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"Come Join Us and Lose Your Accent!" Accent Modification Courses as Hierarchization of International Students

Johanna Ennser-Kananen
Mia Halonen
Taina Saarinen
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the hierarchization of international students by bringing together perspectives of linguistic legitimacy and language ideologies. Our data stems from 26 accent reduction or accent modification course descriptions and websites from U.S. universities. Based on their analysis, we discuss the sociopolitical implications of the phenomenon of these courses for international students and the ways in which language-based, particularly accent-based, arguments are used to create or reinforce different categories of students. We argue that while international students are presented as having different kinds of "comprehensibility problems" that accent modification and reduction courses are claimed to remedy, the seemingly linguistic arguments that are used for marketing do not hold. Rather, what is presented as an accent issue actually seems to be an ideological one, drawing on the students' ethnic or geographical origins, and thereby racializing the question of language proficiency.

Keywords: accent, international study, language ideology, student hierarchization

> This course is designed for high-level non-native speakers of English who want to modify their accent and increase their confidence in a variety of speaking situations. —*College A*

In order to study internationally, students generally need to have command of the language(s) of their hosting institutions. In English-speaking countries, language skills are often measured by standardized tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which are used to measure certain aspects of the linguistic performance of nonnative English-speakers.[1] The notion of "high-level" skills in the extract above from a U.S.-based college refers to such test scores. The tests have, however, been problematized for ethicality, validity, washback effects, and cultural bias (e.g., McNamara & Roever, 2006), and even high-level nonnative English-speaking international students are commonly offered so-called accent reduction (AR) or accent modification (AM) courses in order to ease their problems in adjusting to their studies and the community. The above extract from College A highlights the paradox we want to analyze and discuss in this article: While international students have demonstrated high-level skills in English, they are still presented as needing to modify their accent.

AM or AR courses are a phenomenon familiar in professional, medical, and educational sectors (see for instance, Blommaert, 2009; Ramjattan, 2019), as foreign accents are believed to interfere with the success of international professionals and students. Although these courses claim to boost students' study and labor market success, there is evidence that they reinscribe racial inequalities (Ramjattan, 2019). While there is research on professional and business AM/AR courses (Blommaert, 2009; Ramjattan, 2019), no work exists that investigates such courses in the context of international study. This article fills this gap by analyzing AM/AR courses from the perspective of language ideologies and their repercussions for the hierarchization of international students. Ideologies of accent allow us a window into social power dynamics and ethnic hierarchizations that are implicated in the discourses on the websites that constitute our data. With this, we address de Wit's (2020) concern in the 10th Anniversary Series essay of the *Journal of International Students*, as he called for a more ethical and qualitative approach in order to understand new dimensions of international study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to recent estimates, approximately one in four international students (1.1. million) study in the United States (Zong & Batalova, 2018). We follow the general definition by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2013) of international students as those having crossed borders for the purpose of study, who are not residents of their country of study, or who have received their secondary education in another country. From 2016–2017, China was the top country of origin of these students, making up 33% of the total, followed by India (17%), South Korea (5%), and Saudi Arabia (5%;

[1] Although "nonnative speaker" is a highly problematic concept, we use it here in order to speak back to data and prior literature on the topic.

Zong & Batalova, 2018). In all, at least two-thirds of international students in the United States came from Asia, another 7% from the Middle East, and 4% from Latin America (Statista, 2019). Our literature review focuses on language issues of international study and the role AM/AR may have in addressing them.

The Paradox of High Language Skills and AM Courses

The problems international students face in the United States are commonly summarized as "adapting to a new culture, English language problems, financial problems and lack of understanding from the broader university community" (Sherry et al., 2010, p. 33). This has led to recommendations for pedagogical development of the staff in receiving institutions (Wolf & Phung, 2019). However, Lee and Rice (2007) have pointed out that not all problems international students face can and should be understood as matters of individual adjustment. Rather, based on a case study of one large U.S. university, they suggested that neo-racism (i.e., discrimination based on proxies for race such as culture and national origin) was a key problem international students experienced, surfacing as feelings of discomfort, direct and indirect confrontations, and verbal abuse. While students from Europe, Canada, and New Zealand reported nothing of the kind, Middle Eastern, Latin American, and Asian students experienced "considerable discrimination" (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 393), pointing to racism as the underlying problem. Language, particularly accent, is were bias often surfaces. For instance, Yeo et al. (2019) observed that Asian American students reported being racialized based on their perceived English proficiency, prompting them to speak "exaggeratedly [...] well-formed English" to signal belonging to the group of domestic students (p. 52).

