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Confronting the Political Economy of Englishes in the Classroom

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Confronting the Political Economy of Englishes in the Classroom

Abstract

Despite celebratory discourses of Global English(es), scholars adopting political economic approaches have demonstrated the continued unequal distribution and valuation of English(es), and have shifted the focus to questions of unequal speakers in unequal conditions (Tupas, 2020). Drawing on ethnographic data from an English-teaching NGO for ‘disadvantaged’ young adults in Delhi, this paper seeks to contribute to political economic scholarship of English Language Teaching and Learning in two ways. In a first instance, I trace the shaping effects of class, caste and coloniality on how marginalised students orient themselves to notions of correctness and discursively reject fluid language practices. In a second instance, I introduce data from workshops with staff at the NGO in which we attempt to co-analyse the findings outlined in the first section and discuss potential implications for their practice. Noting the discursive, political and affective discomfort that marked these interactions, I ask what is at stake when engaging in discussions with English language teaching institutions that explicitly locate English learning and teaching within its political economic and ideological conditions, and what this means for scholarly projects aligned with critical, emancipatory and social justice causes.

Keywords: English, India, Political Economy, Caste, Critique

Introduction

At NGO headquarters one afternoon, I sat in on a training session with a group of facilitators who were sharing the challenges that they had been facing in their English teaching that semester. As the session drew to a close, one young facilitator suggested that they all stay in touch by creating a group on '*What's up*'. Many of his peers promptly jumped in to 'correct' his 'error' [What's up/WhatsApp]. Bristling, the young man appeared visibly annoyed, and shrugged off the correction with a flippant "whatever". A few seats away from me, a young woman laughed, shaking her head, almost whispering – "no, no, it's not *whatever*".

It's not 'whatever'. This off-the-cuff comment – itself a response to what might appear a rather inconsequential slip of the tongue – is revealing of a pervasive hyper-focus on correction and correctness. Extending far beyond the walls of the NGO, it is fuelled by anxieties, understood here not in an individualised psychological sense, but rather as emerging from the discursive and political economic conditions in which the students and teachers at the NGO are located (Park, 2021). These anxieties, as I will demonstrate, are tightly linked to fears of what it means to *not* speak 'good' English for those who are socially and economically marginalised. The NGO's facilitators – many of whom had once been students at the NGO – understood in both pragmatic and affective terms that the stakes, for themselves and their students, were particularly high.

The ideological and political economic conditions that shape relationships with English have been well documented in (critical) sociolinguistic scholarship. Over the last few decades, scholars have demonstrated how 'varieties' of Englishes across the globe are subject to colonial hierarchies (Kachru, 1976) that cluster around concepts of standards (Milroy, 2001), native speakers (Holliday, 2006; Rampton, 1990) and correctness. More recently, attention has shifted from the varieties

themselves to speakers and conditions (Tupas, 2020; Tupas & Rubdy, 2015), which raises difficult questions about the evacuation of power and politics from approaches that centre on the celebration of diverse practices, and about the extent to which 'English' can be leveraged as a resource for the development of both nations and individuals. These debates result in tense situations for practitioners, who often struggle to balance the contradictions between a) a desire to reject colonial and class hegemony by embracing diverse practices of English, b) a recognition of the political economic conditions that value certain practices (and speakers) over others, c) a desire for social mobility, and d) a justified scepticism in the neoliberal promise of English as an emancipatory tool (Tabiola & Lorente, 2017). This has important consequences for how students and teachers manage and understand their approach to teaching, learning and speaking English.

The aims of this paper are twofold. In a first instance, I draw on ethnographic data from an English-teaching NGO in India to show the effects of unequal Englishes, unequal speakers and unequal conditions on how students orient themselves to notions of correctness. Through this, I demonstrate how class, caste and coloniality shape how the students negotiate their practices as they pursue English, which results in a highly affective orientation to 'correction' and the discursive rejection of fluid practices. In a second instance, I bring in data from a secondary project at the NGO which took place three years after the initial ethnographic study, and which took the form of data analysis workshops with teachers, management and other senior level employees of the NGO. I present our attempts in the workshop to co-analyse the findings I outline in the first section and the potential implications for NGO policy and practice, in order to explore how we collectively navigated the tensions between an acknowledgement of diversity of language, and an acknowledgement of the political economy of India. Noting the discomfort that marked these

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interactions, I ask what is at stake when engaging in discussions that explicitly locate English teaching within its political economic and ideological conditions, and what this means for scholarly projects aligned with critical, emancipatory and social justice causes.

