"You Will Be Evaluated According to the Following": Language, Race, and International Students at a U.S. Predominantly White Institution

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“You Will Be Evaluated According to the Following”: Language, Race, and International Students at a U.S. Predominantly White Institution

by

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ABSTRACT

As sociolinguists have long noted, racial hierarchies in the United States have been maintained through a hegemonic standard language ideology that assumes white middle-class ways of speaking as “standard” and the linguistic marginalization of non-whites ways of speaking as “nonstandard” (Bonfiglio 2010). This phenomenon is well-documented in studies on the perceptions of racialized international TAs (ITAs), which show that the racializing ideologies about ITAs’ language held by predominantly white, Western undergraduates impact their perception of ITAs’ comprehensibility and teaching ability (Staples, Kang, & Wittner 2014). Other studies on international students have shown that the discrimination that they face is driven by neo-racism, which rationalizes subordination based on culture rather than color (Spears 1999; Lee & Rice 2007). Ramjattan (2020) has highlighted that the notion of “culture” necessarily entails accent and language.

In this thesis, I therefore examine some of the cultural and linguistic ideologies that underlie discourses pertaining to international students at a U.S. predominantly white institution. I employ a raciolinguistic approach (Rosa & Flores 2017) as I identify the co-naturalization of the racial and linguistic marginalization of international students. Centrally, I argue that the discourses in question obscure the racializing dynamics which undergird essentializing definitions of “American culture” and “English language”, thereby encouraging assimilation to hegemonic norms in the guise of benevolent or benign linguistic and cultural education. Finally, I imagine the denaturalization of these ideologies
as a necessary step in the effort towards decolonization and the eradication of white supremacy by offering tangible solutions to U.S. universities.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDC .............................................................. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
ELPIS .............................................................. English Language Programs for International Students
ITA ..................................................................... International Teaching Assistant
PWI ...................................................................... Predominantly White Institution
SFIS ...................................................................... Services for International Students
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education in the United States accept international students every year, a vast majority of whom are racialized within the context of U.S. society. Students’ motivations for pursuing an education abroad are varied, from the desire to secure a financially stable career to the hopes of obtaining a cosmopolitan global citizenship and engaging in intercultural exchange. In order to facilitate both the recruitment and retention of international students, universities have offices dedicated to their support. These offices have multiple responsibilities, from assisting with immigration paperwork to helping international students adjust to life in the United States by addressing the unique cultural and linguistic barriers that they must navigate.

Among the different kinds of services that such offices offer to international students is the transfer of knowledge about “American” language and culture, a practice that is framed as benign or benevolent pedagogy. Yet as I discuss in this thesis, this practice can inadvertently essentialize definitions of “American culture” and “English language” in ways that implicitly center whiteness. Specifically, evaluations of and expectations of international students depend on ideologies that produce a “white listening subject” and

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1 The use of the term “American” often obscures the subjectivities of people living in all regions of North, Central, and South America (Chung 2022). Although I am critical of the U.S.-centrism of the label “American,” I retain its use throughout this thesis in order to evoke the specific ideologies of race, nation, and culture embedded its unproblematized usage by SFIS and ELPIS.
that naturalize the links between race and language (Flores & Rosa 2015). The ideologies echo those identified in studies conducted at predominantly white, Western institutions (Fitch & Morgan 2003; Ramjattan 2020; Rubin 1992), where undergraduates’ negative perceptions of international TAs – or ITAs – are predicated upon raciolinguistic ideologies rather than objective linguistic fact (Rosa & Flores 2017; Ramjattan 2019; Ramjattan 2020).

Given the dual function of marketing to potential students and providing information to current students, all the while carefully abiding by legal and institutional constraints, international student-serving offices often double down on unidirectionally teaching international students why their behavior might be culturally illegible or linguistically unintelligible to “American students” without discussing the racializing undertones of these ideologies. Such discourses are often strategically framed as “helpful services” offered to international students. As such, they are seemingly difficult to critique as culturally, linguistically, or racially exclusionary. While I acknowledge that many components of these discourses are felt to be “useful” to students, even by students themselves, this thesis examines specific examples in which they may surprisingly rely on problematic ideologies.

This thesis examines discourses emerging from and related to two international student-oriented offices on the campus of Southeast University, a predominantly white institution (PWI) located in the Southeastern United States. The two offices are known as Services for International Students (SFIS) and English Language Programs for

\footnote{A pseudonym.}
International Students (ELPIS). Among other functions, they serve as cultural and linguistic mediators between international students and the “American” student body on campus. As such, this thesis aims to analyze the ideologies underlying statements put out by each entity, contextualizing them within a broader set of circulating discourses of language and race vis-à-vis international students as well as systematically problematizing them and their implications. I will specifically examine potential divergences between what these services explicitly claim to be doing and what they may be implicitly and ideologically achieving. I therefore pose the following central research question: What ideologies of language, race, and culture underlie Southeast University's engagement with international students, and in what ways do these ideologies support or marginalize these students?

Prior to presenting my analyses, Chapter 2 provides an overview of the existing literature on ideologies of language, race, and hierarchy in educational contexts, as well as work on globalization and neoliberal multiculturalism as they relate to the academy. I follow this with an ethnographic contextualization of the study in Chapter 3, covering the broader context of international students at the university as well as my own positionality as a researcher. Chapters 4 and 5 offer my analyses the discourses of these offices. The data is comprised of select written, official university discourses pertaining to international students, in addition to one legal document impacting university policy. By closely examining specific terms and phrases used in these discourses, including their unstated implications, I shed light on ideologies of language and race that they reproduce as well as the ways in which these ideologies marginalize international students specifically through

3 Both pseudonyms.
their racialization. Centrally, I argue that the texts I analyze discursively obscure the racializing dynamics which undergird essentializing definitions of “American culture” (Chapter 4) and “English language” (Chapter 5), thereby encouraging assimilation to hegemonic linguistic and cultural norms in the guise of benevolent education. I employ a raciolinguistic approach (Rosa & Flores 2017) to this analysis as I identify the co-naturalization of the racial and linguistic marginalization of international students. Finally, I imagine the denaturalization of these ideologies as a necessary step in the effort towards decolonization and the eradication of white supremacy by offering tangible solutions to U.S. universities in Chapter 6.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1: Ideologies of Language, Race, and Hierarchy in Education

Social scientists have widely problematized the notion that race is a legitimate, biologically-supported way of hierarchizing groups of people. Yet, as Smedley and Smedley (2005) point out, while racial categories do not have a biological foundation, they have taken on a life of their own over time, profoundly shaping the distribution of goods in society (Omi & Winant 1994). Language scholars in particular have examined the central role of language in naturalizing inequalities between racialized groups, particularly when language ideologies have become embedded within social structures. For example, as McElhinny (2016) points out, capitalism, as an uneven world system, has played a role in enabling the production of inequality. Language is thereby used to package symbolic capital by labeling social categories and ways of communicating, respectively, and then by indexically linking the latter to the former in ways that mirror societal hierarchy (Paugh & Riley 2019).

As sociolinguists have long noted, one way in which racial hierarchies in the United States have been maintained is through a hegemonic standard language ideology that assumes white middle-class ways of speaking as “standard” and the language of non-whites as “nonstandard” (Bonfiglio 2010). Language practices, including our evaluative actions toward and discourses about language, reflect and reproduce hegemonic ideologies. While racialized language has sometimes been characterized as an “ethnolect,” such as “African
American Language” (Lanehart 2015), that can involve phonological, grammatical, lexical, and discursive aspects of language, it is sometimes conceptualized as an “ethnic accent” or “foreign accent,” perceived as a phonological divergence from a standardized linguistic variety (Lippi-Green 2012), which is subject to negative evaluation and discrimination (Baugh 1997).

The work of scholars at the intersection of the disciplines of Education and Linguistics has demonstrated the normative centering of white middle-class language within educational settings. Flores & Rosa (2015) have pointed out that the stigmatization of divergence from the standardized or hegemonic norm is not always the based on objective differences in speaking subjects but the product of the “white listening subject” whose hegemonic gaze shapes linguistic evaluation. They draw on Inoue’s (2003) concept of the “listening subject” to note how the value of language is shaped less by the actual characteristics of a speaker’s production than by the perspective of evaluation from which that production is heard. One’s speech is therefore not objectively, passively “understandable”; rather, it is understood (or not) by an agentive listener with a subjective perspective of evaluation, through a lens shaped by the ideologies about speakers and their linguistic varieties.

Racialized speakers who use stigmatized forms of English are thereby at a disadvantage when entering educational spaces, in which standardized language is prescribed as the default mode of communication. A seemingly practical solution to the institutional discrimination faced by such students is to equip them with a context-based sense of linguistic appropriateness: a standardized variety for the classroom and the non-standard variety for the home. Yet Flores and Rosa (2015) critique such “appropriateness-
based” approaches to language education, where racialized students are taught that standardized, hegemonic language varieties are appropriate for academic contexts, while stigmatized heritage varieties are not. They problematize this approach, highlighting that raciolinguistic ideologies produce perceptions of racialized speaking subjects as linguistically deviant, even when they engage in linguistic practices hearable as normative when produced by privileged white subjects.

