

## Intersectional English(es) and the Gig Economy: Teaching English Online

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This article introduces LanguaSpeak, a heretofore underexplored digital platform that functions as a market for language learners and teachers. It argues that LanguaSpeak, through both its interface and users' communicative practice, unwittingly reinforces existing language ideologies, particularly around race. In making this argument, the article suggests the notion of "intersectional English(es)" as a means through which scholars can productively consider the ways in which race, nationality, and language intersect and are (re)enforced through online interfaces/interaction. Drawing on data collected from the profiles of English teachers from the United States and the Philippines, this article examines how language, nationality, and race intersect on LanguaSpeak. Key differences identified between the two countries' teachers include price and marketing strategies. Specifically, White male American teachers are found to enjoy significant advantages over other teachers, reflecting dominant language ideologies. This has implications for English language teaching and language discrimination more broadly.

*Keywords: intersectionality, digital labor, gig economy, English, neoliberalism*

This article examines language ideologies through analysis of an online peer-to-peer platform (LanguaSpeak<sup>2</sup>) that hosts language teaching and learning. It combines communication's appreciation for media and digital interfaces with applied linguistics' attention to the role of language ideology in contouring social interaction, specifically recent work that examines language learning within the context of race and neoliberalism (e.g., Jenks, 2017a). This article argues that LanguaSpeak, through both its interface and users' communicative practice, unwittingly reinforces existing language ideologies, particularly around race. In making this argument, the article suggests the notion of "intersectional English(es)" as a means through which scholars can productively consider the ways that race, nationality, and language intersect and are (re)enforced through online interfaces/interaction.

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Date submitted: 2019-01-03

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Joseph Sung-Yul Park, Lichen Zhen, Sulafa Zidani, Arlene Luck, and the anonymous reviewers.

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Language ideologies are “situated and socially established beliefs about the nature, structure, and usage of language” (Park, 2016, p. 454). This article investigates the way that language ideologies—in particular, around race and nationality—structure the online market for English language teaching. In doing so, it helps answer broader questions of concern, including: How does the Internet challenge or reinforce dominant language ideologies around race? Further, does nationality still matter in a marketplace that is convened entirely in the “space of flows?” (Castells, 2010). Answering these questions involves an explication of neoliberalism and the contemporary gig economy, both built on notions of self-entrepreneurship and free markets. It also necessitates drawing on insights from intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) and adopting methodology specifically developed to study digital artifacts (Brock, 2018).

### **Neoliberalism and the Entrepreneurial Self**

Scholars frequently use the term *neoliberalism* without clearly defining what the term means, or perhaps more important, what (if anything) lies beyond its purview (see Flew, 2012, 2014). However, even though the term might be overused, theories of neoliberalism present a powerful lens for making sense of the changes to the world economy and to individual subjectivities that have taken place over the past several decades (especially in the United States and Western Europe). In spite of variations in definition, the term *neoliberalism* generally describes the extension of market principles and market thinking to all areas and elements of human activity (see Brown, 2015).

One of the key characteristics of the neoliberal world economy since the 2008 global financial crisis is the meteoric rise of peer-to-peer platforms, including Airbnb, Uber, and Upwork (Srnicek, 2017). Although the move toward flexible, part-time, and nonsalaried labor has been steadily increasing in the West since the neoliberal economic reforms associated with right-wing politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, the current rates of participation in the so-called gig economy are unprecedentedly high. According to the digital freelancing platform Upwork, more than 56 million Americans now freelance, providing more than 1 billion labor hours per week (Upwork, 2018).

Alongside the precipitous rise in freelancing has been an accompanying shift in the rhetoric around work. The paradigm of regimented but well-compensated work, which underpinned Fordist industrial societies, has been fundamentally challenged by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has ushered in a rhetoric built around aspirations toward “flexibility” and “creativity” (see Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999/2007, and ideals of stability and lifetime employment have been replaced by the neoliberal ideals of “self-entrepreneurship” (Abelmann, Park, & Kim, 2009; Park, 2016) and “empowerment” (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Eliasoph, 2016). This mantra of self-empowerment is discursively linked with neoliberal notions of meritocracy that promise fair prices/results as a result of (perfect) markets.

The result of this discursive shift is that discrimination against underserved groups is superficially solved by the embrace of the impartial “free” market. Of course, masked by the celebratory discourse of meritocracy are two interrelated issues. First, failure within the sphere of meritocracy becomes anointed with legitimacy (i.e., “fairness”) and is interpreted as a sign of personal failing/laziness, thus obfuscating the structural inequalities that produce unequal outcomes. Second, this neoliberal discourse inherently

devalues and denigrates those who are unwilling or unable to successfully take part in the market. For example, Eliasoph (2016) shows how nonprofit organizations' neoliberal focus on "self-sufficiency" implies that those who are incapable (in her case, elderly persons with dementia) of participating in the market—even the market of nonprofit/volunteer work—are rendered worth-less.

