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## Shared Epiphanies of My Constantly Challenged Linguistic Membership

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### Shared Epiphanies of My Constantly Challenged Linguistic Membership

تجليات عضويتي اللغوية لمواجهة التحديات المستمرة

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## Shared Epiphanies of My Constantly Challenged Linguistic Membership

### Abstract

The pluralization of English has enabled the use of its varieties in cultural contexts that are not traditionally associated with the language. Yet, the inequality of Englishes remains a main characteristic of globalizing and localizing the language. The spread of English use in Kuwait was a result of establishing reconfigured imperial relations during the British protectorate era. Mediated by language ideologies, the English language has 'settled' Kuwait's local linguistic ecology, and its spread remains sustained by the imposition of colonial practices and ideologies through contemporary processes of capitalist globalization. I argue that the pluralization of English in Kuwait's nuanced experience typifies a mechanism to (un)consciously enable globally-formed power relations between local 'native' and 'nonnative' speakers, rendering it unequal. In this article, I lay bare the impact of the phenomenon of Unequal Englishes on my life as a Kuwaiti English language teacher (KELT). Through writing two personal epiphanies, I conducted a critical autoethnographic study in response to my trajectory of English speaking and teaching. Anderson's (1983, 2006) imagined community concept and Phillipson's (1992) native speaker fallacy constituted the theoretical framework of the study, which ultimately explored the perpetuation of unequal power dynamics between 'native' and 'nonnative' English speaking teachers in Kuwait.

*Keywords:* Unequal Englishes, power relations, Kuwait, KELT, imagined community, native-speakerism, autoethnography.

## Introduction

The spread of English has made way for the pluralization of the language, a process under which both globalization and localization naturally fall (Tupas, 2015, 2019, 2021; Tupas & Salonga, 2016). As a result, English has been celebrated as a global, though an imposed myth, *Lingua Franca* (ELF) (Kirkpatrick, 2008; Pennycook, 2012). It has also been celebrated for its sovereign, localized varieties through the paradigms of World Englishes (WE) (Kachru, 1988; Kubota, 2015; Pennycook, 2007, Phillipson, 1992). In light of the former, Tupas (2021) writes:

Scholars celebrate the idea that users of English around that world have not simply passively or naively used English as an imperial or colonial language but, more crucially, they have also transformed (even 'destroyed') the English language to suit their own cultural realities and ideological systems. (p. 723)

Yet, while it is hoped to naturally reduce the gap between its groups of speakers, the pluralization of English falls short. This is because the inequality of Englishes remains a main characteristic of globalizing and localizing the language (Pennycook, 2017; Tupas, 2021).

The presence of English into three concentric circles in Kachru's (1985) Model reflects the perpetuation of the master narrative of national hegemony through imperialism. As it happens, the omniprominence of English on a global scale has excluded not only those who do not speak it but also those who speak outer, or expanding, circle associated varieties of it (Kachru, 1985). The imperialistic nature of English is hence criticized for destroying the world's linguistic diversity rather than uniting it (Phillipson, 1992). Alas, uniting Englishes is a dream deferred, in the words of the late Langston Hughes (1951), which has in turn driven a number of scholars to question the unequal and the unjust discourses and practices through which

the English language is used around the world (Kachru, 1988; Kubota, 2015; Pennycook, 2017; Tupas, 2015, 2019, 2021; Tupas & Salonga, 2016).

Under the umbrella of Unequal Englishes (UE), linguistic equality has been critically viewed as unearthing the configurations of power and social relations between groups of speakers (Tupas, 2015, 2019, 2021; Tupas & Salonga, 2016). Unequal relations of power among social groups are organized based on race, gender, class, etc. (Kubota, 2015). Demonstrating the inequalities of Englishes, Kubota (2015) sheds light on the divide between the romanticized, utopian, and apolitical images of globalizing the language and the inter-group conflicts, often arising from unequal access to English language learning due to socioeconomic factors (Kubota, 2015). For instance, Morikawa and Parba (2022) posit that diversifying nationalities and accents in online eikaiwa has in fact contributed to hierarchizing unequal Englishes and reinforcing native-speakerism. They explain that while native-speakerism is allocated more material worth as a superior version of English, teachers that are hired from non-anglophone, socio-economically disadvantaged countries are described to afford less.