This phenomenon is well-documented within studies on perceptions of racialized international teaching assistants, henceforth ITAs, at predominantly white, Western universities. Fitch & Morgan (2003) have analyzed undergraduate narratives surrounding the “problem of the unintelligible ITA,” a sentiment that is echoed in studies in the area. Intelligibility problems between native speakers of English and predominantly racialized non-native speakers of English are therefore often attributed to some perceived inadequacy of the non-native speakers (Kang, Rubin, & Lindemann 2015). Rubin’s (1992) work has shown that when made to listen to a standardized audio sample, students were more likely to hear an accent when the ITA was believed to be (East) Asian as opposed to white. The specific indexical associations of “nonnative accents” has also been explored by Lindemann (2003), who demonstrates that although listeners may not be familiar enough with specific East Asian accents – for example, a Korean accent – to make a connection between the accent and specific supposed characteristics of the speaker, listeners' higher-order indexical reactions appear to identify a generalized 'foreign faultiness' rather than a relationship between specific features and speaker traits. Overall, ITA research shows that the attitudes of predominantly white, Western undergraduates
impact their perception of ITAs’ comprehensibility, accentedness, and teaching ability (Staples, Kang, & Wittner 2014).

Other studies on international students have shown that the discrimination that international students face on predominantly white, Western campuses is driven by neo-racism, which rationalizes subordination based on culture rather than color (Spears 1999; Lee & Rice 2007). Ramjattan (2020) takes a raciolinguistic perspective to this idea, highlighting that the notion of “culture” necessarily entails accent and language. The term “culture” has been studied by scholars of language, particularly in educational contexts. Urciuoli (2009) has drawn attention to the uneven enregisterment (Agha 2005) of the word “culture,” demonstrating that it is used to refer to everything from diversity to racial markedness. In a similar vein, Ladson-Billings (2006) has demonstrated that “culture” is simultaneously treated as the problem and the solution to white educators’ woes vis-a-vis their marginalized students.

Though many historians and sociologists have recognized that race and racism are not “mere ethnocentric dislike and distrust of the Other” (Fredrickson 2002), the vague notion of “culture” is used by hegemonic groups to appeal to ‘natural’ tendencies to preserve their group identity. Lee & Rice (2007) note that this disarms the fight against white supremacy by constructing more socially acceptable channels to discriminate against racialized people. This runs parallel to the danger of white benevolence (Bebout 2011), a form of racial paternalism within which white people are seen as heroic benefactors who save racialized people from oppression. Neo-racism and white benevolence are, by definition, difficult to problematize because they seem to provide solutions for racism, often constructing those who critique them as racist or divisive. Each ideology hinges on
an older, seemingly more problematic expression of racism for its success, rendering racially privileged people simplistically as either “racist” or “not racist.” This has the effect of obscuring the fact that white people benefit from white supremacy regardless of their stance towards overt displays of racism.

2.2: Globalization & Neoliberal Multiculturalism

Although international study provides great opportunities for personal and professional growth, Lee & Rice (2007) point out that the “irony of globalization” (Habu 2000) is that the view of students as sources of economic revenue allows for less emphasis on cross-cultural and academic experiences. Changing notions of ‘global’ and ‘local’ are underpinned by neoliberalism, defined as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills, within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2005). Kreiter (2013) notes that while neoliberalism has been a hegemonic political and economic ideology since at least the 1980s, it continues to evolve as a concept, mapping itself onto variegated political terrains. Neoliberal multiculturalism (Melamed 2011) refers to a state-sponsored iteration of anti-racism through which the notion of diversity is depoliticized and mapped onto individuals who represent their respective “cultures”.

Within school contexts, neoliberal multiculturalism has played a direct role in perpetuating racial capitalism (Grinage 2020). For example, the pedagogical practices that aim to promote "interculturality" in the school have the paradoxical consequence of positioning marginalized students outside the national collectivity (Garcia-Sánchez 2015). This begs the question: do neoliberal multicultural understandings of cultural diversity –
vis-à-vis international students in higher educational contexts – paradoxically work to further their marginalization?

Solutions to ideologies of cultural and linguistic deficiency ascribed to marginalized students motivate the need to frame language socialization research within a political context (Paugh & Riley 2019). A raciolinguistic approach (Rosa & Flores 2017) seeks to understand how and why language and race have been co-naturalized, and to imagine their denaturalization as part of a broader structural project of contesting white supremacy. In this thesis, I employ a raciolinguistic approach in my analysis of the ideologies underlying discourses addressed to international students by a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the Southeastern United States. I will place a particular emphasis on the ways in which these discourses invisibilize the white listening and perceiving subjects, while placing a majority of the linguistic and cultural communicative burden upon racialized international students.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY & ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

This thesis examines the cultural and linguistic ideologies underlying and motivating discourses put out by offices serving international students. The data for this thesis is thus comprised of select written, official university discourses pertaining to international students, in addition to one legal document impacting university policy. Enabled by the nature of public-facing discourses that serve the dual function of marketing and providing information to students, powerful institutions dominate the conversation with positive, depoliticized characterizations of their services, making them difficult to critique in the first place. I have found a dearth of conversation about the problematic aspects of discourses of language and race vis-à-vis international students both in academic literature and on university campuses. Thus, rather than providing a holistic analysis of all of the discourses that international students encounter, this thesis examines examples selected precisely because they rely on problematic ideologies.

My goal with this is not to decontextualize and show SFIS and ELPIS’ work in a negative light, and I do not claim to provide an overall evaluation of the work of these offices. Indeed, the excerpts that I have chosen are not representative of all of the discourses circulated by these offices. By the same token, however, the excerpts that I have chosen to analyze are circulated, and I have noticed that the ideologies that I highlight are reproduced by similar channels at other American universities. I argue that an analysis of
the ideologies underlying this selection of discourses is therefore crucial in dismantling the structures that perpetuate the oppression of racialized people. Therefore, part of the work that this thesis seeks to accomplish is to begin a dialogue by highlighting these under-discussed yet deeply problematic ideologies.

Importantly, the discourses I analyze must be understood in the broader context of international students at the university as well as my own positionality as a researcher. Prior to describing the methods of my data collection, I describe how my own positionality as the daughter of Indian immigrants who came to the United States as international graduate students shapes the perspective I provide. I then describe some of the institutional and cultural factors that may motivate Southeast University to bring international students into its community while still keeping them at its racial margins. Next, I introduce two units at the university that are charged with interfacing with international students, namely Services for International Students (SFIS) and English Language Programs for International Students (ELPIS), describing both how they are constructed in online contexts, namely their webpages and on social media. Finally, I describe how I collected the data I analyze, and the ways in which my methodology is consistent with fulfilling the purpose of highlighting and problematizing the raciolinguistic ideologies underlying discourses directed at international students.

3.1: Researcher’s Positionality

Garza, Lee, Cheng, and Ánand (2022) write with skepticism toward positionality statements, arguing that, “given the general lack of knowledge about the histories of minoritized peoples in the US, coupled with the pervasiveness of hegemonic ideologies about Asians in the academy, [they] cannot assume readers will take stock of the author’s
positionality and the histories it indexes”. Indeed, assuming that most of the readers of this thesis are not second-generation South Asian American, much of the information offered in this section may not seem culturally salient. Instead of conceptualizing of this positionality statement as a static disclosure of the elements of my social positionality, I regard it as both a dynamic reflection upon and a celebration of the identity that I have simultaneously warred with and reified through my time as a graduate student. I intend for this positionality statement, therefore, to take on the dual function of celebrating the journey that led me to find my cultural “fit” in the Southeastern United States, and of demonstrating how my positionality motivates this work and shapes my perspective.

In most contexts, I identify as a second-generation South Asian (specifically Indian) American woman. The boundaries of generational identity are, however, often blurry: although “second generation” is the label often used in academic literature for the children of immigrants, it is not the label I grew up using. My parents are immigrants, and although they are citizens of the United States, they identify more closely with the label “Indian” than they do with the label “American”, making me part of the first generation in my family to identify as American. I was born and mostly raised in California, but lived in Bangalore, India briefly from age 7 to age 12 – and so although I usually use the label second-generation in my work, I also feel like part of generation 1.5, and in some ways am critical of second-generation South Asian American cultural expression. For the most part, however, I feel most at home when surrounded by other second-generation South Asian Americans, and am inspired by the ability to relate my study of language, culture, and society to issues and conversations within the second-generation South Asian diasporic community.
The lack of such a community at my current institution was, in part, what formed the inspiration for this thesis. As is the case for many students of color, graduate school can be incredibly isolating. As a first-year graduate student, for social survival, I tried not to think too critically about my experiences vis-à-vis language and race in the Southeastern U.S. I’d often share my woes with my parents, who immigrated to the United States as international graduate students in the late 1980’s. Their answer was simple and always the same: “what about the Indian Student Association”? Reflective of the large number of international graduate students across the US, many graduate student-oriented Indian student groups are predominantly comprised of international students. As graduate students, my own parents had relied strongly on their school’s Indian Student Association (ISA) for cultural events, support, and community. In fact, they even met each other through the ISA – and I struggled to help them understand why despite wanting to be around more people who looked like me, I didn’t feel like I belonged in that space as a second-generation Indian American.

