ChatGPT-based prompt engineering as sociolinguistic practice: Stylization, indexical orders, and decolonial reindexing

Abstract

Prompt engineering, the practice of crafting natural language inputs for large language models (LLMs), is widely treated as a neutral technical skill. This article argues otherwise: drawing on Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) sociocultural linguistic framework, Eckert's (2008) concept of indexical fields, and Silverstein's (2003) theory of indexical orders, it reframes prompt engineering as a sociolinguistic practice of stylization, stance-taking, and identity construction, with consequential ideological and societal effects. Theoretically, the article extends three established sociolinguistic concepts, stylization, indexicality, and identity, into the analysis of human–AI interaction, demonstrating their analytical power in a domain previously dominated by computer science. Methodologically, it merges interpretive close readings of 187 ChatGPT-5 prompt-response pairs on three ideologically significant topics (democracy, migration, freedom) with quantitative coding of five linguistic features (chi-square, Cramér's V; $\kappa = 0.83$), demonstrating that differences in prompt style (UN speech vs. populist rally; Shakespeare vs. rap) indexically trigger distinct orders: from first-order register variation to third-order ideological genres like expert policy discourse and right-wing populism. Crucially, the article demonstrates how LLM "best practice" recommendations reiterate Anglo-American communicative conventions, instantiating what de Sousa Santos (2015) terms epistemicide, or the destruction of non-Western epistemologies. Finally, it assesses decolonial prompting designs, proverb prompts, multilingual fusions, and postcolonial re-framings, with the honest admission of their structural constraints in colonial training data regimes. The findings have direct implications for AI literacy education, equitable LLM design, and the governance of language technology in multicultural societies.

Keywords: prompt engineering; ChatGPT; indexicality; stylization; coloniality; decoloniality; language and technology

1. Introduction: From algorithms to social practices

Over the last five years, LLMs (ChatGPT, Bard, Claude) have moved from techno-scientific discourse to being a worldwide resource for communicative practice. Their emergence corresponds to what Blommaert (2010) called "the sociolinguistics of globalization": a new round of entextualization, circulation and recontextualization of discourse in digital spaces. Public discourse is ambivalent about the "miracle" of LLMs, which are able to deliver prompt knowledge, textual fluency and multilingual accessibility yet are also "dangerous" and threatening jobs, creativity and authorship (Gretzky & Dishon 2025). For sociolinguists, however, the question is not just what LLMs do but what they require of users, and how to address them. To what extent do LLMs exhibit sociolinguistic competence, as raised again in the Conclusion (cf. Duncan 2024; Nguyen 2025)?

Prompt engineering makes this question acute. In its technical sense, prompt engineering involves formulating input instructions that are "clearly", "explicitly" and "step-by-step" so as to elicit an "accurate" response (Giray 2023). Within a digital literacy framework, however, it has become a skill which is unevenly distributed and rewarded (Dobson & Willinsky 2009). Formulation itself has connotations of ideologically freighted conduct: a "good" prompt is one that conforms to certain expectations of "correct" use, as formulated in metadata, commentaries or even the output of other LLMs (cf. Hovy & Murray 2022). Users familiar with Anglo-American genres of educational or commercial discourse may find these "rules" easy to apply. Others may find them less accommodating, particularly if their customary practices rely on indirectness (Nelson et al. 2002), embedded narratives (Bal & Tavor 1981), or appeals to relationships (Burgoon & Hale 1984).

These asymmetries arise from the ideology of dataism that underlies the training data of LLMs, which Erdocia et al. (2024) term "dataism". This perspective treats language as decontexualized data points. Such a position has echoes in colonial discourses that codified "native" languages into categories familiar to European linguists (Erdocia et al. 2024: 22). LLMs "primarily 'think' in English" (Kang & Hirschi, 2025), internalizing Anglo-American normativity (Brown et al. 2012). hMensa (2024) shows that African languages are underrepresented in LLMs, while "accent neutralization" practices reinforce English as the language of commerce. AI systems thus operate within infrastructural frameworks set up by

coloniality (Maldonado-Torres 2007), linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992), and unequal geographies of knowledge production (Mignolo 2011a).

Seen in this light, prompt engineering is framed here as a sociolinguistic practice (cf. Sarangi & Candlin 2014) in at least three senses. First, it involves stylistic (Coupland 2007; Hernández-Campoy 2016) and generic shifts (Swales 1990): prompts are formulated in ways that mimic academic discourse, political speeches, casual conversation, or even poetry, and each style has its own set of indexical meanings (cf. Eckert 2019). Second, prompting is a form of stylization (Coupland 2007; Jaspers & Van Hoof 2019), in which users position themselves and the model through role assignments ("act as a professor", "explain like a rapper") and stance-taking (Jaffe 2009; Kiesling 2022). Third, prompting is a site where linguistic ideologies are materialized: the guidelines, defaults, and infrastructures of LLMs privilege some ways of speaking and marginalize others, reproducing global hierarchies of communicative legitimacy (Schneider et al. 2007).

Thus, I frame this article around a reframing prompt engineering can be understood as an emergent field of sociolinguistic practice that makes visible the possibilities and inequalities of human–AI interaction. In doing so, I draw on Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) sociocultural linguistic framework, in particular their principles of emergence, indexicality, and positionality as well as Eckert's (2008) concept of "indexical field" to analyze how LLM prompts and outputs mobilize associations between forms and meanings. I also draw on de Sousa Santos's (2015) and Mignolo's (2021) decolonial theory to assert that these indexical fields are structured by coloniality: the hierarchies of language, knowledge and communicative value embedded in training data and "best practice" guidelines.

Three analytical steps structure the article. First, I demonstrate how prompting works as stylization and identity construction by drawing on examples from politics and culture (e.g., democracy presented as a United Nations speech versus a hip-hop performance; migration described in technocratic versus populist terms; freedom described in Shakespearean versus rap styles). Second, I examine the indexical fields of LLMs, using examples to show how the prompts mobilize several orders of indexicality: first-order differences in register; second-order alignments with stance; third-order recognitions of style as ideologized. Third, I examine the coloniality of the guidelines for the prompts and sketch the horizon of a decolonial practice of prompting. To support these qualitative examples, the research employs quantitative coding of

linguistic features (see Tables 1-3 below) to show that the contrasts are systematic, not merely illustrative, using a code set of high reliability and direct alignment with theory (e.g., stance markers, hedges/boosters, evidentials, audience markers, formality markers).

