

“Your English is so good”: Linguistic experiences of racialized students and instructors of a Canadian university

Ethnicities

2023, Vol. 23(5) 758–778

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/14687968211055808

journals.sagepub.com/home/etn

Ryuko Kubota , Meghan Corella, Kyuyun Lim and
Pramod K Sah

Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

Abstract

Racism has increasingly been exposed and problematized in public domains, including institutions of higher education. In academia, critical race theory (CRT) has guided scholars to uncover everyday experiences of racism by highlighting the intersectionality of race with other identity categories, among which language constitutes an important, yet underexplored, component. Through the conceptual lens of CRT and counter-storytelling as a methodological orientation, this study investigated how racialized graduate students and faculty members at a Canadian university experienced racialization and racism in relation to issues of language, including communication and the use of ethnic names as semiotic markers. Individual and focus group interviews generated participants' stories, to which we applied a thematic analysis. Participants generally felt that they were forced into pre-determined and essentialized categories of race, ethnicity, nationality, and language. Racialized non-native speakers of an official language—English or French—often received compliments or inquisitive comments on their language proficiency, which further accentuated their raciolinguistic Otherness and caused pain. Conversely, racialized native speakers did not report receiving compliments on language. For East Asian participants especially, speaking White English seemed to offset their racial stigma and psychologically separated them from non-native, English-speaking East Asian immigrants who looked like them. These experiences indicate normative expectations. The participants felt they were expected to not only speak, write, or communicate in the White normative language and manners, but also to use or not use an Anglicized name against

Corresponding author:

Ryuko Kubota, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of British Columbia, 6445
University Boulevard, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2, Canada.

Email: ryuko.kubota@ubc.ca

their will. These impositions were questioned and resisted by some participants, and antiracist consciousness was expressed. The participants' voices encourage universities to validate their stories as well as their ways of telling their stories.

Keywords

Antiracism, Canada, compliments, counter-storytelling, critical race theory, ethnic names, intersectionality, multiculturalism within a bilingual framework, raciolinguistic ideologies, university

Introduction

In North America, there has been a heightened awareness of systemic racism in the wake of antiracist movements such as Black Lives Matter and anti-Asian racism protests. Just like many public institutions that are under scrutiny for racial equity and justice, universities are increasingly held accountable for advancing antiracism. Antiracist engagement requires a critical review of the current system that continues to devalue racialized people's unique identities, experiences, and knowledge; deny their access to equal opportunities; and otherwise harm their wellbeing. This necessitates an understanding of how racialized groups experience racism on campus and how systemic racism perpetuates White supremacy and colonial relations of power.

The greater attention to antiracism in universities parallels growing scholarly examinations of multiple forms and complexities of racism through a lens of critical race theory (CRT), which aims to illuminate racialized people's lived experiences (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Although CRT pays attention to the intersectionality of race and other repressive forces related to gender, class, sexuality, and religion, language tends to be neglected. Yet, applied linguistic scholars have begun to examine how race and language are interconnected (e.g., Alim et al., 2016; Flores and Rosa, 2015; Kubota and Lin, 2009; Motha, 2014). Further investigating the interlocking realities of racism and linguisticism experienced by diverse racialized members in higher education would enhance our understanding of the complexities of their experiences and facilitate institutional engagement in antiracism.

Drawing on a larger research project conducted on the experiences of racialization and racism among racialized members of an academic unit at a Canadian university, we extracted interview data in which graduate students and faculty members discussed issues related to language, and examined how race and language intersected in their experiences. Through the lens of CRT, we present racialized participants' stories that are invariably made hidden and silenced by White supremacy and colonialism.

As members of the university, we are committed to problematizing and transforming racist and other oppressive policies and practices. Ryuko Kubota is a woman originally from East Asia and an active scholar and practitioner of antiracism, especially in language education. Meghan Corella is a White, native English-speaking woman from the United States, whose work focuses on the politics of language, race, and gender in interactions.

Kyuyun Lim is a female graduate student from East Asia, whose interests center on critical digital pedagogy and teacher agency. Pramod Sah is a male graduate student from South Asia with research interest in the impacts of language policies on minoritized students. For Ryuko, Kyuyun, and Pramod, who are non-native English speakers (NNESs), our experiences resonate with the voices of the participants in this study.

Language and race in higher-education contexts

Witnessing the rising animosity toward those who look and sound different from the dominant group, applied linguists have increasingly focused on the relationships between race/ethnicity and language by examining discourses in various domains, such as the workplace (e.g., [Tankosic and Dovchin, 2021](#)) and higher education (e.g., [Huo, 2020](#); [Lee, 2015](#); [Mayuzumi, 2015](#); [Ramjattan, 2019](#); [Sterzuk, 2015](#)). Underlying discourses of racialization and racism is language ideology. For example, focusing on K-12 English learners in the United States, [Flores and Rosa \(2015: 150\)](#) highlight how “raciolinguistic ideologies produce racialized speaking subjects,” who are seen as linguistically deviant and deficient by White listening subjects despite their competence in English. The notion of academic language is linked to monoglossic language ideology that constructs standardized English as the norm for all racialized subjects to acquire ([Flores and Rosa, 2015](#)). Raciolinguistic ideology resonates with reverse linguistic stereotyping in which the visual image of a speaker’s race triggers listeners’ positive or negative perceptions of the speaker’s linguistic competence ([Kang and Rubin, 2009](#); [Rubin, 1992](#)). In both cases, racialized members are perceived to be foreigners or illegitimate and incompetent English speakers with an accent.