Two-and-a-half years later, I have formed more friendships with international students, and I find myself finally able to put my finger on one of the reasons that I could not fully relate to their experiences: I take a different orientation to white supremacy within academic institutions than my international student counterparts. For example, while I might view higher education as embodying assimilationist and settler-colonial ideologies, international students may see the institution as a mediator between the imperialistic and xenophobic face of the US and the kind of cosmopolitanism/global citizenship they are acquiring by obtaining a professional degree abroad. Neither of these viewpoints are incorrect, and I do not aim to paternalistically paint international students as naïve
newcomers who are simply misinformed about white supremacy. I also do not aim to speak on behalf of international students: one of the shortcomings of this thesis is that I was not able to systematically incorporate perspectives from international students into my analysis. Rather, what I present in this thesis is a perspective stemming from research in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, as well as my positionality as a second-generation Indian American woman from California navigating graduate school in the Southeastern United States. I aim to embrace all parts of this in my work, and smile as I reflect on my journey from holding tightly to the boundaries of my identity when I began graduate school to now understanding and writing about the ways in which both my identity and my thinking fit into this space.

3.2: International Students and their Economic Valuation

International students make up a small percentage of the students at Southeast University. Of over 35,000 students enrolled for the 2020-21 school year, there were around 1,300 international students enrolled at the university, comprising less than 4 percent of the total student population. Meanwhile, international students made up a larger percentage of the graduate student population at around 13 percent. Notably, the number of international graduate students has steadily declined since 2015, while the number of undergraduate international students since the same year has steadily risen (Global Southeast SFIS Enrollment Report\textsuperscript{4} 2020).

This upward trend in undergraduate student enrollment may reflect the fact that the focus of international education has shifted over the past few decades. While there was an emphasis on the potential for international study to foster diplomacy and build cultural and

\textsuperscript{4} Pseudonyms are used in this parenthetical citation for anonymity.
political ties in the twentieth century, the twenty-first century has seen a massification of higher education, which has brought with it the view of international students as a revenue source (Lee & Rice 2007). Indeed, universities and policy makers alike recognize the economic benefits of having international scholars attend American institutions. Most international students in undergraduate programs and Master’s degree programs pay full tuition, benefitting both the academic institution and the local and national economies. At Southeast University, the tuition for an international undergraduate student was on average nearly $11,000 higher than that of an international graduate student for the 2020-21 school year. This gap may be even higher in many cases, as students who are in doctoral programs often have their tuition covered by graduate assistantships.

Furthermore, through graduate assistantships, including teaching assistantships, international graduate students provide cheap skilled labor to universities. Graduate research and PhD production at universities are also part of the reputation of institutions and contribute to their ability to secure large grants. International students therefore provide economic benefit to universities in ways beyond the direct payment of tuition. Lee & Rice (2007) point out that the “irony of globalization” (Habu 2000) is that although international study provides great opportunities for personal and professional growth, the view of students as economic revenue allows for less emphasis on cross-cultural and academic experiences. My analysis demonstrates that the view of international students as means of economic revenue is not the sole factor standing in the way of the goal of intercultural exchange. I demonstrate the ways in which this goal relies upon neoliberal multicultural ideologies, through which the racialized discrimination faced by international students is invisibilized.
3.3: Racialization of International Students

Southeast University is home to international students from several different regions of the world. East Asian students, primarily from China and South Korea, make up the largest percentage, comprising 55 percent of around 1,300 international students enrolled – nearly 730 students. The next largest regional and cultural groups of international students at the university are South Asian students, predominantly from India and Bangladesh, who make up 16 percent of the total population, and MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) students, who mostly come from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, and Oman, and who comprise 13 percent of the international student population (Global Southeast SFIS Enrollment Report 2020).

The large proportion of East Asian students is relevant in both the context of this thesis and in the contemporary political moment. In countries across the globe, anti-(East) Asian sentiments have become even more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, attributable to the racialization and politicization of the disease especially by conservative factions: for instance, former US President Donald Trump referring to COVID-19 as the “kung flu” (Nakamura 2020). At an institutional level, East Asian international students, even prior to the recent spike in anti-(East) Asian sentiment due to the racialization of the COVID-19 virus, have been the target of racist aggressions on American university campuses. Poon (2011) demonstrates that complaints of over-encroachment of Asian bodies on college campuses echo yellow peril discourses (see also Chun 2016). Such discourses evoke undertones of the historical white populist backlash against Asian migrant laborers throughout the Americas, and a racialized Asian figure that is diseased, treacherous, and perpetually foreign (Lee 2007; Ono and Pham 2009).
This thesis focuses on certain discourses that rely on ideologies about East Asian international students. Increasingly, the phrase “international students” has come to take on a racially coded meaning, where it is often used to refer specifically to *East Asian* international students. For example, one summer workshop at an American research university, billed as supporting marginalized students, identified its groups of interest as “Black, Brown, and international,” thus potentially suggesting that Black and Brown students are not international and that international students are students of color who are neither Black or Brown – most saliently, East Asian. Garza, Lee, Cheng, and Ànand (forthcoming) point out that this type of language erases the disparate needs of different kinds of international students, as well as the needs of Asian students who are not international. It also produces indexical ties between the two categories within the hegemonic public imagination. This thesis focuses on certain discourses that rely on ideologies about East Asian international students, specifically as produced by two university offices. In the following section, I provide an ethnographic contextualization of these offices.

### 3.4: University Services for International Students

The data that I analyze in this thesis are the discourses of two services at the university that are dedicated to the support of international students: Services for International Students (SFIS) and English Learning Programs for International Students (ELPIS). In this section, I provide a description of some of the roles these offices take on, as well as an overview of their online presence.

As a domestic graduate student, I came to know about SFIS through conversation with international students on campus. I initially heard about it during my conversation
with the friend who told me about the anti-mask advisory message, which had been emailed to them through SFIS’s mailing list. Upon exploring SFIS’ website while gathering data, I came to know about ELPIS. While SFIS provides guidance on immigration compliance and organizes cultural programming, ELPIS exclusively provides English language instruction. ELPIS is charged with assessing the English fluency of International Teaching Assistants (ITAs), in compliance with the state’s English Fluency in Higher Learning Act.

Like most university webpages, SFIS and ELPIS’s respective homepages can be understood as public-facing texts that are used not only for providing information and resources for current students but also for marketing the university to prospective students. Both websites follow a visual and textual template required by the university for “branding” purposes: the borders match the school’s colors, and the school logo appears at the top of the home page. From the home page, visitors can find links to webpages that advertise the university to prospective students (*About Our Office, Prospective Students*), followed by resources for students who have committed but not yet enrolled (*New Student Arrival, Living in Capitol City*, *Immigration, Employment*), and then resources for current students (*SFIS Forms Library*). This organization perhaps reflects the fact that one of the primary purposes of the website is to advertise not only SFIS – but the university itself – to prospective international students, many of whom provide economic benefit to the university through tuition and some of whom provide TA labor.

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5 A pseudonym for the city in which “Southeast University” is located.
The websites of these two offices are colorful, and feature photographs\(^6\) of international students as well as their own staff. For instance, pictures on the SFIS website, featuring the SFIS staff, the university’s campus, and multiethnic student cohorts:

![Image of students](image)

*Figure 3.1: International Students Alongside School Mascot.*

Figure 3.1 depicts the 2020-21 executive board of the university’s International Students Association (ISA) seated next to the school’s mascot. ISA is a student-led organization that plans and facilitates multicultural activities and is affiliated with SFIS. A mutually beneficial relationship exists between the two entities, and international students at the university generally take on a positive orientation towards SFIS.

In addition to their websites, SFIS and ELPIS have social media accounts which also serve the dual function of advertising their services to both prospective students and current students. Though the two offices have a comparable number of likes on Facebook (about 2000), SFIS has a more robust social media presence through the use of social media

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\(^6\) Faces and other identifying details in the images included in this chapter have been blurred for anonymity.
platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. While SFIS’ official Twitter and Instagram accounts in part serve the function of advertising the university to prospective students, these channels are also used to engage directly with current students by advertising events and resources that are relevant to them. The SFIS Instagram account follows individual students, and many students re-post content shared by the account to their own Instagram stories. SFIS is therefore more closely engaged with international students on a daily basis and across contexts, while ELPIS is focused more on providing academic English instruction.

This idea is supported by the fact that many of the pictures on the ELPIS website feature students interacting in a professional capacity with university staff, including ELPIS professionals.

Figure 3.2: ITA Assessment in Action.
Figure 3.3: ELPIS students at a reception with the university president and his wife.

Also included on each website are pictures of the staff of each program. Notably, while the students who each of these offices serves are largely racialized, the staff members who run SFIS and ELPIS appear to be predominantly white.

Figure 3.4: ELPIS Staff Members at International Festival.
Figure 3.5: SFIS Staff Members. The SFIS staff members, dressed in business-casual attire, posing in front of a brick wall at the university.