Tupas (2015) forthrightly explains that understanding UE paves the way to understanding the English of the present and the unequal ways and situations in which Englishes are illegitimized. To explain, the notion of UE rightfully does not romanticize the equality of Englishes considering that their “political legitimacies are uneven” (Tupas & Rubdy, 2015, p. 3). In Kuwait, the spread of English use was a result of establishing reconfigured imperial relations during the British protectorate era. Loewenstein (2000) explains, “Taken in the wider context of British imperialism, Britain’s experience with Kuwait in the decades following the late 1930s appear as a distinct anomaly” (p. 119). This is because upon examining the wider context of British imperialism, it becomes clear that Britain’s approach with its other

imperial dependencies differs from the way it dealt with Kuwait (Loewenstein, 2000; Smith, 2001). Loewenstein (2000) explains:

While most imperial dependencies by the 1940s were committed to an anti-colonial nationalism which sought to remove most if not all connection to Britain, in Kuwait the need for protection made its approach to Britain more complex. (p. 119)

Yet, Britain's reconfigured imperial relations with Kuwait "could not be achieved in an ideological vacuum" (Loewenstein, 2000, p. 119).

Mediated by language ideologies, the English language has 'settled' Kuwait's local linguistic ecology since the British protectorate era. This spread, however, is presently sustained by the imposition of colonial practices and ideologies through contemporary processes of capitalist globalization. To this day, Kuwaiti-Arabic, Kuwait's heritage language, remains influenced by the continuous mobility of English with some of its words appropriated in it. For instance, borrowed English words such as light and air-conditioner are appropriated in Kuwaiti-Arabic to ليت /leit/ and كنديشن /kɪndɪʃɪn/ as to literally mean what their equivalent words mean in English (Mohammad, 2009). "Stylizing" and "bending linguistic" codes of borrowed words in any heritage language refreshingly exemplifies "destabilizing the normative idea of who owns English and which English is legitimate" (Kubota, 2015, p. 21). Thus, the appropriation of English words in Kuwait's heritage language is considered as an example of using English in hybrid ways to express the Kuwaiti-Arab identity.

Yet, Tupas (2019) explains that understanding the Unequal Englishes phenomenon also helps to capture the complexity of "imposed globally-shaped local relations of power between groups of speakers" (p. 13). Thus, the use of Englishes around the world is argued to not only typify a

subversive act or a conscious linguistic or structural transformation of the language, since it has also been typically employed as a mechanism for facilitating “globally-shaped local relations of power” between presumed ‘native’ and ‘nonnative’ speakers of the language (Tupas, 2019, p. 13). I argue that the pluralization of English in Kuwait’s nuanced experience is not merely a linguistic or structural transformation of the language but, more crucially, an instrument to, consciously or otherwise, enable globally-formed power relations between local ‘native’ and ‘nonnative’ groups of speakers, rendering it unequal. In this article, I lay bare the impact of the phenomenon of Unequal Englishes on my life as a Kuwaiti English language teacher (KELT). Through writing personal epiphanies, made possible by possessing a particular cultural identity, I conducted a critical autoethnographic study in response to the trajectory of my English speaking and language teaching (ELT) in Kuwait. Specifically, the two epiphanies explored how my linguistic membership to the English language teaching community (ELTC) is constantly challenged by ideological legacies of native-speakerism. Moreover, as I am fully aware of the problematicity of perpetuating using the terms ‘native’ and ‘nonnative’ in instances where it is necessary in my paper, I put them between inverted commas by way of signifying their discriminatory and biased nature.

### Theoretical Framework

Within the Kuwaiti context, speaking English has often been (un)consciously driven by the possibility of gaining access to international linguistic membership(s)- ones that could have not been otherwise offered by Kuwaiti-Arabic or Standard Arabic alone. In other words, speaking English in Kuwait is theoretically and practically assumed to enable its speakers to attain linguistic memberships to *imagined communities* (Anderson, 1983,

2006). The English-speaking club is an imagined community in the sense that its members “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1983, 2006, p. 6). Hence, the re-imagining of linguistic membership is argued to often reside in the minds of bilingual Kuwaiti speakers. Yet, debates about bilingual experiences often encompass questioning the legitimacy of their native-speakerism in English. Personally, the idea of becoming a member of ‘an international linguistic club’ has ironically been challenged by alleged ‘native’ speakers of English in places of education such as universities, conferences, and others alike.

