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Neoliberalism, native-speakerism and the displacement of international students' languages and cultures

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ABSTRACT

With the number of international students growing rapidly within (international) higher education, more attention has been focused on the need to consider international students' experiences, particularly those from the global south, from more critical, ethical and qualitative perspectives. This paper examines how the lived experiences of three multilingual international students at a Canadian university were impacted by ideologies stemming from neoliberalism and native-speakerism within higher education. Through in-depth interviews with each student, the findings point to complex ways in which such ideologies gradually worked to displace the students' languages and cultures through processes of othering and inferiorisation. More specifically, the combined sociocultural and material impact of neoliberalism and native-speakerism resulted in the students appearing to reject participation in and affiliation to their cultural groups, repositioning their languages as deterrents to the development of their English language proficiencies, and adopting behaviours that could linguistically and socially approximate them to an imagined native speaker of 'standard' English, including attending speech therapy. The conclusion critically discusses the importance of reform in higher education with respect to language, diversity and social justice.

Introduction

The transnational movement of students characterises one of the most prominent features of present-day higher education. Yet, the seminal purpose of educational travel, which has included international cooperation, crosscultural knowledge and intellectual development (de Wit and Merkx 2012; Vestal 1994), has been under threat by neoliberal frameworks of internationalisation that serve to benefit the institution and the state at the cost of the experiences of international students, particularly those from the global south (de Wit 2020), which may be understood both as a place and 'a condition' (of dispossession) (Shome 2019, 203) and 'a status of invisibility' (R'boul 2022, 1). The impact of neoliberalism on higher education – and by extension, on international students' experiences – continues to be explored extensively. Yet, a more systematic approach in which neoliberalism is examined in conjunction with language ideologies in higher education (Preese 2019), such as native-speakerism or monolingualism, contributes to a richer understanding of how multilingual international students are affected, as whole persons, by intersecting ideologies (Nguyen 2021).

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This investigation focuses on the combined impact of neoliberal and native-speakerist ideologies on the academic, linguistic and cultural experiences of three multilingual international students at a Canadian University. Through a case study based on interviews, this paper is guided by the following question: How may the impact of ideologies of neoliberalism and native-speakerism manifest in the lived experiences of the three multilingual international students? This paper begins with a discussion of the ideologies of native-speakerism and neoliberalism and subsequently presents the methodological construction of the study. This paper contributes to recent calls for a more qualitative and critical understanding of multilingual international students' experiences (de Wit 2020) and for social justice in higher education that can advance equity, diversity and inclusion.

The ideology of native-speakerism

Holliday (2015) maintained that native-speakerism is an ideology: one that positions 'native speakers' as the ideal speakers of English without taking any individual variance into account (12). As such, this imagined 'ideal' is one which all speakers of English as an LX are expected to embody. Thus, the construct of the 'native speaker' exists in an uneven juxtaposition with that of the speaker of English as an LX, who has been traditionally termed the 'nonnative speaker'. In this dichotomy, the 'nonnative speaker' is positioned as inferior and therefore subject to various forms of discrimination, both subtle and salient (Gonzalez 2016; Kim 2011). Dewaele (2018) proposed that the label LX is more appropriate than 'nonnative speaker' because 'it has no connotation of inferiority' (238). Likewise, the label L1, rather than 'native speaker', is intended to mean the first language acquired without implying 'a very high level of proficiency' (238), which has been generally associated with the term 'native speaker'.

Yet, the 'native speaker' of English as a construct cannot survive without its cultural underpinnings that have been built on and supportive of patterns of othering and marginalisation (Pennycook and Candlin 2017). Some of these cultural underpinnings of modernity have been confected largely through colonialism and maintained through coloniality. As such, racism cannot be excluded from the sociolinguistic construction of the speaker of English as an L1. Maldonado-Torres (2010) defined coloniality as the 'long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration' (97). In this vein, the L1 speaker of English has been inextricably associated with white speakers of an Anglo-Saxon background (Ramjattan 2019; Ruecker and Ives 2015). How other (ed) L1 speakers are viewed, therefore, has as much to do with language as it has with race, in addition to issues of age, gender, sex and class (Kubota and Lin 2006).

Learners of English as an LX may act agentively to confront marginalisation rooted in nonnative-speakerism. As Choi (2016) put it, learners' agency may manifest in 'critically evaluating the essentialist discourse of native-speakerism in order to reconstitute what counts as authentic and valuable language competence' (73). However, others may internalise the 'native speaker' ideal and consequently engage in a perpetual quest for legitimacy. Such an engagement can entail modifying one's accent or separating oneself from their cultural communities (Baratta 2021; Tavares 2021a), among other behavioural and linguistic changes that are tied to one's sense of identity. Because 'standard' accents are considered more prestigious and thus afford their speakers social mobility (Creese 2010), those who speak accented or racialised Englishes may encounter discrimination and marginalisation (Alshammari 2021; Kubota and Fujimoto 2013).