Interestingly, a discrepancy exists between perceived and tested language skills. For instance, Xu (1991) found that while standardized TOEFL test scores did not predict students' perceived academic difficulty significantly, self-rated proficiency in English was the most significant predictor. Thus, even though language tests are required for entry, previous research does not support a straightforward link between test results and academic success. We want to examine this apparent discrepancy a bit closer.

Language arguments are rarely about language alone. Similarly, accent is not only a linguistic but also a sociocultural phenomenon that has been the focus of a lot of research in recent years (e.g., Lippi-Green, 2012; Moyer, 2013). Accent does not refer to so-called intelligibility ('understandability') of the speech, that is, formal language proficiency. Instead, it refers to features that do not affect meaning in a way that vocabulary, prepositions, or idiomatic expressions do. Accent refers to the listeners' perception of how closely the pronunciation approaches a so-called phonetic norm of a native speaker (Flege, 1988). Even though native speech accents also vary, foreign accent is perceptually so fundamental that humans are able to detect one from very early age on, even in a single word played backwards or in a language one does not know (Kinzler, 2008; Major, 2007). The experience of immediate recognition of hearing others speak one's own first language with a foreign accent is familiar, relatable, and intuitive.

This does not, however, make foreign accented speech unintelligible. On the contrary, it has been shown that native-speaking listeners are easily and rapidly able to adapt to different foreign accents when exposed to them; comprehensibility is not only collaborative but also learnable (Bradlow & Bent, 2008). However, what foreign accented speech might affect is the listeners' willingness to understand, that is, *comprehensibility*. Comprehensibility is a mediation concept between understanding speech (intelligibility) and stance toward a speaker. It refers to the perceived ease or difficulty of understanding a speaker and is thus per definition always a two-way street. In other words, comprehension does not hinge solely on the speaker; rather, all the participants are responsible for the communicative process (Munro & Derwing, 1999; Trofimovich & Isaacs, 2012).

Research (e.g., Major et al., 2005) documents clearly that some accents are perceived as more legitimate in particular contexts than others and that these perceptions are not ideologically innocent. For instance, a study by Wang et al. (2018) on communication between international and local students in the United States showed that local students viewed international students with mild accents as more intelligent and educated than those with stronger accents, thus illustrating that perceived accentedness is neither socially nor ideologically neutral.

A focus on accents oftentimes serves as a basis for stereotyping and hierarchizing students and categorizing speakers as groups assumed to share a general geographical origin (e.g., *Asia*) and a particular accent (e.g., *Asian accent*). Focus on language thus becomes indexical of country of origin or ethnicity. As Blommaert (2009) noted in his analysis of web-based AM courses, AM is "not about learning American English, but learning to sound like an American" (pp. 245–246).

Linguistic Legitimacy and the Mismatch Between Comprehensibility and Accent

As high proficiency in English, as documented by standardized tests, is a prerequisite for being accepted to study at U.S. institutions, the students who are targeted by AM/AR courses already are proficient in English. How can speakers have high proficiency and "incomprehensible" accents at the same time? At the point at which the listener thinks they hear a so-called *wrong* pronunciation, they have already understood. In more academic terms, paradoxically, comprehensibility precedes the claimed necessity of AR/AM courses.

In order to understand the role that accents play in the experiences of international students, we outline how language practices are socially perceived, that is, what is considered a legitimate linguistic practice in a given context.

The concept of linguistic legitimacy can be traced back to Bourdieu (1977) who defined a "legitimate language" as

> … uttered by a legitimate speaker, i.e. by the appropriate person … ; uttered in a legitimate situation, i.e. on the appropriate market … and addressed to legitimate receivers; … [i.e.] formulated in the legitimate

> phonological and syntactic forms (what linguists call grammaticalness), except when transgressing these norms is part of the legitimate definition of the legitimate producer. (p. 650, emphasis removed)

Building on the Bourdieuian foundations, Norton (2000) examined and theorized the limited "right to speak" of adult English learners in Canada, whose high investment in language learning did not always transfer to being perceived as legitimate speakers. Relatedly, Ennser-Kananen's (2018) work with multilingual German foreign language learners in the United States underlined the fluid nature of linguistic legitimacy, defined as "discursively constructed acceptance or validation for their language use" (p. 18). When AM/AR courses advertise an expected improvement of comprehension, what may on the surface be described as a problem of speech is in fact an issue related to its speakers, who are for various reasons positioned as *illegitimate communicators*.