Language and Political Economy

That diverse practices of English are subject to hierarchisation has long been acknowledged in sociolinguistic scholarship. A pioneer of the field of World Englishes, Braj B. Kachru's work (1976, 1985, 1988) on circles of Englishes was developed in response to lingering hegemonic ideologies of 'nativeness', language purity and standard English. While much of this work raised important questions about the 'ownership' of English globally, it has nonetheless been critiqued for its pre-emptive pronouncing of the victory of plurality over monolingual ideologies (Tupas & Rubdy, 2015) which glosses over power relations and reinscribes liberal multiculturalism (Kubota 2016), as well as its tendencies to reify languages – this time as *New Englishes* – as discrete codes attached to nation states (Saraceni, 2015). More recently, translanguaging has emerged in response to conceptualisations of languages as static codes, emphasising instead the fluid and dynamic practices of multilinguals for meaning-making and knowledge construction (Li Wei, 2018). As a practical theory of language, translanguaging has been particularly influential in pedagogy (Bonacina-Pugh, da Costa Cabral & Huang, 2021) and is often described as a transformative, liberatory and socially just approach to language teaching (García & Wei 2014; Otheguy, García & Reid 2015). While translanguaging represents a significant theoretical departure from World Englishes and related fields such as English as a Lingua Franca, many have drawn attention to the insufficient attention paid to the political economy of language within the framework. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's work, Block (2018) argues that the translanguaging approach centres concerns of recognition over those of redistribution. While there

may well be important empowering effects of such pedagogical approaches, he argues, translanguaging pedagogy represents “a surface level change in practices” (p. 251) that does not attack the roots of capitalist structural organisation and injustice (see also O’Regan, 2021).

What Block and many others advocate – albeit not always on the same terms – is an analysis of language in the world that is situated within historical, political, social and economic conditions. This means going beyond interpersonal interactions framed as discrimination and anchoring them instead in the unequal distribution and valuation of resources within wider patterns and forces of colonialism, racism and capitalism. Adopting a political economic approach to language means shifting the focus towards addressing how “individuals are embedded in specific socio-political, economic and institutional structures” (Flubacher et al., 2018). It requires us to inquire into the means by which resources obtain and retain value, and their particular trajectories (who has access, who consumes, who can or does not) (Del Percio et al., 2017). In turn, this allows for an understanding of inequality that explicitly situates local practice within wider historical, discursive and material systems and conditions. From this perspective, scholars have shown how language learning under neoliberalism has been re-signified as a ‘skill’ (Urciuoli, 2008; see also Allan, 2013; Martín-Rojo & Del Percio, 2019) that can (and should) be universally acquired for profit (Duchêne & Heller, 2012), which obscures the unequal access to valued resources and the continued unequal valuation and stigmatisation of both language varieties and speakers in global markets (Rosa, 2016; Park, 2021) through coloniality, racialisation, class and, in the case of India, the persistent reality of caste.

Adopting a political economic approach to English in India requires us to situate English and its speakers, learners and teachers within the discursive, historical, social, political and economic conditions which they

are both subject to and are a part of. In India, as Mathew (2022) has written, political economic shifts in India's recent history have dovetailed with discursive shifts patterned around binaries ("colonizer-colonized; native speaker–non-native speaker") in the colonial period; a refusal of binaries in the post-colonial era; and, today, a market-driven approach that celebrates "diversity" (p. 172). While each shift entails its own processes of inclusion and exclusion, they are not marked by strict transitions, but rather, as Park (2021) has shown, are porous boundaries through which different logics are laminated upon one another to produce complex ideological webs, as older discourses co-articulate with newer ones in contemporary conditions. In the NGO, this results in tensions between the sticky (Ahmed, 2014) and persistent nature of colonial taxonomies of language that reify English as a static object around which clear lines of 'correct' and 'incorrect' can be ostensibly drawn, and the neoliberal and developmental re-framings of English as a globally shared tool and key to success in the modern world. Rather than standing in contrast, however, these ideologies work in tandem to nurture a perpetual yet impossible pursuit of English. Delegitimised as English speakers through the discursive linking of race and class, aspirational English speakers in India find themselves on a never-ending treadmill as they strive to attain a legitimacy that will always remain out of their reach (Park, 2021) but which they feel compelled to pursue for fear of the consequences.