These staff members take on the role of mediating between international students and US culture at large. I posit that the danger of this positioning is the power it affords over essentializing a definition of “American culture” in the case of SFIS, and essentializing a definition of “native English” in the case of ELPIS. This allows for the reinforcement of structures where cultural and linguistic assimilation are often presented as objective targets to international students in the guise of cultural and linguistic education.

3.5: Data Collection and Analysis

The first data set includes discourses put forth by SFIS: it includes the public-facing discourse about SFIS displayed on the office’s website, as well as a message addressed to international students regarding mask-wearing towards the beginning of the pandemic. I have chosen to analyze the (anti-) mask advisory because I find it to be a prime example of the culturally assimilationist ideologies often disseminated by universities in the guise of cultural education. To get a better feel for the root ideologies that influence SFIS’s work, I will also be analyzing SFIS’s mission and vision statement.
The second data set will focus on discourses put forth by and related to ELPIS. For this portion, I analyze the cultural and linguistic ideologies that undergird mandated English language testing for international teaching assistants, also known as ITAs. I will analyze the assignment sheet that is used to evaluate ITAs’ English speaking and teaching abilities, alongside the English Fluency in Higher Learning Act, a state law which the ITA assessment claims to prepare ITAs to meet.

With the goal of examining the linguistic ideologies underlying the cultural and linguistic discourses geared towards international students at the university, I qualitatively coded the assembled data based on thematic discourse patterns that emerged in a preliminary analysis. Both sets of data were coded line-by-line using Microsoft Excel, and qualitative coding categories were established based on the way that terms and phrases evoked ideological themes. The documents were grouped into SFIS-related data and ELPIS-related data, which had different coding categories based on patterns of terminology in the discourse that reflect both ideologies and registers. For the SFIS-related materials, the following thematic categories were identified based on their patterned recurrence: affect, community, student agency, cross-cultural/linguistic education, internationalization, corporate, expertise, and legal jargon. For the ELPIS-related materials, the following categories were coded for: exigency, target/imagined listener, evaluation, “linguistic” jargon, directives, official/legal jargon, and victimization.

Although the data is grouped into SFIS-related and ELPIS-related data, I do not aim to make an empirical comparison between both offices on campus. The SFIS-related data is not congruent to the ELPIS-related data. In fact, the data are quite different from one another: they vary in length, in purpose, and in authorship. Instead, this thesis aims to
analyze the ideologies that produce and become reproduced through statements put out by each entity, in an effort to contextualize them within a broader set of circulating discourses of language and race vis-à-vis international students, as well as to systematically problematize them and their implications. I will specifically examine potential divergences between what these services explicitly claim to be doing and what they may be implicitly and ideologically achieving. A particular emphasis will be placed on the ways that raciolinguistic ideologies (Rosa & Flores 2017) are presupposed in discourses that purport to teach students about American cultural and linguistic norms for their benefit.
CHAPTER 4

NEOLIBERAL INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE

In this section, I provide an analysis of discourses circulated by SFIS which pertain to the notion of intercultural exchange. In Section 4.1, I examine the ideologies underlying the “About Our Office” page on SFIS’ website, and the ways in which they work to obscure the racial power dynamics typically at play in interactions between domestic and international students at the university. Section 4.2 provides a counterexample to the bi-directional intercultural exchange that SFIS claims to promote, shedding light on the ways in which an essentialized definition of “American culture” is used to rationalize white supremacy and promote cultural assimilation.


Upon pulling up the homepage of the SFIS website, the reader is greeted by a heading that cheerfully reads, “Welcome Home, International Students!” Resources on website navigation, online chat, and vaccine-related immigration requirements are listed, and in the background is a picture of a group of smiling, ethnoracially diverse students seated next to a statue of the school mascot (Figure 3.1). Taken together, these elements project SFIS’s affectionate and helpful stance towards international students, depicting their enthusiastic inclusion in the university community.

This stance is echoed in the “About Our Office” page of the SFIS website, which will be the first focus of this analysis. The page (see Appendix A, Figure A.1) is divided into three parts – SFIS’ mission, vision, and goals – which I will critically analyze, delving
into the ways in which even ostensibly well-intentioned comments reinforce white supremacy and further the marginalization of international students.

Figure A.1 is a screenshot of the information available on the SFIS website’s “About Our Office” page. It begins with a brief overview of SFIS’ main work and aims on campus, and then lists the office’s mission, vision, and goals, respectively. SFIS’ mission statement can be understood as what the office imminently strives to achieve, and the goals section is a more structured, tangible iteration of the ways in which they work to achieve this. The vision statement, on the other hand, tackles what SFIS would ideally like to accomplish. Notably, this vision includes both international and domestic students, suggesting that the cross-cultural competency that SFIS aims to build is not restricted solely to international students.

The format of this page is part of a standardization across several of the university’s webpages, making this sample one out of several similarly structured statements. Indeed, the content and some of the underlying ideologies of “About” pages of other offices differ. However, the standardized structure is a reminder that any public-facing discourses coming out of the university are shaped in part by bureaucratic constraints. Such discourses are circulated with careful attention to their multiple audiences: prospective international students, as well as others evaluating the university’s compliance with legal and corporate constraints. While there are several evaluative authorities that the authors are mindful of, certain voices systemically prevail over others, because the impact of certain centers of authority – such as those of bureaucracy – is comparatively larger (Blommaert 2007).

The SFIS “About Our Office” statement can therefore be understood as catering to multiple evaluative authorities rather than fully portraying the orientation that the office
takes toward cross-cultural learning through international study. At the same time, the ideologies of neoliberal multiculturalism that underpin the some of the discourses within the statement are circulated due to this example, making it a worthy object of analysis. I turn now to an analysis of some of these ideologies, that position SFIS as a benevolent facilitator of neoliberal student success and multiculturalism through cross-cultural education.

**About**

Services for International Students has many roles on campus. But our most important and favorite role is providing support to our F-1 and J-1 visa holding students and their families. We strive to be a welcoming space for international students with a focus on excellent customer service, genuine care, and immigration expertise.

*Figure 4.1 SFIS’ “About” description.*

The language in the initial “About” section is heavily affective, thereby painting SFIS as a benevolent entity. For instance, the section states that, “our most important and favorite role is providing support to our F-1 and J-1 visa holding students and families.” The pronoun ‘our’ is used within the first few lines of the page, and even in the headings of each section: “Our Mission,” “Our Vision”, and “Our Goals”. This humanizes SFIS, reframing the work of the inanimate, bureaucratic office as the work of a cooperative, inclusive group of people. This also demonstrates how the SFIS webpage can be understood as a corporatized template, as the usage of genitive pronouns recurs across the pages of departments at Southeast University as well. An emphasis on both students and families therefore intentionally positions SFIS as a facilitator of community. The section goes on to assert that SFIS, “strives to be a welcoming space for international students with a focus on excellent customer service, genuine care, and immigration expertise.” This
furthers the image of SFIS as an affectionate entity that is dedicated to the benevolent support of international students.

**Our Mission**

SFIS supports nonimmigrant international students and institutional stakeholders on matters of immigration compliance and cross-cultural adjustment to promote academic success. ISS contributes to global engagement of the greater Southeast University community through dynamic internationalization programming.

*Figure 4.2: SFIS’ Mission.*

The “Our Mission” portion of the statement asserts that, “SFIS supports nonimmigrant international students... on matters of immigration compliance and *cross-cultural adjustment to promote academic success.*” The notion of academic success is one that is frequently neoliberalized, especially in the context of the myth of American meritocracy (Liu 2011), which constructs the United States as a meritocracy, wherein success – despite racial and socioeconomic oppression – can be achieved through one’s own hard work. Indeed, as Donzelli (2019) notes, mission statements in and of themselves are neoliberal micro-genres. Two channels – SFIS-mediated knowledge about immigration compliance, and SFIS-mediated knowledge about United States culture – in the above example are thereby framed as a path to neoliberal student success.

Cross-cultural learning, internationalization, and globalization are prominent themes on the SFIS webpage. For example, in the “Mission” portion, SFIS is purported to, “contribute to *global engagement* of the greater Southeast University community through *dynamic internationalization programming*.” Further, in the “Vision” portion, students are encouraged to, “engage in educational experiences through a *lens of global curiosity*” and develop “*global competencies.*” Lee & Rice (2007) contend with the meaning of
“internationalization”, which has been defined and utilized in many different ways; some have used it interchangeably with globalization, transnational education, or international education, and some have tied it to specific forms of globalization or intercultural exchange.

**Our Vision**

To inspire students to forge international connections, to engage in transformative educational experiences through a lens of global curiosity, and ultimately, to engender positive change in the world through their increased intercultural competence.

**Our Goals**

1. Respond nimbly to a dynamic regulatory environment to ensure institutional immigration compliance at the federal and state levels.
2. Advocate for international student retention and success by providing outstanding support services centered around competence and empathy.
3. Proliferate a culture of “the informed student,” empowering international students with knowledge and skills to properly maintain immigration compliance.
4. Expand cross-cultural learning and global competencies among students, faculty, staff, and the community.