AM courses operate on the assumption that some accents are more legitimate than others and substantiate this by describing nonnative accents as interfering with their speakers' comprehensibility and ultimately their social integration and professional credibility. However, (in)comprehensibility is never ideologically neutral, but a complex relationship between linguistic and ethnoracial category-making (Rosa, 2019).

Despite comprehensibility being a two-way street, in practice it is usually shouldered by those who are considered foreign to a particular context. For instance, while international students have been shown to be concerned about understanding local accents (Marginson et al., 2010), the AM/AR courses in our data encouraged students to lose their accent rather than the teachers to adjust theirs in order to be more comprehensible. How are such misinterpretations of comprehensibility used as an efficient market bait for AM/AR courses?

First, as argued above, even though accents rarely affect intelligibility, they are usually immediately recognized. Therefore, accents do also provide an easy link to the assumed (ethnic, national, linguistic) background of the speaker. As Creese and Kambere (2002) argued, perceptions of accents are racializing as they are "embodied markers of immigration" (p. 10).

Second, accent tends to convey a certain sociopolitical innocence that allows the concept to be used apparently unproblematically. According to Nguyen (1993), as labor market discrimination in the United States based on sex, race, color, national origin, and religion became regulated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, accent has become a common ground for discrimination of nonnative English-speakers. The notion of comprehensibility, including non-accentedness, has thus taken the place of a racist gatekeeper in labor and education markets by constructing accents as ideologically neutral rather than as intrinsically tied to the speakers and their origins.

METHOD

Research Design

Our research design is descriptive, explorative, and phenomenon-based. Our different expertise (linguistic legitimacy, language ideologies, higher education internationalization) were critical for the design, as our collaborative engagement provided a certain amount of researcher triangulation when identifying themes and conducting the analysis. As researchers, we position ourselves within a critical paradigm. We thus subscribe to a research-based understanding of higher education as socially stratified and language use as functional, culturally shaped, and communicatively situated. In keeping with a critical approach to language in education, we want to make inconsistencies, inaccuracies, inequalities, and hidden agendas in real-world data visible.

Research Questions

Given the scarcity of literature that discusses AM courses from a higher education policy and language ideological perspective, our exploratory and analytical efforts aimed at understanding the role of language, the constructed legitimacy of languages and accents, and the process of student hierarchization in course descriptions of AM/AR courses at U.S. higher education institutions.

The following research questions motivated our study:

1. What does the promotion of AM/AR courses tell us about the role of languages (and by proxy their speakers) in the internationalization of U.S. higher education? What view of language is promoted in the course descriptions?
2. What accents or varieties are described as valued and legitimate and how is this done? In which way do these descriptions intersect with other social factors, particularly race and ethnicity?
3. What hierarchizations of international students are constructed through the ways in which some accents are presented? Who is the imagined target audience?

Through this, we invite a discussion around the sociopolitical implications of the phenomenon in international student mobility, and show that AM/AR courses are not primarily about language skills but use (intentionally or not) the notion of *language* ideologically to construct hierarchies based on nationality and ethnicity.

Data

Data for this study consists of texts from 26 websites of U.S.-based higher education institutions that, at the time of data collection, in the Spring 2018 semester, offered AM/AR courses. While the commercial market (often directed

at professionals in fields such as business, education, or medicine) is another significant context for such courses (Ramjattan, 2019), this study focuses on higher education. The selection of data from college websites was a result of a Google search for strings "accent reduction course" and "accent modification course."

The websites for the courses we analyzed are located at departments of speech pathology, communication and communication disorders, and health, or were situated within continuing education and professional development departments. We focused on the course descriptions on these websites that had the twofold purpose of advertising the courses and informing readers about their content, goals, materials, design, costs, and prerequisites. Because of our interest in a systemic phenomenon rather than the individual institutions, we anonymized our data.

Data Analysis

As a first step, we conducted a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) of our data with a combination of inductive and deductive strategies. Inductively, we identified themes that emerged in the course of multiple in-depth readings across different data sources. Our deductive strategies included scanning for data that related to concepts from our literature resources, such as comprehensibility or legitimacy. Both strategies were combined to identify key themes in the texts.