A political economic approach to English also forces us to reckon with the agendas that are served by various attempts to manage unequal Englishes, speakers and conditions in the language classroom, and sheds light on the consequences of pedagogic practices that either seek to make changes within existing social structures, or which (ostensibly) seek to transform such structures (Park & Wee, 2011). As a social space, the classroom is certainly not separate from the wider structures that (some forms of) pedagogy strive to address: education has a long history of serving the reproduction of privilege (Bourdieu, 2010). Educational spaces are shot

through with political, economic, social, historical and institutional forces, and are populated with actors with different (often competing) interests. It is precisely the tensions that emerge within these spaces that this paper seeks to unpack by tracing, firstly, the effects of unequal Englishes on how the students orient themselves towards notions of 'good' and 'correct' English and, secondly, the affective, discursive and political discomfort that this raised for both myself and the NGO staff in our attempts to confront what is at stake for the students, and for ourselves.

Methodology

The data in this paper is taken from my ethnographic engagement with an English and employability training NGO in Delhi, which has over 100 branches across North India. The NGO offers a one-year course, 6 days per week, entirely free of cost, to any student over the age of 15. The objective of the programme, in the NGO's terms, is to alleviate poverty and assist students in their search for professional jobs. In the branch that I observed, most students, although not all, came from Hindi-medium education backgrounds, and while none of the students I met came from families who lived below the poverty line, many struggled with financial instability and could certainly not have afforded the fees of the popular coaching centres that offer similar training. Many of the students I met came from one agrarian caste group that is often stigmatised as being uncouth and uneducated, and which falls under the governmental category of Other Backward Classes (OBC). The facilitators – both those in this branch and those who attended the workshops – had all but one also been students themselves at the NGO before undergoing training to become a facilitator after successfully completing their courses (for more details on the NGO, see Highet & Del Percio, 2021a; 2021b).

My engagement with the NGO has taken several forms, beginning with ethnographic fieldwork over four months in 2018-2019, after which I remained in regular contact with management and participants from the branch that I had primarily observed in the south of Delhi. In January 2022, I began a series of workshops with senior members of staff (trainers, curriculum designers, managers, career counsellors) and facilitators (both junior and senior), most of whom I knew from my fieldwork. The workshops, which took place online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, were designed as a way to share and co-analyse my ethnographic findings with the NGO in order to a) discuss potential implications for their policy and practice and b) to ask broader questions about the challenges (ethical, political, ideological) of these types of researcher 'engagement'. The workshops were certainly not designed as 'training' sessions: I was uncomfortable with the colonial and paternalist undertones of such an exercise. At the same time, as a critical sociolinguistic study, I had identified what I felt were problematic practices and discourses that I was keen to share with representatives from the NGO in order to start a conversation about what this might mean, and see how they might justify their approaches. I wanted to have these conversations not through a desire to 'enlighten' or 'raise awareness' but through an interest in explicitly documenting what it means to engage in complex and sometimes difficult relationships with institutions that we want to hold to account, and between individuals (myself included) who, while highly aware of the contradictions they have to navigate, are complicit in the reproduction of structural organisation.

Correction, class and caste

In contrast with what Tupas and Rubdy (2015) describe as the "tenet of linguistic equality" propagated by the field of World Englishes (p.1), 'diverse' practices of English were certainly not celebrated by the students (and often, the teachers) in the NGO. Orientations to English were often

marked by a hyper-attention to 'correctness' and a discursive rejection of fluidity. In the several months I spent observing classes, training sessions, and other events, it was hard not to notice the pervasiveness of error correction that imbued the teaching and learning processes at multiple levels. Facilitators allocated monitors for particular grammatical points (past tense monitor, plural/singular monitor, articles monitor, etc.) who were responsible for noting and correcting any errors made by other students within their remit. At the back of their books, each student had an 'error tracker' where they were encouraged to note down and correct mistakes they made as well as those of their peers. This peer correction often went unprompted, offered by several students in chorus – and often occurring multiple times in one utterance – and was almost always welcomed by the student who had made the 'error', who would then repeat the reformulated response. I was particularly struck by the patience of the students, both the correctors and the correctees, as this process frequently made discussions rather disjointed, and students often lost their train of thought as they went back to repeat a word or a sentence several times. When students were lax in their peer correction, they were prompted by their teacher to play the role of detective and hunt down "each and every mistake", regardless of how frustrated or not the correctee felt as, ultimately, they were reminded, at the end of the day this would improve their English: "nothing else matters". Students did often respond in these interactions in ways that evidenced their frustration, but their embodied affective responses, which they demonstrated through clicking their tongues, screwing up their faces or hitting themselves on the head, appeared to emerge not from being corrected, but at making a mistake.