Some studies have focused on North American university contexts and documented how racism was experienced by instructors of color. For example, [Mayuzumi \(2015\)](#) interviewed Asian women faculty members at Canadian universities. Although language was not a specific focus, some participants were cognizant of how amalgamation of foreign accent, exoticized Asianness, and feminized bodies led to Othering. This White native English speaker (NES) norm was problematized by [Ramjattan \(2019\)](#). Focusing on racialized teachers of English as a second language (ESL) in Toronto, Ramjattan revealed students’ expectation that their teachers would be White NESs, causing racist and nativist microaggressions against racialized teachers, even though they were Canadian-born. The struggles of raciolinguistic teacher legitimacy are also documented by [Huo, 2020](#) in her autoethnography. As an NNES instructor originally from China, tutoring at a university writing center, she struggled with the White NES norm. Another obstacle was her ethnic name. Of all the instructors, hers was the only obvious Chinese name, which seemed to deter students from making appointments with her; indeed, she was told by one student, “It is so weird to see a Chinese name among all other names” ([Huo, 2020: 133](#)).

Such raciolinguistic Othering is also reported among racialized students in higher education in Canada. Through an intersectional analysis of White normativity and supremacy, [Caxaj et al. \(2018\)](#) explored racialized university students’ navigation of White dominant Canadian campus life. They found that many students felt they were targets of suspicion, hostility, and exclusion. For instance, a second-generation NES Chinese-

Canadian student often needed to prove that he could speak English. The study demonstrated how White Western hegemony fails to valorize the students' cultural and racial differences. White supremacy is also demonstrated in a study on an ESL program (Lee, 2015), which revealed that classroom dialogues on cultural differences between nation-states contained a subtext for racial difference, making Canadian culture a proxy of White race.

Regarding the hegemony of White English in anglophone countries, Sterzuk (2015) documented how standard English was legitimated as White property at a Canadian university that promotes internationalization. Interviews and document analysis revealed that an NES Nigerian student's use of English was illegitimated by White settler classmates and institutional discourse that imposed linguistic standards on international students, solidifying the colonial link between Whiteness and English. Likewise, in his autoethnography in England, Sah (2019) noted how he experienced racial discrimination because of his NNES identity from a third-world country and got penalized for not using standard academic British English. Similar to Caxaj et al. (2018), Sah (2019) highlighted how the Western style of teaching and English ideologies excluded students like him from classroom participation and penalized them for nonparticipation. In a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) program in the United States, Park (2012: 136) described how a Chinese woman's use of English was not recognized as competent enough for studying and seeking employment, causing her to feel she was no longer "a legitimate owner and user of English" and leading to an identity crisis.

In sum, these studies underscore the interlocking relationship between White supremacy and the hegemony of native speakers of standardized language. Raciolinguistic ideologies link the legitimacy of English to White speakers and, therefore, the notion of native English speakerism is attributed to White settlers. The review of literature suggests a further need to uncover intersectionality of language and race in different higher-education contexts. Situated in a Canadian university, our study specifically focuses on the raciolinguistic experiences of students and faculty of color.

Multicultural Canada: A raciolinguistic landscape

Our study was conducted in Canada, a settler colonial society with a state policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework in English and French. Haque (2012) provides a critical analysis of the development of the policy. The bilingual policy of English and French was established in 1969 to protect the linguistic rights of French Canadians who were socioeconomically marginalized compared to anglophone Canadians. The term *two founding races*, which appeared in the initial stages of deliberations of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (RCBB) (1963–1970), referred to French and English White settlers and it symbolizes how Whiteness has formed a foundation for the raciolinguistic landscape. Although Indigenous people had lived for centuries before the *two founding races* colonized their land, early discourses of RCBB denigrated them as primitive, viewed their languages as fragmented, thus a barrier for communication and cohesion, and devalued their cultures as deficits (Haque and Patrick, 2015).

The shift in immigrants' countries of origin from predominantly European to Asian in the 1960s as well as demands from Indigenous peoples for their linguistic rights led RCBB to pay more attention to *other races*, eventually replacing the concept of race with languages and cultures and culminating in the Multiculturalism Policy of 1971. However, multiculturalism within a bilingual framework gives collective linguistic rights to only the two founding groups of official language speakers, which are assumed to be "porous and open enough to assimilate everyone" (Haque, 2012: 184). For other ethnic and indigenous groups, their languages were relegated to individual choice rather than collective rights, although they were given the freedom to claim their cultures. This framework reinforced national unity through ensuring cultural freedom for raciolinguistic minorities, while integrating them into official languages.

Despite the raciolinguistic hierarchy solidified by these state policies, Canadian multiculturalism upholds a national identity as being kind, gentle, caring, and peaceful (Kymlicka, 2003). However, such representations have been criticized as a liberal multicultural approach to superficial celebration and idealization of difference, which leads to both essentializing and assimilating the cultural Other. In synthesizing criticisms of Canadian multiculturalism, Sato and Este (2017) problematize the lack of attention to racism despite its prevalence in every corner of Canadian society (Fleras, 2014; Henry et al., 2017; James, 2010; Kubota, 2015). They promote critical multiculturalism, which problematizes essentialism and unequal relations of power that oppress racialized groups.

In sum, Canadian multiculturalism within a bilingual framework has created and perpetuated a racial and linguistic hierarchy between the White founding anglophone and francophone groups and raciolinguistic Others. What further needs to be uncovered is how raciolinguistic hegemony fortified by state policies is embodied in everyday experiences of racialized people.

About this study

Guided by CRT, this qualitative study aimed to uncover and examine how graduate students and faculty of a Canadian university experienced racialization and racism in relation to issues of language. We conducted the study as part of a larger research project investigating experiences of racialized faculty, staff, and students at a university located in a city with a raciolinguistically diverse population in an anglophone province of Canada.

Conceptual orientation

Critical race theory, a framework originally developed in US legal studies, recognizes that racism in various forms permeates all levels of society and shapes everyday experiences, negatively affecting the lives of racialized groups while maintaining White supremacy (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). It acknowledges the diversity of experiences within a racialized group arising from intersectionality of race, gender, class, sexuality, language, and other identity categories. As such, just as critical multiculturalism disavows cultural essentialism, CRT questions essentialization of a single identity assigned to a racialized group. Critical race theory has also been employed in the field of education in general

(e.g., Han and Laughter, 2019; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) and language education (Crump, 2014; see Von Esch et al., 2020) to uncover the hidden realities of racial oppression and discrimination against racialized people. This study will illuminate intersectionality, especially between race and language.