As a next step, we selected shorter excerpts and phrases from our data for a closer critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) to understand their discursive, sociopolitical, and historical layers of meaning more deeply. For instance, we took a closer look at names for presented varieties of English, such as "Standard American English" to unpack their meaning and implications. We paid special attention to medical terms ("diagnosis," "therapy") and how they were used to describe accents. To understand hierarchization, we focused on direct and indirect hierarchizations of the target group students as others (i.e., "foreign," "nonnative," etc).

Last, we put our identified themes into connection, usually by mapping them visually on a whiteboard, with the goal of understanding them in relation to each other and to bigger societal discourses. This process produced answers to our research questions.

RESULTS

Our analyses produced responses to the research questions that we organized into three themes: images of language and accent, homogenization, and hierarchization of targeted (imagined) speakers.

Images of Language and Accent: Language as Building Blocks and Accent as Pathology

Language and language skills are presented as one major source of problems that international students identify as standing in the way of their academic success and of integrating in the higher education community. However, rather than addressing language(s) as a whole, these websites focus on one component of it, accent. In response to our first research question, we examined the understanding of language that undergirds the content of the course websites.

Accents and Language as Building Blocks

A recurring pattern that was prominent on numerous websites was the notion of accent, language, and the learning process as consisting of independent or isolated pieces that are to be acquired in a particular consecutive order. Similar to a set of building blocks, language acquisition or AM is presented happening as a process of putting together individual parts (e.g., vowels, consonants, stress, intonation, etc.) until a particular desired construction is completed. This also applies to language itself, which seems to be viewed as separated from accent, so that the accent block can be simply added onto the previous language blocks that the participants have acquired earlier. For instance, course websites may state the following:

> Topics covered include a quick, basic, and useful introduction to where and how speech sounds are produced; individual sounds of American English in isolation, with close attention to typically problematic consonants and vowels; difficult combinations of sounds; word stress; intonation; and pronunciation differences between formal and casual speech. —*College B*

This extract illustrates the notion of accent as made up of individual sounds that can be learned and taught (quickly and) "in isolation." Other bricks of accent include "combinations of sounds," "word stress," and "intonation." The description of some of these linguistic building blocks as "typically problematic" or "difficult" raises questions about the implied target audience, which is constructed in opposition to users of "American English" (see also next subsection on homogenization). It further invites problematizations of what constitutes "difficult" language or accent features in this context and for whom. A similar targeted variety of English is referred to in the next extract, which also provides examples for "particular sounds" and "melodies" that the respective course addresses:

> ACT involves direct instruction and models for articulation (the way sounds are produced) and prosody (the melody of speech) in Mainstream American English (MAE). It provides opportunities to practice learned skills in a variety of communication settings and situations (e.g., presentations, interviews, ordering food), as well as direct feedback on performance from the

> instructors. The content includes customized instruction of articulation and prosody in MAE to fit an individual's specific needs. The particular sounds (e.g., "th" sound as in "the" and melodies of speech (e.g., stressing/emphasizing the second syllable in "deVElop" instead of the first syllable "DEvelop") that are targeted in training depend on those identified during the evaluation. —*College C*

This extract offers improved pronunciation of particular sounds and correct syllable stress as examples of the course content, all with the goal of complying with "Mainstream American English," a variety that, by any linguistic measures, is purely imaginary and a folk-linguistic belief at best (Niedzielski & Preston, 1999; see also next subsection on homogenization). In addition to reinforcing the notion of accent as a set of building blocks, this extract also distinguishes between "learning" and "practicing," thus introducing another level of Lego-like structures where practice is added on top of learned skills. The notion of a set of building blocks is thereby extended to the process of AM (or, more generally speaking, language learning) itself. In addition to the notion of block building being applied to the three levels of accent, language, and learning, our data analysis also revealed an implied order of this process.

> The class will follow the order of the textbook, emphasizing stress, intonation, rhythm, linking and reductions, as well as vowels and consonants. We will also focus on fluency with exercises designed to encourage the free flow of communication. The course will be a mix of listening to the CDs that come with the book, focused practice, and other fun exercises. —*College A*

As this extract suggests, class and textbook follow a particular order, which implies that the process of modifying one's accent is viewed as consecutive, adding or joining together building blocks. Among the later ones seems to be the block of "fluency," which is also noteworthy for its potential to "encourage the free flow of communication."