*Figure 4.3: SFIS’ Vision & Goals.*

The latter emphasis on intercultural exchange – which is reproduced by SFIS – can be understood in the context of higher education as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight 2003). This definition emphasizes the motivation of intercultural exchange for improved understanding and relations between peoples. This iteration of internationalization, which is conflated with globalization in the context of the
SFIS webpage, emphasizes students as central players in intercultural exchange and diplomacy between nations.

This constructs the globalization for which SFIS advocates within a neoliberal multicultural framework. For instance, part of the Mission of SFIS is to, “support nonimmigrant international students... on matters of cross-cultural adjustment.” The office envisions both domestic and international students engaging in “cross-cultural learning” through which they are encouraged to build “increased intercultural competence”. The use of terminology such as “cross-cultural” and “intercultural” in relation to international versus domestic students constructs students as representatives of their respective home countries — and therefore of their “cultures”. This frames the interactional dynamic between domestic and international students within a neoliberal multicultural ideology (Melamed 2011), where cultural diversity is idealized and depoliticized.

However, as Lippi-Green (2012) notes, the social space—or the sociocultural power dynamic—between two interlocutors is rarely ever neutral. This is particularly true in the case of racialized international students at American PWIs, whose belonging to the campus and broader national community is often called into question in neo-racist fashion (Spears 1999) on the basis of ‘culture’ (Chun 2016; Lee & Rice 2007; Ramjattan 2020). Scholars of language and racialization in educational contexts have called attention to the usage of the term “culture” (Ladson-Billings 2006), highlighting its uneven enregisterment (Agha 2005; Urciuoli 2009). “Culture”, as it is used within the context of this webpage, appears to index both racial markedness and social difference from mainstream ‘American’
students. The idealization of neoliberal intercultural exchange thus invisibilizes the racial overtones of interactions between international and domestic students at American PWIs.

Although SFIS idealizes the supportive role it takes on as a benevolent entity designed to facilitate cross-cultural competencies and to help students achieve their individual goals, this analysis has theorized the ways in which the neoliberalization of intercultural exchange potentially works to bolster white supremacy by invisibilizing the dimensions of racial hierarchy involved. The following section examines the extent to which cross-cultural learning is implemented bi-directionally by delving deeper into the power differential between racialized international students and predominantly white American students. As the following sections of this analysis will demonstrate, what is framed as benevolent cultural learning can – intentionally or unintentionally – come to be synonymous with assimilation into the hegemonic culture.

4.2: “Should I Wear a Facemask?” - Anti-Mask Advisory

The previous analysis examined a public-facing text that takes a positive stance toward cultural exchange yet potentially reproduces an ideology of white supremacy by marginalizing international students on campus. In my second analysis, I turn to an example of how the university communicates with international students who are present on campus: those ostensibly invited to be part of the community. I focus on an advisory published on the SFIS website and emailed directly to international students towards the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The advisory discourages international students from wearing face masks, and I examine the ways in which it promotes cultural assimilation in the guise of providing cultural education for international students. The advisory reads as follows:
5. Should I wear a facemask?

The **Centers for Disease control (CDC) recommends** that you wear a facemask *if you are infected with Novel Coronavirus*. While wearing a facemask is commonplace in many cultures, it is not commonplace in the U.S. *In American culture, wearing a facemask signifies that you are carrying an infectious disease*. It is not common for Americans to wear masks if they are not ill.

Southeast University **recommends** that you follow CDC guidelines as well as your own comfort levels regarding whether to wear a face mask.

*Figure 4.4: Anti-Mask Advisory*.7

The ostensible purpose of the message is to advise students against wearing face masks: coverings used to minimize the spread of COVID-19. Indeed, prior to the pandemic, most Americans did not wear face masks, even if they were showing symptoms for illnesses such as the flu. By contrast, even pre-pandemic, it was more common for people in East Asian countries to wear face masks in public settings as a civic duty when one was ill. As the advisory suggests, at the time, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – the federal public health agency of the United States, had not yet recommended the universal wearing of face masks, as they recognized that masks needed to be conserved for healthcare professionals and infected patients. The example above echoes the “official” refrain against buying and wearing face masks.

However, these messages were often racialized and targeted. On a global level, hate crimes and a general mistrust of East Asians were rising, fueled by the racialization of the COVID-19 virus as the “China virus.” Such discourses invoked a well-worn narrative of East Asians as “diseased,” thus reviving the construction of East Asians globally as the “yellow peril” (Jack-Davies 2020). This targeted and racialized messaging was mirrored at

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7 Bolded text is included in the original.
an institutional level at Southeast University, where the anti-mask advisory was emailed exclusively to international students as part of a COVID-19 FAQ page. As a domestic graduate student, I had not heard about the message until an international student informed me. My outrage over its targeted reach was the impetus for this thesis.

Generally speaking, FAQ pages for international students are part of the official websites of several U.S. universities, and highlight information on topics such as immigration paperwork, local restaurants and businesses, housing, and “American culture” using a question-and-answer format. While some of the questions on FAQ pages for international students may have been posed verbatim by international students, the questions can also reflect information which international student affairs professionals believe is important for international students to know. Often, the answers address cultural peculiarities or things that are presumed to be common cultural misconceptions about the United States.

On one hand, such FAQ pages offer objective and crucial information regarding immigration requirements and the university’s locale. On the other hand, while knowledge about “American culture” may be helpful to international students, the information they receive on the topic through FAQ pages is necessarily subjective. Scholars of linguistics have demonstrated that the culture and language of marginalized groups are often viewed as abnormal or “marked,” constructing by opposition the notion of unmarked, “normal”, or “mainstream” language and culture which align with hegemonic norms. One might therefore call into question which aspects of US culture are centered in these definitions – or even whose American culture is centered as “American culture.”
The anti-mask advisory essentializes a definition of “American culture” by juxtaposing what is, “commonplace in many cultures” with that which is “commonplace in the U.S.” This reinforcement relies on cultural normativity (Johnson 1999), in essence defining American culture as a matter-of-fact set of norms. This, along with the statement that “[i]n American culture, wearing a facemask signifies that you are carrying an infectious disease,” potentially rationalizes anti-Asian hate speech as byproducts of an apolitical incongruency of norms – and specifically, the failure of Asians to conform to American norms. As Lee & Rice (2007) note, justifying racist ideologies using the vague notion of “culture” enables hegemonic groups to appeal to 'natural' tendencies to preserve their group identity. This idea is problematized by the fact that several historians and sociologists have recognized that race and racism are not “mere ethnocentric dislike and distrust of the Other” (Fredrickson 2002). Nevertheless, by relying on a normative definition, SFIS presents and essentializes a rigid, hegemonic definition of American culture as objective fact. Crucially, this serves to invisibilize the racial power dynamics at play, thereby bolstering the racism which motivated the attacks.

The point that racialized international students should not wear masks is not made through pointed directives, which might be understood by a broader audience as problematic. The assertion is instead framed as a rational recommendation backed by institutional authority and American cultural norms. The advisory appeals to powerful institutions – such as the Center for Disease Control and the University itself – in order to reinforce the assertion that students should not wear masks. For instance, the final sentence of the advisory reads, “The University recommends that you follow CDC guidelines as well as your own comfort levels regarding whether to wear a face mask”. By citing
reputable, prestigious institutions, SFIS fortifies its argument against what is then constructed (underlined portion) as the individual choice to wear a mask. After asserting that the University, the CDC, and “Americans” do not recommend or approve of mask-wearing when one is not infected with a contagious disease, the choice to wear a mask is left up to an individual against whom powerful institutions and hegemonic cultural norms are stacked. This renders the already-marginalized individual left with the illusion of choice, despite being powerless.

Cultural pedagogy being offered to East Asian foreigners by the (white) American cultural expert is a common framing: for instance, “this is America, speak English!” Chun (2016) briefly analyzes such pedagogy in her analysis of a white student’s rant against the perceived over-encroachment of Asian bodies on her California college campus. The white student positions herself within the narrative as an average white American who has been inconvenienced by the culturally ignorant behavior of racialized foreigners. She then discursively takes on the pseudo-altruistic burden of educating the ignorant, racialized foreigners about why their behavior is a nuisance. While the discourse exemplified in SFIS’ anti-mask advisory is not intentionally antagonistic towards East Asian international students, it evokes a similar genre. SFIS assumes the position of the benevolent, self-proclaimed cultural educator vis-à-vis “American culture,” taking on the burden (Kipling 1899) of educating racialized foreigners as to why their mask-wearing is construed as offensive. As this example demonstrates, the formal cultural teaching provided by SFIS can be unidirectional: older, predominantly white student affairs professionals and ESL professionals present facts about “American culture” – which is imagined to be static and monolithic – to racialized international students. Ironically, “American culture,” rather than
being static or unitary as portrayed by the advisory, underwent a shift shortly after the advisory was issued, based on the CDC recommendation that people wear facemasks to avoid the spread of COVID-19. For many, wearing a mask indexed one’s Americanness, while for others it represented a violation of their American rights.

