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Banal nationalism and conversational cosmopolitanism: The potential of online language education
for intercultural communication

Abstract

This article considers the potential of language-focused online teaching platforms (OTPs) for fostering intercultural communication among their users. Drawing on interviews with both students and tutors (N = 10) alongside an analysis of two OTPs websites, I identify dominant language ideologies circulating on and through OTPs. I argue that OTPs' webpages (re)produce banal nationalism grounded in nation-language congruence, as well instrumentalist language ideologies that conceive of language learning in terms of potential socioeconomic gains. However, I find that: 1) learners' experiences can result in them questioning essentialist language ideologies; and 2) many users embrace a language ideology I call *conversational cosmopolitanism*, which is premised on open-minded interaction with others and is consistent with the goals of intercultural communication educators. I conclude by discussing the implications of the findings in terms of OTPs' potential for facilitating transformational intercultural communication experiences for both students and tutors.

Keywords: Intercultural communication; online teaching platforms; banal nationalism; cosmopolitanism

日常民族主义与对话式的世界主义：网络外语教学对跨文化交流的挑战与愿景

该研究讨论网络外语教学平台推动其使用者进行跨文化交流的潜在作用。通过分析两个网络外语教学平台的页面设置以及对使用该平台的学生和老师进行访谈，笔者指出主导于该平台上的语言意识形态。笔者发现，网络外语教学平台正在输出日常民族主义价值观以及工具主义式的语言意识形态。该种工具主义式的语言意识形态宣扬外语学习的意义在于潜在的社会经济收益。然而，笔者亦发现：1) 部分学生的学习经验鼓励他们质疑本质主义式的语言意识形态；2) 不少使用者拥抱一种笔者称之为“对话式的世界主义”的语言意识形态，这种进步的语言意识形态倡导不同文化之间的开放交流，并且与跨文化交流的教育主旨相一致。笔者在结论里

还讨论网络外语教学平台对改变学生和老师的跨文化交流经验可能带来的影响。

关键词：跨文化交流，网络外语教学平台，日常民族主义，世界主义

Banal nationalism and conversational cosmopolitanism: The potential of online language education for intercultural communication

Driven by globalization and facilitated by rapid advances in information and communication technologies, a vast ecology of language-focused online teaching platforms (OTPs) has emerged since the early 2010s. These companies have mimicked the business model of other platform-based companies such as Uber and Mechanical Turk, which take advantage of the ubiquity of the Internet and smartphones to act as digital intermediaries that pair customers (e.g., learners) and service providers (e.g., tutors) together for short-term, one-off contracts (e.g., lessons). Around the world, millions of people have used OTPs, which include Preply (founded in 2012), VIPKid (founded in 2013), 51Talk (founded in 2011), and Cambly (founded in 2013). By the year 2020, these companies had amassed billions-of-dollars of funding and were booking tens-of-thousands of lessons per week. At one point, a single online English tutoring company (VIPKid) achieved a valuation of more than \$3-billion-dollars (Sullivan, 2021).

Learners use OTPs to search through and select from a wide array of potential teachers, while tutors use OTPs to access an enormous global pool of potential students (Curran & Jenks, in press). Through their role as global marketplaces that connect language learners and tutors from around the world, OTPs foster interactions between learners and teachers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As a result, OTPs are a potential resource for improving users' intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Byram et al., 2013). Unfortunately, the ease with which OTP users can find and interact with people different than themselves does not automatically imply that the ensuing exchanges will result in either improved intercultural communications skills or more cosmopolitanism dispositions. Indeed, scholars have long warned that while the Internet provides

learners with ready access to foreign languages, cultures and people, this access does not automatically imply enhanced cultural understanding (e.g., Kern, 2014). Kramersch (2014, p. 47) warns:

The very technology that promised to give all learners access to any foreign culture and its members is exacting its own price: shallow surfing of diversity instead of deep exploration of difference.