The stakes of such a reframing are twofold. Theoretically, this project applies established sociolinguistic concepts of style, stance, and indexicality to a novel interactional context: human–machine communication (cf. Kelly-Holmes 2024). While these concepts have been widely applied to written and digital discourse (Heyd 2015), their application to AI-generated text opens up a new field of study, especially given that the "interlocutor" is an algorithmic system rather than a human agent. This shift raises questions about how identities emerge when one participant lacks intentionality, consciousness and social positioning in the traditional sense. Ideologically, this project highlights the reproduction of colonial, technocratic and resistant repertoires within LLM outputs, emphasizing the stakes of language in the design and use of AI (Kelly-Holmes 2022).

2. Theoretical framework: Where sociolinguistics and AI meet

A sociolinguistic analysis of prompt engineering requires translocutory concepts that spanned across registers of practice, ideology and history. The project is to explicate how technically-seeming processes are thick with semiotic choices and ideological commitments. When a user prompts an LLM, what seems like a neutral request for information takes on a styling, positioning and contestation across a globally uneven domain of communication. Consider this example: When ChatGPT-5 is asked about climate change in technocratic speak, it returns an authoritative, scientifically-informed explanation that is only rendered possible by the absence of modal verbs and hedging. But when it's asked the same question in protest speak, it returns an answer that's centered on injustice and colonial responsibility for climate change, spoken in emotionally-charged terms and full of metaphorical language that contest the status quo. What looks like a neutral technical query has styled its output in a political semiotic: The default register for asking to be returned unstyled (neutrally) is Western scientific register. The default register for a protest style returns a response framed as a protest. The style of the prompt

is a powerful variable; asking for neutrality in return enables the AI to style its response in a user-specified register.

This paper's theoretical framework spans three conceptual landscapes: (1) sociocultural linguistics and identity construction, (2) indexicality and stylization, and (3) critical and decolonial approaches to data, ideology, and inequality. These conceptual landscapes converge to form a synthetic analytic scaffold for the analysis of prompt engineering (see Figure 1).

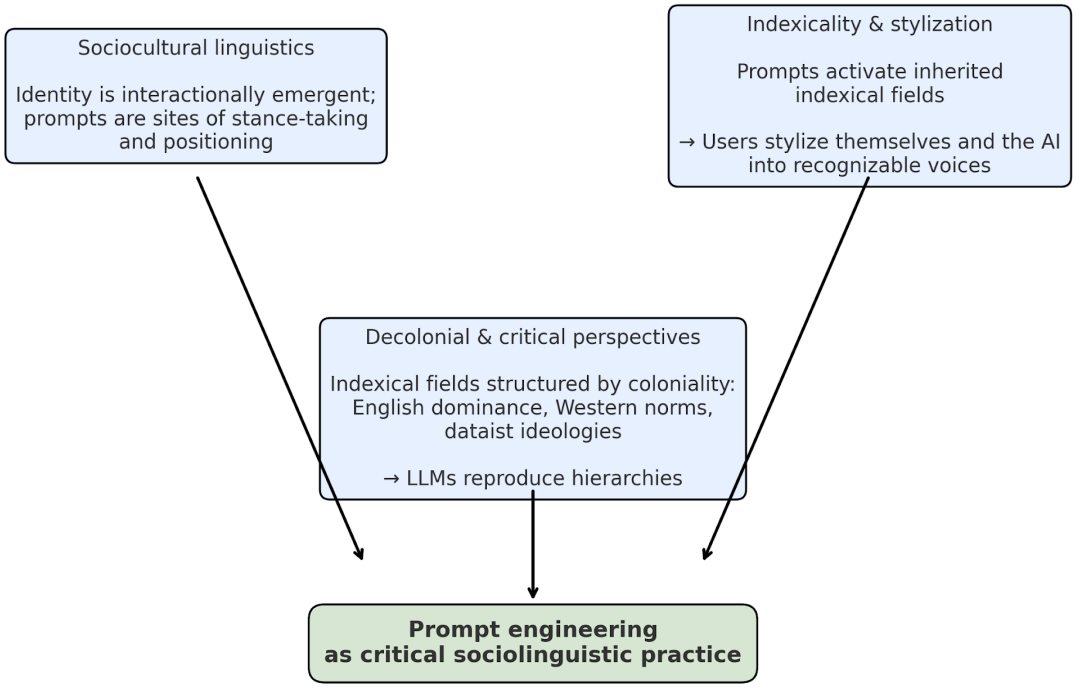


Figure 1: A critical sociolinguistic framework for the analysis of prompt engineering

Sociocultural linguistics characterizes identity as non-fixed and interactionally-constructed (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). The field's five principles, emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality, and partialness, illuminate the prompt as a site of identity construction. The identity thus constructed is cast in the register of the user who framed the prompt in "Explain democracy as if you were a hip-hop artist", where the AI takes on the role of performer and the user takes on

the role of culturally competent by requesting the prompt in this form. Identity is constructed in interaction: it emerges, has positionality, is indexed, is related to other agents in the interaction, and it is partial (i.e., it is not a whole). This resonates with Tang's (2024: 18) appeal to view AI as part of dialogic knowledge-making.

Indexicality is central. Silverstein's (2003: 193–4) orders indexicality in three layers of meaning linked to form: first-order meanings linked directly to context; second-order stances towards professionalism toward users in the form of the users' questions; third-order ideological recognition for given values like clarity over complexity to be preferred. This work is further developed as an Eckert's (2008: 454) indexical field that treats such meaning as constellations of meaning instead of a linear web. The LLMs' knowledge is thus organized in these associations; the frames that users prompt trigger recognizable LLM styles (Bender et al. 2021): Shakespearean style through elevated diction in language use, and populist speech through brevity, repetition, contrastive pronouns like "we" vs. "they" (cf. Sclafani 2017). The engineering of prompts for LLMs thus takes on the shape of stylization (Coupland 2007), the purpose being to see if LLMs can reproduce styles that are socially-acceptable as voice.

Recent scholarship reveals how these dynamics manifest in LLMs. Erdocia et al. (2024) pin down the ideology of "dataism", treating language as reducible to quantifiable input. English dominance results in systematic bias against other varieties, while hMensa (2024) documents the double marginalization of African languages: they're excluded from training data, yet English accents commodified through technologies like Sanas receive more promotion. Yet Birhane (2021) characterizes these asymmetries as "algorithmic injustice", saying they reinforce global power structures through neutral computations.