In all, a common theme in our data was the understanding of languages, accent, and the AM/learning process as acts of adding isolated building blocks onto earlier constructions in a particular order. This runs counter to current understandings of language as a dynamic, social, and multimodal tool of meaning making and of language learning as a complex and multidirectional process of using and combining a variety of multimodal resources to acquire and negotiate ways of communicating, being in, and making sense of the world (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014; The New London Group, 1996). All of these are skills that both international as well as local students need during their studies and lives.

Pathologization of Accent

Another theme that characterized the websites' discourses on language was the pathologization of accent. Although several websites assure their readers that having an accent is nothing outside of the ordinary, even an important part of

one's cultural identity, and a reason for pride, such statements were often overshadowed by a strikingly forthright discourse of accent pathologization.

> The N. N. Speech and Hearing Clinic offers diagnostic and therapy services for Accent Modification (also called Accent Reduction). These elective clinical services are designed to assist individuals in changing their accents/dialects to Standard American English. … this "elective" therapy focuses on the individual needs of the client, with the objectives selected after an evaluation of linguistic skills. —*College D*

As this extract states, the courses introduced on the respective website are offered by a speech and hearing clinic, which situates accents (here understood as any speech other than so-called Standard American English) in the realm of pathological abnormalities that need to be attended to. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that common medical procedures such as diagnostic and therapy services are offered to prospective client(s). The following extract from the website of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association was linked from College D's website: "Insurance companies will not pay for services to change your accent. This is because an accent is not a speech or language disorder. You will need to speak with your SLP about how you can pay for services."

The mention of insurance in this extract roots AM courses firmly in the pathological realm. The statement "accent is not a speech or language disorder" appears almost ironic, as it seems to apply merely to payment options yet not to the legitimacy of the targeted participants' accents. One consequence of accent being pathologized in ways described above is the impossibility of a natural or independent recovery. In other words, the implication of a "condition" as complicated as accent seems to be that it can only be treated under the supervision and guidance of a professional. The following extracts speak to this point: "The international speaker of English can greatly improve pronunciation with the assistance of this professional speech-language pathologist" (College F).

The pathologization of accent thus goes hand in hand with the need for a professionally trained expert (speech-language pathologist) who can remedy the course participants' deviation from what is described as Standard American English pronunciation. In connection to this elevation of a professional expert, some promises the websites make struck us as noteworthy—for example, the ones stated on the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association website that is behind a link on the website of College E, which invites participants who seek to "… modify their speech pronunciation, sentence intonation, learn the subtleties and implied meanings in English, improve comprehension of English and cultural pragmatics" (College E).

Whether international students (as well as domestic ones) may or may not need the help of a speech pathologist is not the issue here. The placement of some of the courses within a setting of speech pathologies, and the consequent construction of accents in need of remedies and cures, nonetheless implies accents as a pathology. This plays toward a unidirectional construction of comprehensibility hinging on the speaker, and the solution being an intervention with them.

Homogenization: International Students and Imagined Native Speaker Communities

Having discussed the construction of accent as a linguistic problem, we now shift toward what is offered as the solution in AM/AR programs, namely the language varieties that are promoted in the courses.

The notion of "English spoken in the United States" not only refers to English being used within the U.S. context, but also denotes a particular variety in the hierarchization of World Englishes. We acknowledge that not all international students are nonnative speakers of English, but may come from English-speaking countries. However, the English proficiency of these students is also complicated by the fact that different varieties of English have been hierarchized into inner and outer circles. While English is the official language of about 60 countries in the world, it enjoys a different and sociohistorically unique status in the United States, United Kingdom, Anglophone Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland, which is reflected in Kachru's (1992) term "inner circle" for these countries. Other native Englishes spoken, for example, in India, Pakistan, Singapore, and Nigeria are considered to be "outer circle" (e.g., Kachru, 1992). Although these hierarchies within English are subject to negotiation in any given context, differences in status and prestige are often reproduced and perpetuated in higher education (Saarinen & Nikula, 2013). The course descriptions offered a variety of target accents to be learned:

- English/English pronunciation
- North/American English
- Standard American English / Standard American English accent (SAE)
- Mainstream American English (MAE)
- General American English (GAE)
- The American English
- New standard American patterns

The varieties North/American English and English in most language learning contexts might be taken as neutral and commonsensical. However, Standard American English and Standard American English accent are inventions having no basis in research. With regard to the English spoken in the area of North America, linguistically speaking there is no such thing as a standard variety (Labov, 2012), as native speakers' speech always varies idiomatically, regionally, and situationally. In other words, by linguistic standards, American English is a myth. Also the variety described as the new standard American patterns implies and promotes a particular standard, even though the word "pattern" slightly softens the underlying claim of a stable variety.