As a research method, CRT employs counter-storytelling (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002), which addresses and understands racism by centering on the experiences and perspectives of racially marginalized people. Listening to their stories of lived experiences allows researchers to expose and understand how racism is interwoven with other forms of oppression or privilege and impacts the lives of racialized people.

Data generation and analysis

Participants were recruited via email sent to listservs of an academic unit at the university. The email invited self-identified racialized members to take part in a survey, which contained demographic questions (e.g., self-identified racial and ethnic group, language, gender), open-ended questions about their challenges of being racialized, and their willingness to participate in further interviews. Of a total of 62 survey responses, we interviewed 19 participants who self-identified as racialized, Indigenous, non-White, or people of color. Of them, 13 offered substantial discussions on language-related issues in the interviews and focus groups, whereas the other six, including two Indigenous participants, did not report any language-related problems. We analyzed data offered by these 13 participants. They included three faculty members, nine doctoral and master students, and one with a status of both instructor and student. Their self-identified ethno-racial categories encompassed mixed-race/biracial, South Asian, East Asian, West Asian, East/Southeast Asian, Arabian, and Latin American. Among them, eight self-identified as NNESSs, five self-identified as NESSs, and one self-identified as a non-native French speaker (NNFS)—10 were women, whereas three were men.

To minimize power differentials, a graduate student researcher interviewed student participants, whereas the faculty investigator interviewed faculty participants. Both individual and focus group interviews were conducted in 2020–2021 via Zoom and followed the Zoom interview guidelines of the University's Research Ethics Board. All interviews were audio- or video-recorded based on each participant's preference.

Individual interviews followed a semi-structured format with open-ended dialogues about emerging topics. They probed how racism manifested and impacted racialized individuals interpersonally (e.g., microaggressions) and institutionally (e.g., admission, employment, racial representation, policies) in working/studying, as well as how language or other identities intersected with racism. Although we were interested in hearing about on-campus experiences, participants were also invited to freely share their experiences outside of the campus.

Three focus groups were conducted with two or three student participants in each group. One focus group was arranged with ethno-linguistic affinity grouping. Our aim was not only to generate data but also to offer a safe space for sharing. Thus, the racialized graduate student researcher, who had already built rapport with most interviewees, served as the moderator. Since we wanted to better understand both similarities and differences in

the participants' experiences and perspectives, we added comparing/contrasting questions or reflective questions (e.g., "Is there any experience of racism that you would like to share with the group?") and questions suggested during individual interviews (e.g., As a racialized minority, what is it that we want?).

For data analysis, from the large repository of data, we extracted segments in which participants mentioned issues related to language, and then applied a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Much of the analysis was conducted simultaneously with data generation as each interviewer wrote analytic and reflective notes to document interview highlights. Following data generation, we listened to and viewed the recordings, transcribed the relevant parts, and generated themes. In doing so, we focused on what and how the participants communicated, seeking to understand patterns and particularities within the data. We also paid close attention to the use of gestures to capture emotions and tones. Finally, we incorporated member-checking to build mutual trust and validate interpretations (Yin, 2016).

Our study could have benefitted from a broader representation of racialized groups, especially Black members, as well as a larger number of faculty members. The absence of Black participants is perhaps because Black members are severely underrepresented in the university. Regarding the low response rate from faculty, one participant shared possible reasons, including a fear of being further traumatized by talking about emotional pain and a concern about becoming identifiable within the stories. Accordingly, we are taking extra measures to protect participants' confidentiality in the next section.

Stories

Participants shared varied experiences of racism and how they intersected with language, communication, and semiotic representations. Specifically, they shared how their racialized lives were intertwined with assumptions and expectations imposed by others regarding their language use, communication style, and personal names. Although the participants had diverse intersectional identities with regard to race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, language, and institutional status, their stories shared a common theme of racialization—*being put into a box*. This metaphoric image of *box* was variedly expressed by words such as *mold* or *pigeonhole*. Essentially, the participants, who embraced individually unique intersectional identities, felt that they were often forced into a pre-determined racialized or linguicized single category which constitutes one of the colorfully arranged Canadian multicultural boxes.

In contrast, participants' stories indicate that there is another *box*—an enormous hegemonic *White box* filled with cultural and linguistic privilege and expectations into which they are expected to fit. Most of the self-identified NESs grew up learning English as their dominant language. Thus, they already possess part of this privilege which supposedly protects them from being linguistically marginalized, even though the *White box* rejects their racialized body. Conversely, many NNEs participants had intense experiences of being excluded and simultaneously forced to assimilate. However, the hegemonic forces were often sugar-coated with benevolent caring gestures, reflecting the idea of "Canada as a 'kinder, gentler' country" (Kymlicka, 2003: 364).

The major theme of *being put into a box* was associated with an oft-commented phrase, “Your English is so good”—a trope that signals a compliment but was interpreted as an insult and humiliation by our NNEs participants (cf. Moffitt et al., 2018). Perceived illegitimacy as a French-as-an additional-language speaker was also amplified by the appearance of a racialized body, which accentuates Otherness. While these racialized non-native speakers tended to receive comments on their language with varied connotations, racialized NESs did not receive such comments but instead emphasized confidence in their language. In contrast to these positive representations of the participants’ language proficiency, albeit superficially imposed or self-claimed, an opposite message, “You should speak and write the way WE do,” was identified especially in NNEs’ stories, signaling a deficit view, assimilation, or Othering. The sense of being boxed in is also expressed in how participants’ personal ethnic names as semiotic representations, which they chose to either keep or anglicize, received comments that were imposing. While our racialized participants struggled with raciolinguistic hegemony, some NESs, as well as NNEs, resisted by proclaiming their own choices and exploring their roles in antiracism. In what follows, we will present participants’ stories on these points.