At first glance, it may seem extreme – or even unfair – to liken discourses designed to help international students navigate American universities with overtly racist tirades. Yet I contend that that such assimilationist discourses are effective and dangerous precisely because they firmly regiment white supremacy while wearing the mask of benevolence or altruism. As Lee & Rice (2007) have noted, neo-racism is, by definition, difficult to problematize because it seems to provide solutions for “real” racism, thereby constructing those who critique it as, themselves, racist or divisive.

This analysis has examined the ways in which this anti-mask advisory promotes cultural assimilation by essentializing a hegemonic definition of “American culture” in the guise of providing objective cultural pedagogy. While the SFIS “About Our Office” page – the subject of the previous analysis – idealizes bidirectional cultural learning and exchange between American students and international students, the same office in this example presents unidirectional cultural assimilation to the hegemonic norm as the solution to the racism and xenophobia faced by racialized international students.
CHAPTER 5
LINGUISTIC POLICING AND THE IMAGINED LISTENING SUBJECT

While Chapter 4 focused on how “culture” was an object of normalization and policing at the university, this chapter examines how language specifically—as a kind of cultural practice—was standardized and policed specifically through a linguistic assessment of ITAs. Section 5.1 provides an analysis of the state law motivating the ITA Assessment. I examine in particular the notion of “adequate proficiency”, which is predicated upon ideologies that construct an imagined, white listening subject to whom ITAs must linguistically cater. Section 5.2 then dissects the linguistic assessment that ITAs must pass in order to teach undergraduate students at the university. The analysis explores the ways in which the assessment, while appearing objective, is predicated upon raciolinguistic ideologies. Taken together, these analyses demonstrate that raciolinguistic ideologies pervade both formal and informal assessments made of ITAs’ language.

5.1: “Adequate Proficiency” - The English Fluency in Higher Learning Act

This section presents an analysis of the state law motivating the ITA Assessment: The English Fluency in Higher Learning Act (henceforth the EFHLA). The law was put into effect in 1991 and mandates that a grievance procedure be provided for students if their instructor is not “adequately proficient” in written or spoken English. ELPIS is the office tasked with enforcing this law through ITA assessment & training. This analysis investigates the ideological construction of the listening subject and demonstrates the ways
in which the EFHLA bolsters whiteness by constructing “American students” as being victimized by unintelligible ITAs (Fitch & Morgan 2003).

The tone of this document is the most formal of the four pieces of data that were analyzed for this project, using only third-person pronouns, and making liberal use of directives. This is in keeping with the genre of legal documents within which the EFHLA falls. Due to the conventions of the genre, there is also an added emphasis on being as precise as possible when it comes to the meanings of words, leaving as little room as possible for ambiguity or misrepresentation. Yet as I will demonstrate through this analysis, the notion of “English fluency” is imprecisely defined and laden with ideologies about the imagined listening subject.

STATE COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION


(A) This section may be cited as the English Fluency in Higher Learning Act.

(B) The following words and phrases when used in this section have the meanings given to them unless the context clearly indicates otherwise:

"Instructional faculty" means every member of a public institution of higher learning whose first language is not English, other than visiting faculty but including graduate teaching assistants, who teaches one or more undergraduate credit courses at a campus of that institution within this State except:

(1) courses that are designed to be taught predominately in a foreign language;

(2) student participatory and activity courses such as clinics, studios, and seminars;

(3) special arrangement courses such as individualized instruction and independent study courses; and

(4) continuing education courses.

Figure 5.1: Sections A & B of the EFHLA

Centrally, the EFHLA claims that “instructional faculty whose second language is English [must] possess adequate proficiency in both the written and spoken English language.” Within the document, this requirement of “adequate proficiency” is defined in disparate ways, beginning with the title itself. The title reads, “The English Fluency in
Higher Learning Act.” In this instance, adequate proficiency is equated with *fluency* in English.

(C) Each public institution of higher learning shall establish policies to:

(1) ensure that the instructional faculty whose second language is English possess adequate proficiency in both the written and spoken English language. Student and faculty input is required in establishing these policies.

(2) provide students with a grievance procedure regarding an instructor who is not able to write or speak the English language.

(D)(1) Each institution of higher learning must submit its policy or amendments to the Commission on Higher Education within six months from the effective date of this section. Any amendments to the policy must be promptly forwarded to the commission. The commission shall notify the chairmen of the Senate and House Education Committees of those institutions not submitting plans and any amendment to the commission.

(2) Each institution of higher learning must report annually to the Commission on Higher Education and the chairmen of the Senate and House of Representatives Education Committees grievances filed by students under the requirement of subsection (C)(2) and the disposition of those grievances.

*Figure 5.2: Section C of the EFHLA*

Later on, in section C, the document mandates that students must be provided with a “grievance procedure regarding an instructor who is not able to write or speak the English language.” In contrast to its a notion of “fluency,” this allusion to adequate proficiency appears to refer to *any* ability to speak or write in English. In this way, “adequate proficiency” is an imprecise target that an imagined listening subject evaluates.

The core focus on the notion of “adequate proficiency” in English raises this question: in whose eyes (or ears, as it were) must instructional faculty’s English be adequate? According to section C of the EFHLA, “student and faculty input is required in establishing policies” for the assessment of instructional faculty’s adequate English proficiency, legitimating the notion that both students and university faculty are evaluative authorities. Section B is devoted to clarifying who falls under the category of instructional faculty. The definition extends to “every member of a public institution of higher learning
whose first language is not English… including graduate teaching assistants, who teaches one or more undergraduate credit courses.” The policy therefore deliberately includes graduate TAs whose first languages are not English, many of whom are ITAs. Furthermore, instructors who are exempted from this requirement include those teaching courses “designed to be taught predominantly in a foreign language.” The term “foreign language” refers to English despite denoting a language that is not natively spoken, whether by an individual or by a community. The assertion that instructional faculty must have adequate proficiency in English, coupled with the characterization of non-English languages as “foreign,” constructs English as the national language of the United States. The imagined listener of an ITA’s lecture, for example, is then an English-monolingual, “American” student.

And yet, while the importance of having “adequate proficiency” in English so as to be understood by “American” undergraduates is underscored by this example, the United States itself does not have a national language. While racial categories are not explicitly mentioned here, it should be recognized that anxieties about the need to enforce English use in the United States often reflect racial anxieties about “foreigners” who use languages other than English (e.g., Spanish, Chinese, Hindi). The notion that English should be learned thus often hinges on the notion of white linguistic normalcy (Hill 1998), thus indexically tying ideologies of race (whiteness) with those of “culture” and nation (Americanness), as well as ideologies of language (English). I therefore argue that the imagined white listening subject (Flores & Rosa 2015) of the “American student” reflects an amalgamation of all of these subjectivities in their evaluative perspective.
As salaried employees of the university, instructional faculty are required to perform a type of aesthetic labor by aurally appealing to undergraduate students (Ramjattan 2018), reflecting the late twentieth-century shift towards understanding students as ‘customers’ and ‘consumers’ (Lee & Rice 2007). Within this framing, the university is constructed as a vendor, and instructional faculty are constructed as workers paid to provide a service to undergraduate consumers. While “adequate proficiency” in some sense sounds like a practical operationalization of the ability to communicate and may not readily evoke “aesthetic” imagery related to luxury and pleasure, an aesthetics of language is necessarily relevant when as these instructors must both ‘look good’ and ‘sound right’ for students, who act as their customers (Ramjattan 2018). This is consistent with Fitch & Morgan’s (2003) finding that in narratives maligning ITAs as “unintelligible,” American undergraduates typically constructed their identities as blameless victims who had paid "good money" for an education. The view of students at PWIs as consumers paying “good money” for an education reproduces a commonly critiqued attitude of white, middle-class entitlement toward the labor of others. Linguistically, this reproduces a dynamic where ITAs who teach monolingual, English-dominant students, as aesthetic laborers working for the benefit of predominantly white customers, are expected to shoulder most of the communicative burden (Lippi-Green 2012).

This (re)produces the notion that American students – and all of the subjectivities that their listening perspective connotes – must be protected from racialized, unintelligible ITAs. In fact, section C decrees that, “each institution of higher learning must report annually to the Commission on Higher Education and the chairmen of the Senate and House of Representatives Education Committees grievances filed by students… and the
disposition of those grievances.” The law reflects the view of American students as blameless victims (Fitch & Morgan 2003) in interactions with ITAs, thus prioritizing the protection of whiteness over the ability to communicate. American undergraduates’ grievances about an ITA’s perceived inadequate English proficiency can be reported to legislators, making the stakes of “unintelligibility” grave.

5.2: ITA Assessment

The present section offers an analysis of an ITA Assessment “Microlesson Assignment,” which is created and regularly administered by ELPIS, or the university’s English Language Program for International Students and while may be understood in response to the law discussed in the previous section. Specifically, I show how the listening perspective of the “American undergraduate” that was privileged at the level of state legislature carries into the local setting of the university.