Given the fact that from a linguistic standpoint there is no such thing as a unified standard variety of American English, AM/AR courses advertising exactly that become highly problematic. In the case of AM/AR courses, these speakers are as imagined as the variety itself. Who is this imagined homogenous

community of imagined native speakers speaking the imagined ideal standard variety that is promoted? A common means of portraying such an ideal is the language ideological process of erasure (Irvine & Gal, 2000) of language internal variation of English(es) and of language in general, also known as homogenization. In the course promotions, this is achieved through three means.

First, the imagined standard is constructed by acronymizing and capitalizing the descriptive words that usually remain rather vague, like General American English (GAE) and Mainstream American English (MAE). From a discourse analytical standpoint, this could be described as a claim of legitimacy (Ennser-Kananen, 2018; Van Leeuwen, 2008), with the invented names mimicking commonly accepted acronyms such as AmE for American English to obtain authority by association. Such invented terms and abbreviations refer to English spoken in Northern America as one homogeneous unit, which is further highlighted by the use of the definite article in the variety name "the American accent."

The second means of homogenization does quite the opposite of naming a variety of assumed standards; it simply does not acknowledge any kind of situational, contextual, regional, or idiosyncratic variation. The imagined standard is described as being spoken to an imagined homogeneous group of passive recipients, who have difficulties comprehending the speech of nonnative speakers. Applying Anderson's (1991) concept of an imagined community, such an imagined native speaker community is discursively constructed as uniform and homogenous on the basis of assumed commonalities, in this case, assumed similar ways of speaking.

Third, a quite common means of homogenization is to chop language up into disconnected building blocks (see above subsection on accent and language as building blocks), which is usually tied to the implication that some features of language are thought of and presented as more prominent and legitimate than others, and that changing them would change the perception of the whole variety. Such a view conceives of language as an indexical field (Eckert, 2008), in which one block can index a whole variety. In our case, the pronunciation of particular linguistic features becomes representative of a homogenous (yet nonexistent) variety of American English.

Through these means, an ideal language and speaker community is created, which seems to serve the promotion of AM/AR courses rather than address an actual linguistic issue.

Hierarchization: International Students as "Others"

In our final analysis section, we look into how students are categorized with ways that emerge from behind the descriptions of assumed language skills and desired accent. The course participants and their accents are described in ways that mark them as others. Their otherness may be implicit, based on language criteria such as nonnativeness, or it may be explicit, based on being "foreign" or "international."

Implicit Otherness: "Nonnatives" as Opposed to "Natives"

The most salient description in our data for potential participants was their so-called nonnativeness. In many second language classrooms, nativeness was and sometimes still is seen as a goal of language learning: A native speaker is considered authentic, has acquired the language from birth on, and is in possession of the so-called correct knowledge of the language (Paikeday, 1985). Such models have been criticized and largely abandoned by language education scholars (e.g., Rampton, 1990), although they pervasively continue to exist in many language learning contexts. In addition to being an obstacle to learning, the ideal of nativeness is ideologically loaded, linking language to constructions of a national and cultural identity, and to a particular (nation) state (McCambridge & Saarinen, 2015).

The extract below is an example of a course description in which nonnative speakers are addressed as the target group and othered as lacking the knowledge of "subtleties and implied meanings in English"—in other words, the knowledge of native speakers' language. The construction of otherness and nonbelonging is not a (purely) linguistic one. As the nonnative speakers are described as others vis-a-vis native speakers of an imagined variety of General American English (see subsection on homogenization above), they become positioned as outside of, or even in opposition to, a group that is understood to share the status of *being American*. In other words, through the equation of accent and geographical region, linguistic othering becomes an exclusion based on nationality and cultural background, or more simply put, based on a pragmatic knowledge of what is deemed to be American and non-American. "Accent modification is an 'elective' service designed for nonnative speakers of English who want to modify their speech pronunciation, sentence intonation, learn the subtleties and implied meanings in English, improve comprehension of English and cultural pragmatics" (College E).