Being put into a box

Racialized participants felt that they were forced into being categorized into a pre-determined raciolinguistic group. A student with Black heritage from Latin America was constructed as, not Black, but Brown, by people and described how various identities were assigned randomly, like Latin American, Mexican, and even from India.

I have people come and talk to me ... in some languages from India, so ‘Hey I don’t speak Indian,’ and they get mad at me, because I don’t reply back in their language and say ‘Okay, I know I LOOK Indian, but it’s because we are MIXED race, we’re very mixed in my country and Latin America in general.’ ... I have never considered myself Indian looking until I arrived to Canada, and now I can see how similar it could be, but it was like this, this, there’s this urge to, for you to fill that BOX, and now I don’t know how to introduce myself. (FG)¹

Similarly, a Canadian-born ethnic Chinese female student used the word *pigeonhole* to describe the multiple identities forced on her, including “rich Asian” and different-sounding Cantonese that she used as a heritage language, leading to questions like “Where are your parents from?”

A male student with multiple identities as Arab, Muslim, and gay, who had lived in many parts of the world, questioned how White Western European superiority would define diversity in a certain way and commented:

They impose that definition on us. ... It is a cartoonish version of different societies around the world. And when you, they interact with a real human, who is not fitting that *mold*, they don’t know what to do with it. ... ‘Oh my god, what are we going to do with you? You’re not fitting the...’

[Another participant] Of course! The *mold* they want you to fit in! [laughs] (FG)

Here, multiculturalism is seen as constellations of people that are neatly categorized according to the idea of, reflecting the comments of the above student from Latin America, “you’re from this place, you should look like this, talk like this, be like this.”

Your English is so good

A comment on good English, however intended, indexes non-native speakerness and carries multiple meanings. For instance, a male student originally from West Asia with extensive experiences and professional qualifications talked about his difficulties obtaining positions:

My boss was telling me why she’s not inviting me for another interview ... and she was telling me how I’m not going to be invited because—I don’t have enough skills, obviously, which is ridiculous, because I DO have those skills, but that’s not the point. Her comment is ‘But your English is so good.’ I told her I speak three languages, like ‘Oh yeah, but your English is so wonderful.’ Like, ‘Thank you,’ but [laughs] ... It’s such a paper-cut micro-aggression kind of stuff. I come to apply for a leadership position and she’s telling me ‘Your English is good.’ (FG)

Underlying this presumed compliment is a message, ‘You are not qualified, but don’t feel bad, your English is good.’ For him, this was a hurtful insult.

A similar comment on English caused a female student from East Asia discomfort. She remembered how a female visiting scholar from her home country was treated when she introduced herself in the departmental orientation meeting:

She said, ‘My English is not very good, but I’m working on it. If you can help me that’d be great’ or something along that line. And I think she tried to exaggerate, like her English is horrible by trying to kind of make a joke out of it. ... What happened was after she introduced herself, some people go to talk to her saying like ‘Your English is FINE, it’s BEAUTIFUL, it’s OKAY’ and she got very confused about how people reacted. ... People [in my department] say everybody’s language is good and everybody’s English is beautiful, but it kind of coats or covers everything that they’re suffering and they want to share together. I felt sometimes uncomfortable with that atmosphere. (FG)

Here, the comments perhaps expressed benevolent sympathy. However, a sense of hardship attached to speaking English that she perhaps wanted to convey was ignored. Operating behind this story also seems to be a sugar-coated form of White supremacy that legitimizes the compliment givers as the ultimate evaluators of “good English.”

A sense of confusion was also felt by a racialized NNEOS student in relation to a traumatic experience of having her thesis proposal negatively judged by her supervisor, who said: “This is poorly written.” Referring to this painful experience, she said:

It's not the first time that I see people complimenting someone's English level or whatever they think about the other person's proficiency level as a compliment, like, 'What does that mean? Why do you have to compliment my proficiency in another language?' like 'What are you trying to do with that?' ... Sometimes I received the message of 'You know what? Maybe your English is not good enough to write this kind of papers but your English is GOOD.' Like okay, so what do I do with it? (FG)

These stories signify subtle or more explicit denigration of the participants' academic and professional competence together with English proficiency, which the perpetrator glosses over with a performative compliment on their English.

In contrast, one NNES faculty member, who described her professional journey as smooth, without racial discrimination, especially in teaching mostly graduate students with critical perspectives, talked slightly differently about the favorable reactions to her English others provided:

I surprise people with my English. ... I don't think I experienced overt discrimination based on my language. ... I guess people who took my courses are the people who don't mind my language or who don't mind my accent. ... and people who don't like me or who hate the way I speak English may not take my courses. ... people did not expect good English from me and then I happened to be okay with English.

While not experiencing overt raciolinguistic discrimination seems circumstantial (i.e., students can choose her as a course instructor), people's surprised reaction to her English problematically signifies a stereotypical image of racialized Others not speaking good English.

Where did you learn French?

While the above examples occurred in English-dominant contexts, speaking French, the other official language of Canada, is mostly relegated to very specific contexts, one of which is school. An East Asian student, who is also a school teacher of French, often received questions such as "Where did you learn French?" and "Did you live in France long enough?" He recounted the following story of an event that took place in his school gym:

At a Teacher-Parent Night and I have a table and I have my Eiffel Tower, it's so cliché ... And people constantly, parents come and ask me 'Are you the Chinese teacher?' 'Are you the math teacher?' I'm like 'OK, there are other Mr. Chans [pseudonym] in the building, and yes, there is Mr. Chan for math and there is a Mr. Chan for science. And, [pointing to his chest] it says 'Monsieur Chan' in French. I wanted to make sure that I am not being confused and I am standing in front of a big Québec flag and a French flag. So, it's pretty obvious that I'm not any other teacher. The assumption is that people are like—'Hmm I'm not sure' [that he is a French teacher]. (I)

He continued that, although he had three White female NNFS colleagues who were teaching French, they never received such questions as “Where did you learn French?” or “What accent do you speak with?” This is a typical example of reverse linguistic stereotyping (Kang and Rubin, 2009), in which ideologies about his bodily appearance dissociated him from the normative image of a French teacher.