'Standard' accents are, however, based on standard language ideologies that neglect important aspects of language use. Tollefson (2007) discussed standard language ideologies in the context of English by elaborating on three points. First, 'standard English' is a construct that does not take into account the variation in the speech of English speakers around the world, a fact which has been 'largely ignored within ELT [English language teaching] theory and practice' (26). Second, the 'standard' accent of English has been traditionally viewed as socially and politically neutral. However, it reflects the speech of the upper-middle class. Lastly, the idealisation of a standard

accent is strongly maintained in educational settings, where students are rewarded for speaking 'standard' English.

The ideology of native-speakerism goes hand-in-hand with the ideology of monolingualism. Krulatz, Steen-Olsen, and Torgersen (2018) explained that monolingualism operates under the assumption that 'each language is associated with one community and geographical location, that languages are pure and separated from each other, and that one's identity is associated with a single language' (554). Since each language is considered pure and distinct, free from 'contamination' from interlinguistic contact, monolingualism fabricates the L1 speaker as the best representative speaker of the language. However, such an approach to how languages exist is easily dissolved when the lived experiences of bilingual and multilinguals are recognised with the legitimacy with which they have not always been seen (García 2009). Even the linguistic practices of 'purely monolinguals' cannot be considered monolingual as such if we consider that these speakers are apt in employing different registers and discourses in a variety of social and interactional contexts (Blackledge and Creese 2014; Canagarajah and Liyanage 2012).

Neoliberalism in language and higher education

Neoliberalism emerged as an economic paradigm in the mid-nineteenth century. At its inception, neoliberalism focused on 'free trade and small government' (Wrenn 2014, 6). Since then, it has evolved in complex ways that have allowed it to permeate into many, if not all, dimensions of modern life. It is for its multiple conceptual applications and material implications that Connell and Dados (2014) rejected neoliberalism as 'a single doctrine' tied only to economics (118). Neoliberalism has fundamentally shifted the role played by the state: from one initially characterised by the commitment to protecting citizens against the excesses of the market to one in which the market becomes the object of protection by the state (Wrenn 2014). Some have argued that neoliberalism, as the dominant ideology in society, has led to increased global anxiety, insecurity and inequality (Harvey 2007; Wilson 2017).

Considering such developments, it cannot be seen as any surprise that neoliberalism has also altered the role and purpose of higher education. Nearly two decades ago, institutions of higher education had already been criticised for being 'now run as corporations' (Olssen and Peters 2005, 327). In this neoliberal model of education, students are customers and institutions are sellers of education that is continuously quantified off and through the work of faculty and staff. Knowledge acquired through higher education is now 'sold' primarily to help promote the economic success of the individual in the workplace rather than one's intellectual development (Zepke 2018). As a consequence of the emphasis placed on national progress, traditional higher education has been slowly replaced with more market-oriented education that can prioritise economic return.

As products of neoliberalism, students are expected to both identify and acquire the constantly changing skills valued by the economy. Because the neoliberal economy remains in a perpetual state of instability and uncertainty, the 'good' student is one who is now willing to be adaptable and flexible in their self-(re)construction and educational journey (Patrick 2013). This includes, for instance, accumulating as many credentials as possible in order to remain marketable. Yet, considering how unstable the market is, students are positioned in competition with one another in a style of education that is largely individualistic rather than collaborative. Individualism poses significant consequences to the psychological well-being of students since working with and caring for others clash with the sense of independence that neoliberalism superficially produces (Wrenn 2014). In other words, the more alienated the student feels, the more they experience a sense of power (Tavares 2022).

Achieving 'near-native' proficiency is also tied to self-marketability. Heller (2010) spoke of the commodification of English by identifying its role 'as a resource to be produced, controlled, distributed, valued and constrained' (para. 30). In a similar vein, Preese (2019) explained that neoliberalism repositions multilingualism and language learning as resources by focusing on its instrumental

value for the economy. Although many multilingual international students work to develop 'near-native' proficiency in English to succeed post-graduation, reality paints a challenging picture for the students. The commodification of English creates a false impression that all multilingual international students can now not only access English language education, but also succeed academically and socially after sufficient proficiency is developed (Plumb 2020). This is because the neoliberal approach to education fuels ideologies of native-speakerism and vice-versa since the 'non-accented' (or 'standard') forms of English are still privileged in the workplace.