In the next extract, native speakers are implicitly treated as the model, while the focus is on the homogeneously constructed group of nonnative speakers. Defining speakers through their nonnativeness is not only a deficit-based approach that erases a large amount of variation and difference; it also uses language as a tool to mark nonnative speakers as "the others" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) who need to conform to an implied, self-evident norm. As the need is formulated as something the nonnative speakers *want*, it is crucial to remember that our data are market-oriented suggestions from course websites rather than the target groups' self-reported needs (see also Riuttanen, 2019). Implicitness thus strengthens the weight of native-speaker status as a given, self-evident criteria that appears to need no further discussion, offering ideologically charged information as common ground (Bertucelli, 2006).

Not surprisingly, in several course descriptions, nonnative and native speakers of English are referred to explicitly side by side, with native speakers being represented as the natural counterpart of the non-native speakers. The following extracts are typical examples of this juxtaposition: "… designed for mid to high level nonnative speakers of English speaking with native English

speakers" (College A) and "… to help non-native speakers feel more at home and confident in their communications with native speakers" (College G).

Apart from the hierarchy that is repeatedly established between native and nonnative speakers, native speakers are subject to a process of homogenization, as they are represented as a monolithic community of model language users (see above). Representing native speakers as linguistic models and nonnative speakers as linguistically deficient draws on and reproduces an outdated but still common hierarchy, which emphasizes and perpetuates the otherness of nonnative speakers. An added peculiarity is that the need for AM/AR seems to apply only to communication between native and nonnative speakers, as communication among nonnative speakers is not mentioned. Despite constituting the larger group of English users, nonnative speakers are measured against elusive native-speaker standards, which sets them up for failure in multiple ways.

Explicit Otherness Based on "Foreignness" or Ethnicity

While most of the target group descriptions are based on an implied otherness, some courses explicitly define *international* or *foreign* students as their target group. The next extract explicitly mentions international professionals in the name of the course and continues to describe the course goal by talking about "communication barriers" and the somewhat glorified "unique cultural identity" of the students. "Each course is tailored to a specific aspect of Accent Reduction (vowel sounds, consonant sounds, intonation and speaking skills) to minimize your communication barriers while maintaining your unique cultural identity" (College H).

The excerpt describes English learners as possessing unique cultural identity, a description that can be read as exoticizing. Additionally, the legitimacy of cultural identity is presented as something that has its limits. While it is presented as worth maintaining, accent is also presented as needing to be minimized for the sake of comprehensibility. If the nonnative speaker could indeed not produce English sounds or had no speaking skills, it would surely be a problem. In that case, the problem would lie in general proficiency, in *knowing* English. However, the courses we focus on in this article are marketed for high-level English speakers with test-proven proficiency. The course descriptions, in turn, refer to accents, which do not affect intelligibility but might affect native speaker's willingness to comprehend (see literature review above). Thus, College H specifically continues to place the problem at the nonnative speakers' side, rather than viewing comprehension as bidirectional.

The next excerpt combines the description of foreign as the target group with the implication that the students feel an intrinsic need to take the course: "… designed for foreign-born students, faculty, and staff who feel their ability to communicate effectively and their employment options are limited by intelligibility issues" (College I).

The construct "foreign born" is an apparent attempt to avoid mentioning language. However, it explicates what the majority of courses only imply: It is the foreignness of the students that is seen as the key problem. While we have seen

the representation of these others or so-called foreigners as a monolithic group, what becomes clear in this extract is the problem of "foreignness." While, on the surface, AM/AR courses aim to solve language-related problems, neither international nor foreign are linguistic categories.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have analyzed texts from 26 university websites that promote AR/AM courses. We asked what view of language and accent they promote, what mechanisms of language ideologies are at work, and how the target audience of these courses is perceived.

While international students are presented as having different kinds of *comprehensibility problems*, the seemingly linguistic arguments that the courses are marketed with are not valid. We recognize that the desire to reduce a so-called foreign accent is urgent to many speakers, and the modification of an accent may even produce an experience of empowerment and success. Our goal here is not to dismiss these experiences. However, what is identified as a language issue in the context of these courses is actually an ideological one, drawing on the students' ethnic or geographical origins and consequently racializing the question of language skills. This not merely erases recent foundational work in the field of applied linguistics (e.g., Creese & Kambere, 2002; Rosa, 2019), but is especially problematic for the target audience of AM/AR courses—international students—who are set up for failure through such an approach.