But 'mistakes' were not all corrected equally: as I became more familiar with the classes, I noticed patterns in the types of errors that were enthusiastically, relentlessly corrected. Pronunciation was corrected the

most, with non-standard grammatical utterances coming a close second. The pronunciation errors were those that are particularly stigmatised as being 'Indian' – the /v/ and/w/ merger (Chand 2009; Cowie 2007) or replacing /ʃ/ with /s/ in words such as 'fish' (/fɪʃ/, /fɪs/). I.e., errors that frequently appear in popular culture media that mock South Asian speech practices in English (both inside and outside of India) or become easy targets for 'trolling', as evident in the RIP English meme that mocks the English language practices not of South Asian speakers writ large but rather those with unstandardised practices, often from marginalised and exploited class positions (see Highet, in press). The most frequently targeted errors, it appeared, were those which were most saliently ideologically marked, and which indexed the speaker as vernacular-medium rather than English-medium (Ramanathan, 2015), as 'too' Indian, as 'uneducated', or as a middle-class pretender. Students thus made a concerted effort to 'rid' themselves of such linguistic practices and were frequently prompted to do so by the facilitators, who, having been in the students' positions themselves, justified their perceived necessity of speaking 'correctly' as being the most promising means to (potentially) capitalise on the value of English for social mobility.

The hyper-focus on correction is certainly not unique to the students of the NGO – as Chand (2009) notes, bookshops across India stock a "seemingly endless assortment of grammar books" designed explicitly to 'correct' local forms of English (p. 406). What became clear in the NGO classes was the target market of such books, and how such textbooks are located within a larger apparatus that feeds into and profits from the anxieties felt by particular groups of English learners and speakers – anxieties which, as Park (2015) has shown, are not the product of individual psyches but rather emerge from ideological and political economic conditions (see also Williams, 1976). For those from marginalised groups, whose language practices and whose positions in a stratified society are

already devalued, many of these students felt compelled to continually invest (with time if not with money) in their English skills in order to rid themselves of indexically loaded 'errors' that they feared would lead to negative material and social consequences such as failing a job interview or being bullied by peers at university. Their desire for 'good' English was inextricable from their sense of heightened consequences of their potentially divergent practices; consequences which not only were attached to the hierarchisation of language varieties, but rather – more importantly – were specific to their social locations within stratified structures of coloniality, class and caste.

For Arnav, one of the students who belonged to the same agrarian caste as many of the other students, this resulted in a careful management of his language repertoires in function with the context of the interaction. While fluid language practices are the norm in India, seventeen-year-old Arnav was acutely aware of how his practices were differently evaluated across different interactional contexts. This did not mean that he consistently adhered to language boundaries: in fact, his linguistic deftness – what he described as 'mixing' Hindi and English – was something he both enjoyed and took pride in when in the presence of friends or family whose competency in English was not as strong as his, as "they think that I know English and they talk me very politely or they gave me respect". In this context, Arnav's ability to draw on English marks him as a competent speaker of the language which, in turn, works as a form of symbolic capital, indexing education, intelligence and status. Arnav was aware, however, of the limits to the positive uptake of such fluid practices, and he reportedly monitored his speech more carefully when around people he knew (or assumed) to be English speakers – regardless of whether these people engaged in fluid practices or not – for fear of them interpreting his fluidity as incompetency, himself as "not properly educated". As work on

raciolinguistic ideologies suggests, Arnav's self-monitoring emerges from a recognition that, rather than being framed as "sociolinguistic deftness, skill, and futuristic dynamism", his practices often become "evidence of deficit, confusion, and inadequate past language learning" (Lo, 2020, p. 298; see also Rosa, 2016; Rosa & Flores, 2017). Here, however, while racialisation certainly shapes Arnav's relationship of legitimacy with the language, it is less salient in Arnav's narrative as the imagined interlocutors are similarly racialised (as Indian). What emerges more markedly here is how Arnav and his imagined interlocutors are differently positioned through class and caste stratification. Unlike for Bollywood actors or other such cultural elites who tend to engage in such celebrated fluidity with uninhibited ease (Kachru, 2006 p. 223), or in high-end advertising which exploits language fluidity to target the upper and elite classes (Sandhu & Higgins, 2016), Arnav's social interactions appear to have taught him that his practices will be heard and thus evaluated differently – and potentially even mocked (Sandhu, 2015) – particularly, he suggests, by those located in positions of social and economic power (see Roy, 2013).

