context and prompting new narratives that elevate our value as humans. These narratives extend beyond spoken language, emphasising depth. Secondly, territory is intertwined with migration, reshaping viewpoints. Thirdly, the colonial wound influences self-identity and unintentional othering, challenging us to overcome this internalized colonization, this involves rewriting embedded mental constructs. Finally, metaphors of transition link these themes, symbolizing evolving understanding and experiences.

## 4.3. Selection of keywords and creation of the glossary

In the creation of the glossary, the selection of keywords was based on a set of criteria designed to ensure relevance and applicability within the context of design research. Including: the frequency it was mentioned across presentations and during general debate, the relevance in relation to the workshop's theme and its direct relationship to the topics proposed, the conceptual depth requiring further definition and prompting more discussion, an interdisciplinary resonance between the different speaker's fields, and potentiality for further research such as terms that still have space for scholarly research. These parameters were applied systematically in the analysis of the workshop's content to identify the most pertinent elements for the glossary, a preselection of 38 words was condensed into the following list (Table 1), which contains the term and its corresponding and in-progress description based on the workshop findings. The resultant keywords were subject to a validation process with the workshop facilitator and research supervisors which reviewed the selections to ensure their relevance and significance within the field of design research.

**Table 1. Work in progress on the glossary**

N°	Term	Description
1	Code[s]	Sets of systems, linguistic, cultural, or computational, that determine how information is communicated and understood.
2	Contact	Point where two entities meet, allowing exchange, interaction, or communication, often leading to new insights or understandings.
3	Cosmovision	Tied to understanding indigenous perspectives, it refers to a holistic way of seeing and interpreting the world, encompassing cultural, spiritual, and environmental dimensions.
4	Curiosity	An intrinsic drive to explore, understand, and learn. It's the spark that propels individuals to seek knowledge beyond the familiar.
5	Dialogue	A multi-way communication process where ideas, beliefs, and opinions are exchanged, promoting understanding and growth.
6	Displacement	The act of moving or being moved from one place, position, or situation to another, often due to external forces or changes.
7	Emotion	A psychological state involving feelings, physiological responses, and behavioural reactions. Emotions are fundamental to human experiences, shaping perceptions and actions.
8	Flexibility	Adapting or accommodating to varying situations, challenges, or dynamics is essential in an ever-evolving world. Malleability within our context shows also a degree of empathy.
9	Globish	A fusion of "Global" and "English," representing a version of the English language, adapted for communication in a global world. This raises questions on language colonialism and adaptability.
10	Knowing Coordinates	Recognising position, context, and relation to broader systems or structures, guiding interactions and decisions.
11	New Imaginaries	Innovative ways of conceptualising, envisioning, or interpreting the world. These can be ideas, visions, or shared dreams that differ from established beliefs or systems.
12	Newcomers	From "Nouvinguts," a Catalan term, refers to people who recently arrived in a region, bringing varied backgrounds and views, an alternative to "immigrant" and border connotations.
13	Periphery	Areas outside the centre are often marginalized but richer in unique perspectives and experiences, as strong objectivity.
14	Quantity and Quality	While quantity pertains to numerical aspects, quality focuses on its value or essence. Together, they offer a holistic evaluation.
15	Reflect	Introspection and contemplation, examining one's thoughts and actions to gain insights, practicing reflexivity and reflectivity.
16	Rights	Fundamental entitlements and freedoms that everyone should have, regardless of background, ensure equality and justice. An open discussion on equity re-establishes values on this topic.
17	Sentipensar [Feeling-thinking]	Coined by Fals Borda (1984), it merges "feeling" and "thinking," highlighting the interconnectedness of emotion and cognition in understanding and engaging with the world.
18	Warmth	A sensation or quality that evokes feelings of comfort, intimacy, and genuine affection, fostering connection and understanding.

## 5. Conclusion

The glossary is intended not as a definitive lexicon but as a dynamic repository capturing the plurality of language. It aims to embrace the universal and the, searching to provide descriptions of key terms that resonate across communities while respecting the unique nuances that define specific cultural or disciplinary uses. The objective is to deepen the collective understanding of emergent terms, fostering a dialogue that acknowledges diversity and encourages the ongoing transformation of language.

During the workshop the act of notetaking transformed into an engaging collaborative exercise, with individuals connecting and building upon each other's ideas. This dynamic was further amplified when lecturers or facilitators posed questions, fostering participation and breaking inhibitions, especially on



the first day. The communal board, containing myriad arrows and colours, evidences this collective activity. While it aimed to document insights, translating some experiences into written form proved elusive, although it rendered visible how some words were exclusively of certain topics presented, while others were repeated across various lectures, evidencing their relevancy.

The challenges of translation become evident when considering the varied differences between Spanish and English, underscoring the complexity of linguistic diversity. The predominance of female participants in the workshop, while contributing valuable perspectives, also calls for a critical reflection on potential biases. This imbalance might have steered discussions towards certain topics more than others, such as feminism. While this focus has enriched the conversation in some areas, it is important to acknowledge and address the need for a more balanced representation in future workshops. This would not only diversify the themes and insights but also mitigate the risk of any single group's perspective becoming inadvertently predominant.

Future sessions will search for a more equitable gender and age distribution, and a broader range of backgrounds to ensure a multiplicity of viewpoints. Creating a possible lexicon that describes the research topic sheds light on the fact that concepts related to decoloniality have been around for centuries and are all referenced in different ways. Further research intends to understand how colonised cultures and communities also define these terms if they do so.

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