As noted in Chapter 3, ELPIS is the campus entity charged with providing language pedagogy to and assessing the English proficiency of international students. It conducts this assessment for international graduate students who are new to the university and who serve as teaching assistants in undergraduate classes. As part of this assessment, the new ITAs are provided a handout (see Appendix B) that instructed to prepare a 5-7 minute “microlesson” on a concept that they might ordinarily teach in an undergraduate class in their major field of study. They then present these microlessons to a mock-class composed of ELPIS instructors and fellow ITAs. The following analysis illustrates how raciolinguistic ideologies (Rosa & Flores 2017) undergird the structure of the ITA Assessment Microlesson Assignment, thereby regimenting ideologies that sociolinguistically marginalize ITAs.
Register, Genre, and Acts

The linguistic structure of the “Microlesson Assignment” handout reflects its goals and context. Presented as an authorless, official text of “The Graduate School,” in a simple black-and-white electronic document typed in Times font, its purpose is to guide international students and their ELPIS evaluators who will be participating in a future language assessment event.

Conventions such as capitalization, bolding, and underlining are used throughout to demarcate “important” categories and points. For example, the underlined content pertains to the importance of preparing for the assessment (“This is a very important activity. Please prepare accordingly.”, the time limit (“5-7 minutes”). The bolded information emphasizes events that may or may not be allowed to take place while ITAs are presenting their lessons, including the possibility of questions from the mock class (“Expect for your ‘class’ to ask you questions. . .”) as well as the prohibition of particular technology (“No power point technology is available.”). Both bolded and underlined are the scores that ITAs are required to serve as a graduate teaching assistant (“. . . ‘satisfactory’ (85% - 100%) or ‘marginal’ (75% - 84%) or ‘at risk’ (74% or below).
If your assessment is ‘at risk’, you will not be permitted to teach in an undergraduate setting”). The tone of the assignment is that of academic instructional texts more generally, written in standardized English and prioritizing and highlighting the dimensions of the assessment constructed as important through its organization: the length of the lesson the audience expected to be present (“a ‘veteran’ TA, a Linguistics graduate student, and an undergraduate student”), the evaluation criteria (see below), the constraints on the teaching materials, and the uptake of the evaluation, as it enters institutional documentation
(notification of the student’s Graduate Director and the archiving of a recording of the lesson for a year).

In this sense, the format of the microlesson is different from the SFIS documents analyzed above, in that instead of offering suggestions to international students, the Microlesson Assignment prescribes what must be done. The text is comprised of assertions that function of directives, instructing future event participants to perform particular actions. At the opening, the text reads, “Candidates are to prepare a ‘microlesson’” and “You should choose a small teaching point.” After a third-person reference to “candidates” in the opening line, ITAs are consistently referred to using the second-person pronoun “you” throughout the document, placing the focus on the TA’s actions. The use of terminology like “candidates” and the laying out of “rules” create a more formal and prescriptive tone, indicative of the framing of the assessment as an assignment: the instructions are given directly, and the main point is not linguistically hedged.

The tone of this document lies in contrast to that of the discourses exemplified in the previous chapter, wherein the direct assertion that international students must assimilate to American culture was not used. This difference may arise in part because of the outward-facing nature of webpages and the inward-facing nature of this assessment document. But it may also arise because linguistic discrimination remains one of the most socially acceptable forms of discrimination (Baugh 2005). Therefore, while the formal, directive tone of the assignment can in part be understood as reflective of the genre of academic assignments, it can also be understood as a categorical enforcement of a hegemonic linguistic standard that is viewed as unproblematic within the academy.
Figure 5.3 below provides a close-up breakdown of the weighted categories through which ITAs’ speech is evaluated.

**Ideologies of Accent and Race**

You will be evaluated according to the following:
- pronunciation (50%)
- grammar (10%)
- vocabulary (10%)
- general fluency (10%)
- organization (10%)
- cross-linguistic awareness (5%)
- extra-linguistic communicative strategies (5%)

*Figure 5.3: Weighted categories of evaluation.*

The breakdown is prefaced with the statement, “you will be evaluated according to the following,” thereby clearly and seemingly objectively outlining the evaluative criteria. Notably, the passivization of the phrase as opposed to “we will evaluate you” invisibilizes the listening perspective of the evaluator. The assignment sheet outlines that “your targeted audience is undergraduates at the university” and encourages those playing the role of students during the exercise to ask questions during their presentation “just like any American student would.” The imagined listener to whom ITAs must be comprehensible is therefore the “American” undergraduate student at a PWI, or a white listening subject (Flores & Rosa 2015). While the listening perspective of an American undergraduate is not formally evaluative, studies have demonstrated that undergraduates do pass judgment on ITAs and their linguistic abilities. Undergraduates’ complaints about ITAs’ linguistic (un)intelligibility are predicated upon raciolinguistic ideologies (Fitch & Morgan 2003; Ramjattan 2018; Ramjattan 2020).

The order and relative weights of each category reflect the relative prioritization of particular aspects of communication over others. For instance, categories such as “cross-
linguistic awareness” and “extra-linguistic communicative strategies” are weighted at 5% each, while categories such as “grammar” and “pronunciation” comprise 10% and 50% of the total score, respectively. Through this categorization, the “sociocultural” or “discursive” dimensions of language are both separated from and made less important than dimensions that pertain to linguistic structure. This reflects a perspective on language according to which its structure cannot be explained by appeals to “non-linguistic” factors such as emotions and social structure (Hanks 1996), despite the fact scholars of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics have demonstrated that social context is necessarily embedded into the literal meaning of an utterance (Hanks 1996b).

It is also notable that the most heavily weighted category within the criteria for ITA evaluation on the ELPIS assessment is pronunciation, comprising 50% of the overall score that ITAs receive. Phonological patterns are commonly mapped onto social indices (Silverstein 2003), reinforcing ideologies about who speaks with an “accent” and who does not. Lippi-Green (2012) elaborates that while all speakers have an accent, non-hegemonic “accents” are often constructed as linguistically incorrect. Ramjattan’s (2020) work corroborates this claim in the context of studies on ITA perception, highlighting that ITAs are often maligned for allegedly having unintelligible accents which are believed to interfere with communication in the academic workplace (Fitch and Morgan 2003; Wang and Mantero 2018). Such claims about ITAs’ alleged unintelligibility are racially grounded, as research has shown that non-white ITAs are subject to harsher criticism about their accents than their white counterparts (Kang, Rubin, & Lindemann 2014; Lindemann 2003; Rubin 1992). Racialized international students are therefore primarily assessed on their ability to meet a phonological target that aligns with hegemonic American linguistic
norms. Although ELPIS claims that they are uninvested in altering or policing ITAs’ accents, the evaluative emphasis on pronunciation necessarily entails quantification of ITAs’ linguistic approximation of an imagined, standardized phonological target that is comprehensible by predominantly white undergraduates at the university.

It may seem logical or even necessary, for ELPIS to take measures to prevent the reporting of ITAs to government agencies specifically by offering classes that teach ITAs how to adhere to hegemonic linguistic norms. However, I argue that catering to the listening perspective of the American undergraduate student at a PWI without actively engaging them in conversation about how placing the communicative burden on international privileges a white American listening perspective constructs ITA “intelligibility” as static. This assumption stands in contrast to research that suggests that both speakers and listeners work harder to share the communicative burden (Lippi-Green 1997; 2012) when involved in structured inter-group contact (Kang, Rubin, Lindemann 2014; Staples, Kang, & Wittner 2014). I argue that the assumption in legislature (the EFHLA) and in academic evaluation (the ITA Assessment) that American undergraduates at PWIs are victimized by problematically unintelligible ITAs will continue to be reproduced within the academy if we do not engage in critical reflection on the ideologies that motivate the lack of understanding.

In the following section, I summarize the main points of my analysis and offer tangible strategies using which the university presently being discussed, as well as other universities, can combat linguistic & cultural racism and xenophobia.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have analyzed the ideologies of race and language that are implicitly reproduced via four sites of discourse that offer cultural and linguistic guidance to international students at Southeast University. Centrally, I have argued that the data analyzed discursively obscures the racializing dynamics which undergird essentializing definitions of “American culture” (Chapter 4) and the “English language” (Chapter 5), thereby encouraging assimilation to hegemonic linguistic and cultural norms in the guise of benevolent education.

In Chapter 4, my analysis of the SFIS “About” page has demonstrated that the neoliberalization of intercultural exchange works to further white supremacy by invisibilizing the racial overtones of interactions between international and domestic students at an American PWI. This was tangibly exemplified by the anti-mask advisory, which reproduced ideologies of neoliberal multiculturalism that allowed for overtly racist aggressions against East Asian students on campus to be chalked up to “cultural misunderstanding,” ultimately encouraging assimilation to hegemonic cultural norms.

Chapter 5 examined the way that an evaluative emphasis on pronunciation necessarily entails quantification of ITAs’ linguistic approximation of an imagined, standardized (largely) phonological target that is comprehensible by predominantly white undergraduates at the university. Simultaneously, the perspective of the white listening subject (Flores & Rosa 2015) is invisiblized, constructing a subjective linguistic analysis
predicated upon raciolinguistic ideologies as scientifically objective. As the EFHLA demonstrates, the law backs these raciolinguistic ideologies, reflecting a view of American students as blameless victims (Fitch & Morgan 2003) in interactions with ITAs, thus bolstering whiteness. This thesis has therefore highlighted the ways in which language and race are co-naturalized vis-à-vis international students at Southeast University. In addition to this focus, Rosa & Flores (2017) have pointed out that a key aspect of a raciolinguistic approach is to imagine the denaturalization of these ideologies as a necessary step in the effort towards decolonization and the eradication of white supremacy. The following sections discuss some of the limitations of my work, some opportunities for future study, and the implications of my findings for praxis.