Research design

Context and participants

Participant experiences are considered in the context of Leaf University, the pseudonym for the university in focus in this study, located in Canada. Leaf University is recognised for its multicultural and multilingual environment. According to its website, the number of undergraduate and graduate students combined, in the year of 2019, exceeded 40,000. Based on content published by the university, 'multiculturalism' may be understood to refer primarily to the visibility of cultural diversity on campus. For instance, the institution held several events throughout the year, most of which were student-focused, aimed at increasing the visibility and representation of cultural and ethnic groups that are minoritised in the broader Canadian society. In such events, cultural diversity markers of food, art, sport and fashion are typically prioritised, as was the case in Leif University's 'Multicultural Week'.[1] Kubota (2015) has critiqued neoliberal forms of multiculturalism that embrace 'cultural difference actively and yet superficially' for they do not move beyond celebration and representation to actually address 'racial and other forms of inequalities that exist in our social system' (9). In this sense, a hierarchy of cultures (and languages) is maintained that privileges dominant groups and, by extension, impacts international students who speak English as an LX.

As a case study, this study focuses on developing a situated and in-depth understanding of lived experience. Following approval by the ethics board of Leaf University, an email was shared with an international student group at the university. Four students responded to the invitation on the basis of personal interest in the aims and scope of the project. However, in this study, the experiences of three students are examined for one student was located on a smaller and bilingual campus of Leaf University where most of her classes were in French. The remaining three students studied at Leaf's main campus and studied completely in English. Working with three students also afforded the researcher the opportunity to explore experience from a qualitative point of view in which both researcher and participant could discuss and reflect on the meanings and perceptions of the experiences considered in more depth.

The pseudonyms for the participants are Carla, Lee and Carlos. Carla was a graduate student from Brazil in her first year of the Master of Business Administration (MBA) program; Lee was an undergraduate student from Macau majoring in linguistics, in his last year following his transfer from a college in the United States; and Carlos was an undergraduate student from Colombia majoring in criminology, also in his last year. Carla and Lee had been students at Leaf University for about five months at the time of the study, while Carlos, as a full-degree undergraduate student, had been a student at Leaf University for over 3 years. In comparison to Carla and Lee, Carlos had a more expansive experiential repertoire as a student at the university. Consequently, Carlos' accounts might offer more insight into the topics discussed.

As a kind of social interaction, interviews were sites in which meanings and understandings of lived experience were revisited, co- and re-constructed. The findings thus reflect the participants' 'accounts of social phenomena' (Talmy 2010, 139) which they experienced in the past and re-created in interaction with the researcher at the time of interviewing, which takes into account the shifting nature of meaning-making based on continued life experience and accumulated knowledge. A perspective of interviewing as a social practice also means that the social context in

which the interaction took place influences how and what participants choose to say. In the context of this study, the students spoke from multiple social positions – such as interviewee, student and/or transnational – in which varied understandings intersected to make sense of lived experience. These social positions change according to the time, place and people involved in the interaction.

Additionally, the accounts were co- and re-constructed in interactions where the researcher held more power. Being able to choose what, how and when to ask questions illustrates one 'location' of power in which the researcher's interests are prioritised (Anyan 2013). Indeed, as an attempt to work with and through the power differential, the aims, intentions and concerns of the research were explained to participants prior to the beginning of the first interview and elaborated upon in subsequent interviews as new accounts emerged. Moreover, a summary of each interview was discussed with the participants in each following meeting in which the researcher's understandings and interpretations of the accounts were presented to the participants for clarification and confirmation. Such attempts were implemented in order to acknowledge and manage some of the power dynamics embedded in the interactions.

Data collection and analysis

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with each student during the winter of 2019, lasting about 60 minutes each. The interviews were employed to comprehensively investigate students' lived experiences in relation to language, culture, academics, work experience and social life, including family and friendship development. To make sense of the transcribed interview content, a discourse analytic approach was used. This approach is grounded in the 'recognition of the variability in and the context dependence of participants' discourse' (Baxter 2010, 240). From such a perspective, language use varies depending on the interlocutor, context and purpose, and in doing so, it produces different accounts of reality (Baxter 2010). Rather than analysing units of language, such as words, phrases and sentences discretely, a discourse analytic approach considers these to both reflect and shape social experiences.

Considering the situatedness of language (use), local discourses are thus intertwined in broader discourses within societies and institutions. An attention to participants' discourse reveals the ways in which language can replicate or challenge social and institutional narratives (Gee 2004). In this study, such narratives are related to the influence, in both subtle and salient ways, of discourses rooted in neoliberalism and native-speakerism in higher education. Excerpts from the interviews are presented to illustrate contextualised accounts of the students' experiences, which were organised together into broad categories to develop a sense of collective meanings. Considering the objective of the study, its focus on situated discourse, and the number of participants, the findings are not meant to be generalisable. Nevertheless, they may still align with concerns that continue to be identified in the research literature.