The dangers posed by “shallow surfing of diversity” magnify the importance of having a skilled instructor who help mediate intercultural interaction in online spaces (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Ware & Kramersch, 2005). Unfortunately, many tutors on OTPs lack any type of teacher-training, let alone training in how to navigate cultural differences. Further, most OTPs provide little or no guidance to either their teachers or students in terms of how to productively navigate cultural differences (Panaligan & Curran, 2022). To date, little research has examined OTP users’ intercultural experiences or whether “deep exploration of difference” is possible in the unsupervised context of for-profit OTPs.

Language ideologies

The type and form of intercultural interaction that occurs on OTPs is determined in part by the affordances of the platforms as well as the motivations and attitudes of the users. Users’ motivations and attitudes are in turn shaped by their language ideologies. The term language ideologies refer to “situated and socially established beliefs about the nature, structure, and usage of language” (Park, 2006, p. 454) and language ideologies are recognized as playing a crucial role in language learning, affecting learners’ attitudes toward both languages and their speakers (e.g., King, 2013; Martinez-Roldan & Malave, 2004; Rosiak, 2022). For example, Park and Bae (2009) explicate how language ideologies serve to link language with geographic space in many learners’ imaginations, creating a hierarchy of favored destinations for language acquisition. However, Park and Bae (2009) note that while their participants’ language ideologies reflect the instrumental value different languages are seen to possess, these language ideologies are not static. This is in keeping with broader recognition that language ideologies are “multiple, context-bound, and necessarily constructed from the sociocultural experience of the speaker” (Kroskrity (2004, p. 497). That is,

language ideologies, like other ideologies, are (re)produced in social practice and “confirmed, changed and perpetuated through discourse” (van Dijk, 2006, p. 115). Therefore, language ideologies are open to contestation and evolution—within the limits of individuals’ experience and imagination.

Banal nationalism

Today, as a result of various socio-historical processes linked with the development of modern states and their imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) many people around the world embrace language ideologies that posit the natural congruence among language, nationality, and ethnicity (see Lie, 2011). The supposed congruence among these three identity-markers is often referred to as the “Herderian triad,” after the 18th European Romantic Johannes Gottfried Herder (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 20). Herder’s promulgation of the notion that a nation is tied together by and expressed in language played an important role in the emergence of modern European nations (Park & Wee, 2017, p. 48) (on Herder’s own personal yet largely forgotten cosmopolitan dispositions, see Piller [2016]). The supposed connections between nationality and citizenship are institutionalized via states’ language planning practices, which continue to reflect attempts to standardize language and promulgate specific national varieties (Shohamy, 2006). As a consequence, language and nationality take on a one-to-one correspondence, such that “languages name nations and pure symmetry is cast between the two: In Russia, Russians speak Russian, in Japan, Japanese speak Japanese, and in France, the French speak French” (Lo Bianca, 2014 p. 313).

The imagined common-sense reciprocal relationship between language and nationality represents *banal nationalism* (Billig, 1995). Banal nationalism references how national identification (and the social imaginary of the nation more generally) is continuously (re)produced through banal, or everyday, events, activities, and symbols (Billig, 1995). Billig (1995) highlights the key role that national languages play in the continuous production of nationalism, and notes that counter to nationalist rhetoric around the globe, languages and nations often do not neatly correspond to each other in a simple one-to-one correspondence and that instead, languages, like nations, “also have to be imagined” (p. 10). Crucially, banal nationalism not only ties languages and peoples to particular nations (and vice-versa) but it also discursively constructs particular languages and people as distinct from other languages and people (i.e., Russians are *not* ethnically Japanese and do *not* speak

Japanese). Banal nationalism can be understood as a language ideology wherein congruence among nationality, language, and personal identity is accepted as common-sense and natural.