This article highlights the problematics of the first issue obfuscated by neoliberal discourse: meritocracy-celebratory discourse that elides the existence of structural inequalities, in this article represented by discrimination at the intersection of nationality, race, and language. That is, I focus my critique on neoliberalism's meritocratic façade and the ways in which the supposedly impartial market is itself structured in ways that render only certain skills, practices, and bodies as valuable. The other issue, of whether the market deserves celebration at all, is an important one, but lies beyond the purview of this article.

### ***Digital Platforms and the Limitless Market***

Digital platforms often adopt the meritocratic and emancipatory rhetoric of neoliberalism to attract users and workers. A recent spate of work focuses on these trends. For example, Popiel (2017) examines the neoliberal rhetoric of the freelancing platform Upwork, concluding that "the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the rise of online platforms and marketplaces extend [neoliberal precarious labor] trends to the online sphere" (p. 223). Upwork, for example, recruits freelancers by promising the "freedom and flexibility to control when, where, and how you work" (Upwork, 2018, para. 3). Similarly, ride-share platform Uber entices new drivers with the promise, "No office and no boss. That means you'll always start and stop on your time-because with Uber, you're in charge" (Uber, n.d.). Here it should be noted that the combination of low wages, gamification, and just-out-of-reach bonuses means that drivers are highly disincentivized to actually stop (see Mason, 2018). Indeed, digital platforms, with their superficial erasure of space and expansion of the market to include every aspect of the individual, are crucial tools for enabling/subjectivating the self-entrepreneurial subject that undergirds the neoliberal project more broadly.

However, this article does not focus on neoliberalism and digital labor in general; both issues have been theorized in the extant literature (for example, on the issues of digital platform labor, see Casilli, 2017; Popiel, 2017; and Prassl, 2018). Instead, this article makes its primary contribution at the specific intersection of language teaching, digital labor, and race. Neoliberalism is introduced because its inescapable, hegemonic<sup>3</sup> ethos provides the "common sense," in terms of vocabulary and environment, that structures the practices I document and thus inflects the contours of language teaching, digital labor, and race. More specifically, the rhetoric of neoliberal-meritocracy is unwittingly supported by LanguaSpeak's market-based interface, which implies that anyone, anywhere can teach. Further, this rhetoric is (re)produced by teachers' profiles on LanguaSpeak.

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<sup>3</sup> A number of scholars have argued that, following the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, neoliberalism's hegemony is no longer intact (e.g. Mouffe, 2018), but the continued trends of (re)financialization that followed the crisis seem to imply neoliberalism's continued hegemony.

### ***Language Teaching and Neoliberalism***

The impact of neoliberalism on individuals' subjectivity is well established (see Read, 2009), but an emerging body of literature explores how language is implicated in the process, in particular through a "neoliberal regime of human capital development" (Park, 2016, p. 453). Shin and Park (2016) open a special issue on the subject of language and neoliberalism by suggesting that language learning is "a key site where we can critically analyze the underlying assumptions of neoliberalism" (p. 446). They note, "Language plays a central role in the production of . . . neoliberal subjects, as a key skillset to develop human capital, or as a commodity with market value" (p. 448). This recent work makes an important contribution to theorizing language under neoliberalism by extending its analysis beyond simply acknowledging that the expanding global market has resulted in a greater demand for English education, and instead documenting/discussing the ways in which neoliberalism subjectivates a self-entrepreneurial agent who internalizes the demand for language skill (English) as yet another source of human capital.

The self-entrepreneurial demand for English is also explored in Abelman et al. (2009), which documents how neoliberal subjectivity is fostered by Korea's intensely competitive education market, in which English is seen as a "basic" skill. Indeed, as English becomes increasingly treated as an indispensable skill in an expanding global marketplace, its absence in an individual indicates a glaring deficit, which is then seen as indicative of an individual's personal failure to invest in his or her human capital. Thus, Park (2010) documents how English learning is naturalized in the Korean press and competence linked to issues of morality. Park demonstrates that connecting English ability and personal virtues, while superficially functioning within the sphere of meritocracy, in reality celebrates the economically privileged.

### **Race and Intersectionality in English Teaching**

The scholarship reviewed in the previous section highlights the ways in which evaluation of English increasingly functions along an axis of deficiency, such that speaking English is considered normal, and not speaking English is considered deviant. In this regard, English bears striking resemblances to contemporary deployments of Whiteness. Following centuries of explicit racism and oppression, Whiteness today is naturalized as an "unmarked" quality against which other races are judged according to their deviance from its imagined universality. Daniels (2016), drawing on Dyer (1988), notes, "[A] central mechanism of Whiteness is a seeming invisibility, or 'unmarked' quality, that allows those within the category 'White' to think of themselves as simply human, individual and without race, while Others are racialized" (p. 43). Senft and Noble (2013) describe this as "the privilege Whites have to render themselves raceless" (p. 110) and represents what Brock (2018) calls "the power of Whiteness to be unmarked as 'culture'" (p. 1026).

Language ideologies, like racial ideologies, invoke hierarchies that are based on imaginary binaries and quantification. Perhaps unsurprisingly, language ideologies (also like racial ones) invariably privilege Whites at the expense of people of color.<sup>4</sup> That is, (White) English, like Whiteness, needs no explanation. These issues are addressed through the emerging field of *raciolinguistics* (Alim, Rickford, & Ball, 2016;

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<sup>4</sup> It remains to be seen to what degree this will change with the rising importance of China/Mandarin on the global stage.

Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017), but the topic is still underexplored, especially with regard to English teaching. Jenks (2017a) notes,

A search on Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts using the keyword "race" with either "TESOL" [Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages], "language teaching," or "ELT" yields 24 peer-reviewed articles from 1974 to 2014. However, searching the same database with the keywords "culture" and "language teaching" produces over 1100 peer-reviewed articles from 1974 to 2014. (p. 535)

In addressing the research gap on English teaching and race, Jenks and Lee (2019) introduce the concept of "native speaker saviorism," which they argue "reflects the long-standing assumption that the White community can 'save' peoples of color by teaching them English" (p. 1). They observe, "The notion of native speakerism describes the tendency to privilege and uphold 'native speakers' as inherently more qualified to teach English on the arbitrary basis of linguistic birthright" (p. 1). Notions of native speakerism (Holliday, 2005) not only are tied to incorrect notions that native speakers are better teachers, but also are predicated on notions of Western cultural superiority (see also Phillipson, 2016). Of course, cultural superiority and racial superiority are mutually imbricated, and as Jenks (2017a) notes:

Skin color, nationality, ethnicity, and facial morphology are used to sell an "authentic" and "Western" learning experience, thus creating exchange value in characteristics and features that are not traditionally associated with good language teaching, such as the ability to communicate information effectively. (p. 520)

Although race has been underexplored with regard to English, a number of scholars have interrogated English's place and purpose in the world today. For example, Phillipson (1992, 2009) investigates and challenges the "linguistic imperialism" through which English has achieved global prominence, and Pennycook (1994, 2007) critically examines the tensions/gap between the discourse and practice of English as a global language. Pennycook (2016) notes that despite the promise that English is seen by many to hold, it is also "an exclusionary class dialect, favouring particular people, countries, cultures, forms of knowledge and possibilities of development" (p. 26). This recognition of English's function as an "exclusionary class dialect," coupled with recent research on English teaching and race, indicates that productive headway can be made by illuminating (and then changing) the current status quo.

### ***Intersectional English(es)***

Crenshaw (1989, 1991) introduced the term *intersectionality* as a means to "account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245, as cited in Cooper, 2015). Theories of intersectionality are the product of multiple generations of Black feminists' articulations of the multiple forms of oppressions that Black women endure as simultaneously suffering both racism and sexism (and classism). The concept has been taken up by a wide variety of scholars who recognize that oppressions rarely operate in a mutually exclusive fashion, and identity rarely lends itself to meaningful examination along single axes. As Cooper (2015) notes, although intersectionality does not fully illuminate individuals' identities, it does offer a powerful tool to push back against tendencies to essentialize identity. In

this way, intersectionality, according to Collins (2015), involves “the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (p. 2).

The application of an intersectional lens to study the ostensibly neutral communication tool of English is inspired by recent studies that apply intersectionality to studies of the Internet; these studies shed light on how racism, patriarchy, and White supremacy are baked into the ostensibly neutral Internet (Noble, 2018; Noble & Tynes, 2016). In this vein, intersectionality has been used to examine discriminatory practices in online dating practices (Nielsen, 2016) and racism and sexism vis-à-vis virtual agents (Sweeney, 2016). Intersectionality has been helpful as scholars of the Internet have moved from celebratory discourses around the potential of digital culture (Kang, 2000) to confront the realities of racist trolls, hate groups, and algorithmic oppression (Noble, 2018).

As a way of making sense of the teacher profiles and interactions I document on LanguaSpeak (and language ideologies and practices more broadly) I introduce the term *intersectional English(es)*. Intersectional English(es) highlights that one’s linguistic identity, like other aspects of one’s identity, is realized along multiple axes. Describing linguistic identity in terms of intersectional English(es) highlights that simply evaluating someone’s ability according to one salient marker (e.g., proficiency in the language, country of origin) fails to take into account other dimensions along which his or her language ability is identified (e.g., race). The plural *es* at the end of *intersectional English* reflects the theoretical and empirical untenability of subsuming under a unitary marker all the different communicatory practices around the world called English.

Works debunking the supposedly value-free space of the Internet are especially helpful for making sense of intersectional English(es), because English, like the Internet, is too often accepted as a value-free and neutral vehicle of communication (on the Internet, see Noble & Tynes, 2016; on English, see Park, 2016, p. 454, and Pennycook, 2016, p. 26). This is despite long-standing acknowledgement that language acts as a site of class power (Bourdieu, 1991) and contemporary research documenting the inequalities reified and legitimated by global English (see Jenks, 2017a, 2017b; Jenks & Lee, 2019; Motha, 2014; Pennycook, 2016). Indeed, Park (2016) notes, “One language ideology that is highly prevalent and frequently goes unquestioned is the idea that language is a neutral and abstract tool for communication that can convey information and messages in a transparent and unadulterated way” (p. 454; see also Park, 2009, 2017). An examination of intersectional English(es), like that of the intersectional Internet, requires questioning the notion of any tools of communication as value-free. To treat either English or the Internet as objective vehicles of communication is to erase the history of the development and dissemination of both “technologies.”