While imagined communities (Anderson, 1983, 2006) are explained to negotiate local ways of belonging to broader identity memberships (Wenger, 1998), the problematic and essentialist positioning of bilingual English language speakers within a deficit model (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019), that is induced by native-speakerism ideologies (Phillipson, 1992), is observed to interrupt the organic formation of such communities. What it means is that the framing of bilinguals’ linguistic competency within a deficit, in which their competency is constantly questioned, contributes to the ‘native-nonnative’ dichotomy between groups of speakers. Such problematic framing also unearths the configurations of power and social relations between speakers as a result of perpetuating ideological legacies of native-speakerism. This way imagined communities cease to allow its members to negotiate local ways of belonging to broader memberships (Wenger, 1998)- ways that could otherwise bridge the gap between the local-global divide of pluralizing the English language. Hence, Anderson’s (1983, 2006) imagined community concept, with its later expansion (Norton & Pavlenko 2019; Wenger, 1998), and Phillipson’s (1992) native speaker fallacy constituted the framework that guided the study. The integration of



a critical approach into this autoethnographic study helped explore the unequal power dynamics between 'native' and 'nonnative' English-speaking teachers.

### Imagined Community

"If community is not given but achieved, it is constantly constructed and reconstructed through the language choice and negotiation strategies of individuals" (Canagarajah, 2010, p. 48).

Nations are anthropologically defined as "imagined political communities," imagined as "both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 1983, 2006, p. 6). Anderson (1983, 2006) explains that even the largest of nations have fixed boundaries. More importantly, Anderson argues that a nation is imagined, because it is a fraternity that is "always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (p. 7). Similarly, the concept of fraternity is examined as a mechanism for identification and inclusion, in which it is postulated that differences between apparent non-brothers, like women, are neutralized (Bennington, 1997; Derrida, 2005). In light of this, I wrote, "Here, the word *brother* signifies the relationship between siblings that share the common archetype: humanity" (Bin Rashed, 2022, p. 193, emphasis in original). As a result, including women, as non-brothers, in a fraternity becomes possible despite imposed phallogocentric limitations. Yet, such limitations render non-brothers, like women, voiceless, absent in discourse, and without acknowledgment within a phallogocentric society (Bennington, 1997; Bin Rashed, 2022). This means that although a nation could be celebrated as a fraternal community, with the implication of comradeship, it is still rendered limited. Thus, while describing a nation as both limited and fraternal could be understood as a paradox, it is true-to-reality. Derrida (2005) examines the thread of paradoxes between true and strict fraternity by explaining:

True fraternity, fraternity in the literal sense, would be universal, spiritual, symbolic, infinite fraternity of the oath, etc., not fraternity in the strict sense, that of the ‘natural’ brother (as if such a thing ever existed), the virile brother, by opposition to the sister, the determined brother, in this family, this nation, this particular language. (p. 240)

As noted, fraternity, in the strict sense, is a phallogentric concept of comradeship, signifying the marginalization of excluded groups.

Wenger’s (1998) theory of situated experience expands Anderson’s view of nations as imagined communities to communities of practice. As a result, identity is defined as a “nexus of multimembership” (p. 149); part of which includes a connection between the local and the global. Wenger posits, “We define who we are by negotiating local ways of belonging to broader constellations and of manifesting broader styles and discourses” (p. 149). Belonging to broader communities of practice, nevertheless, necessitates engagement, imagination, and alignment, which when combined effectively, a community of practice can ultimately become a learning community (Wenger, 1998). Wenger explains:

Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming- to become a certain person or, conversely, to avoid becoming a certain person. (p. 215)

In other words, learning becomes meaningful if it contributes to identity formation through engagement, imagination, and alignment. More than any other language, English is implicated in the process of imagining nations in language (Phillipson, 2009).

Norton and Pavlenko (2019) specifically examine membership in imagined communities, relevant to the English language as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Their insightful account challenges the problematic positioning of English language learners as marked identities within a deficit model. Similarly, essentialist notions of speakerism have often excluded 'nonnative' speakers from the 'native' speaking fraternity (Bin Rashed, 2017, 2022; Phillipson, 1992). Such essentialist notions interrupt the organic formation of imagined communities- ones that make the connection between the local and the global possible (Wenger, 1998). Canagarajah (2010) argues that communities are meant to happen unexpectedly and to eventually transform the relationships between its members. *Members* is a word worth examining here, as it alludes to the concept of a membership-formed-through-language. For instance, Christison (2010) posits, "Reciprocal linguistic forms used within a community also create solidarity within a group, and this solidarity is important for the survival of the community" (p. 78). Christison (2010) highlights the concept of solidarity in light of community, as it is explained that one is able to situate themselves in relation to others and establish their allegiance to a specific community by choosing to speak a specific language. A thematically relevant statement articulating linguistic ownership is from Richard Rodriguez's (1982) *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, in which he writes:

Español: my family's language. Español: the language that seemed to me a private language. I'd hear strangers on the radio and in the Mexican Catholic church across town speaking in Spanish, but I couldn't really believe that Spanish was a public language, like English. Spanish speakers, rather, seemed related to me, for I sensed

we shared- through the language- the experience of feeling apart from *los gringos*. (p. 14, emphasis in original)

In another part, he writes:

But I couldn't believe that the English language was mine to use. (In part, I did not want to believe it.) I continued to mumble. I resisted the teacher's demands. (Did I somehow suspect that once I learned a public language my pleasing family life would be changed?" Silent, waiting for the bell to sound, I remained dazed, diffident, afraid. (pp. 18-19)

The theme of re-imagining language ownership in Rodriguez's memoir explores the legitimacy of owning and using English in the United States of America. His memoir also sheds light on imagining diverse ownership as a task that primarily, and exclusively, falls on the shoulders on public figures like writers. Through language, Rodriguez joins a lonely community of scholars, united by a shared respect for the written word and for scholarship. However, despite the exclusivity of this community, its members are described to remain distanced from one another. This is because Rodriguez's cultural background, supported by Affirmative Action, is explained to warrant him an ever-lasting minority status, rendering him "prized" (1982, p. 163), even though his published essays and public speeches have asserted that he does not consider himself a minority.

### **Linguistic Discrimination: The Native Speaker Fallacy**

"The native-speaker ideal dates from a time when language teaching was indistinguishable from culture teaching" (Phillipson, 1992, p. 195).

Simply put, the native speaker fallacy holds the assumption that the ideal teacher of English must be a 'native' speaker (Phillipson, 1992). The assumption is derived from the belief that 'native' speakers have "greater

facility in demonstrating fluent, idiomatically appropriate language, in appreciating the cultural connotations of the language, and in being the final arbiter of the acceptability of any given samples of the language” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 194). Holliday (2006) defines native-speakerism as “a pervasive ideology within ELT, characterized by the belief that ‘native-speaker’ teachers represent a ‘Western culture’ from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology” (p. 385). Phillipson (1992) explains that the native speaker fallacy “predates any realization of the consequences of what Kachru (1986a) refers to as ‘nativization,’ the process of which English has indigenized in different parts of the world” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 195), and so it dates from a time when it was assumed that all learners of English were required to familiarize themselves with the culture from which English originates (Phillipson, 1992).

More importantly, native-speakerism is assumed as a result of “a correspondence between holding the citizenship of a nation-state and being a native speaker of the national language of that nation state” (Doerr, 2009, p. 18). The correspondence between one’s citizenship and native-speakerism, however, questionably supposes the homogeneity of languages and their speech communities (Doerr, 2009). Also, native-speakerism ideologically assumes the attainment of high level of competency in all first language dimensions (Doerr, 2009). Criticizing the native speaker fallacy, I previously wrote that the ‘native’ speaker is problematically believed to “have a distinct command over their language and is regarded as the model that people normally seek for the ‘truth’ about the language” (Bin Rashed, 2017, p. 14). To explain, while poor pronunciation skills for example have been linked to ‘nonnative’ speakers/educators (Benke & Medgyes, 2005; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005), ‘native’ speaker stereotypes have been associated with flawless pronunciation, which then influenced the perception of them as speakers with superior capacities (Thompson &

Fioramonte, 2012). In a preceding study, I shed critical light on some alleged proficiency aspects as what differentiate ‘native’ speakers from ‘nonnative’ ones (Bin Rashed, 2022). For example, considering fluency a characteristic for ‘native’ speaking is problematic, as Cook (1999) argues that some ‘native’ speakers “are far from fluent in speech, some, such as Stephen Hawking and Helen Keller, having to communicate via alternative means” (p. 186).

The native speaker tenet is practiced in Kuwait, in the form of teaching job advertisements demanding the need for ‘native’ speakers of English (Bin Rashed, 2017). As a result, English varieties associated with inner circle countries become the only legitimate models of the language (Kachru, 1985; 1988). In Kuwait, it specifically reflects the consequences of a historical alliance with Britain and America, which has in turn influenced the orientation of English language pedagogy (Bin Rashed, 2017).