It is not my intention here to suggest that race and caste can or should be conflated (see e.g., Banerjee-Dube, 2014). There are, however, useful parallels that can be drawn between racialised and caste/class deficit ideologies through which speakers' practices are interpreted regardless of the "objective characteristics of their language use" (Flores & Rosa 2015, p. 151). In addition to the white listening subject (Flores & Rosa, 2015; see also Inoue, 2006), here we are confronted with the figure of the upper class, upper caste listening subject – a figure infused with its own complex colonial histories of alignment with whiteness (Highet & Del Percio, 2021a). Arnav appears to have sensed this himself, and he reportedly adapts his language practices to mitigate potential risks. In this sense, if we can understand fluid practices in the sense of translanguaging as "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the

socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages" (Otheguy et al. 2015, p. 283, my emphasis), what we see Arnav and the other students engaging in is not only watchful but anxious adherence to boundaried, standardised languages. While this anxiety shapes how Arnav pursues and engages in English more generally, it is particularly heightened when in contact with those who, through their racialised, class and caste positions – myself included – have been granted discursive legitimacy as speakers of English.

For students such as Arnav, their adherence to boundaried English appears to be shaped by the tacit understanding of the potential social and material risks they may encounter when engaging in such practices – risks that are less pressing for those from more privileged backgrounds, who are "bolstered by their self-assured competency in the language, their socio-economic status and resources, and their discursively constructed legitimacy as speakers" (Browning et al. 2022; see also Kubota, 2015). Of course, this is not to say that their adherence to 'good' English will necessarily offer the students stability and prosperity – as I show elsewhere, these students often find themselves walking a particularly difficult tightrope as their new-found English capital both enables and hinders their mobility (Highet, 2022; see also Hassemer & Garrido 2020). What it does do, however, is keep the students in a perpetual loop of self-improvement (Park, 2021). Through the further layers of stratifying effects (both material and discursive) of class and caste, the pursuit of 'good' English interpellates even more deeply the bodies and minds of marginalised students.

Discursive frictions

In the previous section, we have seen how students and teachers alike (self)monitor their adherence to constructed language boundaries through anxieties that result from their experiences of the differentiated

valuation of speakers and language practices. Given how this was frequently negotiated in the classroom, it is unsurprising that it also became a dominant theme in the workshops that I facilitated three years later. This was of course partly by design – I had curated and selected the discussion prompts and data in advance based on the salient themes of my analysis – but they also appeared to be subjects about which the participants had great enthusiasm, and much to say. In this section, we turn to these discussions, in order to unearth the tensions that arose when reflecting on the NGO's (in)ability to act upon these challenges, to trace how the political economic and discursive configurations of modern India shaped our diagnoses and analyses of 'problems' and 'solutions', and to account for the discomfort that emerged from discursive regimes that contour what can and cannot be 'said'. This approach is underscored by a conceptualisation of discourse as a social practice that imbues the world with meaning. At stake is the ability to define the terms of the discourse – that is, "the limits of intelligibility in a given situation" (Hanson & Ogunade 2016, p.45) – making discourse "a site of meaningful social differences, of conflict and struggle" (Blommaert 2005, p.4). In the context of community-based research, Hanson & Ogunade (2016) emphasise the political and power-laden nature of discourse, describing the contradictions or tensions that emerge as *discursive frictions* (2016; see also Murphy 2012). These discursive frictions – moments where different discursive regimes of 'truth' attached to varying agendas are brought together and negotiated, reproduced, challenged by different actors – do not only arise between the researcher and the 'community' in question (here, for example, the members of the NGO) but rather are also negotiated and contested among 'community' members with various competing interests (Hanson & Ogunade 2016 p.49).

After the first two workshops in which we had unpacked the elusive 'promise' (Park, 2011; Tabiola & Lorente, 2017) of English in India and its historical and socio-political conditions of emergence, the objective of the

third and final workshop with management was to introduce to the debate the topic of 'unequal Englishes'. In both groups the conversation flowed well: participants seemed eager to share their thoughts on questions of language standards and, although they did not name them explicitly as such, raised questions about register, style, and the intrinsic malleability of speech in interaction – what one participant described as "moulding" our way of speaking according to "where I'm speaking" and "with whom". At one point, I fumbled my words – rather ironically pronouncing 'native speaker' as 'nurtive', much to the amusement of the whole group – which prompted one senior trainer to share an anecdote about growing up watching English Test Cricketer Geoffrey Boycott's cricket commentary. Having rediscovered these nostalgic videos on YouTube as an adult, he had re-watched them only to notice, this time round, that Boycott often tripped up over his words, and made what he identified as 'errors'. This became a springboard into discussions of the flexibility of grammar, the evolving nature of language, the absurdity of hard-line notions of 'correct' and 'incorrect' and, drawing on the two previous workshops, we connected the hegemony of these language ideologies to their historical and socio-political conditions of emergence. This prompted further discussion of the consequences of these ways of conceptualising language use, as we asked what was at stake, and for whom.