I speak perfect English—making efforts to not seem as Asian as possible

Self-identified NES participants did not receive complimentary comments on their English. Instead, they claimed that they spoke “perfect English” or English with a “Canadian accent” or a “British accent,” depending on where they grew up. For these participants, speaking these legitimated forms of English seemed to protect them from the potential harm of racism. However, it seemed that the nature of protection was different between the two female participants—one from West Asian heritage and another from mixed-race background—who were often perceived as White passing, and East Asian non-immigrant participants with the *perpetual-foreigner* stereotype attached to them (Caxaj et al., 2018). For the East Asian participants, speaking English with a legitimate Canadian accent entitled them to be *Canadian* and thus distinct from an *Asian immigrant* who physically appears identical but typically speaks English with an accent. One of them commented:

...a lot of Canadian-born Asian students don't want to be confused as immigrant and they keep apart, and that was my childhood, where students are like 'Oh I don't want people to think I don't speak English because teachers will mark me lower or teachers will ignore me.' So then a lot of Canadian-born Asian kids in school age really made themselves not seem as Asian as possible or not seem as Chinese as possible for fear of marked low or being ignored. (I)

Speaking on behalf of Canadian-born Asians, this participant elucidated the ways in which they try to be part of the large White box by acquiring standardized Canadian English, which would blend in the White majority linguistically and presumably prevent them from being complimented on their English.

Another self-identified NES male Asian participant—actually an immigrant because his family came to Canada when he was six—expressed the significance of acquiring an accent that would distinguish himself from *immigrants*:

When I was younger, I would be like I was Canadian, but I am an immigrant. But I did not tell anybody that, because I mastered the accent as I was young enough to come here and to pick up the local accent. So, people would be actually shocked that I was an immigrant. They are like 'You're not from here?' They have the assumption that I am from here because of the way I SPEAK. ... So, when people say things like, 'Oh you know those people....,' I am like, 'Excuse me, I am actually one of those people.' ... And, I think accent, in some ways, permits entry and, in some ways, allows me to meander in spaces. (I)

For these Asian NES participants, speaking White English offsets their racial stigma and psychologically separates them from immigrants with an overlapping physical appearance.

You should speak and write English the way we do

Participants who were non-native or non-standard language speakers experienced being forced to speak, write, or communicate in the White normative way. For instance, a female participant from Latin America commented:

I've been corrected a few times, on pronunciation or use ... at one point I said I'm going to use a metaphor, and then somebody came off and said 'This is not a metaphor. This is a figuration or an analogy.' I said that's not the point [laughs]. I feel that my language works against, like my accent and my capacity to communicate in a foreign language does affect. ... how I'm perceived, and it decreases the value of what I put on the table, if it's not presented in perfect way in terms of their expectations. And they will be looking for it, to poke the holes. ... If you bring a variety of English, that is not the erudite variety, then you may get penalized. (I)

Another participant, a South Asian female student, shared her experience of having her writing style negatively commented on anonymously by her instructor in a classroom during her first year of study in Canada. It was about posting discussion questions online:

The instructor made this comment, 'This is not how an argument is done here,' something like this. I'm 'here,' by 'here' she meant to say in North America and [our university], ... differentiating 'here' from 'there.' So, by that framing, THERE as deficit, you know. Yeah, so that was something that really bothered me a lot. ... As I said earlier, you just can't get rid of your own ways of writing or saying things. So, that was really, I would say, not a good experience. (I)

While this participant pointed out different writing conventions, a male student from West Asia complained how his cultural communication style was criticized:

Got a comment from my colleague, 'You are not smiling enough.' ... Where I come from, you don't smile, just...this constant smile is not appropriate. They thought I am bringing down the team, because I don't laugh enough. (FG)

These stories are typical for non-native speakers' experiences and they index cultural difference rather than race, although racism is often expressed in cultural terms (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). In contrast, the ending of the following story told by a racialized NNEOS participant elucidates how race and language intersect in this painful experience, which we touched upon earlier:

When I was chosen to do this graduate program, they told me that they liked, and they enjoyed my writing a lot, that they thought it was very good. And ... in the past two years, I have sent [my supervisor] lots of texts written in the class that I thought they could work towards my dissertation. And he was like, 'Yeah, that's well written,' but I never got any feedback. ... Now when I sent him my thesis proposal, he told me, like, 'Now, you know what? This is poorly written. Please write in plain English, and I think these communications issues have to do with English being your second language.' So I got angry because most of the paper was other papers that I have sent him way before. (FG)

Although this made her feel the problem was her language rather than conceptual issues, she confronted her supervisor, explaining that English was her *foreign* language but she knew why she chose certain words and styles by referring to linguistic terms. However, her linguistic explanations apparently offended her supervisor. She continued:

It felt like, okay, am I really a bad writer? I don't want to continue anymore. And since that moment on, I haven't been able to write anything. ... And when he tells me to write in plain English, I don't know how to read that phrase. What is plain English? We are supposed to be writing in academic English and you tell me to write in plain English, what do I make of that? (FG)

She then made a link between language and race. She said, "Yes, I thought that there were some racial issues," and shared her conversation with a Black peer from Africa:

We started talking about our experiences without telling names, and when we started looking at similarities, we started looking into names and we had names that were intertwined in our stories. How is this possible? Does this happen to people? And the worst part is that English is his first language. So there is no excuse in this case about the language thing being a problem. So we started asking which English is the one that is valid. (FG)

For her, having their academic English texts devalued was clearly intertwined with racialization, indicating power dynamics of the writer and the reader as the racialized and White subject, respectively (Flores and Rosa, 2015; Kubota, 2003).