A complement of banal nationalism is *native speakerism*, which refers to the belief that native speakers are naturally the best and most appropriate teachers of a language (Holliday, 2005). The label of “native speaker” is linguistically fallacious concept related less to linguistic proficiency than to assumptions of the natural congruence among language, nationality, and race (J. Lee, 2017), including assumptions how a native speaker should look and sound (Jenks, 2017; Ramjattan, 2019). Native speakerism is fundamentally essentialist; it posits inherent connections between language and identity that are as linguistically unsupported as they are historically unfounded (J. Lee, 2017). Given the hegemony of the Herderian triad and native speakerism, it is unsurprising that many language learners around the world draw a close correlation among language, nationality, and ethnicity (cf. Ahn et al., 2021). Learners on OTPs are no exception: Curran’s (2022b) open-ended questionnaire study of more than 1,000 users of a popular OTP found that learners embraced both native speakerism and the Herderian triad (e.g., a user’s description of their ideal Italian instructor as an “ethnic Italian, born and raised in Italy” (Curran, 2021b, p. 7). However, little research has explored OTP users’ language ideologies in depth and it remains unclear how users’ experiences on OTPs challenge or reinforce dominant language ideologies, or what sort of language ideologies are reproduced via the platforms’ webpages.

Cosmopolitanism

In addition to the banal nationalist language ideologies outlined above, there are also globally circulating language ideologies that construct language learning as a tool to achieve socioeconomic success (e.g., Wee, 2003) and signal “cosmopolitan membership” (Song, 2010). Scholars have long recognized that yearnings for a global, cosmopolitan identity play a vital role in learners’ decisions to learn a foreign language (e.g., Kanno & Norton, 2003; Park & Abelmann, 2004). The English word cosmopolitanism comes from the Greek word *kosmopolitês* and its first usage is attributed to the Greek philosopher Diogenes (Robbins & Horta, 2017). The word is generally translated as “citizen of the world” and it continues to carry this meaning in contemporary popular usage. Notoriously difficult to operationalize, scholars often conceptualize cosmopolitanism as a general openness towards, and

willingness to engage with, those perceived to be different than oneself (Sobré-Denton & Bardhan, 2013). Intercultural communication scholars have often noted that the tenets of cosmopolitanism (e.g., openness, hospitality, and tolerance) significantly overlap with the qualities of the intercultural speaker (Jackson, 2011) and scholars have productively applied the concept of cosmopolitanism to analyze intercultural communication between students based in different countries (e.g., Collins & Armenta Delgado, 2019; Ros i Solé, 2013).

Many scholars conceive of cosmopolitanism as a practice, grounded in interaction between people from different backgrounds. For example, Canagarajah (2013) theorizes cosmopolitanism as “interacted and negotiated... achieved in situated interactions” (p. 196). Because of his focus on interaction as an inherent ingredient in cosmopolitanism, Canagarajah’s (2013) notion of *dialogic cosmopolitanism* has much in common with Appiah (2006), who conceptualizes cosmopolitanism as a rooted in conversation with those who are saliently different. Indeed, Canagarajah (2013) draws on Appiah’s work in his formulation of dialogic cosmopolitanism. However, where Appiah’s (2006) conceptualization of cosmopolitanism as conversation is primarily metaphoric, Canagarajah’s (2013) is literal; Canagarajah (2013) identifies a conversation-based cosmopolitanism with historical precedents in translingual contact zones. The conversation-based cosmopolitanism theorized by Canagarajah (2013) and Appiah (2006) has parallels with the notion of intercultural competence developed by Byram (1997) and in particular with the notion of *savoir être* (intercultural attitudes), which Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002, p. 7) describe as: “curiosity and openness... a willingness to relativise one's own values, belief and behaviors, not to assume that they are the only possible and naturally correct ones.” This interpretation of cosmopolitanism is fundamentally conversation-based, and it can be identified in learners’ embrace of the language ideology of *conversational cosmopolitanism*.