The idealized native-like speech promoted in the courses but only imagined in reality is a misleading premise that ignores the vast variation among varieties of Englishes as well as individual variation stemming from regional, socioeconomical, and other differences. The homogenized view on language promotes a deficit perspective on nonnative speakers, who will perpetually lag behind an obscure norm. This approach disregards the complex, and often contradictory, reality of learning trajectories, multilingual and multimodal meaning making and communication, and the role of social (status, power, gender, class, race, ability, etc.) and societal (globalization, neoliberalism, technologization, etc.) factors, all of which constantly permeate and shape language use, as well as the role of language users. Combined with requirements to take high-stakes standardized tests (which are an equity issue per se) and a perpetuation of harmful native-speakerist ideologies, this creates the perfect storm of failure for international students, who are led to believe that their experienced failure in becoming a full member of the academic community is a personal rather than a systemic one.

Discourses of pathologization reinforce this setup as they position international students as deficient in a process of AM, to which only speech specialists hold the key. Creating such a relationship of dependency robs students of their agency and negates their skills and experiences. Pathologizing accent isolates questions of comprehensibility even more from social and societal processes and simultaneously makes the issues not just individual but intrinsic to the students.

The targeted audience, international students, are not the only ones who are depicted in simplistic ways in our data. The imagined goals of AM/AR are fictional representations, simplifying diversity and variation in ways that go against current research. Additionally, variation is also erased from languages and accents within the community of native speakers, problematically positioned as role models. By constructing imaginary languages, variations, and acronyms, the native speaker community is presented as one monolithic unit that is the source and owner of one monolithic accent.

The homogenization of language and speakers as native and nonnative is an ideal condition for juxtaposition and othering. With the (fictional) groups described as clear cut and uniform, hierarchies of *us* and *them* are easy to establish and reproduce with the help of discursive strategies that create opposition and othering. Within this power game, we also found some evidence of attempts to carve out spaces for the building and expressing of cultural identities. However, given their effort to restrict *cultural uniqueness* to particular (unidentified) times and spaces (presumably outside of accent) and their tendency to exoticize and essentialize cultural identities, they can only be described as limited and limiting.

If the linguistic arguments for AM/AR courses do not hold, what then, is behind this effort to advertise these courses? Our analysis indicated that not all students were imagined or addressed in the same way. While native speakers of American English were presented as accent-free, socially and academically successful students, potential participants for the courses were depicted as deficient and struggling in their academic lives. While the talk of students as nonnative, international, and foreign is void of any explicit mention of race or ethnicity, the majority of international students in the United States are from racialized groups (Statista, 2019), meaning that AR or modification may, in the end, become an exercise in reducing or modifying non-White race and ethnicity. International students face problems that are diverse and related to a variety of socioeconomic factors (Lee & Rice, 2007; Sherry et al., 2010); a focus on so-called accent oversimplifies and misrepresents their experiences.

The motivations behind these courses are beyond the scope of our study. However, if higher education contexts promote such discourses, intentionally or not, native speakers may learn very quickly that it is not their responsibility to establish successful communication with international students. The message to international students is, in turn, that there is almost no limit to the expense and effort they have to invest in order to fit in. While none of this may be the intention of higher education policy makers, it is nonetheless a likely consequence. If such courses are to be organized, we suggest their focus should not be on accent but, more broadly, on successful communication in linguistically and culturally diverse academic contexts. In order to actively challenge native speakerism, racism, and other means of hierarchization that permeate predominantly White institutions, it is critical for such courses to call in all participants of an academic community, particularly those who consider their communication skills to be standard, unproblematic, or neutral. The issue to be tackled here is not the accents but the systemic othering that AM/AR courses reproduce.

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JOHANNA ENNSER-KANANEN, PhD, is an Academy of Finland research fellow at the Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä. Her current work focuses on linguistically and culturally sustaining education for migrant teachers and anti-oppressive (language) pedagogies for migrant students, particularly those with refugee experience. Email: johanna.f.ennser-kananen@jyu.fi

MIA HALONEN, PhD, is a senior researcher at the Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä. Her recent areas of research include sociophonetics and historical sociolinguistics as well as language attitudes and stereotyping related to language ideologies and policies. Email: mia.m.halonen@jyu.fi

TAINA SAARINEN, PhD, is a research professor at the Finnish Institute for Educational Research, University of Jyväskylä. Her major research interests lie in the area of language ideologies and language policies in higher education. Email: taina.m.saarinen@jyu.fi