Why does your Chinese sound funny?

In the above examples, racialized NNES participants were penalized by the White NES norm. A similar experience of raciolinguistic Othering was narrated by heritage speakers of Chinese. Although they did not explicitly mention the link between race and language, underlying their stories was their racio-ethnic background. For instance, a male NES of Chinese descent, who spoke Cantonese at home and learned Mandarin at a heritage school, recollected his early adolescent period when he was disconnected with his roots due to speaking English:

It's almost like the reverse that people haven't really commented on my English skills, but they comment on my Cantonese skills, or my Mandarin ability, whether I understand these words or I have a Canadian like accent when I speak Chinese language. ... For a long period of time ... I didn't really want to speak Cantonese, I wanted to speak more English to fit in. It wasn't until like Grade 9, when one of my Chinese friends, she was like 'Why is your Cantonese like so shitty!' And then I was like 'Okay, I guess, I really need to like learn this now.' (FG)

This echoed a Chinese-Canadian female student's experience with her accent in Chinese:

Well, my family left Asia in the 1940s, so our accent is like nonexistent [laughs] and so we're speaking a language with an accent that, you know, doesn't exist anymore. I don't speak with the Hong Kong accent, I don't speak with an accent from mainland China, and it's, you know, it's quite different. ... Someone said, 'Why are you speaking so funny?' because I don't use the slang so. You know, that's frustrating. I do get that people try to pigeonhole me. (FG)

While native speakerness in English arms these participants with power to belong to the normative White NES box, their ways of speaking their heritage language alienate them from the perspective of both White people and those of Asian descent.

Whitened resumes, whitened names, and who decides my name

The ethnic name of a participant as unfamiliar vocabulary in English can be a strong identity marker or a disadvantage. An Arab male student struggled to obtain teaching positions despite his sufficient qualifications. He asked himself, "Is it because of my name?" For him, his ethnic name was a potential cause for being excluded. Previous studies have indeed found disadvantages of ethnic names in the job market evidenced by a low call-back rate for interviews (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004; Booth et al., 2012; Oreopoulos, 2011). A female student from Latin America shared a story consistent with these studies:

So I did an experiment. My name is Leticia [pseudonym], which can be hard to pronounce, and I have a hard last name as well. While looking for a job, I have used Leticia. But then after a few months ... nobody, well not nobody, but I would have a hard time or it would be a harder time to get interviews. And I was like, oh, hey, let's just make it simpler. My name. I just changed it to Lia [pseudonym] and I started getting more calls [laughs]. (I)

Anglicizing names as a strategy for obtaining employment is called *resume whitening* (Kang et al., 2016). While the above student engaged in *resume whitening*, another female participant from West Asia resisted such tactics that was suggested at an off-campus workshop given by an immigration service for newcomers to Canada:

They said if I basically put a nickname that is familiar [and more Western] in this context on my CV, ... maybe I get a higher chance to be invited for the job interview. And I was very shocked and disappointed, because I thought that is part of my identity and how I know myself, and I do not want to change my name or choose a nickname that I'm not comfortable with just because I want to find a job or because it is easier for people to call me. If they want to get connected with me, they should learn how to pronounce my name just like the way I should learn how to pronounce their names, right? (I)

Aside from job hunting, a classroom is a context where participants felt ambivalent about using names. The following two contrasting cases are intriguing. First, a West Asian Canadian female student remembered the first day of a class taught by a racialized instructor. Reacting to the English name introduced by a Chinese-looking student, this instructor commented:

Please feel comfortable to use either name. I DON'T think it's too hard for people to learn your real name, or the name you were given if you like your given name. ... We will take the time to learn your names and how to say it right. (I)

For this participant, such a comment was the first time of its kind from an instructor. She felt fortified by this approach and thought it should be the norm. It also resonated with her own decision to keep her ethnic name, despite her earlier experiences of being bullied because of it.

Second, a female student from East Asia felt uncomfortable when she was forced to use her ethnic name instead of her preferred Anglicized name by a White male instructor, who assumed her home country even though she had not self-disclosed:

I said, my name is Claire [pseudonym] in that course, and he kind of challenged me, 'Why are you using an English name? Why don't you use your [ethnic] name?' It was very strange to me how he had this authority to decide my name instead of myself. His rationale was that 'All the people I've met so far [from your country] use their own names therefore I'm very confused why you use it...' (FG)

For her, her English name was very special. She said, "It was a big part of who I am in this program, so I wanted to embrace it." Her peers also ignored her identity and questioned why she was using an English name or what her *real name* was, even though "they don't even know how to pronounce that name." She associated such experience with her racialized appearance and NNESSness. She suffered from imposed ethnic categorization based on a preconceived assumption.

Resistance and antiracism: This is my choice

Despite a sense of being categorized, marginalized, or rejected, some participants tried to resist. Resistance was expressed in a nuanced way by the aforementioned racialized

NNES student who felt mistreated by her supervisor; she problematized the imposed identity of being a poor writer:

I didn't fight for myself and this idea of 'No, this is the language and the syntax that I want to use. Yes, maybe there are mistakes, but this is not a mistake, this is a conscious CHOICE.' ... I've been fighting with the idea of I cannot let others define who I am, because of these racialized notions of what an X person should be.(FG)

This sense of self-determination resonated with a statement by an NNES male participant, who noticed that NESs make more mistakes than he does, but he is often corrected:

I've had so many papers [corrected by others] like 'Oh, you should use this,' but that's NOT the word, that's NOT what I wanted to say. I know what that means, and I want to say THIS. ... their expectation is that everyone should speak this way. And I know other languages, so ... I just construct language a little differently. So maybe you can open your mind a little bit and consider that someone else IS proficient in English AND wants to communicate this way. (FG)

Resistance was also found in how some participants handled the perceived imposition of changing or holding on to their ethnic names, as discussed above.