Seen in this perspective, prompt engineering does not happen in a free-play of stylistic options, but is bounded by coloniality of data on the one hand, and norm enforcement via so-called "best practices" (Ekin 2023) on the other. As Maly (2024: 1) claims, AI is thus a socio-technical assemblage, embedding ideology at the level of data, design, interface, and user instructions. I frame LLMs as assemblages: they combine technical assemblages (training data, algorithms, infrastructural computing) with social assemblages (users who prompt and reuse its output), institutional assemblages (platform policies, corporate interests), and ideological assemblages (users agreeability to a privileged style for good communication). This compound structure helps account for decolonial prompting by considering all its targets: users confront not

just a tech product but a rich ecosystem for generating knowledge that contains no privilege for any given style. The assemblage framework does not let us conceptualize LLMs as neutral tools & targets for critique; it compels us to focus on its power relations, economically-, linguistically- and epistemologically-driven ones, that structure its technological design and users' applications.

Yet prompting is a style of practice that occupies the space between the aesthetics of creativity and the politics of constraint. It is the space of creativity and constraint, and it is here that prompt engineering becomes a sociolinguistic object of study. It allows us to see how users style and construct identity, but it also shows us how infrastructures for AI reproduce and naturalize hierarchies of language and knowledge (Schneider & Migge 2025). Within the framework of Bucholtz & Hall (2005), I see prompting as a space of emergent, positional, and indexical identity. Based on Eckert (2008), I also trace how to analyze how LLMs reorganize indexical fields. Following Alatas (2024), Mignolo (2021), and de Sousa Santos (2016), I ask how coloniality limits what can be done in those fields, and what an anti-colonial practice of prompting might look like.

Within this theoretical framework, prompt engineering is not only a sociolinguistic practice, but a political terrain (cf. Burkhardt & Rieder 2024). Its study requires a synthesis of micro-level interactional analysis with macro-level analysis of data infrastructures, locating even the most mundane act of typing (or saying) into a chat box within histories of style, power, and inequality.

3. Methodology and data: A linguistic ethnography of prompting

The study is grounded in three research questions, each posed in a deliberately stylized way that regards language as social practice in LLMs, not as a neutral input:

1. How does prompting serve as a practice of stylization, when users draw on cultural repertoires to do voicework?

2. How do these stylizations scale into indexical orders, with structured associations between form, stance, and ideology?

3. What does this reveal about the ideological politics of prompting, particularly its role in either reproducing or resisting colonial and technocratic discourses?

These are not questions that seek answers; they open a space for sociolinguistics to inject a much-needed nuance into a debate currently carried on by people with little or no understanding of the field beyond what they have picked up from computer science forums. These questions do not pose a technical puzzle but treat prompting as a practice (relevant to RQ1), a structure (relevant to RQ2), and a critique (relevant to RQ3).

A caveat regarding epistemological approach: The study employs interpretive and quantitative approaches in combination, and without contradiction. The analysis of the prompt–response texts employs an interpretive, reflexive approach to sociolinguistic analysis drawing on discourse-centered online ethnography (Androutsopoulos 2008), which means that the close reading of texts is not an end in itself but a foundation for a set of claims about semiotic possibilities. The quantitative coding (Cohen's κ, chi-square tests, Cramér's V) does not betoken a positivist approach but a pragmatic one: these statistical tests serve an instrumental purpose that is bounded, which is to demonstrate that any stylistic contrasts identified in the qualitative analysis are systematic rather than merely illustrative, and to enable the study authors to report in a transparent way the inter-rater agreement between different coders. Interpretation and statistics go hand in hand here; there is no contradiction in wanting to account for semiotic patterns in a way that is both rigorous and accountable.

3.1 Data collection and prompt design

Unlike classical sociolinguistic projects that draw on recordings of naturally occurring conversation, the data here consist of illustrative prompt–response pairs produced with ChatGPT-5, a widely used large language model. The dataset consists of 210 prompts (prior to exclusions) submitted to ChatGPT-5, focusing on three ideologically salient concepts, democracy, migration, and freedom, selected because they activate entrenched political and cultural discourses enabling comparison across registers. For each concept, two contrasting prompts were designed to elicit outputs in divergent styles (e.g., diplomacy versus populism; literary tradition versus rap).

These topics reliably induce contrasting styles for typical user intentions, vary in audience design, persuasion, and accountability, and are well-documented, consequential, and item-wise comparable across settings. They reduce topic confounds, steer clear of knowledge-heavy activities, and make pragmatic shifts salient. As a set, they induce similar outputs with conspicuous stylistic variations.

I excluded prompts that would most probably induce confounds or ethical hazard: sensitive topics, personal data, plagiarism of copyrighted content, multimodal outputs and inputs, expert-domain queries, long or culture-dependent prompts, duplicates, and prompts inducing run-to-run erratic outputs. Exclusions protect respondents, ensure comparability, reduce hallucination noise (Förster & Skop 2025), and keep the analysis in the space of style and stance. A complete summary of all excluded prompts by category, with one representative example per category and the rationale for each exclusion decision, is provided in Appendix C.

3.2 Data analysis procedures

3.2.1 Coding protocol

Each linguistic feature was operationalized to ensure reliability and replicability as follows:

Enumerative syntax: Instances of list structures using commas, semicolons or numbered points were counted. Reliability assessment was performed as percentage of total sentences exhibiting such structure; a sentence was coded as enumerative if it had three or more items in a series with explicitly recognized syntactic elements.

Affective pronouns: Instances of first-person plural (“we”, “our”, “us”) and second-person (“you”, “your”) pronouns with affective connotation were counted. Reliability was assessed as proportion of total pronouns; third-person references as well as impersonal constructions were excluded from consideration.

Us-them binaries: Instances of explicit designation of in-group vs. out-group (e.g. “our traditions” vs. “outside powers”) were counted; reliability for each output was coded as

present/absent. Coding required explicit reference to group boundaries; ambiguities or implied associations were not sufficient.

Metaphorical density: Number of non-literal expressions were counted. Reliability was assessed as metaphors per 100 words; only deliberate (not conventional) metaphors were counted.

Rhyme/Rhythm: Presence of end rhymes and rhythmic patterns typical of verse or rap were assessed; each output was coded for present/absent. A minimum of two rhyming pairs or sustained rhythmic patterning over multiple lines was required for rhythms to be considered.