Findings

This section presents the findings under four major categories. These categories illustrate different and complex ways in which ideologies of native-speakerism and neoliberalism, along with macro monolingual and monocultural beliefs, impacted the students' experiences in connection with their languages and cultures. The boundaries between the four categories are not fixed. Therefore, the impact of these ideologies on the students' experiences may be located in more than one category, at times even simultaneously.

Neoliberalism and the othering of international students' cultures

The experience of studying at Leaf University was naturally a proxy for the international students to become gradually more familiar with Canadian society. Since all three students wished to work and

live in Canada following graduation, they believed it was important for them to fit in socially and professionally. Following her move to Canada, part of Carla's adjustment into the new environment entailed inserting herself into groups and events organised by Brazilians who also lived in the new Canadian city. Connecting with fellow Brazilians afforded her the chance to familiarise herself with Canadian society through advice and emotional support in a mutual language and culture, thus learning from those who had previously gone through the same process. As a result, Carla settlement into Canada unfolded in continuous and increasing social, cultural and linguistic proximity to other Brazilians. For instance, Carla undertook part-time work at a Portuguese-language company and lived with other Brazilians in a shared home for some time. In the context of Leaf University, however, Carla approached association to one's own cultural groups differently. She valued maintaining some *distance* from interactions and behaviours that could signal her affiliation to Portuguese and Brazil:

> There's one or two Brazilians in my current [MBA] program, but we don't really talk much, *which is good* because what I wanted actually happened: I didn't have to automatically get into a group simply because of a mutual culture or language—this didn't happen. Which I think is good because it forces me to *diversify*. (Carla)

In Carla's response above, 'diversifying' oneself included self-exclusion from interaction with fellow Brazilians within her courses and program. 'Diversifying' the self manifested in not 'talking much' with other Brazilians, which is reflective of a neoliberal discourse on multiculturalism in which cultural differences are acknowledged, but whose value is still inferior to the dominant culture and therefore not worth investing in. Carla was one of many international students in the MBA cohort; however, she embraced the Anglophone ethic, which was favoured institutionally. Banks (1993) argued that the othering of non-dominant cultures in educational contexts reinforces the 'false sense of superiority' of the dominant culture and denies students 'the opportunity to benefit from the knowledge, perspectives and frames of reference that can be gained from studying and experiencing other cultures and groups' (195). In Carla's experience, such an issue impacted her relationship with her own cultural group.

Carlos attended an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program in another Canadian city prior to beginning his studies at Leaf University. During that time, in which he was still a recent newcomer to Canada, he sustained his cultural association to Colombia by attending cultural events of and socialising with peers from Spanish-speaking countries. However, accumulated time in Canada and at the EAP school influenced his perspectives on the role of participation in cultural experiences related to his cultural background.

> When I was Sandytown [pseudonym], we [EAP students] used to go to, like, a Hispanic, a Spanish club at night. And I had Spanish[-speaking] friends as well, from Colombia, but when I got to Leaf, I was never like, "oh I need to find Spanish friends." I know there is OLAS—"The Organisation of Latin American Students" [pseudonym]—but I never felt like I needed to go to that. But I think it's interesting: there's a lot of [Spanish-speaking] students, they usually get engaged into OLAS in first year. So, if they just came to Canada, and they want to find a group quickly, they go to it. But I never felt that way, *probably because I was here before starting school*. (Carlos)

Carlos' discourse illustrates one mechanism by which neoliberalism inferiorises non-dominant cultures. The more he lived in Canada, the less he identified with his own culture. While he recognised the role played by OLAS at Leaf University, it was more socially advantageous for him to display less association to this cultural group. His new perspective on cultural association was that it played an entirely instrumental role in helping incoming students acclimatise until they could operate according to the dominant Anglophone ethic of Leaf University. As a result, Carlos minimised the value of taking part in OLAS for himself.

A considerable part of Carla's process of settling in Canada relied on her continued association to Brazilian networks. Initially, such close association was important for the support it offered her as she individually navigated the new sociocultural environment. Over time, however, she considered

that being in such close contact with other Brazilians and speaking Portuguese constrained her social progress. Indeed, one reason behind her choice to take the MBA program was to detach herself from her existing cultural associations and step into a more 'Canadian' one.

> My roommates were Brazilian, so after work I would find myself speaking Portuguese again. I went to Brazilian events with friends on the weekends. My boyfriend was Brazilian. I basically lived in a little Brazil here. Until I said: *this can't go on anymore.* (Carla)

The fact that cultures do not only coexist, but also intermix, was obscured in Carla's understanding of the 'place' held by Brazilian culture within her multicultural repertoire. Kubota (2016) explained that frameworks of multiculturalism driven by neoliberal directives serve to reproduce monolingual and monocultural ideologies by delegitimising the importance and potential of true diversity. As Carla wished to grow further professionally and socially, she believed that she had to choose one culture or/over the other. In this sense, maintaining a cultural association to her initial networks was reframed as disadvantageous, which she consequently addressed by dismissing them.