For one of the activities, I showed a clip from one of the NGO's promotional videos which featured two students talking about the changes their NGO training had made to their lives and to their and their families' prospects. The students – a young woman and man around the same age as Arnav – spoke in English with subtitles in English provided by the NGO (i.e., not YouTube auto-generated closed captions). These subtitles did not always correspond verbatim to the speakers' utterances, and I had interpreted this as a means of 'cleaning up' the ostensible 'errors' made in the students'

speech. In one instance, to which I called the workshop participants' attention, the student's statement that "in my past there was a lot of struggle" was glossed in the subtitles as "in the past I faced a lot of struggle". While this initially prompted a discussion around whether or not the student's original statement contained an 'error', the question was soon raised about how this 'error' would 'sound' had I been the one to utter it: would I have been 'corrected' in the subtitles in the same way? Perhaps, we agreed, the markedness and subsequent coding of the sentence as an 'error' in need of correction had less to do with the grammatical or idiomatic status of the utterance than with other dynamic markers of the speakers' social location – here, in particular, markers of the speakers' social class as mobilised through the camera's shots of his home and his family, contrasted with my whiteness, Britishness and middle-classness. In ways that echoed work on raciolinguistic ideologies – and which mirrored what Arnav had shared with me – the conversation began to point to the dynamic shaping of race (and implicitly, class) on how speakers are heard and evaluated.

The conversations until this point had a cathartic feel to them, as participants appeared to enjoy airing their frustrations about the global politics of English language teaching and learning. I was keen, however, to push this discussion further. Not as a means to diminish the powerful shaping effects of colonialism and race on the evaluation and categorisation of speakers, but rather as a means to integrate dynamic processes and structures of class and caste into the analysis. Aware of the political charge of such topics, however, I felt a great deal of discomfort at this prospect, and I was conscious of the fact that the NGO explicitly banned all discussion of politics and religion in their classrooms. I had intentionally left the following activity to one of the final sessions, when I felt that we had all adjusted to the format of the workshops and were – at least as far as I could tell – more at ease, more prepared to tackle uncomfortable topics. For this activity, I

shared an extract from a text written by Dalit[1] scholar Yogesh Maitreya, for Buzzfeed (2018), in which he described his experiences of being consistently belittled at university through the relentless 'correcting' of his English grammar and pronunciation by upper-caste, 'educated' speakers. In his words, this constant act of correcting his English "was nothing but an exercise to use the position of domination". There was a noticeable shift in tone in both groups as I introduced the text. Sharing my screen, I gave the participants a few minutes to read through Maitreya's words. It was hard to judge the immediate reactions over a Microsoft Teams call, difficult to tell if they were shifting uncomfortably in their seats as I was; impossible to pick up on awkward avoidance of eye-contact that there may have been if we had all been sat in the same room. But the discomfort was nonetheless palpable in the discussion that followed, in the questions raised by one participant about why we were talking about Dalits; in the hesitant replies by others that this was indeed relevant, that this indeed should be part of our conversation; in the framing of participants' responses, peppered with hedges and reminders that their contributions were "just my opinion".

The change in tone upon the introduction of caste to the conversation was not simply a consequence of the specific people in the (virtual) rooms; it was not (necessarily) an indication of any individual's reluctance. Rather, as much research on India's middle classes has shown, this was a symptom of a wider discursive erasure of caste, in which it is the naming of caste, rather than its lived reality, that raises discomfort as it challenges claims to modernity and meritocracy (Deshpande, 2013; M.S.S. Pandian, 2002; Upadhya, 2011). To talk explicitly about caste can also entail engaging in dangerous political territory, particularly in the current climate

[1] Dalit ('oppressed' in Sanskrit) is the preferred term for members of what were previously known as the 'untouchable' castes, who continue to suffer from severe economic and social oppression in India.

of increasing far-right Hindu nationalism in which Dalits (along with Muslims) are constructed as threats to the (Hindu) nation (Natrajan, 2022). This, I imagine, was only compounded through the workshop format, as the participants – colleagues – may well have felt compelled to monitor their own views on the topic for fear of potential professional consequences. This in itself raised a serious ethical dilemma, and was the reason why I chose to run the workshops for management and teachers separately, despite a request from senior management to include some representatives from management in the teacher group. I battled with the decision of whether or not to include caste in the workshops at all but, ultimately, decided that to leave it unsaid would be to further entrench what Deshpande (2013) has called “caste-blindness”.