3.2.2 Output specifications

To allow for comparison and control for potential confounding variables, each ChatGPT-5 response was limited to a range of 150–200 words through explicit instructions given in the prompt. This would allow for the control of the potential effect of longer responses potentially containing more of the feature in question. Each prompt was run twice (then combined into a single file for analysis). Responses with >30% variation in total word count OR >50% variation in features present/absent were excluded (which resulted in the loss of 23 prompts (approximately 11% of the initial 210-prompt dataset), leading to a final dataset of 187 prompts, with the 5 types of prompt categories (approximately) evenly split into 5 equal groups of n = 70 outputs (35 prompts / 2 runs, after exclusions) in the primary comparisons reported in this paper.

3.2.3 Statistical tests

Statistical analyses were conducted to assess whether observed patterns exceeded chance variation. Chi-square tests (χ^2) assessed whether the distribution of linguistic features differed significantly between prompt types. Effect sizes were reported using Cramér's V. A conservative significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.001$ was used given the multiple comparisons involved (five linguistic features × four prompt contrasts = 20 tests). Sample sizes (n = 70 per prompt type) provided statistical power ($1-\beta > 0.90$) to detect large effects.

3.2.4 Exclusion criteria

Prompts were excluded if they met any of the following criteria: (1) sensitive content (e.g. related to self-harm or graphic violence), (2) reasons related to plagiarism (e.g. a request to

reproduce a copyrighted creative work verbatim), (3) confounding effects related to domain expertise (e.g. prompts that would yield style-variant outputs based on a user's understanding of the prompt's subject matter rather than their domain expertise), (4) multimodal prompts that require image generation or analysis, (5) prompts that exhibit run-to-run instability (i.e., >30% variation in output length or >50% variation in feature presence from one iteration of the prompt to the next)), and (6) culturally inaccessible references that consistently produce generic or false responses rather than genuinely stylized responses. The full exclusion record, including example entries and counts for each category, can be found in Appendix C (Table A5).

3.2.5 Rationale for contrastive design and its limitations

The choice of maximally opposing genres (UN speech vs. hip hop; neutral expertise vs. populist rally; Shakespeare vs. rap) is both theoretically motivated and subject to important limitations. Such oppositions maximize analytical visibility, for instance: extreme contrasts make indexical fields visible, and documented usage in prompting communities (analysis of Reddit's r/ChatGPT and r/PromptEngineering shows that such strategies are indeed employed by users). They also maximize coding reliability: effects of subtle style are hard to code with high inter-rater agreement.

Yet, as Section 6 emphasized, binary oppositions create artificial boundaries between cultural spheres that do not correspond to communicative practice; registers blend and styles mingle. The use of binary oppositions may therefore produce stereotyped essentialized outputs rather than nuanced performances. Future research should examine everyday genres, however, such as emails exchanged between colleagues vs. managers, explanations directed at different levels of comprehension, and formal vs. informal registers, etc. (to determine whether the activation of indexical fields is indeed robust outside of the dramatized instances employed here). Preliminary research suggests that such indexical dynamics do hold across the full range of communication; the design of this study simply renders them visible.

These design choices are reflexive as well as analytical. Outputs reflect not just model design, but my own prompting decisions, aligning with a decolonial, reflexive (Salö 2017) approach to sociolinguistics. Although illustrative rather than exhaustive, the data presented does demonstrate that sociolinguistic frameworks are applicable to human–machine communication.

4. Prompt engineering as stylization and identity construction

In response to the first research question, I provide here the explanation of how prompts exercise stylization. Stylization has long been a major theme in sociolinguistically-informed studies of how speakers use forms of language to present themselves in ways that relate to their social identities (e.g., Jaspers & Van Hoof 2019; Tsiplakou & Ioannidou 2012). In the case of LLMs, stylization manifests itself in the prompts that users give to the model that ask it to speak in certain voices, genres or registers.

Through two examples that I have chosen to be particularly expressive, democracy (political) and freedom (cultural), I demonstrate how users' styles project meaning not just in the AI's response but also in the user's stance towards knowledge, authority, and cultural identity. A short discussion of the stylization of migration and nationalism in political discourse appears in this section, though only in brief form to avoid repetition; the complete analysis of stylization for the two cases can be found in Appendix A (migration: Appendix A1; nationalism: Appendix A2).

4.1 Democracy as UN speech vs. hip hop verse

The first case concerns the concept of democracy, a term saturated with ideological meanings. By comparing a diplomatic and a hip-hop framing, we see how prompting revoices the same notion through radically different repertoires, activating both institutional authority and cultural resistance.

Prompt A (formal/diplomatic):

"Write a speech on democracy as if addressing the United Nations."

Output (abridged):

"Distinguished delegates, democracy is not merely a system of governance but the moral foundation of human dignity. It is through democratic principles that nations secure peace, justice, and prosperity for all."

Prompt B (cultural/hip hop stylization):

"Explain democracy as if you were a hip hop artist dropping rhymes for your community."

Output (abridged):

"Democracy's the mic, and the people got the flow / Voices in the cypher, that's how the power grows. / No king on the throne, no one man's show / It's the crowd, it's the streets, that's where the truth goes."

Consider these instances of divergent registers. The UN framing connotes a register of diplomatic discourse, global governance, authority, and elite internationalism (cf. Kurbalija & Slavik 2001; Nick 2001). It connotes a stance of universality and moral superiority. The hip hop framing connotes a register of cultural discourse associated with rhythm, community, and resistance (cf. Kreyer 2016). It connotes a stance of grassroots solidarity. In the Bucholtz & Hall (2005) model, identity and stance are interactionally achieved: the user positions the AI in recognizable voices, and in so doing positions herself as a conversational partner who can move between diplomatic and cultural voices.

The examples of contrast are not unique. Table 1 shows some descriptive statistics of the stylistic features of the AI's responses by type of prompt. As is clear from the table, enumerative syntax is the most frequent grammatical syntax for diplomatic framing (85%), while metaphorical and rhythmic features are most frequent in rap framing (95%). These figures simply serve to confirm that the examples of contrast that have been analyzed in detail are representative of the data sets in question.

Linguistic feature	**UN / Diplomatic**	**Hip hop / Rap**	**Shakespeare**	**Populist rally**
Enumerative syntax	85%	12%	20%	38%
Affective pronouns (we/you)	22%	61%	18%	74%
Us–them binaries	8%	30%	10%	88%

Metaphorical density (per 100 words)	14%	45%	90%	28%
Rhyme / Rhythm (present)	5%	95%	62%	40%
Hedging / Modal verbs	55%	10%	15%	6%

Note. Values represent percentage of outputs exhibiting each feature. n = 70 per prompt type. See Section 3.2.3 for statistical tests.