While living in Brazil, Carla practiced *spiritism*.[2] This spiritual doctrine is often practiced alongside Catholicism in Brazil. Carla used to regularly attend study meetings at spiritist centres in the country, and upon moving to Canada, she maintained this practice by attending sessions at a centre run by Brazilians in her new Canadian city. The cultural practice held a multifaceted role for her, including the opportunity for her to reflect on herself and connect with fellow Brazilians who also followed the doctrine. However, the experience of being a graduate student at Leaf University took priority in her life, and as discussed previously, she could not see both experiences coexisting:

> The MBA has become my life priority and so I have put the spiritual experience aside. I'm a spiritist and I'm used to going to the meetings on Sundays. And yes, this helps me, it feels like it puts me—because I am totally out of balance, for sure, because the MBA being the priority puts everything else aside, but it's a choice I made myself. But because I know the program goes quickly, I prefer to go on like this [without regularly attending the meetings]. But I think the spiritual experience gives me a chance to stop and think about myself, think about mental health, and think about what the MBA is doing to me, like the impact it's having. It's a time for me to reflect, because at the end of the day, the student Carla is nothing if the whole Carla is not complete from all her other parts. (Carla)

Carla demonstrates an awareness of the impact that being a student in Canada has had upon her sense of identity and overall quality of life. Yet, she still chose to remain 'totally out of balance' because her current educational experience is tied to potentially a "good" future in terms of career prospect. The othering of a cultural practice that has been important for her is justified on the basis of the envisioned social, professional and economic return from completing the MBA program.

The English language displacing international students' languages

The students explained that they experienced a sense of confidence and comfort as a result of increased proficiency in English developed over time. However, such linguistic progress influenced the students' views and attitudes toward their own languages. Although similar to the ideological process identified in the previous section, in here it was language, rather than culture, which English displaced in varied ways. For Carla, the impact was considerable in that Portuguese went from being the primary language, used in multiple interactional contexts, such as with colleagues and friends, to being confined to the home, despite being, as she states below, the language of 'her culture'.

> Portuguese has a connection to my culture. My boyfriend is also Brazilian—we met here, but he's also Brazilian. So, at home, it ends up being all Portuguese. But everything *outside* the home is in English, like running errands, going to school, all in English. (Carla)

Carla appears to position English and Portuguese as two distinct codes for different purposes in life. Yet, English is supposedly only not used at home because of her boyfriend, who also speaks Portuguese. Her response also suggests that her view of the 'place' of international students' languages

(and cultures) is the one of the home. In a similar vein, English displaced Lee's Chinese because the two languages coexisting would supposedly hinder his learning of English. He explained:

> Here in Canada, it's just a lot of Chinese students. Outside of class, they use Chinese, too. *It would just stop me from learning English*. I would just say people like to do that [to use Chinese] because they're not very confident in their English. (Lee)

As Slaughter and Cross (2021) discussed, perceptions anchored in a monolingual mindset refuse to see the interlinguistic synergy in the process of learning an LX. In the context of learning English, monolingual attitudes also perpetuate the notion that for the acquisition of English to occur successfully, learning has to take place in English only, hence Lee's belief that using Chinese would 'stop' him from further developing his English. Following several weeks of study at the university, over which he could develop some familiarisation with the sociocultural context of Leaf University, Lee's position was also that the choice of using the L1 by his Chinese peers was a sign of low confidence in English, rather than an intentional choice made by the individual in connection with one's cultural identity. In this sense, he preferred to use English to signal confidence in his use of English in public spaces.

However, in another instance, Lee contradicts himself when describing his perceptions of his peers' proficiency in English relative to the use of Chinese. The prominence of the Chinese community in the new Canadian city was such that he believed his peers had not come to experience the new Canadian city differently from what they had been accustomed to when it comes to language use and cultural practices:

> And the whole Asian vibe here is so enormous. So, he [a student from China] feel very comfortable, he doesn't have to change or do anything about that [that = put in effort to learn English]. I mean, in the west coast [= Los Angeles], there's not many Chinese so you just kind of go out, it's totally different. I mean here is the biggest Chinese environment that I've ever seen outside of China. 'Cause it's SO many Chinese students at Chinese restaurants. Most of the Chinese student, I have been kind of asking a lot, the answer is all the same, they just, when they came to [Canadian city], they think it's just another city in China. You don't even need to speak English, but still, a lot of their English is perfect, they speak English perfectly. The Chinese students here speak better English than the ones I've seen in LA, they spoke English very poorly there. But still, here, they think that they just went to another city in China or … they just moved places. (Lee)

At first, Lee explains that being in the absence of fellow Chinese students is positive for learning English. He contextualises such a perspective by highlighting his experiences in Los Angeles, the place he lived before moving to Canada, where it was 'totally different' in that he had to speak English when he went out. On other occasions, he explained he experienced the most linguistic development in Los Angeles, precisely because he had little to no contact with fellow Chinese students. The contradiction emerges when he assesses the proficiency of his Chinese peers in the Canadian city, who speak English 'perfectly'. He critiques his peers' continuous use of Chinese and adherence to Chinese cultural customs, such as in eating out at Chinese restaurants or staying in groups. A fallacy of monolingualism appears in his own discourse, in which the Chinese students who used both Chinese and English in the new Canadian city spoke English more proficiently than those who lived in LA, where supposedly they were more immersed in English.