Methods

Data

This study is based upon two sources of data. The first source of data is the webpages of two popular OTPs: LanguaSpeak and Preply. These two OTPs were selected because: 1) they are two of the largest OTPs; and 2) both platforms give teachers significant latitude in designing lessons and also

give students' wide control in choosing who to take lessons from. The second source of data is interviews conducted with users of LanguaSpeak, including both teachers and students. The interviews were collected as part of a much larger, multi-author, multi-disciplinary study of OTPs that took place between 2019 and 2021. The study was reviewed by a University Institutional Review Board. The larger project from which the data for this study are drawn included survey-experiments and questionnaires as well as interviews I conducted with 17 learners and 19 teachers. All interviewees were either Korean learners of Korean or English, or tutors of Korean or English. None of the tutors whose interviews I discuss had formal training as teachers (e.g., bachelor's degrees in education, CELTA degrees, etc.). All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and where necessary, translated. The interviews chosen for analysis in this article were selected because they explicitly addressed the topic of language ideologies. Due to the constraints of space, excerpts from only 10 participants are presented in this article.

Analytical approach

This study adopted a discourse analysis (DA) approach. Although discourse analysis approaches vary by discipline, researchers adopting a DA approach “share the belief that discourse indexes social issues that are not always immediately visible when looking at surface linguistic form” (Jenks, 2020, pp. 66-67). This study also borrows from critical discourse analysis approaches by examining discourse in order to reveal how it functions to sustain and (re)produce particular (language) ideologies and configurations of power (van Dijk, 2006). Because I am concerned with how language ideologies are reproduced and perpetuated through OTPs specifically, I also draw on Brock's (2018) critical technocultural discourse analytic (CTDA) perspective. CTDA adopts techniques from critical theory to conduct “a close reading of the user interfaces of the ICT artifact in question, examining elements such as graphic user interface (GUI) design, narrative [and] context of use” (Brock, 2018, p. 1019). I combined CTDA with “walkthroughs” that mimicked how a typical user might encounter the platform. Walkthroughs are useful because they “make explicit the otherwise implicit and (by design) apparently seamless process of engaging with a digital media object” (Light et al., 2018, p. 886). During my walkthroughs, I used a private browser to ensure that my experience was not algorithmically influenced by my previous visits to the website. I focused my analysis of

websites on how various multimodal affordances of the website discursively (re)produce particular perspectives of language and language learning (i.e., specific language ideologies).

To analyze the interview data, I used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative research approach concerned with people's lived experiences and how they make sense of their experiences (Smith, 1996). IPA actively acknowledges that participants' accounts reflect attempts to make sense of experience rather than offering researchers direct access to participants' experiences and recognizes the important role the researcher plays in the meaning-making process (Smith et al., 2009). As a result, IPA is known for employing a "double hermeneutic" in which "the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (Smith & Osborne, 2015, p. 26). IPA studies are usually based on analysis of transcripts produced from semi-structured interviews and emphasis is placed on themes identified in the data, which are explicated with illuminating excerpts (Smith & Osborne, 2015). Because IPA is fundamentally concerned with how individuals make sense of their experiences, it is ideal for analyzing OTP users' experiences and language ideologies.

Results

Reproducing banal nationalism

Both Preply and LanguaSpeak reproduce banal nationalism. At first glance, the platform appear to advocate cosmopolitanism—Preply urges would-be learners to "immerse yourself in a new culture" and LanguaSpeak webpage urges would-be learners to "connect with a global community of language learners." However, a more thorough examination reveals that the two platforms in fact (re)produce banal nationalism. That is, the discourses (re)produced on both platforms' are highly essentialist and premised on fixed and static understandings of language and identity that reinforce a one-to-one correspondence between language and nation. On Preply, this one-to-one correspondence is achieved by representing each language with a sleep and stylized image of a distinct building or landmark (see Figure 1). For example, the Great Wall is used to symbolize the Chinese language; a stylized image of the Brandenburg Gate signals German; Spanish is identified by an outline of renowned architect Antoni Gaudí's *Basilica de la Sagrada Familia* in Barcelona. The use of these distinct *national* landmarks banally reinforces the supposedly natural correspondence between

language and nation. The pairings also perpetuate the notion that languages are “owned” by particular nations and their citizens. For example, using a landmark such as the *Sagrada Familia* suggests that native speakers *from Spain* (rather than Mexico or Argentina for example) are the ideal teachers of the Spanish—further reinforcing the idea that each language appropriately corresponds to only one nation. The overall effect of the stylized icons is the conflation of language and nation such that one metonymically indexes the other.