Table 1: Frequency of stylistic features by prompt type (%)

Theoretically, this example illustrates the concept of entextualization as described by Bauman & Briggs (1990), in which democracy is not only defined but also restyled into new genres of stylistic form. This example also illustrates the concept of stylization as performance as described by Coupland (2007). The UN example restyles democracy as an ideal, and the hip-hop example restyles it as a form of lived practice. The contrast between the two examples illustrates how the process of prompting not only generates text but also interactional positioning.

4.2 Freedom as Shakespeare vs. rap

To demonstrate how prompting extends beyond political registers into cultural genres, I compare Shakespearean and rap framings of freedom. This case broadens the analysis, showing how prompts mobilize literary tradition on the one hand and popular resistance on the other.

Prompt A (literary canon):

"Describe freedom in the style of Shakespeare."

Output (abridged):

"Freedom is a tempest both noble and cruel, a sovereign flame that binds hearts in rapture yet scorches with jealous fire. It is the noble madness that makes fools of kings and monarchs of fools."

Prompt B (pop culture/rap):

"Describe freedom as if it were a rap lyric."

Output (abridged):
"Freedom's the beat in my chest, no chains on my verse / Rising up strong, turning pain into words, reversing the curse."

The Shakespearean output-site is linked to tradition, literary prestige, and cultural capital, while the rap output-site is linked to youth culture, resistance, and community. In terms of quantification, 90% of the Shakespearean output-site have high metaphorical density, while 95% of the rap output-site focus on rhyme and rhythm (Table 1). Both output-sites index not only verbal performance but also different ideological mappings of freedom as noble madness versus freedom as lived resistance. This is heteroglossia in the sense of Bakhtin (1981): the co-presence of multiple voices and ideological mappings in a language. The LLMs are heteroglossic machines, but only insofar as their training data enregister their heteroglossia. The user is a conductor who orchestrates which voices are actualized and which are effaced.

In the instances of democracy, freedom, and the political instances of migration and nationalism documented in Appendix A, the LLM user is not only a passive recipient of a technologically mediated text. The prompts that users input into the model activate indexical fields that coalesce into recognizable communicative traditions, enabling the user to express stance, identity, culture, and perform cultural knowledge. In this respect, prompts work according to the concept of enregisterment (Agha 2015): linking forms to recognizable registers. For instance, "UN speech" registers diplomacy, "hip hop" registers cultural resistance, "neutral explanation" registers technocracy, and "populist rally" registers nationalist rhetoric. This is in line with the enregisterment and indexicality principles formulated by Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 593–8). Voice recognition is a form of identity recognition.

The notion of dual authorship complicates the concept of authorship in familiar terms. The model is styled according to the prompt, but the user is styled according to their ability to mobilize culturally competent voices. Instructing AI to mimic diplomats, populists, rappers, or Shakespeare styles users according to ideological mappings and tests voice recognizability. As Dong (2024: 36) observes, people nowadays "construct different identities with AI". Prompt engineering is, therefor,e sociolinguistic stylization: non-neutral practices that reproduce established traditions and recognizable ideological mappings.

Having demonstrated how these contrasts emerge, I now turn to situating these patterns within Silverstein's (2003) model of indexical orders, showing how first-order forms scale into second-order stances and third-order ideologies, making explicit the layered dynamics that structure LLM outputs.

5. Indexical fields of LLMs: Multi-order analysis

With respect to the second research question, I analyze how surface forms scale into stances and ideological voices through indexical orders. The concept of "indexical fields" (Eckert 2008) is especially relevant when considering the relationship between prompt forms and output forms within a large language model. An indexical field does not posit a one-to-one mapping of form to meaning, but considers a range of socially-acceptable meanings that can be invoked depending on context.

Silverstein's (2003) account of indexical orders, however, adds a temporal dimension, such that forms sediment over time into first-order (direct association), second-order (stance and persona) and third-order (recognition of ideological style) indexicalities. These concepts apply directly to prompt engineering, suggesting that LLM outputs are to be understood not as technical recombination of text tokens but as ideological performances enabled by the inherited indexical fields of training data and embedded design instruction.

5.1 Nationalism: UN diplomacy vs. populist rally

Political concepts like nationalism and migration reveal how prompts activate layered indexical meanings. I focus here on nationalism, with migration exhibiting closely parallel dynamics (see Table 3; for the full three-order indexical analysis of migration, see Appendix B1; the corresponding statistical tables for nationalism appear in Appendix B2).

Prompt A (formal/diplomatic):
"Write a speech on nationalism as if addressing the United Nations."

Output (abridged):

“Nationalism must be redefined for the 21st century — not as exclusion, but as pride that coexists with cooperation and peace.”

Prompt B (populist/rally):

“Write a speech on nationalism as if addressing a political rally.”

Output (abridged):

“Our nation first, our people first! We are strong because we refuse to bow to outside powers. Together we defend our traditions and future.”

The example of nationalism shows how the indexicality of the questions is layered. At the first level of indexicality, there is a difference in register and vocabulary between the UN speech and the rally. The UN speech uses vocabulary such as “cooperation” and “peace”, whereas the rally uses vocabulary such as “our people first!” repetition, and us versus them oppositions. At the second level of indexicality, these forms of vocabulary index stances. The stance of the UN speech is one that values inclusivity and institution, whereas the stance of the rally is one that indexes urgency, charisma, and exclusion. At the third level of indexicality, these stances are linked to typified ideological genres (diplomatic UN speech versus populist rally). This shows how the accumulation of form at previous levels of indexicality leads to ideological resonance at the current level of indexicality, whereby a series of lexical choices leads to a stance that develops into a genre. The consequences of prompt engineering, therefore, are to resuscitate sedimented indexical fields while showing that the notion of “nationalism” is never a neutral one but is always one that is mediated by communicative traditions that make claims about its ideological legitimacy (cf. Fuchs 2020).