The notion of intersectional English(es) highlights that some Englishes are valued over others. However, it goes further than simply documenting an established hierarchy of Englishes and calls attention to the fact that contemporary understandings of what is “authentic” English are built on racist, colonial discourses that are reproduced through and on digital platforms. These often implicit types of discrimination surface in the ways that native English speakers are privileged (in particular, White native speakers from the West). Jenks cogently (2017a) summarizes the situation:

Values that are traditionally associated with the ability to teach a language (e.g., the use value of possessing "great English") are perverted and often replaced with belief systems that are more profitable (e.g., the exchange value of being an instructor with blue eyes). (p. 535)

Online spaces have previously been looked toward optimistically as sites where race might be transcended (Kang, 2000). Teachers on LanguaSpeak do possess some agency, expressed in terms of what languages they self-select as knowing, where they are from, what kind of video to upload, etc. However, as Korn (2016) notes, such a process of identity formation is complex, because self-categorization is never a choice that an individual unilaterally makes; people are sexed and raced in ways that do not always accord with their own particular self-identification. Likewise, as I illustrate later in this article, individuals on LanguaSpeak are not only raced and sexed, but also "languaged" in ways that may not reflect either their own self-identification or that of standard tools of linguistic appraisal (test scores, certifications, etc.). For example, while LanguaSpeak users have some wiggle room in terms of self-identification (e.g., choosing one's avatar in a game), for the LanguaSpeak teacher profiles I examine, the interface options—native language, country, etc.—structure the platform such that socially defined identities offline are mapped onto the online. In this way, LanguaSpeak serves as a useful testing ground with which we can explore how existing language ideologies are challenged and/or reinforced in an online market.

### **Critical Technology Discourse Analysis**

According to Brock (2018), critical technology discourse analysis (CTDA) "combines analyses of information technology material and virtual design with an inquiry into the production of meaning through information technology practice and the articulations of information technology users in situ" (p. 1013). As a method that addresses both the discursive practices of a community and the material affordances that structure those practices, CTDA is a natural choice for examination of LanguaSpeak. I thus use CTDA not only to make sense of the discourses I encounter on LanguaSpeak, but also to interrogate how the interface itself serves to structure discourse.

Because this project focuses interested on the ways in which preexisting ideologies are challenged or reified on and through LanguaSpeak, this article draws on CTDA's ability to "link seemingly disparate phenomena in a technocultural framework, creating the opportunity to see continuities with broader ideological systems" (Sweeney & Brock, 2014, p. 6). CTDA calls for both an appreciation for the discourse produced and an awareness of the underlying platform and interface that mediate its production. Thus, Brock (2018) notes that CTDA analyses strives "to maintain a balance between studying context and studying text" (p. 1023).

Importantly, CTDA does not take a deterministic view toward technology or proceed with a priori assumptions about the effects of a particular interface. Sweeney and Brock (2014) note that "technologies are designed with preferred users and interpretations in mind, though users, in turn, may use and interpret technologies in unexpected ways" (p. 4). This means that using CTDA to examine LanguaSpeak necessitates a critical examination of the interface (screen, app, etc.; Brock, 2018) while maintaining an awareness that users themselves can subvert or reinterpret the interface in a variety of ways. Drawing attention to the

ways that users articulate themselves using information technology, Sweeney and Brock (2014) note that Althusser's (1971) notion of interpellation "serves as a guiding principle for CTDA analysis" (p. 3). Interpellation, or the process whereby subjectivity is constituted through interaction with/on the interface, is crucial for understanding how LanguaSpeak teachers' linguistic identities take shape within the market for linguistic services (i.e., how they are interpellated).

CTDA's critical discursive approach (Brock, 2018), which recognizes ICTs as both artifact and medium, is helpful for making sense of the LanguaSpeak advertisements that I analyze. Therefore, I adopt CTDA to explicate my argument that LanguaSpeak's interface structures the intersectional English(es) I document and reinforce the language ideologies I critique.

### **LanguaSpeak**

LanguaSpeak is an online digital platform for language learning/teaching. As of 2018, it boasts more than 5 million users and 10,000 teachers. Although LanguaSpeak hosts no-fee language exchange, the main service it provides is an interface for connecting language learners with teacher(s). Teachers set their own prices, and students select teachers based on which language they want to learn, how much they are willing to pay, and what sort of teachers they want to teach them. LanguaSpeak makes money in this process by deducting a percentage fee when teachers "cash out" their earnings and convert the platform's in-site currency into real-world money.

In many ways, LanguaSpeak is emblematic of a host of other peer-to-peer platforms that have proliferated in the past decade, including Airbnb, Uber, Upwork, and Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Alternately housed under neologisms such as *sharing economy* or *gig economy*, these companies attract workers by offering flexibility and freedom from what they cast as the undesirable yoke of traditional employment (see Schor, 2016). However, LanguaSpeak is somewhat unique in that it offers a peer-to-peer service for a skill that seemingly everyone possesses and that is completely unmoored from geographic location. Unlike Uber, which demands that workers have a driver's license and live in an area with the requisite roads and demand, LanguaSpeak functions entirely online. So long as workers have a phone/computer and Internet connection, they can sell their language teaching online. However, as one might expect, various languages and language teachers are valued differently on LanguaSpeak.