What Deshpande calls attention to here is not an actual dismantling of caste but rather a discursive regime that emerges from India’s historical and contemporary political economy which means caste can only be talked about in specific ways. This fuels and is fuelled by discourses of meritocracy and modernity that relegate caste (as ‘culture’ (Mosse, 2020) to the past or to a rural (‘backward’) (Heller & McElhinny, 2017) elsewhere. This hegemonic narrative was both reproduced and contested in the workshops: as soon as we finished reading the text, one facilitator asked how old the text was: “when did it take place like if we have any idea, is it like very recent and it it maybe it's been long?”. When I told him it had been published in 2018, he asked where the ‘incident’, as he termed it, had taken place. Surprised to hear that it had taken place in a metropolitan city – Mumbai – he suggested that, while this ‘discrimination’ happens in some states, it has generally “reduced to a certain level”. He was quick to remind us that he was not an expert on the topic. I would venture that nobody in the room (myself included) would have claimed expertise on the matter, but there was, I sensed, a rather anxious urgency to his reminders, as he told us that “I've been out from this particular you know casteism from this system. I may not

know much about it"; "uh again I am not from it, I whatever I have read […] other people could tell better"; "this is again my opinion". As a member of a different marginalised community often targeted by Hindu nationalists and the BJP government, his hesitancy was, in my eyes, at least partly borne from a reluctance to speak too freely or too damningly of the caste system lest he run the risk of being labelled as 'anti-national' (see Lall & Anand, 2022). He certainly did not *deny* the effects of casteism, as he referred to it: soon after this hedged reply, he shared an anecdote about a Dalit friend who uses a fake surname when travelling in India in order to avoid being refused accommodation due to his caste. Later – and this time with more hedging – he offered the suggestion, drawing on a story of himself being bullied at school for being a member of a marginalised community, that he understood this "discrimination" personally, before apologising, once again, for talking "a lot", and reminding us, once again, that this was just "his opinion".

There are high stakes to these conversations, and the management of risk as engaged in by the participants has the consequence of further fuelling the discursive erasure of caste as it becomes – affectively, discursively, politically – easier to talk around the subject, to make vague references to 'community' instead of 'caste'; to talk of 'discrimination' instead of stratification, exploitation, marginalisation and power. 'Discrimination' recurred frequently in both groups in our discussion of Maitreya's text, as the experience the author shared was recast as an interpersonal issue – even, as one trainer suggested, a problem that was ultimately due not to the fact that his teachers were Brahmin ('upper' caste), but because their feedback techniques and bond with the students were inappropriate as they were neither constructive nor conducive to helping the student achieve. In response to this suggestion, another trainer questioned Maitreya's immediate reaction to the act of correction, arguing that this is part of the "learning process" which should not be taken

"negatively". This correction, he suggested, should be seen as evidence that Maitreya's interlocutors were "active listeners". Once more, the group did not reject the experience that Maitreya had written about, but they found, in one trainer's words, "that the story of Yogesh [Maitreya] is inconclusive". On the one hand, they acknowledged that the act of correction can be "used as a method of domination", with one facilitator sharing a historical anecdote of B. R. Ambedkar's[1] unsuccessful attempts to find a teacher willing to teach him Sanskrit. On the other hand, however, they wondered whether Maitreya "may have had a preconceived notion about his own uh about his own caste identity. He may have felt bad. So this is also a possibility". In other words, they suggested, Maitreya's interpretation of correction as violence may have been a product of his own (negative) attitude. As the conversation unfolded, we moved swiftly from Maitreya's argument crafted upon theories of power and symbolic violence, to an individualisation of the problem as potential discrimination at worst, helpful feedback at best. From questions of power, social stratification and marginalisation, we moved into individualised solutions of building students' confidence, working on their "insecurity", taking away their "fear". In other words, the educational endeavour became a story of capacity building (Mathew, 2022) in which the solution, put simply, is to better equip students to manage the discrimination they will face through hierarchised ways of speaking and being.

Conclusion

I opened the paper with a short vignette about the effects of unequal Englishes in terms of how an awareness of the consequences of not adhering to 'good' English leads marginalised young adults in Delhi to consistently,

[1] B. R. Ambedkar was a highly influential Dalit organizer and political leader who served in the first independent government of India and led the committee tasked with writing the Constitution of India.

anxiously, strive towards (vague) notions of speaking 'correctly'. As we saw through Arnav's narrative, this affective stance is not an individualised phenomena but rather is rooted in a wider historical, political, economic, social and material conditions that create not only social hierarchies of speech practices but also the stratification of actors through continued effects of coloniality, caste and class.