Migration follows a similar pattern. The neutral prompts produce enumerative forms (“economic disparities, labour market needs, political instability”), which index a technocratic position at the second order and consolidate into the form of “expert policy talk” at the third order. The populist prompts, on the other hand, use emotive repetition (“our borders, our jobs, our traditions; weak policies are to blame”), which indexes an alarmist blame-shifting position at the second order and consolidates into the form of “right-wing populism” at the third order. The LLM performs the culturally sedimented communicative practices that produce recognizable discourses of policy expertise (Callander 2008) and populist alarmism (Weyland 2024). The

complete prompt-response pairs and feature-level discussion for the migration example are given in Appendix A1, and the corresponding three-order indexical analysis in Appendix B1.

5.2 Cultural genres: Tradition vs. resistance

Cultural genres have a similarly structured profile, and this profile can now be efficiently compared to the Shakespearean and rap examples introduced in Section 4.2. The analysis moves from stylization to indexical layers, making an explicit argument that was implicit in the previous analysis.

However, the cultural genres also have the same profile as before. At first order, the Shakespearean outputs that were introduced in Section 4.2 use a high level of diction and a high density of metaphors (90%), and the rap outputs use rhyme, rhythm, and urban dialect (95%). At second order, these genres index different positions: Shakespeare indexes nobility and majesty, connecting freedom as codified in eternal cultural heritage; rap indexes resistance and lived experience, reconnecting freedom as embodied and oppositional. At third order, both genres congeal into recognizable ideological genres: Shakespeare indexes the voice of tradition; rap indexes the voice of youth culture and resistance. In this way, what began with a nod to stylistic form itself takes on an ideological character, illustrating Bakhtin's (1981) heteroglossia, in which multiple voices speak and the same referent is refracted through different indexical fields.

In this instance, prompt engineering not only produces stylistic differences but also facilitates the reception of rival traditions of cultural struggle. In order to demonstrate that the differences are not random but follow a pattern, Table 2 presents the contingency measures for first-order forms, second-order stances, and third-order ideologies of the five framing types that underlie the analysis reported in this study. All chi-square tests are statistically significant at the Bonferroni-corrected $\alpha = 0.001$ significance level, and all Cramér's V values are greater than 0.5.

First-order form	**Second-order stance**	**Third-order ideology**	**χ^2 (df=4)**	**Cramér's V**
Enumerative syntax	Technocratic neutrality	Expert policy talk	61.3***	0.66
Emotive repetition	Alarmist blame	Right-wing populism	74.8***	0.73
Elevated diction + metaphor	Cultural prestige	Literary canon	58.9***	0.65

Rhyme / rhythm + vernacular	Embodied resistance	Youth counter-voice	69.2***	0.71
Diplomatic register + hedging	Inclusivity / authority	UN governance discourse	55.4***	0.63

**** $p < 0.001$ (Bonferroni-corrected $\alpha = 0.001$; 20 comparisons). All $V > 0.5$, indicating large effects (Cohen 1988). $n = 70$ per prompt type.*

Table 2: Contingency of first-order forms, second-order stances, and third-order ideologies (χ^2 and Cramér's V)

In order to integrate these analyses, Table 3 below summarizes the contrasts with respect to nationalism, migration, and freedom, and brings together the cases in a comparative framework. By juxtaposing the cases in this way, it becomes clear how the prompt engineering at each point reanimates the communicative traditions, and that the indexical fields are not uniformly structured but rather mark some ideological voices as privileged while others are marginalized.

Concept	**Prompt frame**	**1st-order form**	**2nd-order stance**	**3rd-order ideology**
Nationalism	UN / Diplomatic	Diplomatic vocab, hedging	Inclusivity, institutional authority	UN governance discourse
Nationalism	Populist rally	Affective intensifiers, us–them	Urgency, exclusion, charisma	Right-wing populism
Migration	Neutral expertise	Enumerative syntax	Technocratic neutrality	Expert policy talk
Migration	Populist blame	Emotive repetition, us–them	Alarmist blame	Right-wing populism
Freedom	Shakespeare	Elevated diction, metaphor	Cultural prestige, nobility	Literary canon / tradition
Freedom	Rap / Hip Hop	Rhyme, vernacular, rhythm	Embodied resistance, solidarity	Youth counter-voice

Table 3: Summary of indexical orders across cases of prompt engineering

The multiplicity of indexical fields can also be represented. Figure 2 illustrates the intersection of formal/neutral and populist/performative fields, highlighting two aspects: first, that the same referent (migration, for instance) is revoiced through different indexical fields; second, that despite the semantic overlap (the topic), the ideological stances differ.