### **Teachers on LanguaSpeak**

Teachers on LanguaSpeak must upload short introductory videos, which average about two minutes in length. These videos allow teachers to showcase their language skills and tout their personal and professional qualifications. These videos also serve to highlight the teachers' physical appearance; rather than solely stressing their professional teaching qualifications, teachers often highlight their gregarious personality, hobbies, the different countries to which they have traveled, and their ambitions for the future.

Teachers on LanguaSpeak are split into two categories: professional teachers and community teachers. Community teachers do not need any credentials to teach, whereas professional teachers are certified teachers, either through completion of a university teaching degree or acquiring a language



teaching certification. These documents must be uploaded to LanguaSpeak for verification. English language teaching certifications are usually acquired through various TESOL certificate programs, such as Cambridge English's CELTA (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), which currently boasts 300 centers in 70 countries and offers a 120-hour course (Cambridge English, n.d.). Many professional teachers also have master's degrees in education, and some even have PhD or EdD degrees. In contrast, the community teachers do not need to upload any certifications in order to teach and usually lack certification and tertiary education.

Given English's centrality to the world economy and its important place in the global imaginary (see Crystal, 2012), English is a highly sought-after language on LanguaSpeak, with around 1,500 professional English teachers and more than 1,000 community teachers. Roughly half of the community teachers are non-native English speakers (NNEs), and around 500 of the professional teachers are NNEs.<sup>5</sup> Table 1 shows a breakdown of teacher numbers by country. In addition to the number of teachers from the "popular" list, I also include in the table the numbers of teachers from the Philippines and India, two countries with a history of colonization and in which English has an official status.

**Table 1. English Teachers by Country.**

Country	Professional	Community	Total	% of Total
U.S.	396	236	632	43.3
UK	354	109	463	31.7
Canada	66	43	109	7.5
South Africa	36	24	60	4.1
Philippines	23	36	59	4.0
Australia	31	20	51	3.5
Ireland	28	8	36	2.5
India	11	21	32	2.2
New Zealand	10	9	19	1.3

\*Data are current as of November 2018.

It is important to note that not all professional teachers work on LanguaSpeak full time. In fact, the majority of professional English teachers on LanguaSpeak do not teach full time. Many have day jobs offline, though their offline job is often still English teaching.

Each teacher's page displays the number of lessons he or she has taught, the number of students, and his or her "rating" out of five stars. Of the hundreds of profiles I examined for this article, no teachers received lower than a 4.8 rating. In addition to the ratings, teacher pages also feature "reviews" written by their students. Students often leave multiple reviews—in some cases, one review per lesson. Thus, if an individual student takes many lessons, he or she sometimes ends up leaving dozens of comments on his or her teacher's page. Examining these reviews is telling about how different teachers are viewed and what sort of services students value.

<sup>5</sup> These numbers are based on data I collected in November 2018.

### ***Philippines and the United States***

I examined the profiles of all the teachers from the Philippines ( $n = 59$ ) and the profiles of approximately 100 American teachers. I also examined profiles of teachers from other countries (though less systematically) to understand how representative teachers from the United States and the Philippines are of teachers on LanguaSpeak more generally. In total, I examined 200 teacher profiles. My analysis included watching their introduction videos; reading their self-descriptions; recording the rates they charged for lessons, which type of lessons they gave, and the number of lessons they had given; and reading the comments students left on their pages.

I chose to examine the United States and the Philippines because they represent important sites for comparison and contrast. The United States, because of its hegemonic status in world politics and the global cultural industries, has a strong claim to an "authentic" English. The Philippines, on the other hand, in large part because of its former status as a U.S. colony, has a long history of English and is noted for its high levels of English proficiency in comparison with other countries. In addition, most American English teachers on LanguaSpeak are White, whereas all the teachers from the Philippines were Asian.<sup>6</sup>

Noting that the Philippines' English education system dates back more than 100 years, Friginal (2007) writes:

English has been regarded as the preferred language of business, politics, and education, and most official publications in the government and the legal system have been printed in English. From the early 1900s to the present, English, rather than Filipino or other regional languages, has been considered as the language of prestige. (p. 332)

Thus, it is not surprising that there are dozens of English teachers from the Philippines on LanguaSpeak.<sup>7</sup> Comparing teachers' profiles from the two countries thus offers valuable insights into existing language ideologies and how the market for English language teaching operates.

### **Teacher Profiles**

Because LanguaSpeak teaching takes place completely online, with no distinction made between the location of teachers or students, one can surmise that the different prices that teachers command on LanguaSpeak are largely a by-product of their "value" in the linguistic marketplace of English teaching. Examining and comparing profiles of teachers thus reveals which traits the market values and which are considered undesirable. For example, we would expect that teachers with credentials in teaching (professional teachers) would command higher prices than uncredentialed ones (community teachers), given students' ostensible goal of language acquisition.