[Figure 1 approximately here]

The banal nationalism inherent in the superficial cosmopolitanism being advocated by the platforms’ webpage becomes even clearer when a would-be learner clicks on the landmark representing the language they wish to study. After clicking on an icon (e.g., the *Sagrada Familia*) the user is immediately taken to a long, scrollable list of different teachers. Each teacher is represented with a user-selected photo and basic teacher profile. On each profile, a small national flag appears, ostensibly to represent the teacher’s country of origin. Directly below this, teachers are marked with a tag that identifies them as either a “native” speaker (via a green word-tag) or merely a “proficient” speaker (via a blue word-tag).

LanguaSpeak’s website is similar to Preply, and it too visually represents the languages it offers to learners via images of distinct landmarks in the country associated with the language: The Eiffel Tower for French; Mount Fuji for Japanese; the Leaning Tower of Pisa replacing the Colosseum that Preply uses to symbolize Italian. However, on LanguaSpeak the banal nationalism (re)produced via the images is even more pronounced: in each image the colors and lines of the national flag of the country being associated with the language is subtly worked into the background of each image. On both Preply and LanguaSpeak, users can also, via the click of a button, restrict their view to only “native speakers” of the languages they intend to learn. By doing so, all non-native-speaker teachers are literally made invisible to the user. However, both platforms go further in drawing explicit connections between language and identity: LanguaSpeak allows learners to restrict their view to teachers according to where the teacher is “from” by selecting a particular country of origin, with the implication that learners can use this feature to further refine their pool of potential instructors to include only those whose nationalities are congruent with the language they are teaching.

Preply is even more explicit in its banal nationalism and its embrace of the Herderian triad and the mythical connections between language, nationality, and place. The Preply interface allows users to restrict their search for teachers to those from a particular “country of birth.” Interestingly, the only other three filters available for students to choose from are highly practical: the language the student want to learn, the price range they are willing to pay, and the time they are available (see Figure 2). That “country of birth” is awarded equal preference in the search filter to language, price, and availability, signals platforms’ awareness, and reproduction of, essentialist language ideologies. By including search filters such as “country of birth” Preply also reifies native speakerism and casts doubt on the language abilities of migrants, ethnic minorities, and anyone else who have ever had to answer the dreaded question “where are you really from?” (Hua & Li, 2012).

[Figure 2 approximately here]

Analysis reveals that Preply and LanguaSpeak’s webpages also reproduce a language ideology of instrumentalism. By instrumentalism, I mean that the discourse on the two OTPs’ webpages construct language learning as valuable because it can help users become more socioeconomically successful (on linguistic instrumentalism, see Wee, 2003). For example, on the Preply’s website, next to where encourages learners to “Immerse yourself in a new culture” Preply urges would-be learners “make a good impression” and “succeed in your career.” This instrumentalism can also be identified in other places on the two OTPs’ websites, such as a promoted blog post by a Preply user titled “How I got a job promotion by learning English.” On LanguaSpeak, instrumentalist language ideology is signaled via the prominently displayed logos of finance-focused websites that have covered the platform: *Yahoo! Finance*, *The Economist*, *Investopedia*, etc., and is further evidenced by the fact that many tutors directly incorporate career-related words such as “interview” and “business” into their usernames in order to attract customers.

It is well-documented that consumer products are often marketed by use of national varieties of languages that indicate the products’ countries of origins, thereby signaling authenticity and taking advantage of people’s associations between particular countries and industries (e.g., Piller, 2001; Kelly-Holmes, 2016). On OTPs, a somewhat similar process of branding takes place, but in a different direction. On OTPs, languages are turned into products, and branded as such. On OTPs, the

combination of national flags and landmarks is used to establish the authenticity of the language being marketed. In the same way that using German lends credibility to a product's claim of being German—and thus well-engineered (Kelly-Holmes, 2016, p. 55)—the combination of a German flag and a distinct landmark in Germany (the Brandenburg Gate) lends credibility to OTPs' claims of selling an “authentic” language learning experience. Crucially, the use of national landmarks that require a high level of cultural capital to recognize and appreciate (i.e., the *Sagrada Familia*) also serve to increase the value of the language commodity being sold—the implication being that taking Spanish lessons will make learners not only proficient in a foreign language but also offer them access to a more sophisticated and worldly identity (see Curran & Jenks, in press).