Proclaiming self-determination as resistance overlaps with expressing a stance of antiracism and anti-monolingualism. For instance, an NES Asian participant spoke about overcoming the complicity with colonization, systemic racism, and structural oppression in his tendency to "not rock the boat." He questioned "How do I turn the privilege I have in those positions I'm in and to really start to push back?" (FG). Another NES Asian participant expressed skepticism against the antiracist initiative of simply hiring racialized people, and instead advocated that "the kind of material and the lens we apply to ... different content that we're teaching to students needs to be ... revamped and totally changed" (FG). He also questioned the English-only policy for an academic program on campus for international students, mostly from China, in which he worked as a teaching assistant. His experience of having to force students to use English only was upsetting:

I also, you know, find myself asking and questioning too like, 'Why are we all speaking English?' ... You know, this sort of language dominance or they are all tied to a lot of other, you know, issues, whether it's with ... White supremacy or with heteronormativity ... and the patriarchy ... all the things it's kind of like kind of group them all together. (FG)

Here, he clearly recognized the oppressive forces interlocking language with race, gender, and sexuality. As a student, he feels less empowered to speak up even though he is concerned about the wellbeing of the students, but urges program directors, instructors, and material developers to critically examine the impacts of these policies and practices on the students.

Discussion

Many racialized participants in this study expressed their feelings of being forced into pre-determined categories of race, nationality, and language. The effects were feeling Othered, excluded, and injured. The complimentary remarks made to NNES participants' English, however, they were intended, reflect raciolinguistic ideology that assumes racialized immigrants or international students are deficient speakers to begin with. When NNESs speak "good enough" English, they either surprise people or deserve compliments, which sometimes offset negative evaluation of other professional or academic qualities. When a negative evaluation is attached to the same linguistic compliment, the recipient feels patronized and undermined.

There is also a hegemonic White Canadian NES or NFS *box* that functions as the norm to which everyone is expected to fit in. Indeed, official Canadian multiculturalism within a bilingual framework reflects the state interest of building national unity founded on the bilingual and bicultural hegemony of White settlers (Haque, 2012). Although all the participants are proficient English or French speakers, none fits the category of White NES/NFS settlers that stands at the top of the power hierarchy. The hegemonic *White box* forces racialized people to fit in, but in reality, they can rarely rise up to the top of the *White box* even if their English is deemed "good."

While racialized NNES people are obviously excluded from this *White box*, racialized NES participants occupy a linguistic space inside the box. However, they are still affected by the racial hierarchy. Whereas two participants were White passing, NES East Asian participants seemed to suffer from a greater racial stigma. The stories told by these Asian participants indicated their significant efforts to fit in linguistically while growing up, and very little was mentioned about being discriminated against due to their English. Applying the empirical evidence of reverse linguistic stereotyping to this context (e.g., Kang and Rubin, 2009; Rubin, 1992), we could say that their race may trigger negative perceptions about their linguistic and other competence despite their English being unmarked (i.e., White-sounding). However, such stereotyping was either absent or unnoticed, perhaps due to a large presence of Asians in the geographical location or their effort to not let their race negatively affect their unmarked English. While claiming White unmarked English may offset the racialized stigma of being wrongly categorized as Asian immigrants, their racially marked Otherness is never erased.

This reminds us of a narrative offered by Lee (2021). Karen Lee, a third-generation Asian woman teacher educator in Canada, felt assaulted by a comment made by a White man, "I like talking to you because you don't have an accent" (Lee, 2021: 618). Underlying this comment is the assumption that a woman who looks like Lee would be an immigrant and speak with an accent. The same comment would never be made to a White woman, similar to our NNFS participant's observation that his White NNFS colleagues never receive comments about their French. Such comment racializes Lee and brings her linguistic ability, which is supposed to be unmarked for her, to the fore. A similar example is found in Moffit et al. (2018: 843)—a study on Turkish-heritage young adults' experiences in German schools. One German-born participant recounted an incident, in which his 10th-grade teacher said "...it's really good, um, that you can use German

figures of speech like a German student would.” The participant took the comment as discriminatory against all Turkish students. Such compliments about language can evoke the trans-generational injuries of racism.

The notion that proficiency in English safeguards Asian Canadians is also reflected in the experience narrated by Kubota (2015). The author, a Japanese immigrant to Canada, was mistaken by two White men for a Chinese tourist by sight. However, the author’s striking conversation with them immediately prompted them to ask, “Were you born here? Are you Canadian?” Proficiency in English does offer a status of entitlement as a non-immigrant legitimate settler. Interestingly, another question that these men repeatedly asked the author was “What is your name?” Names are a type of sign, which elicits pre-existent images (Smith, 2017). As Huo, 2020 experienced, only particular first names index “Canadianness,” while ethnic names signal racialized foreignness, as some of the stories in this study indicated. Yet, a name constitutes a very special aspect of one’s identity. Our racialized participants struggled with the decision of whether they remain outside or go inside of the hegemonic *White box* filled with Anglo first names.

Conclusion

Not every Asian is the same type of one story.

When we talk about diversity, ... we don’t think of it as one person being very diverse.

These comments were made by one of the participants. The first one reminds us of a Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s acclaimed TED Talk, “The danger of a single story.” While Adichie problematizes how the images of a certain country or culture are stereotyped, our participants speak to the danger of putting each of East Asian, South Asian, West Asian, or Latin American groups into one box neatly compartmentalized by a homogeneous category of race, ethnicity, language, nationality, and so on. On the contrary, each group contains vast diversity and differences, which can be found in linguistic and racialized experiences between, for instance, immigrants and settler citizens. Moreover, the second comment above points to how the complexity of each person cannot be defined by a single ethnoracial or linguistic identity. As another participant commented, “I’m like walking intersectionality”; each person carries diversity regarding family history and life experiences on top of other identity categories. Universities should not continue to impose a single story onto a group of members who are categorized by their race, language, and other identity markers, nor should they force all members to tell the stories in the same language or the same form of a language.