### **Write So That Hearts Can Skip A Beat: Autoethnography**

“My head had been turned and twisted, but my heart had not skipped a beat” (Bochner, 2012, p. 7).

Ellis et al. (2011) define autoethnography as an approach that systematically analyzes personal experience to understand a larger cultural experience. Rather than mainly adhering to canonical research norms, turning to ethnography has allowed numerous scholars to attain an alternative mode of research, deemed as subversive in its ability to challenge the borders of the canon. This is because through systematically analyzing one’s personal experience (auto), autoethnography is able to shed light on personal and identity narratives that have otherwise been labeled as nonconformist by alienating research practices (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Mirhosseini, 2018; Quicke, 2010). In light of this, Bochner and Ellis (2016) write, “Autoethnography struck a chord in students and seasoned scholars whose personal connection to research (and the people they studied) had

been stifled and inhibited—if not crushed—by discredited methodological directives and inhibiting writing conventions” (p. 212).

Part of doing autoethnography is to “retrospectively and selectively write about *epiphanies* that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 8, emphasis added). I chose to share personal narratives in the form of epiphanies in this article. While conformists in research often condemn it as the most controversial form of autoethnography especially when it is not complemented with more traditional analysis (Ellis et al., 2011), I deem writing epiphanies, as a form of autoethnography, fitting for my article. This is because it allowed me to better understand my linguistic ownership as a fundamental aspect of my cultural identity. In other words, reflecting on the shared epiphanies allowed me to understand how my personal life intersects with a larger community i.e., with other participants who speak English.

Ellis et al. (2011) define personal narratives as “stories about authors who view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative narratives specifically focused on their academic, research, and personal lives (e.g., Berry, 2007; Goodall, 2006; Poulos, 2008; Tillmann, 2009)” (para. 23). My epiphanies, as personal narratives, are argued to intersect the public and private life spheres (Langellier, 1989; Rodriguez, 1982). Langellier (1989) explains, “Telling a personal experience is part of a social process of coping” (p. 264). Yet, my epiphanies were written to challenge, rather than to cope with, the status quo of native-speakerism in Kuwait and in other cultures where similar experiences can be had. This way, epiphanies are argued to construct realities that can be both personally and culturally appropriate as to create space for cultural challenge and innovation. This way, doing ethnography also sheds light on a culture’s shared experiences as to help insiders and outsiders, or cultural strangers, better understand the culture

(Deegan, 2001; Maso, 2001). It is worth mentioning that I approached this autoethnographic study as an outsider/cultural stanger. Yet, my outsider writer stance was in fact enforced, as warranted by the Other. The epiphanies thus shed light on my engagement in a passive process of identity construction and negotiation with the Other in response to microaggressions.

Writing epiphanies is also essential for examining how communication is used in intense situations, and how “recollections, memories, images, [and] feelings” could linger long after one’s exposure to a crucial incident (Bochner, 1984, p. 595). This way, autoethnography allows its practitioners to do research “focused on human longing, pleasure, pain, loss, grief, suffering, or joy ought to require holding authors to some standard of vulnerability” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 212). The epiphanies in this article were written with the intention to “[provide] catharsis for the teller and engages emotional support from listeners” (Langellier, 1989, p. 264). Hence, writing epiphanies as remembered moments allows for shedding light on intersubjectivity (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), especially that it allows researchers to influence their research by accommodating their subjectivity and emotionality rather than assuming they do not exist (Ellis et al., 2011). Personally, reflecting on my past experiences enabled me to reconnect with my emotions, especially those invoked as a result of feeling of not belonging.

### Analysis

In autoethnography, the process of taking field notes involves the translation of an embodied sense into language (Willis, 2000). I did not initially record the above two experiences in a notebook. They were instead initially documented in voice notes and verbally shared in past phone conversations with close friends via a smart phone. I continued to voice my



thoughts in voice notes but more so in phone calls intermittently as to understand and ultimately interpret the relevant experiences in discussions with others. Only in 2020, when these verbal reflections aided to document the epiphany entitled *Near 'Native'* in preparation for an oral presentation given in class. Moreover, similar audio resources were employed to document the epiphany entitled *A Racially Charged CCQ* for the purpose of presenting it an online forum in 2022. These relevant verbal reflections functioned as fieldnotes in a modality other than written text, and not as a basis for detailed transcription and textual analysis (Hokkanen, 2017).