In summary, the language ideologies that are discursively produced on OTPs are in line with popular globally circulating language ideologies more broadly (e.g., Park & Bae, 2009). OTPs re(produce) banal nationalism as well as an instrumentalist language ideology that posits language learning as important due to the value of language competence as an exploitable resource (de Costa, 2016; Kubota, 2021). Having briefly explicated the banal nationalist and instrumentalist language ideologies that circulate on and through OTPs webpages, I now turn to discussing how users alternately internalize, challenge, and transform these language ideologies.

Native speakerism

Given that OTPs' websites reproduce dominant language ideologies such as native speakerism, it is unsurprising that the majority of learners I spoke with also embraced these language ideologies. In fact, learners' native speakerism was so strong that most of the participants simply assumed the validity of the Herderian triad. This sentiment was summarized by Rachel, an American woman in her late 30s: “I'm only looking for native speakers, and you know, native speakers who have lived, *obviously*, in the country.” In other words, for most learners on OTPs, the necessity of having a teacher who fulfills the language-people-place congruence posited by the Herderian triad is “obvious.” Interestingly, learners' language ideology of native speakerism persisted even when their own experiences contradicted this language ideology. For example, a Korean learner of English, Jae-hyuk, told me that he had previously studied on a different OTP but joined LanguaSpeak precisely because it offered the chance to take lessons from native speakers. He explained: “on that platform,

there are only Filipino teachers but I want to expose myself to native speakers, so that's why I decided to join LanguaSpeak.” Prompted about what difference he might expect between learning from native speakers versus non-native speakers, he answered confidently “it’s totally different.” Yet, after pausing to considering what the differences might be, Jae-hyuk admitted that his experiences with his Filipino teachers had in general actually been much better than his experiences with native-speaker teachers: “Actually, I prefer to study with Filipino teachers [...] they react to what I say really, really well.” Jae-hyuk’s contradictory comments are instructive in that they highlights the persistence of dominant nation-centric language ideologies—Jae-hyuk was adamant that he desired a native speaker even when his own personal experience offered evidence that contradicted the idea that native speakers are super language instructors.

While approximately fourth-fifths of the LanguaSpeak users I interviewed expressed language ideologies in line with native speakerism, a few OTP users did find their native speakerism directly challenged by their experiences on the platform. One of these learners was Jae-gook, a middle-aged Korean man learning English so that he could communicate with his son’s English-speaking fiancé and future grandchildren. When we spoke, Jae-gook had just recently completed his first lesson with a non-native speaker. He had been shocked by his experience because, like most other learners, he had been under the impression that native-speakers were ideal English teachers. However, his non-native teacher, who was from Eastern Europe, had deeply impressed him with both her proficiency and professionalism. As a result of the experience, Jae-gook planned on studying more with his Eastern European teacher going forward. When we spoke he was still reeling from his new-found revelation that native speakers were not necessary the best instructors of English: “today, I realized English teacher who is not native speaker is better [at] teaching than a native speaker!” Jae-gook’s experience also resulted in him questioning the notion that native speakers are rightful owners of a language—a core aspect of the Herderian triad (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 22):

I’m not American, you know? Not a native speaker. [my teacher is] also not a native speaker. [But] we can understand each other. The most important thing is that we can *communicate each other*, in English... English is an international language, not [just] for British people or American people.

As illustrated by the italicized text, Jae-gook seems to have shifted from a nation-centric language ideology concerned with authenticity and legitimacy to a language ideology focused on connection and interpersonal communication—tenants of the cosmopolitanism advocated by Appiah (2006) and others. While Jae-gook's new-found realization that non-native speakers can be excellent teachers may seem minor in comparison with the prevalence of native speakerism among the participants, his experience demonstrates how interactions on OTPs can potentially help learners reject dominant language ideologies, including the notion that native speakers are the ultimate arbiters and owners of a language (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 22).