Carlos' perspective on the role of Spanish in his life was also influenced by his progressive use of English and involvement in events geared toward international students at Leaf. He described that speaking and being immersed in the English language were related to feeling and enacting his true self, something he could no longer experience from speaking Spanish:

> English is like, I feel like English is my life. When I'm in English, I feel like *it's my real life*. And when I'm speaking Spanish, it's just like, *a side*. Like, my family and vacation and that's it. But like, my friends, like, everything to me now is English. So, I don't even think about making Spanish friends anymore or trying to find Spanish [student] clubs. (Carlos)

For him, English held an international, cosmopolitan meaning to the extent that it reduced Spanish to occupying just 'a side' of his multilingual identity. Any experience connected to speaking Spanish

that Carlos had control over individually was displaced by English, such as in making new Spanish-speaking friends or attending social events in which the language was used. For that which he could not reinvent through English – i.e. relationships and travels with family – the Spanish language remained. Similarly to Carla and Lee, Carlos could not see the two languages coexisting. Additionally, the role played by English stands for what Preese (2019) called 'elite bilingual identities' in higher education, in which monolingualism subtracts international students' 'less prestigious' languages and, through English, gives students access to 'elite' experiences.

Native-Speakerism as the all-encompassing ideal

This section illustrates the ways in which ideologies of native-speakerism manifested specifically in Carla's experiences. In the beginning of her English language learning journey, Carla had studied the language infrequently and with little personal interest. In Brazil, students are accepted into university depending on the outcomes of an entrance test called *vestibular*. Since the English language was one of the subjects assessed in the test, Carla decided to study English specifically for that purpose. She explained that she never really 'liked' English because she could not connect with it personally and emotionally:

> I studied English on a part-time basis. I went to a private language school twice a week, so I did study it, but to be honest, I never liked English. I studied it because I had to—I had to pass the *vestibular* exam … the English language never attracted me; it has no charm whatsoever. Like, it's so simplistic in ways of expressing yourself. It's an objective language, which is easier to learn, but not something I like personally. (Carla)

Since Carla's move to Canada, but particularly since the start of the MBA program, her perspective on the meaning of studying English has changed significantly. In her response below, she draws on knowledge gained through one of her business courses to redefine the purpose of speaking English in her life.

> Now English is completely important, basically the number-one factor for my future. Because we study in Business that everyone has a bias, a prejudice, that even though you may not see it, it exists within you. Like you see someone and think "she's going to be brilliant" but then she starts *speaking* and so she won't be that brilliant anymore because *she doesn't have a well-developed level in the language, she's not that fluent*, you know? So, the English language is totally important for my life now. (Carla)

Carla explained that her future now depends solely on having a 'well-developed' level in the English language. She highlights that everyone has a bias, but rather than confronting her own bias related to native-speakerism, she takes it upon herself to improve her English so that others' biases in relation to language do not affect her professional future. In here, the ideology of native-speakerism emerges as the route to success for the individual in all domains of lived experience: if one speaks English well, they will be 'brilliant'. The ideology is also present in the conflation of achievement of success or success itself with being or speaking 'fluent' English. Creese (2010) pointed out that the 'standard' accent of speakers of English as an L1 in Canada marks who has access to positions of power and privilege, particularly in the professional domain. This ideology seems to have been perpetuated, rather than challenged, in Carla's learning experiences within the MBA program.

Prior to joining Leaf University, Carla had taken English language classes offered by the Canadian city in which Leaf University was located. Her hope was that the language classes could help her achieve native-like proficiency since her proficiency in the language was 'already at a good level'.