The written versions of the two experiences in this article were the result of listening to past voice notes and recalling verbal conversations with close ones. While a speech analysis might have proven favorable in many studies, excluding it from the research design focuses on the cultural analysis of the two experiences and not that of speech (Hokkanen, 2017). In addition, the subsequent reflections of the two epiphanies narrate the experience of speaking about the two experiences, ultimately written for a different audience and in a different genre (see Hokkanen, 2017). In other words, the main purpose for writing (about) the experiences was not to report results of analysis, but rather, to think about and to analyze the epiphanies through writing (see Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

## My Epiphanies

'Nativeness' has been defined in opposition to 'nonnativeness,' creating a dichotomous relationship between the two groups of speakers (Davies, 1991). More significantly, native language is often defined as the language learned in childhood from a bio-developmental perspective (Davies, 1996). For instance, Davies (1996) defines a 'native' speaker as one that "acquires the first language (L1) of which she or he is a native speaker

in childhood” (p. 154). This, however, problematically limits the description of a ‘native’ speaker to someone who acquired the language at the start of their linguistic development (Masangya, 2021).

After experiencing the below highlighted encounters, I was forced to reflect on how my identity as a speaker of the English language is perceived by the Other. The below epiphanies resemble local and global backdrops of a similar experience. The first, entitled *A Racially Charged CCQ* (concept checking questions), recounts one of my first experiences in which my ability to speak English is questioned by a ‘legitimate’ ‘native’ speaker of the language. It retells a recurring encounter with a former work superior. This epiphany epitomizes a local practice of employing English, consciously or otherwise, to arrange local power relations between ‘native’ and ‘nonnative’ English speakers. In other words, it describes a local example of rendering the use of Englishes unequal between a presumed ‘native’ speaker of the language and myself, a KELT.

*Near ‘Native’* is the title of my second epiphany in which challenging my linguistic membership to the ELTC is experienced on a global stage, surpassing the locality that portrays the first epiphany. In other words, the second epiphany describes the perpetuation of challenging my linguistic membership based on ideological legacies of native-speakerism outside the Arab world. It dates back to a time when I had just finished presenting my paper, in English, in an international conference outside the Middle East. Experiencing encounters like in the second epiphany has always left me with the bitter feeling of not fitting in despite my shared language, specialization, and career interests with the concerned group.

## A Racially Charged CCQ

During my thirteen-year-teaching experience, I had the pleasure of being mentored by a number of well-experienced educators. One of whom was a presumed 'native' speaker whose English epitomized the inner circle model of the language (Kachru, 1985). I remember her constantly checking my understanding after assigning me work tasks. She would simply ask, "*Do you understand?*" after each one of her requests, be it straightforward or complex. During that time, I realized that the same question was never asked of my 'native' English-speaking colleagues whom she mentored as well. It might not have been done intentionally, but it was done. I never questioned her practice out loud. Maybe it was because I wanted to spare us the awkward confrontation, maybe because I did not want to question my superior, or maybe it was a combination of both.

### Near 'Native'

#### A= Author; CA= Conference Attendee

CA: Hello there, I just want to say that your English is brilliant!

A: Oh, thanks. I admire your English, too.

CA: Well, I am from the UK.

A: (Silence)

CA: I am sure you studied abroad. You sound like a native!

A: (Smiles awkwardly) I actually studied all my life in Kuwait.

CA: That's definitely something to admire. Good for you!

I froze for a minute after the encounter, and for the rest of the day, I kept asking myself: *would she also praise a presumed 'native' speaker of the English language for their English after their conference presentation?* It was only after this incident that I started to reflect on my identity as a speaker of the English language in light of the 'native-nonnative' dichotomy and its membership to the wider linguistic community around the world, and not just locally.

## Discussion

### Reflections on my first epiphany, A Racially Charged CCQ

As an ELT country, Kuwait holds a special situation in a dichotomy between ESL and EFL countries (Bin Rashed, 2017). In other words, Kuwait resembles what Choi (2010) calls *Living on a hyphen*, which describes an in-between space. A space that allows for a possibility of multiple cultural affiliations to coexist. For instance, because English is widely used in its tertiary education as well as its private sector employment, it can be argued that Kuwait is an ESL country (Bin Rashed, 2017). However, Kuwait can also be regarded as an EFL country because English is not a medium of instruction or government, and because Kuwaiti children are exposed to a little amount of English in governmental education (Bin Rashed, 2017). Like my country, I have always seen myself as a Kuwaiti who is at a midpoint between 'nativeness' and 'nonnativeness' with regard to my English language.