Other learners related similar stories that underscored how their experiences on LanguaSpeak were causing them to confront their existing language ideologies. This included another Korean, Young-jun, an art teacher in his mid-30s. Like Jae-gook, Young-jun told me that he had originally planned to take lessons only from native speakers. However, he had recently had a change of heart after starting to take lessons from a Colombian teacher on LanguaSpeak. Unlike Jae-gook, Young-jun did not explicitly criticize native speakerism. However, like Jae-gook, Young-jun framed his decision to study with a non-native speaker teacher in terms of English being a global language. He explained: “You just don't want to listen to the same North American accent. You want to listen to British accent, Indian accent, South American accent.” Young-jun's inclusion of British English as an acceptable alternative to North American English is unsurprising, but his inclusion of Indian English and “South America English” is noteworthy given the dominance of native speakerism in South Korea—a country where nativeness is a criterion for instructing English and citizens of neither India nor any countries in South America can legally be employed to teach conversational English (Jenks, 2018, p. 526).

None of the learners of Korean gave any indication that their experiences on LanguaSpeak led them to question native speakerism. This may be due to the fact that while non-native speaker teachers of English are plentiful on OTPs, there are very few teachers of Korean on OTPs who are not ethnically Korean and from Korea. As a result, learners of Koreans are less likely to have had experiences like Jae-gook's and Young-jun's, that would expose them to taking lessons from non-native speaking or non-Korean teachers. Alternatively, English's status as a global *lingua franca* with

may mean learners of English are more open to questioning native speakerism. Further, English in Korea has a highly instrumental value and English proficiency is in Korea increasingly considered a necessary skill that individuals are expected to possess (Curran, 2018). In contrast, learners who are interested in Korea are often motivated by idiosyncratic reasons, such as personal interest in Korea media (I. Lee, 2018) and as a result may be less willing to study with a non-native speaker.

Conversational cosmopolitanism

In this section I present the findings from interviews with learners of Korean. I argue that while they did not challenge native speakerism, they did embrace a language ideology at odds with the linguistic instrumentalism being produced via the OTPs webpages. I refer to this language ideology as *conversational cosmopolitanism*. Unlike the linguistic instrumentalism being re(produced) via the OTPs webpages, conversational cosmopolitanism conceives of language learning as valuable because it allows for meaningful interaction with others. Rather than seeking “authenticity” or individual “mastery” of a language, conversational cosmopolitanism is rooted in dialogue and exchange. An example of an OTP user who embraced conversational cosmopolitanism is William, an Asian American engineer in his 30s who takes Korean. William explained that his motivations and goals had evolved after starting to study on LanguaSpeak (note: italics in this quote and following quotes is added for emphasis):

Everyone says that they want to speak fluently [and] I think I *used to* say that as well, but, maybe, I really just want to be able to *understand* another person in a different language and learn a little bit more about their culture or just learn a little bit about how they think and how their upbringing affects their way of thinking.

William’s response acknowledges that he while he used to instrumentally pursue “fluency” he is now interested in learning languages primarily because doing so allows him to better understand the experiences of others.

Many of the language learners expressed their conversational cosmopolitanism with direct reference to the importance of conversation in their desire to learn foreign languages. This included Molly, a White American in her 30s who studied multiple languages on LanguaSpeak and has become friends with several of her teachers and online language partners:

I have no reason, without learning these different languages, to have friends who are based in China, or Egypt, or South America [...] [language learning] opens up the ability to *connect* with more people, you know, and I can go to China and just start a *conversation* with a cab driver, somebody in a local shop, and that wouldn't be open to me otherwise

As illustrated in this quote, Molly's desire to learn languages is based on her desire to talk to people and understand foreign cultures on a deeper and more meaningful level than afforded to a typical tourist. A similar sentiment was expressed even more explicitly by Bradley, a White American in his late 20s:

I want to be able to travel and *engage* with the local community, on *their* level... I'm going to *their* space and I want to be respect of that...that's what it boils down to, just like being a *good global citizen*.