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<sup>6</sup> Race/ethnicity is based on the author's assessment of profile.

<sup>7</sup> Here, I should note that despite the relative strength of English in the Philippines vis-à-vis other nations, English within the country is unequally distributed according to socioeconomic class (Martin, 2014).

Unsurprisingly, this price disparity manifested when comparing teachers within a given country. That is, uncredentialed teachers in the United States tended to make less money than their credentialed counterparts who were also in the United States. The same also holds true for the Philippines. However, uncredentialed teachers in the United States were usually better compensated than their credentialed counterparts in the Philippines. Filipino teachers tended to make under \$10 an hour even though the majority of the teachers were highly qualified. For example, Maria,<sup>8</sup> who had a TESOL certificate and a university degree in English education, taught the majority of her lessons for \$7 an hour and offered a specialized TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) class for \$9 an hour. Maria was a full-time teacher who taught more than 40 hours per week on average. The majority of Filipino teachers were, like Maria, young women. Indeed, of the 22 professional teachers from the Philippines, only two were men.<sup>9</sup>

The higher proportion of women is likely related to the fact that a higher-than-average number of teachers from the Philippines work with children, possibly reflecting raced and gendered ideologies of reproductive labor. Women from the Philippines are often employed as domestic workers in higher income countries such as Hong Kong and the United States, performing such tasks as housekeeping and child care (see Parreñas, 2000). This likely results in stereotypes about Filipinas that appear to play out even when the women are highly qualified English teachers. That is, in addition to dominant language ideologies that position White English above other varieties of English (Jenks, 2017a), Filipina teachers must combat discrimination related to their race, nationality, and gender.

One male student's review of Maria described her as "cute," "small," "naïve" and a "little girl." Comments such as these speak to the fact that language, race, and gender all interact together. A different student referred to his Filipina teacher as "my angel," and another student wrote simply, "pretty teacher." Although difficult to definitively prove, it seems likely that some students explicitly select teachers based on their supposed embodiment of an exotic Other. Many of the comments on the Filipina teachers' pages refer to parents' satisfaction with their children's lessons, with several also mentioning how "cute" the teacher is. These sort of interactions further reinforce the stereotype of Filipina teachers as primarily caretakers for children. Importantly, this obfuscates that many of the Filipina teachers are also highly qualified in offering lessons specifically for preparation for tests such as IELTS and TOEFL; it is important to note that such test preparation courses usually command a significantly higher rate than lessons aimed at children.

Although it is possible to argue that the much lower overall rates commanded by teachers from the Philippines are the result of the lower cost of living in the Philippines, this argument is unconvincing when one considers that LanguaSpeak's services take place completely online. Both teachers' and students' location is ostensibly immaterial. Certainly, if neoliberal logic is to be assumed sound, prices should reflect what LanguaSpeak's placeless, spaceless, completely virtual market can bear. Thus, although it is likely that a degree of price discrepancy might reflect some teachers' willingness to work for less, it does little to explain the large difference in income between teachers from the United States and the Philippines in general (particularly when teachers boast similar qualifications, number of students, hours worked, etc.).

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<sup>8</sup> This and all other teacher names are pseudonyms.

<sup>9</sup> Based on the author's interpretation of the users' gender presentation.

Another Filipina teacher, Ella, has a master's degree in education and charges a comparatively (for teachers from the Philippines) high rate of \$10 an hour. Ella opens her video by stressing her status as a "professional teacher" in the very first sentence. This is common for non-American (and non-White teachers), who particularly emphasized their professional qualifications. On the other hand, American teachers were more likely to stress their hometowns and personal hobbies. American teachers placed a great deal of emphasis on their American accents. In fact, for many American teachers, the category of lesson for which they charged the most money was related to accent, with names including "Accent Reduction," "American Accent Mastery," and "American Pronunciation." Given that accent is a completely relative concept, the misnomer "Accent Reduction" implicitly refers to the purposeful adoption of a White, American accent. Here it is important to reiterate that, linguistically speaking, American English is not without accent, just as White people are not without race. Further, little to no empirical evidence suggests that native speakers are better at teaching English than NNESSs. Indeed, noting the comparatively high level of English there, Phillipson (2016) remarks,

Native speakers of English play virtually no role as teachers in many European countries . . . for employment in teacher training and university departments of English, what is important is possession of *relevant qualifications irrespective of nationality or mother tongue*. (p. 83, emphasis added)

Like the meritocracy that undergirds neoliberalism more generally, LanguaSpeak's democratizing of the world's market for language teaching is proved to be ephemeral. The most highly compensated teachers were usually White and most often young. These young White teachers commanded hourly rates sometimes in excess of \$30 an hour. One young White woman charges closer to \$35 an hour for her "American pronunciation" classes, of which she has given hundreds. Another young White woman, Michelle, gives the majority of her lessons at \$38 an hour. She stresses that she was "born and raised" in the United States and promises to teach students the "things that you need to know in order to connect deeply with native English speakers." Another White teacher, Bill, writes,

PRONUNCIATION is my specialty. If you're looking to pick up the American accent, you have found the right teacher! There are lots of patterns, tricks and practice methods I'll share with you, which will DRASTICALLY reduce your accent.