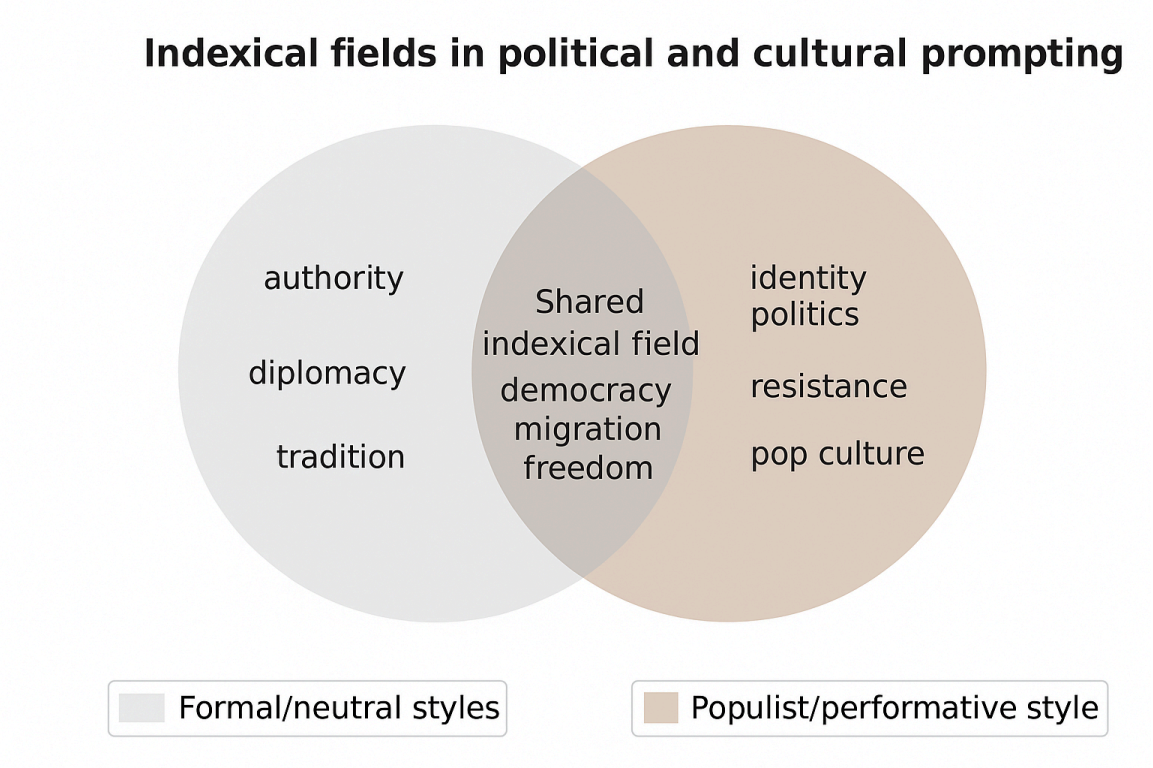


Figure 2: Indexical fields in political and cultural prompting

This means that prompting is a matter of traversing indexical fields, in which users style their prompts to index particular voices in the model. However, the fields are not equally populated. For instance, genres of traditions nearer to the Anglo-European, globalized culture (UN diplomacy, Shakespeare, rap, populism) have a higher density of stylizations. Genres associated with more marginalized traditions (Indigenous oral poetry, African proverbs) tend to be underrepresented, resulting in generic or stereotypical outcomes. This resonates with Dong's (2024) claim that ChatGPT "inherits biases from its training data" (p. 35) and hMensa's (2024) point about languages of Africa's double marginalization in digital spaces. What this produces is a digital enactment of the Linguistic Imperialism Phillipsion (1992) posited as a tendency toward the hegemony of voices framing themselves as universal, located in Western nations.

Yet the concept of indexical field also offers a more complex view of prompting as a sociolinguistically layered practice rather than a technological one. Through first, second and

third order indexicals, LLMs reconstitute subjects like nationalism, migration, and freedom into genres and stances familiar to users. In this way prompting reveals the ideological underpinnings of LLMs. Users style the model into recognizable voices yet those voices are unevenly distributed across time, space and power relations that echo coloniality and the geographies of language dominance around the globe.

6. Toward a decolonial prompting practice: Reindexing the interaction

The output of the LLM is ideologically structured, not neutral. The genres that are most fully represented in their training corpus, including UN diplomacy, Shakespeare, hip-hop, and right-wing populism, index the preponderant importance of Anglo-American and Western corpora. The critical question is: if the indexical fields that condition the output of the LLM are colonially structured, what does it mean to prompt against that structure? This question is explored in Section 6, where the coloniality of prompt engineering norms is analyzed and three decolonial approaches, including proverb prompts, postcolonial reframings, and multilingual hybrids, are evaluated under the rubric of "reindexing".

6.1 The coloniality of "best practice"

The guidelines for prompt engineering always emphasize the importance of clarity, directness, explicitness, and step-by-step organization. These are not neutral values but the communicative habits of Anglo-American educational and commercial discourse. Users whose traditions emphasize indirection, narrative, and proverbial logic find these guidelines to be structurally hostile, not because the guidelines are poorly designed, but because "clarity" is itself a culturally specific value. This coloniality is enacted on two levels at once: the training data, which is predominantly English-speaking and Western-sourced, and the user guidelines and defaults of the platform, which encode and enforce the same values. This creates what de Sousa Santos (2015) calls "epistemicide": the erasure of alternative epistemologies not through violence but through their naturalization as the universal standard. The analogy to colonial

grammaticalization, in which European grammarians codified indigenous grammars according to Latin-derived models, is intentional: in both cases, a particular language ideology is naturalized as a neutral technical standard. Three such strategies were systematically explored in this study: proverb-based prompts, postcolonial reframings, and multilingual hybrids. Each represents a distinct mode of challenging the default indexical fields of LLMs, and each produces characteristic outputs and characteristic constraints. The The full prompt–response pairs for all three strategies, together with feature-level commentary, are presented in Appendix D.

6.2 Three decolonial strategies

Users are not merely passive recipients of this structure. The same indexical logic that indexes default LLM responses also provides a lever for decolonial reindexing – the strategic activation of alternative epistemological frames via prompted stylization.

Proverb-based prompts activate the logic of oral and communal knowledge traditions. A prompt asking the model to describe migration in West African proverbs moves the model from the enumerative, nominalized syntax of technocratic policy discourse to analogical, relationally focused reasoning. At the first order, these prompts do indeed activate measurable shifts: metaphorical density increases, passive voice yields to more direct formulations. At higher orders, responses are mixed. Where there is enough training data, the model can approximate a genre of oral philosophical discourse. Where this is not the case, the model defaults to generic paraphrase or pseudo-African pastiche, which are surface features without semiotic depth. This is a theoretically interesting finding: it indicates that decolonial reindexing is possible but structurally constrained by the density of the relevant indexical fields in the training data.

Postcolonial reframings operate at the third order of indexicality, not the first. To give the model the voice of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, or to explicitly state colonialism as a primary causal frame, is not to aim for a register shift but for a complete reorientation of the interpretive frame. These prompts do have strong third-order effects: they produce outputs centered on colonial critique, epistemic justice, and African agency, genres that are almost entirely absent from the default LLM repertoires. But they are also susceptible to ideological domestication: the model is prone to expressing postcolonial critique in academic register, reducing the politically urgent and

stylistically distinctive voice of the source tradition to a well-organized expository essay. The third-order ideology changes; the first- and second-order forms remain fixed in the model's defaults.

Multilingual hybrid prompts work on both indexical orders at the same time. Code-switching between Swahili and English, or between Hausa and French, involves what Rampton (1995) refers to as "crossing", which involves the deliberate crossing of linguistic boundaries to disrupt the default monolingual habitus of the model. On the first order, these hybrid prompts will code-switch in the output. On the second order, the discursive position will be one of translingualism. On the third order, there will be a hybrid genre that lacks a fixed name in mainstream classifications, something akin to the "pluriversal" epistemology Mignolo (2021) describes as a decolonial horizon. The empirical outputs, presented in Appendix D (Section D3), illustrate both the potential and the instability of this strategy: the model can sustain multilingual reindexing when given a clear generic frame, but it tends toward reversion to English-dominant outputs as prompts become more complex, reflecting the structural dominance of English in its training data (Kang & Hirschi 2025).