We, as antiracist actors in society and institutions, aim to share the stories told by our participants with a broader audience in accessible ways so that people understand how racialized members’ experiences are tightly intertwined with White expectations, which many of our participants resist, challenge, and dismantle. This understanding would be the first step for antiracist engagement.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Ryuko Kubota  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5072-7169>

Note

1. *FG* indicates focus group, whereas *I* indicates individual interview as data source.

References

- Alim S, Rickford JR and Ball AF (eds), (2016) *Raciolinguistics: How Language Shapes Our Ideas about Race*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bertrand M and Mullainathan S (2004) Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A field experiment on labor market discrimination. *The American Economic Review* 94(4): 991–1013.
- Bonilla-Silva E (2018) *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. 5th edition. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Booth A, Leigh A and Varganova E (2012) Does ethnic discrimination vary across minority groups? evidence from a field experiment. *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics* 74: 547–573.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.
- Caxaj CS, Chau S and Parkins I (2018) How racialized students navigate campus life in a mid-sized Canadian city: ‘thrown against a white background’ but ‘comfortable enough to laugh’. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 24(4): 503–522.
- Crump A (2014) Introducing LangCrit: critical language and race theory. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 11(3): 207–224.
- Delgado R and Stefancic J (2012) *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd edition. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Fleras A (2014) *Racism in a Multicultural Canada*. Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier Press.
- Flores N and Rosa J (2015) Undoing appropriateness: raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review* 85(2): 149–171.
- Haque E (2012) *Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework: Language, Race, and Belonging in Canada*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Haque E and Patrick D (2015) Indigenous languages and the racial hierarchisation of language policy in Canada. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 36(1): 27–41.
- Henry F, James C, Li PS, et al. (2017) *The Equity Myth: Racialization and Indigeneity at Canadian Universities*. UBC Press.

- Han KT and Laughter J (eds), (2019) *Critical Race Theory in Teacher Education: Informing Classroom Culture and Practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Huo X (2020) *Higher Education Internationalization and English Language Instruction: Intersectionality of Race and Language in Canadian Universities*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- James C (2010) *Seeing Ourselves: Exploring Race, Ethnicity and Culture*. 4th edition. Toronto, Canada: Thompson Educational Publishing Inc.
- Kang O and Rubin DL (2009) Reverse linguistic stereotyping: measuring the effect of listener expectations on speech evaluation. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 28(4): 441–456.
- Kang SK, DeCelles KA, Tilcsik A, et al. (2016) Whitened Résumés: race and self-presentation in the labor market. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 61(3): 469–502.
- Kubota R (2003) New approaches to gender, class, and race in second language writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 12(1): 31–47.
- Kubota R and Lin A (eds), (2009) *Race, Culture, and Identities in Second Language Education: Exploring Critically Engaged Practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kubota R (2015) Race and language learning in multicultural Canada: towards critical antiracism. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 36(1): 3–12.
- Kymlicka W (2003) Being Canadian. *Government and Opposition* 38(3): 357–385.
- Mayuzumi K (2015) Navigating orientalism: Asian women faculty in the Canadian academy. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 18(2): 277–296.
- Moffitt U, Juang LP and Syed M (2018) “We don’t do that in Germany!” A critical race theory examination of Turkish heritage young adults’ school experience. *Ethnicities* 19(5): 830–857.
- Motha S (2014) *Race, Empire, and English Language Teaching*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Ladson-Billings G and Tate WF (1995) Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record* 97(1): 47–68.
- Lee E (2015) Doing culture, doing race: everyday discourses of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural difference’ in the English as a second language classroom. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 36(1): 80–93.
- Lee KV (2021) White whispers 2: an Asian experience. *Qualitative Inquiry* 27(5): 618–621.
- Oreopoulos P (2011) Why do skilled immigrants struggle in the labor market? A field experiment with thirteen thousand resumes. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 3(2011): 148–171.
- Park G (2012) ‘I am never afraid of being recognized as an NNED’: one teacher’s journey in claiming and embracing her nonnative-speaker identity. *TESOL Quarterly* 46(1): 127–151.
- Ramjattan VA (2019) Racist nativist microaggressions and the professional resistance of racialized English language teachers in Toronto. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 22(3): 374–390.
- Rubin DL (1992) Nonlanguage factors affecting undergraduates’ judgments of nonnative English-speaking teaching assistants. *Research in Higher Education* 33(4): 511–531.
- Sah PK (2019) Academic discourse socialization, scalar politics of English, and racialization in study abroad: a critical autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report* 24(1): 174–192.
- Sato C and Este D (2017) From multiculturalism to critical multiculturalism. In: Este D, Lorenzetti L and Sato C (eds), *Racism and Anti-Racism in Canada*. Halifax, Canada: Fernwood Publishing, pp. 329–366.

- Smith GW (2017) The semiotic meanings of names. *Onomastica (Wroclaw)* 61(1): 111–118.
- Solórzano DG and Yosso TJ (2002) Critical race methodology: counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 8(1): 23–44.
- Sterzuk A (2015) ‘The standard remains the same’: language standardization, race and othering in higher education. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 36(1): 53–66.
- Tankosic A and Dovchin S (2021) (C)overt linguistic racism: Eastern-European background immigrant women in the Australian workplace. *Ethnicities*. DOI: [10.1177/14687968211005104](https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968211005104).
- Von Esch KS, Motha S and Kubota R (2020) Race and language teaching. *Language Teaching* 53(4): 391–421.
- Yin RK (2016) *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*. 2nd edition. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.