These teachers, through their focus on a supposedly "correct" (i.e., White native) accent, serve to reify existing language ideologies and also perpetuate the myth that native speakers in general, and White ones in particular, have a special claim to "authentic" English. Many Anglo-White teachers on LanguaSpeak similarly frame their ability to teach around such "tricks" that they, as White people, are singularly positioned to provide. The idea that a NNESS, through his or her having had to acquire the language (and thus encounter the difficulties it poses firsthand), might be better equipped to provide such "tricks" is apparently never considered.

It is also important to note the use of the term *reduce* in the mentioned advertisement. This small but important detail highlights how White teachers implicitly draw on the aforementioned discourse of Whiteness/White English as "unmarked." Although the advertisement begins by offering to help students

"pick up the American accent," it ends by framing accent as something that, if reduced, will more closely approximate a natural White American accent. Through the advertisement, White American English is framed as the natural, nonaccented norm against which other accents are judged according to their supposed "deviance."

There are non-White American teachers on LanguaSpeak, but they tend to command lower prices than their White counterparts. In addition, and unlike many of the highest paid White teachers, they speak another language, which aids in their ability to help native speakers of that language. For example, Roger, who is Asian, is fluent in Portuguese, and the overwhelming majority of his students are from Brazil (based on the student profiles of those who left him reviews). Likewise, the profile of a Black teacher, Gary, is written in both Portuguese and Spanish, and the majority of his students appear to be native speakers of those languages. Non-White teachers are also left the added work of establishing their claim to "authentic" English, as when Roger says he was "born and raised here *all my life*" (emphasis added). The addition of "all my life" (which pairs awkwardly with "raised") seems intended to stress Roger's claim to an authentic (i.e., White) American English in spite of his clearly non-White features.

Although there are White American teachers who earn low wages, they tend to lack qualifications such as college degrees. This includes Cody, who is living and teaching in Thailand. He charges \$10 for his lessons. Despite the low rate that Cody charges, he still embodies the native-speaker saviorism of many other White teachers on LanguaSpeak. In his introduction video, he states that he is "teaching the Thai people how to speak English." His use of the article "the" seems to imply that he is employed to teach not just Thai students, but the entire Thai people, or nation, and that he (because of his status as White American) is uniquely qualified to engage in this civilizing mission. That is, he embodies Jenks and Lee's (2019) notion of "native-speaker-saviorism."

Indeed, it becomes apparent from browsing the profiles that often, Whiteness itself is what is for sale on LanguaSpeak. Teachers stress their claims to an authentic American identity that seems only open to Whites, who frame themselves as embodying "authentic" English. At times, Whiteness, Americanness, and English seem interchangeable, as exemplified by one White teacher's course entitled "The United States of Greg." Whiteness's claim to authentic English is highlighted to a near-comical degree by one White teacher, Teddy, who writes, "One of my ancestors wrote a play that Verdi used as the basis for the famous opera 'La Forza del Destino': Thus, I have been steeped in European literature from the earliest age." For Teddy, his claim to English is presented as intrinsically linked to his (White) ancestry.

LanguaSpeak's interface also unwittingly supports an implicit association among race, nationality, and English. Not only is there the mutually exclusive categorization of "native" and "advanced" speakers, but user names are accompanied by a flag symbol of users' country of origin, which further reifies the nation-language nexus. Indeed, in many ways, LanguaSpeak's interface seems to reinforce long-standing "essentialist ties between territory, language and national identity" (Park & Wee, 2017, p. 49). Thus, while LanguaSpeak superficially erases national borders because it is online, its interface (and the discursive practices of its users) reinforces them.

The vastly different amounts of money charged by the Filipina and American teachers (White teachers in particular) support the hypothesis that something other than language education is being offered on LanguaSpeak. Indeed, it is Whiteness, or at least access to a cosmopolitan lifestyle indexed by Whiteness, that teachers are selling on LanguaSpeak. This is somewhat unsurprising, given Park's (2015) observation:

The ideal kind of English pursued through the English frenzy is typically that of a "native speaker," imagined in terms of class, race, and national origin—that is, the ideal speaker of English is presumed to be a white, educated speaker of mainstream American English. (p. 62)

LanguaSpeak thus unwittingly reinforces existing prejudiced language ideologies. The supposedly liberating effects of LanguaSpeak's peer-to-peer service fail to flatten the playing field for English teaching and instead likely exacerbate already existing inequalities in the global structure of English teaching.