These were discussions that I wanted to explicitly bring to the workshops, to see how we could collectively interpret the notion of correction and its embedding in wider social structures. In other words, one of the goals was to engage in conversation about the effects of unequal Englishes, unequal speakers and unequal conditions in the classroom, and how this is or might be navigated, reproduced, challenged by the institution. In doing so, my goal was neither to 'guide' nor to 'teach' the participants – these were not training workshops, and I had no institutional leverage to implement changes even if I had wanted to (even if, by virtue of my Britishness and my university affiliation, I was granted a certain authority). But, of course, I did – as we all do – have an agenda that was shaped by my own epistemological, ideological and political alignments. I hoped to reflect collectively on the NGO's relationship to and location within processes of inequality that go beyond the domain of English language teaching; to ask under what circumstances these types of language solutions come to be offered as a response to questions of social inequality and social mobility; to explore how this is linked to wider discursive regimes and material organisation that work in service of particular political arrangements.

To some extent, these conversations did happen; I learnt a lot from participants' analyses of Indian society, globalisation and English. We agreed about the absurdity of correction – particularly from a colonial perspective; less so from a caste perspective – but what was more difficult to address was how to navigate or alleviate this. The challenge here emerged from our

differing discursive conceptualisations of the root of the problem – as a wider structural issue embedded in class, caste and colonialism, or as an interpersonal issue. The latter framing leads to a (reluctant, perhaps) resignation of the need to adhere to 'correct' English, even if they were all aware that this would not do anything to fundamentally change things. With a tone of slight frustration in response to my repeated suggestions of the futility of English as a means for social mobility, one trainer noted that this English 'capital' may or may not "change their position in society", but that "societal barriers are beyond our scope".

The workshops themselves were not impermeable to the ideological and political economic forces that I had brought to light in my ethnographic analysis; they were the parameters that shaped the contours of our discussions. These discursive frictions meant that solutions and responses end up being articulated in particular ways – avoidance of taboo subjects, vague references, claims of neutrality or of incapacity. The discussions ended up locating the 'problem' and the 'solution' in the individual who needs only to be 'proud' or 'confident' of their ways of speaking, ways of being; to avoid interpreting everything 'negatively'. In ways that parallel certain academic analyses of global inequalities of English, we found ourselves locked in a discussion of English that obscured power and politics and refused to connect the violence of correction to a wider organisation of resources and unequal valuation linked to the caste system and infused with class, coloniality and race.

By tracing these processes of inequality that unfurl and are negotiated in the classroom by students and teachers, and by interrogating the attempts at co-analysing these processes with members of staff, I have sought to bring into sharp focus the ethical and political dimensions of engagement exercises that are aligned with critical, emancipatory approaches. What does this tell us about our attempts as researchers to be a part of processes and practices that seek to alleviate – or even undo –

inequality that is perpetuated through (English) language learning across the globe? What does it tell us about the limits of education and pedagogy in such a pursuit? We know that education is hardly inherently emancipatory; that it can serve the reproduction of the status quo and be repurposed to serve far-right agendas (Tebaldi, 2021). But even in critical pedagogical approaches that explicitly focus on leftist and liberatory goals (e.g., critical anti-racist pedagogy, Kubota, 2021), we need to be wary of an over-emphasis on the emancipatory 'power' of education. To suggest that the participants of the workshop were in need of 'awareness raising' about unequal Englishes and its relationship with class, caste, colonialism and race would be to do them a huge (paternalist, colonial) disservice. If anything, the workshops were evidence of their strategic management of the discourse that demonstrated heightened awareness of what was at stake for them (and for the NGO more widely) in such discussions. This of course is, in itself, problematic, as it reinscribes the logics that uphold the status quo from which the participants variously benefit or suffer. This certainly does not mean that attempts to engage our participants in critical reflection are futile or pointless: I am sure that there is much to be gained for researchers, students and teachers alike from critical reflection on the political economy of unequal Englishes in the classroom, and I am certain that these need to be a staple of teacher training. The point, rather, is that we need to be alert to how the same symbolic and material organisation, agendas and interests that we critique also shape, guide, and hinder our efforts to change them. Our engagement in projects that are aligned with emancipatory and social justice goals must, then, be subject to the same critical analysis – one that is attuned to discursive, ideological and political economic logics and stakes – that we apply to the rest of our scholarly work.

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Conflict of Interest

The researcher reported that there is no conflict of interest with regard to research, intellectual property, and the publication of this research.