Daily encounters with the Other, like in the first epiphany, sharpen the dichotomous lines between 'nativeness' and 'nonnativeness' and question my in-betweenness. Norton (1997) defines identity as how people can understand their relationship to the world. Similarly, Sabaté-Dalmau (2018) writes, "I conceptualise identity as social categorisation practices mediated through, and constituted in, situated communicative events" (p. 366). Reflecting on my first epiphany, my linguistic identity was constantly, (c)overly questioned and hence condemned by my work superior, making our shared English language a tool for exclusion and for regulating membership to its linguistic system(s) and culture(s). Thus, similar encounters also mainly indicate a lack of solidarity within the ELTC. I remember feeling embarrassed during such encounters as well as doubtful of my own ability to speak the language. Simply put, I felt that my English language was not enough, and hence I was not enough.

Moreover, reflecting on the encounter now, I feel disappointed that I never pointed that out to her. I now feel upset over my docility, which came as a result of indirectly and continuously experiencing stereotyping. I now also regret not expressing my feelings whenever the same encounter would repeat, as an honest conversation could have been had about how I felt and about the implied power relationship that was at play. To explain, a cultural hierarchy is evident in how archetypal 'native' speakers of English, like my former superior, are given the legitimacy and power to judge people based on racial and national-based stereotypes. In the same vein, Holliday (2006) explains that the effects of native-speakerism can be observed in many professional life aspects, starting "from employment policy to the presentation of language. An underlying theme is the 'othering' of students and colleagues from outside the English-speaking West according to essentialist regional or religious cultural stereotypes" (p. 385). This in turn made my perception of myself as an insider in that particular situation and, the broader cultural sense, illegitimate, contrived, inaccurate, and unnatural.

Canagarajah (2010) and Christison (2010) explain that one is able to establish their allegiance to a specific community by choosing to speak their language. However, such allegiance cannot be attained unless communities start to embrace cultural diversity. Like the concept of phallogocentric fraternity (Derrida, 2005), the imagined ELTC community allows for the joining of 'nonnative' speakers of English, but such membership is in fact limited (Bin Rashed, 2022), rendering speakers like KELTs voiceless. In light of this, I write:

Although teaching English as a second language is considered as a shared archetype between the two groups, which should be

sufficient to neutralize the ethnic, gender, and racial differences between them, nonnative speakers are often excluded from the native speaking fraternity. (2022, p. 193)

The English language, which the concerned cultural group and I commonly speak, should instead have been used as a reason to celebrate inclusivity, diversity, and multiplicity rather than as a tool for cultural and, more specifically, linguistic exclusion.

### **Reflections on my second epiphany, Near ‘Native’**

To many, such an interaction is regarded as legitimate, and in some cases, praises about one’s language abilities are considered to be courteous, thoughtful, and considerate. Yet, it caught me completely off guard, as I felt that her commenting on my English language ability was more pressing, and more relevant, than to comment on the ideas discussed in my presentation. Reflecting on the encounter now makes me feel bitter about how my identity as a KELT was and probably still is perceived by the Other. It is evident that I am perceived as an outsider, whose English skills a reason for praise rather than one for linguistic inclusion. What is problematic is that praises of such are observed to never be directed to presumed ‘native’ speakers of the English language, regardless of the fact that they actually differ in their English language abilities and skills.

In the above encounter, the native speaker fallacy concept is at play, which stems from ideologies of exclusion. Using expressions like “you sound like a native!” is an example of microaggression, through which the conference attendee intentionally, or otherwise, passed stereotypical and prejudicial judgment toward a culturally different speaker of English. Microaggressions are defined as intentional or unintentional, verbal or

nonverbal, derogatory or negative, messages targeting marginalized people (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007). Sue (2010) explains:

These everyday occurrences may on the surface appear quite harmless, trivial, or be described as “small slights,” but research indicates they have a powerful impact upon the psychological well-being of marginalized groups (Brondolo et al., 2008; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001; Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008) and affect their standard of living by creating inequities in health care (Sue & Sue, 2008), education (Bell, 2002), and employment (Purdie-Vaughns, Davis, Steele, & Ditlemann, 2008). (p. 3)

Stereotyping or questioning bilinguals’ language ability, whether through praises or negative remarks, is an example of microaggression. Dovchin (2020) explores linguistic stereotyping, observed to make social participation awkward. Signs of microaggressions are described in the study as “[passing] racial insults or [communicating] derogatory and negative messages to Ilhan [the study participant] based solely upon how she looks and what she wears” (Dovchin, 2020, p. 814). In other words, such microaggressions can affect one’s mental and emotional health especially if they are racially charged.