A number of other features also privilege native-English speaking teachers and reinforce existing language ideologies. For example, the teacher search function splits teachers of a language into two different categories, native speakers and advanced speakers. In addition, when choosing where one's teacher is "from," countries are split between "popular" and "other countries," with Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, United Kingdom, and the United States making the "popular" list. In addition, learners can select teachers based on their hourly rates, their calendar availability, their skills (works with children, does test prep, etc.), and whether their teacher speaks a specific language (i.e., the native language of the learner). Crucial to my critique here is the binary split between native and advanced, which serves to reify an ideology of native speakerism/native-speaker-saviorism (Jenks & Lee, 2019) despite the long-standing recognition that native speakers have no special skills in terms of actual language teaching (see Phillipson, 1992, 2009). Given the way that many native speakers on LanguaSpeak use Whiteness as a primary referent for teaching ability, the native-advanced binary may also reinforce racist notions of English as an inherently "White" language (see also Ruecker & Ives, 2015). This is in keeping with Lee's (2017) observation (he uses the example of African American English) that "there are 'native' speakers of English who do not enjoy the assumed privileges of nativeness" (p. 15), which, Lee argues, undermines the usefulness of the notion of nativeness itself.

### Conclusion

More than 20 years ago a special issue of *TESOL Quarterly* posed the question "[Does] English belong to Native speakers of English, to speakers of standard English, to White people, or to all of those who speak it, irrespective of their linguistic and sociocultural histories?" (Norton, 1997, p. 422). Unfortunately, the question is as pertinent now as it was then, and the Internet, then in its budding stages, has (perhaps unsurprisingly) failed to unseat long-standing racial and linguistic hierarchies.

LanguaSpeak democratizes the global language market by ostensibly allowing anyone with an Internet connection to compete in the global marketplace for language, thus vastly lowering the barrier to entry. However, and in part unwittingly aided by the interface of LanguaSpeak itself, users' practice seems to highlight or even exacerbate preexisting inequalities in language teaching. What became quickly apparent

from this initial analysis of English teaching profiles is that English teaching and Whiteness are inextricably tied together, through not only the advertising practices of the teachers themselves, as evidenced by their introductory videos, but also the structure of the interface itself. What remains unclear, however, is how the situation might be remedied.

LanguaSpeak's interface is, superficially, "color-blind" and, unlike countries such as Korea, does not legislate which countries' citizens are fit to teach English (see Jenks, 2017a). However, Jenks and Lee (2019) conclude, "A 'color-blind' approach that simply suggests that all teachers are equal regardless of race and ethnicity does very little to decolonize White public spaces in the TESOL profession" (p. 16). This is because color-blind ideologies that privilege "objective" measures of English inherently privilege White speakers, given that the standards themselves have been constructed based on the ideal of White Western speakers. Thus, color-blind ideologies do not confront the problem at a structural level; rather than challenging the unspoken hegemony of Whiteness, they do little more than extend the royal trappings of Whiteness to a favored few. Rather than color-blind, meritocratic rectifications, what is needed is recognition that the neoliberal utopia of open markets does not guarantee equitable distribution of either profit or opportunity. On the contrary, the superficially objective and democratic nature of digital platforms in fact reifies existing social structures, while at the same time providing them with a dangerous veneer of legitimacy.

When viewed through a neoliberal lens, the low wages of teachers from the Philippines do not signal the continued persistence of the language ideologies addressed above by Norton (1997), but a failure by teachers in the Philippines to successfully compete in the open market. That is, according to the neoliberal perspective, the higher wages commanded by Bill and Teddy can be interpreted not as a result of the operation of discriminatory language ideologies (directly harnessed through their advertising strategies), but instead as a reflection of Maria's and Ella's failure to successfully invest/tap into their human capital and self-entrepreneurial instincts. Furthermore, the neoliberal lens completely overlooks those English speakers from the Philippines who lack the necessary credentials to compete with teachers like Marie and Ella, who are, relative to many of their compatriots, highly privileged.

It is in light of these prejudices that I suggest intersectional English(es) as both a critical lens for making sense of the complex nexus of nationality, race, and native speakerism vis-à-vis the Internet, and as a research program that tackles these issues. An intersectional English(es) approach means adopting a more holistic view of English that acknowledges that linguistic identity, like identity more broadly, is multifaceted and intersectional. It also means interrogating the ways that online digital platforms both upset and reinforce unitary, one-dimensional conceptions of identity and language. As I have argued, the status quo benefits White Americans at the expense of people of color, and an intersectional English(es) approach can help reveal the complexity of these power imbalances. However, the task ahead is made difficult by the neoliberal logic that drives both the gig economy and the global demand for English; so long as Whiteness possesses such valuable currency in the global market (see Jenks, 2017a), it is unlikely that its dominance can/will be challenged by either students or teachers. Indeed, while this article has critically highlighted the ways in which White teachers market themselves, the neoliberal economy—and the White teachers' precarious position within it—prompts them to maximize whatever market value they have, including reproducing dominant language ideologies in their advertisement strategies. Likewise, so long as Whiteness

commands such a premium in the global-labor market, it is likely that students themselves will remain committed to the adoption of White-Anglo accents.

Future research is needed that explores the ways in which digital platforms intersect with nationality, race, and language. While the Internet is recognized as helping to spur global adoption of English, the ways in which digital platforms affect current language ideologies have been largely ignored. Future research should investigate how digital platforms (beyond just language learning platforms) serve to reinforce or challenge language ideologies and, with them, White normativity. Such a research program, though difficult, is increasingly necessary to illuminate points of intervention in the imbricated and mutually reinforcing logics of both the Internet and Whiteness in the market for English language teaching.

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