> The classes weren't very useful, but they helped me realise that I was already at a good level of proficiency, you know? What held me back then and still does sometimes when it comes to speaking is because I don't feel totally confident that I'm speaking well, that *I'm speaking correctly*. So, I think the classes played this role of confirming that I was on the right path with the language. (Carla)

She explained that the real obstacle lays in her self-confidence rather than her proficiency in the language itself. As it may be seen, the 'ghost' of native-speakerism (Zacharias 2019) cast doubt in her about speaking well or correctly, which in her following response, is equated to how "native

speaker" Canadians speak English. The uncertainty which this ideology caused led Carla to seek ways to find continuous validation, which was exactly the role the English language classes played in the end. In other words, her proficiency in the language was never insufficient, but it was the thought of not sounding 'native-like' enough that influenced her to try out the classes. She had also attended a private ESL school in Canada before starting her graduate program at Leaf University. She contextualises her experience by saying:

> Canadians, even today, always diffuse that kind of intimidation because they speak so well, *natives speak so well*, so automatically that intimidates you and you get stuck. You think twice before you start speaking. (Carla)

The ideology of native-speakerism elevates speakers of English as an L1 to the highest position socially and linguistically simply on the basis of one having acquired English since birth. As a consequence, even when speakers of English as an L1 lack formal knowledge and study of their own language, they may still be considered superior to those who speak the language as an LX. Despite Carla's years-long formal study of English at this point and her status as a graduate student in a highly competitive MBA program at Leaf University, she still considered herself inferior to Canadian speakers of English as an L1. This is what some have called the *native speaker fallacy* – the belief that 'native speakers are superior to nonnative speakers because native speakers speak English with a 'standard' accent' (Sung 2011, 28). In here, the ideology created feelings of apprehension, intimidation and self-doubt in Carla.

Carla came to see the ESL course offered by the city as confirmative of her having a 'good level' in English. Despite the sense of confirmation and the understanding that her challenge originated in feelings of insufficient self-confidence, she still opted to seek further training in English to 'correct' her pronunciation, this time with the assistance of a speech therapist:

> I will actually begin speech therapy, I've decided to do it because I know that it's something *in me—I have that stigma*. Everybody tells me "no, you don't have any issues," but I know I have an accent, people always recognise it. I don't think it's bad having an accent, but I've noticed that there are certain things I deliberately avoid speaking, like certain words, because I know that I am not speaking them correctly [= native-like], so I will avoid speaking those words altogether. I am very picky with myself. I know a lot of people who just don't care, they have thick accents and I think that's great, but I still can't get myself to feel that way about my speaking, so it's another thing *in my head* that I'm working on. (Carla)

More concerning is the apparent undispellable 'stigma' that native-speakerism fuelled within Carla as a speaker of English as an LX. Speaking English correctly meant speaking it with the 'standard' accent of speakers of English as an L1. As such, Carla went as far as seeking speech therapy to correct her pronunciation to help her sound more 'native-like'. As an ideology, native-speakerism prevented her from seeing value in the diversity of speaking English with different accents that reflect the rich lived experiences of multilingual speakers of English. Speech therapy not only has the potential to then erase or minimise this facet of Carla's multilingual identity, but also reinforces the dominance of the 'standard' accent, employed largely by educated, white speakers of English (Baratta 2021).

Neoliberalism in education and the constant need to reinvent the self

This final section explores the possible influence of neoliberalism stemming from higher education into other domains of Carla's lived experience. Carla's journey was characterised by a constantly evolving struggle to reinvent herself professionally in order to meet the expectations of the Canadian labour market. She could not secure work in her field, despite having a university degree. She felt as though her former education was not recognised for being from outside Canada. Consequently, she decided that she needed to have Canadian education in the form of 'micro-credentials' in order to be seen as qualified by Canadian employers, despite redoing coursework that she considered redundant given her academic background:

> I was going to study at City University [pseudonym], but what I didn't know about City University was that, even for continuing education courses, international students would have to pay two and a half times more. When I saw that tuition was two and half times more, and considering the course I was going for, I said, it's not worth it. So, I never went to City University. My objective was to study at City since they offered courses in journalism, but I never did go. Later I studied at McIntosh—I completed a certificate in business communication—and then I went to Canada's University for another course … This whole new experience had been really difficult so far, first because of my [low] confidence in the language, I felt I wasn't capable. But once I overcame that feeling and felt capable, I realised I didn't have connections. I lacked [professional] contacts that could lead me into the field in [Canadian city]. (Carla)

The high tuition fees for a certificate credential at City University diverted Carla to experiment with another possibility: McIntosh College (pseudonym). Following the course in business communication at McIntosh College, she moved on yet to another institution: Canada's University (pseudonym). All these choices were based on their potential to help her find and secure employment. However, Carla felt as though nothing had changed as a result, despite accumulating more academic experience and Canadian credentials. Wheelahan and Moodie (2021) argued that micro-credentials 'reorient higher education from educational purposes to employment purposes' (3). Carla believed that having new credentials would allow her access to the labour market, a myth perpetuated by neoliberal discourses as explained by Wheelahan and Moodie (2021):

> The biggest problem is that they [micro-credentials] feed the myth perpetuated by human capital theory that the right 'credential' (or qualification) at the right time will enable individuals to 'break through' social congestion in the labour market and get a job aligned with their qualification […] or, maybe, just a foot in the door to the labour market. (3)