6.1: Limitations of the Current Study

Due to the short time frame of this study and the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to conduct ethnographic fieldwork that would have allowed me to represent and analyze a fuller range of discourses both circulated among and directed toward international students. While the pandemic helped form the impetus for this project, it disallowed me from conducting face-to-face and digital ethnography (Varis 2016) efficiently. For instance, I was physically allowed into some spaces while wearing a face mask, but my ability to digitally communicate and network with SFIS and ELPIS staff members was impeded by people affected by illnesses. As a result, I was not able to gather heterogenous perspectives among SFIS/ELPIS staff and international students. Additionally, although I did engage in many informal conversations with international students, I was not able to systematically consider their perspectives, since I was unable to conduct formal interviews with them. Systematically considering the perspectives of international students as well as observing
the actual ITA assessment process would have enriched and nuanced my analysis of the ways in which they are racialized. Future studies might highlight the heterogeneity of perspectives on language and race among relevant stakeholders, delving into the ways in which certain perspectives prevail in the public-facing discourse.

While the written discourses that I analyze in this thesis are not representative of the holistic work accomplished by offices such as SFIS and ELPIS, I maintain that the discourses are worthy of critical attention because they are among the most visible discourses circulated by the offices. The analysis I have provided highlights the public-facing discourses vis-à-vis language, race, and international students and draws on sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological methods to analyze how such widely circulating discourses shape our shared understandings of language and race. This work therefore aims to open up both applied and theoretical discussions about the problematic aspects of some of the discourses that international student-serving offices put forth.

6.2: Implications for Praxis

While this thesis has focused on the ideologies present in discourses related to SFIS and ELPIS at Southeast University, an impressionistic analysis of several university websites suggests that the ideologies that I have highlighted pervade the discourses directed towards international students at universities throughout the United States. This analysis has called into question the utility of lofty ideals of neoliberal intercultural exchange which, by invisibilizing race, regiment the marginalization of racialized international students. An alternative approach to addressing the cultural and racial differences between American students and international students at PWIs is for international student-serving offices to adopt an overt, critical stance towards white supremacy. I therefore suggest that the efforts
of offices dedicated to the support of international students would better be diverted – at least in part – from encouraging cultural and linguistic policing and redirected to dismantling the structures and discourses of racism that have been discussed in this thesis.

Such efforts would first entail critical reflection upon existing procedures that portray cultural and linguistic assimilation as the answer to the xenophobia and racism encountered by racialized international students. As this thesis has demonstrated, the obscuring of racial power dynamics in linguistic and cultural pedagogy offered to international students reifies the hierarchies which oppress them. The SFIS and ELPIS need to reflexively consider and change the ways in which public-facing and internally circulating discourses essentialize definitions of “American culture” or the “English language.”

Of course, this work is not as simple as revising a few sentences on a website or being occasionally conscientious in the classroom. It involves a reimagining of the foundations of the types of discourses that have been directed towards international students for decades and across multiple sites that shape university policies and procedures. As an important first step, offices such as SFIS and ELPIS could hire staff members who are trained in disciplines such as Linguistics, Sociology, and Anthropology and who have the methodological competence to explicitly identify the systematic and inadvertent reproduction of hierarchies of race and language.

Furthermore, as I have highlighted in this thesis, most of the staff of the two international student-oriented offices were white, while the students they worked belonged to racialized identity groups. As my analysis has demonstrated, this allows for definitions of “American culture” to be essentialized based on hegemonic perspectives as well as to
reproduce a culture of “white benevolence.” Offices should therefore place an emphasis on recruiting staff members of color, including immigrants, members of diasporic groups, Latinx, Black, and Indigenous people. PWIs should also work towards the goal of building connections between racialized international students and racialized domestic students, thereby facilitating recognition and discussion of shared circumstances and opening up opportunities to speak back to the systems of power which oppress both groups. This could inspire reflexivity and provide counterexamples to the dominating discourses that the United States is a monolingual, culturally homogenous place.

Efforts to ameliorate the racializing experiences of international students must necessarily extend beyond pedagogy geared towards racialized international students: they must also extend to those who linguistically and culturally evaluate them — “American” undergraduates. As Chapter 5 of my analysis demonstrates, the protections afforded to “American” undergraduates in legislature and university assessments treat their understandings of language, race, and culture as static. Given that intelligibility is a negotiated process between speaker and listener that is often hindered by racializing ideologies about non-hegemonic accents, it is also my recommendation that universities, as part of mandatory trainings geared toward freshmen, discuss within a critical, insightful context the concept of sharing the communicative burden. Research suggests that both speakers and listeners work harder to share the communicative burden (Lippi-Green 1997; 2012) when involved in structured inter-group contact (Kang, Rubin, Lindemann 2014; Staples, Kang, & Wittner 2014). I therefore propose that a combination of learning about raciolinguistic ideologies vis-à-vis ITAs and taking part in structured inter-group contact
activities that include domestic and international students would all be steps in the direction of decolonization and the eradication of white supremacy at an institutional level.
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APPENDIX A

SFIS “ABOUT OUR OFFICE” WEBPAGE

About

Services for International Students has many roles on campus. But our most important and favorite role is providing support to our F-1 and J-1 visa holding students and their families. We strive to be a welcoming space for international students with a focus on excellent customer service, genuine care, and immigration expertise.

Our Mission

SFIS supports nonimmigrant international students and institutional stakeholders on matters of immigration compliance and cross-cultural adjustment to promote academic success. ISS contributes to global engagement of the greater Southeast University community through dynamic internationalization programming.

Our Vision

To inspire students to forge international connections, to engage in transformative educational experiences through a lens of global curiosity, and ultimately, to engender positive change in the world through their increased intercultural competence.

Our Goals

1. Respond nimbly to a dynamic regulatory environment to ensure institutional immigration compliance at the federal and state levels.
2. Advocate for international student retention and success by providing outstanding support services centered around competence and empathy.
3. Proliferate a culture of “the informed student,” empowering international students with knowledge and skills to properly maintain immigration compliance.
4. Expand cross-cultural learning and global competencies among students, faculty, staff, and the community.

Welcome!

- Staff members understand the unique cultural adjustments that international students go through. All of us have lived or traveled internationally, and some of us were even international students in the U.S.
- Sign up for our email newsletter to find out about your immigration status, cultural opportunities that expand your horizons, and social events & programs that connect you with others.

Figure A.1: SFIS Statement of Mission, Vision, and Goals
APPENDIX B

SFIS “ABOUT OUR OFFICE” WEBPAGE

Microlesson Assignment

Candidates are to prepare a "microlesson" to teach to their group. (For this activity, each candidate will be assigned to one of several groups, determined by discipline as much as possible.) This is a very important activity. Please prepare for it accordingly.

TOPIC:

The topic of your microlesson should be related to your field, something you would ordinarily teach to a group of undergraduates at or near the beginning of a course offered by your department. (One possibility could be to present an introduction to a concept or a review of a homework problem. You should choose to teach a small teaching point, something that could be addressed in 5 minutes. Remember that your targeted audience is undergraduates, so be sure to define any technical terms in your presentation.) Make certain that your topic is focused enough to be done within the time limit.

LENGTH: 5-7 minutes. (Your presentation will be timed. This time length includes questions from your "class" and your responses to these questions. Your presentation should allow for at least 2 minutes of questions from your "class" and your answers. Expect for your "class" to ask you questions both during and after your lesson, just as any American student would.)

AUDIENCE:

Your audience will be composed of your International Teaching Assistant colleagues and instructors from English Language Program for International Students. For the initial August ITA assessment, the audience also includes a veteran TA, a Linguistics graduate student, and an undergraduate student. They will be playing the role of "undergraduate USC student." Your linguistic performance will be assessed by two instructors who will also check input from the rest of the assessment team.

You will be evaluated according to the following:

* pronunciation (50%)
* grammar (10%)
* vocabulary (10%)
* general fluency (10%)
* organization (10%)
* cross-linguistic awareness (5%)
* extra-linguistic communicative strategies (5%)

TEACHING MATERIALS:

You may use any of the following: whiteboard/chalkboard, markers/chalk, handouts and/or overhead transparencies (prepared before the session—you need to find and make your own transparencies). A board and overhead projector will be available. No power point technology is available.

Your Graduate Director will be notified in writing about your results on the assessment. Please check with your Graduate Director about your assessment, which will be either “satisfactory” (85% - 100%) or “marginal” (75% - 84%) or “at risk” (74% and below). If your assessment is “at risk,” you will not be permitted to teach in an SU undergraduate setting.

Your lesson will be recorded and kept on file for one year for review.

Figure B.1: ITA Assessment sheet.