Moreover, experiencing linguistic stereotyping in social and academic life is noted to cause a lack in one’s sense of belonging (Dovchin, 2020). To explain, the awkward encounter in my second epiphany shows that there are cultural boundaries hindering my full blend into the ELTC and implies a form of segregation between she and I, a KELT. As result, microaggressions induced by exclusionary ideologies and rhetoric could be argued to render imagined nations, like the ELTC, limited, with boundaries fixed by cultural and linguistic standards. To explain, speaking English at an international conference, where topics on English language teaching were

discussed, forms and organizes my identity as a KELT as well as shapes how my identity can relate to the larger community of English speakers.

Yet, by being indirectly branded as a ‘nonnative’ speaker of the English language, I was forced to engage in a passive process of identity construction and negotiation, which often result in my exclusion from the ‘native’ English-speaking group. In the encounter, my citizenship, or cultural background, has been rendered the only markup of my linguistic identity. In similar situations, my bilingualism is argued to gain a new meaning in relation to a specific context. In other words, language, in my personal example, has been utilized as an exclusionary tool based solely on my Kuwaiti citizenship, which is evidently regarded as the only markup of my own identity, regardless of my experience with the English language as a speaker, a reader, a student, an English language teacher, a researcher, a writer, and a certified English language assessor.

### Conclusion

While Hughes’ *Harlem* does not directly speak about a dream of equal Englishes, I shed light on it as a backdrop for a deferred dream of uniting, equal Englishes. Yet, this *deferred* dream of equal Englishes does not necessarily have to *dry up, fester, stink, sag, or even explode* (Hughes, 1951). Equal Englishes could instead displace nation states from the center of world narrative, thus displacing Anglo countries from the center of world narrative, and could examine the cultural implications behind the spread of canonical models of the language. Otherwise, English will remain a cultural product used as a form of ideological and hegemonic control, reasserting and reconstructing dominant power structures and relations between nations and individuals.

By choosing to speak the languages in my linguistic repertoire, I aim to subscribe to a linguistic membership, hoped to accommodate mobility, diversity, and new cultural possibilities. Achieving a community can happen by constructing and reconstructing it through language, which can therefore



impede social hierarchies from suppressing the unity of its membership (Canagarajah, 2010). Constructing situational identities, which allows for the possibility of joining other social networks and adopting more diverse identities, can be the answer to many complex questions about membership and language. Conversely, the conference attendee in the second epiphany was keener to comment on my English language skills from an exclusionary 'native' speaker perspective rather than to ask about the information I presented.

Additionally, this autoethnographic study is significant for three main reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates the relevance and importance of understanding oneself as a speaker/researcher within one's context, and outside of it, as part of their narrative interpretation. For instance, seeing myself as an active affiliated member in the ELTC made me naïvely believe that I would assume an insider role by default. However, my views about this linguistic membership were forcibly reconstructed and negotiated, shifting my role from insider to outsider. Accordingly, analyzing the encounters was instead done through a critical lens that considered the hegemony of English and the dominance of the Western world. Secondly, the study provided the space to describe one of my many subjective realities through thoughts and feelings and through objective analysis. Expressing my subjective and objective thoughts created an interesting scopal balance through which a greater understanding of my position, as both an experiencer and a navigator of cultural microaggressions, was achieved. Another reason is that the gained understanding of such cultural encounters in turn equipped me with the necessary skills for understanding my position as a KELT.

Nevertheless, these specific encounters also helped me reflect on my personal biases as an educator. For instance, teaching through the use of my social, cultural, religious, economical, and/or political frames of reference might have sometimes led to practicing unintentional favoritism and bias,

especially when selecting teaching content and class discussion topics. Therefore, reflecting on similar encounters empowers educators, like me, and equips them with the necessary tools to examine the presentation of their own standard culture(s) in the classroom, how that might leave students from other cultures feeling alienated and less valued, and how that could sustain unequal power dynamics in teaching and learning.