6.3 The limits of reindexing

Each of the three approaches has a common structural issue: they are all operating within the indexical fields they aim to subvert. When a genre has limited representation in the training corpus, the model cannot create a real indexical field for it. It creates "indexical pastiche" instead, which is a superficial representation of the target genre but lacks a cohesive semiotic foundation. This is not just a technical problem but a theoretical observation: the coloniality of the LLM training data is a structural aspect of how indexical fields are constructed from data aggregation, not a bug in design.

There is also a danger of essentialism. When "African wisdom" or "multilingual hybridity" is posited as a counterpoint to Western norms, it can have the unintended consequence of reducing these traditions to a monolithic trope, rather than being centered in their own right. When the model is asked to "write like Ngũgĩ", it can reduce a rich literary tradition to a style category, which is the same reductionist impulse that colonial administrators used on indigenous languages. Decolonial prompting, therefore, must be seen not as the retrieval of the authentic

voice of the non-West but as the work of bringing forth the coloniality of LLM defaults and providing alternative orientations, even if only partially.

More subtle methods of prompting, such as gradient prompting, multi-turn dialogue, and hybrid identity prompting, have yet to be systematically evaluated. There is no prompting method that can escape the colonial infrastructure it inhabits. As Mignolo (2011b) suggests, decolonial prompting is better understood as a horizon, a process of constantly leaning the interaction towards epistemic plurality in the knowledge that the infrastructure resists. The evidence from this study is that this leaning is possible, measurable, and theoretically significant, inasmuch as it alters indexical fields, even if it cannot erase them.

7. Concluding discussion

This article has argued that prompt engineering is a sociolinguistic practice, not a neutral technical capacity, and not only in its micro-level effects of stylization and stance, but also in its macro-level implications of ideology, coloniality, and inequality. By reading prompt engineering, sociolinguistically, we have seen how prompts can be understood as a process of styling and stance-taking, we have analyzed LLM responses through the concept of indexical fields, and we have seen how the guidelines that users follow reproduce the coloniality of communication. Yet, we have also seen, with the due reservations about the limitations of such a reading, how users might engage in a decolonial prompting practice that bends the tool toward epistemic plurality through proverbs, multilingual hybridity, and postcolonial reframings.

Prompt engineering, then, is a particular instance of what Coupland (2007) and Bucholtz & Hall (2005) theorized about human interaction more generally: that identities are emergent, positional, and indexical; that they are accomplished through stylistic means that draw on shared resources; and that identity is not fixed but constantly reconstituted through each interaction. When a user asks an LLM to act as if it were a United Nations diplomat, a populist rally speaker or a hip-hop artist, this is not just a neutral request for a technical assistance; it is an act of styling that, in its digital-human interface, takes the sociolinguistic process of standing and voice to new levels of complexity. It extends the idea of style-shifting and stylization (which underpins a good

part of sociolinguistics) that has long been at the heart of the discipline's thinking about human identity in real-time to the hyper-stylized world of digital mediation.

As Sections 4 and 5 demonstrated, prompts bring up multi-order indexicalities: first-order forms that give rise to second-order stances; these stances, in turn, have third-order ideological reactions to them. The fact that users can consistently elicit LLM responses that take on the form of United Nations diplomacy, populist rhetoric, Shakespearean language or hip-hop style shows that LLMs mimic sedimented cultural formations. What is innovative here is that these formations are algorithmic: the "interlocutor" or "speaker" is not a human being but a model that has been trained in a massive data set. Yet, the sociolinguistic processes involved are unmistakably familiar; we may therefore claim that our conceptual frameworks have currency despite changes in the world around us.

At the same time, the analysis has shown us how uneven these indexical fields can be. Genres connected with globally hegemonic forms of discourse, be it Anglo-American diplomacy, Shakespeare or rap, or political populism, are richly represented in the LLMs' responses. The same does not apply to genres drawn from marginalized forms of life. This is consistent with what Phillipson (1992) called linguistic imperialism; we might call it genre imperialism in its digital guise.

Finally, going back to the questions raised in the Introduction: Do LLMs show sociolinguistic competence? If so, what does their competence look like? The answer to these questions is not easy to pin down. On the one hand, LLMs demonstrate sociolinguistic competence in that they can repetitively elicit sociolinguistically differentiated registers, stances and ideological reactions to users' prompting requests in patterns that can be measured with relative accuracy. On the other hand, this competence is starkly uneven; it is limited by the training data hierarchies that condition these models. The model does not demonstrate competence in an active, agential way comparable to that of humans (cf. Duncan 2024; Nguyen 2025); it reenacts competence in others that is conditioned on the coloniality of its training data.

In light of the above, this article offers three contributions. At the theoretical level, it extends the sociolinguistic concepts of "stylization", "indexicality", and "identity" into the analysis of human–AI interaction, demonstrating that these frameworks remain vital for understanding new communicative practices. At the empirical level, through three illustrative cases, democracy, migration, and freedom, it shows how prompts activate indexical fields that

reproduce divergent stances and voices, mapped through tables and quantitative analysis. At the critical level, it highlights the coloniality of prompting and proposes, while honestly acknowledging their limits, strategies for decolonial practices, situating AI within longer histories of linguistic imperialism and epistemic inequality.

For future work, I would like to propose two areas of investigation. The first is ethnographic research on prompting practices, with a focus on the ways in which students, activists, or professionals in different sociolinguistic settings use prompting. In addition, research on non-English prompting practices is necessary, to better understand the ways in which underrepresented languages and genres are treated when used in LLM interaction.

Finally, the study of prompt engineering as a whole reminds us that the field of sociolinguistics must move beyond the study of human interaction. In the "human-machine era" (Kelly-Holmes 2024), our work is to examine how machines repeat our discourses, how users personify machines, and how ideologies of language are algorithmic. Prompting is a contact site where questions of identity, style, and inequality are constantly being negotiated. As in previous eras of sociolinguistic research, from Labov's work on class and style (2006), to Rampton's work on crossing (1995), to Coupland's work on stylization (2007), the task is to recognize the political in the ordinary. Prompting is typing, but it is also indexical work in a colonial field. By making this visible, sociolinguistics contributes not only to understanding but to reimagining: pointing toward practices that resist epistemicide and open spaces for plural voices to speak, even through machines.

Endnote

1. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1938–2024) was a Kenyan author and academic widely regarded as a central figure in modern African literature. A strong advocate for literature written in native African languages, his novels are written in both English and Gikuyu, and his writing style is considered among the most distinctive in the African literary tradition (Cook & Okenimkpe 1997).

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Appendices

Link to Appendices A, B, C and D:
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