The multiple attempts at 'rebranding' herself through linguistic and academic investments fell short of leading Carla to where she hoped to be socially and professionally. In the end, she decided that completing a graduate program (the MBA) at a Canadian university would be the best way to potentially solve all existing problems.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper points to the prevalence of ideologies of native-speakerism and neoliberalism in Canadian higher education. Additionally, it illustrates some possible ways in which their combined influence materially and socioculturally impacted the lived experiences of three multilingual international students. To begin with, despite discourses on the importance of diversity in the context of Leaf University, neoliberalism in higher education reproduced the hierarchy of cultures through patterns of othering, which also influenced the students' perceptions of their own cultural practices. Socioculturally, the neoliberal orientation to multiculturalism in higher education negatively impacted the students' appreciation for their own cultural practices, such as in neglecting 'religious' traditions and social events led by members of their cultural groups. Materially, the impact was such that the students distanced themselves from practices and behaviours which could signal adherence to their cultural groups. These experiences reinforce that discourses of neoliberal multiculturalism 'value' diversity, but still organise different cultures vertically (Kubota 2016).

The more the students developed their proficiencies in English, the more their L1s were displaced within their multilingual repertoires. In such cases, ideologies of monolingualism and neoliberalism worked differently, but could not be separated from each other in action. Monolingual ideologies raised the false impression for the students that their L1s could not coexist synergistically and could only interfere with the further development of their proficiency in English. As Slaughter and Cross (2021) have similarly discussed, this is an instance in which the experience and knowledge of how languages not only work in real social settings, but also can be incorporated into language learning are blurred by monolingual perspectives. On the other hand, neoliberal discourses of English as the language of globalisation, prestige and success influenced the students'

perceptions of their own languages. Indeed, because some languages are not linked to cosmopolitan identities (Preese 2019), the students believed it was socially advantageous to invest solely into speaking English.

Native-speakerism was explored specifically in the context of Carla's experiences. The imagined 'native speaker' is one who speaks 'standard' English, and it is for this reason that it can hardly be divorced from issues of racism (Ramjattan 2019; Ruecker and Ives 2015). As such, ideologies stemming from native-speakerism that delegitimise and erase different varieties of English resulted in Carla's multiple attempts to approximate her pronunciation to that of a 'native speaker' Canadian. The psychological imprint of native-speakerism was detrimental, leading her to experience feelings of self-doubt, anxiety and inferiority, and to seek out continuous validation, including through speech therapy. Yet, native-speakerism is also enabled by neoliberalism in language education. Language is commodified and available for purchase by those who have the financial means to do so, which sustains yet another hierarchy within language education. Carla resorted to speech 'therapy' – suggestive of English as an LX as something that needs to be fixed – as she attempted to deal with the stigma she had toward herself.

Neoliberalism in higher education realigns the purpose of education according to economic needs and trends. It fuels competition, individualism and isolation in academic spaces. Economic values replace the need to have 'human development at the core of all curricular areas' (Patrick 2013, 7) at the expense of students' educational experiences. The impact of such an ideology on Carla's experiences was primarily a constant pursuit of credentials. The lack of reform in higher education will continue to amplify the impact of neoliberalism on students' academic development, their mental and physical health, especially for international students who speak English as an LX. The focus on revenue within internationalisation frameworks reflects yet another feature of neoliberalism in higher education (de Wit 2020) and neglects the lived experiences of international students as whole people.

Institutions of higher education have been increasingly called upon to address and transform their role in reproducing social and economic inequality, both nationally and globally. Stein and de Andreotti (2016) argued that 'if we wish to enact more ethical approaches to internationalisation in higher education, then it remains a pressing challenge for scholars and practitioners alike to go beyond a mere change in *vocabulary*' (236, italics in original). In here, the authors refer to shifts in discourse by institutions of higher education, but not to the system itself (Tavares 2021b). Without a change to the system, the 'potential for exploitation and racist treatment of international students' (235) embedded within current internationalisation efforts will continue to manifest in complex ways and affect students' relational experiences with their cultures and languages. The call for change becomes even more timely now as the Canadian government has recently announced a number of policy changes to make post-graduation immigration easier (Government of Canada 2021) – a move which is supposed to contribute to addressing the labour shortage in Canadian society. Without a reform to the system, institutions of higher education will continue to prepare students to fit into Canadian society, rather than to transform it.

Notes

1. To maintain the anonymity of the institution, links and references to online content published by the university have been omitted.
2. Being first developed in France in the nineteenth century, *spiritism* is concerned with the holistic study of the human soul. Its doctrine proposes that human spirits are immortal and incarnate different material bodies in different lifetimes for the purpose of moral and intellectual self-improvement (Kardec 1975).

Disclosure statement

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