Bradley recognizes his privilege as a native speaker of English and chooses to learn on LanguaSpeak in order to engage with foreign others on an equal footing. In doing so, Bradley is embracing conversational cosmopolitanism. Conversational cosmopolitanism does little to question or transcend the banal nationalism being re(produced) via OTPs' websites. However, because of their desire to be "good global citizens," users such as Molly and Bradley are more likely than typical tourists to enter into conversations in which both they and their interlocutors' cultural stereotypes and ascribed national identities are opened up to interrogation and negotiation (e.g., Brandt & Jenks, 2010).

Learners of Korean were more likely than learners of English to explicitly express attitudes in line with conversational cosmopolitanism. This may be due to the differing levels of instrumental value the two languages are seen to possess, as discussed above. However, not all learners of Korean embraced conversational cosmopolitanism and only some learners of English rejected native speakerism. These findings indicate the difficulty in challenging dominant language ideologies and cultivating conversational cosmopolitanism on OTPs.

However, it was not only language learners who embraced the language ideology of conversational cosmopolitanism, but also language teachers. Many of the teacher I spoke to related how their experiences teaching had made them more receptive to the views of others, as well as more empathetic. This included, Beomseok, a Korean teacher in his mid-30s from a small town in Korea:

I have become less biased than before. For example, [before] I always thought I was right in terms of politics. However, some of my students like Bernie Sanders, some others like Trump. Trump looks stupid and crazy in the news, but hearing what they say, I get to know why they support Trump. There are reasons—There are reasons to like him. It doesn't mean I like [those reasons] but I can understand them.

In his willingness to try and understand the perspectives of people he disagreed with, Beomseok embodies the spirit of conversational cosmopolitanism, reminiscent of Appiah (2006, p. 85): “conversation doesn't have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it's enough that it helps people get used to one another.” The reflexive ethos of OTP users' conversational cosmopolitanism is encapsulated by a remark from an OTP English teacher in her 20s who concluded of her experiences on LanguaSpeak “It's so valuable to learn from people who are different—*both how different we are, and how similar too.*” This statement illustrates that, for at least some users, OTPs do indeed foster a progressive cosmopolitan language ideology that does not exoticize other languages and cultures and instead recognizes the “universality of difference” (Mignolo, 2000).

Crucially, even for teachers who did not explicitly adopt the language ideology of conversational cosmopolitanism, there were indications that the teachers' worldviews were positively altered by their experience learners from foreign cultural backgrounds. For example, a 20-year-old teacher from the UK, Jasmine, admitted that she had little interest in the language or culture of the young Chinese students she instructed. Nonetheless, her experience teaching them had caused her to reevaluate her perceptions of China, especially in light of the highly negative comments about China that she came across on social media in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. She explained:

You're going through Facebook or Instagram and whatever it is [sic] and you see lots of comments about “the virus coming from China” and “I'm not gonna buy anything from China and blah blah blah.” And I just think—obviously because of this connection per se that I have with China at the moment— I take it quite, I want to say, quite *personally*.

While ostensibly non-committal, Jasmine's quote illustrates how her experiences as an OTP teacher have caused her to shift from a tacit acceptance or simple dismissal of anti-Chinese sentiment to “taking it personally.” Jasmine's shift illustrates the potential of OTPs to introduce more open-minded

perspectives even to those users who are ostensibly non-cosmopolitan. This is in keeping with Appiah (2006, p. 85), who argues that “conversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it’s enough that it helps people get used to one another.” In this vein, OTPs’ greatest potential for fostering tolerance and empathy among users may be located in the transformational potential of conversation itself.

Discussion and conclusion

This article demonstrated how banal nationalism and linguistic instrumentalism are (re)produced through OTPs’ websites. However, interviews with users demonstrated that rather than simply “surfing diversity,” some OTP users do in fact seek out meaningful engagement with difference, including via their embrace of *conversational cosmopolitanism*. Thus, while OTPs’ webpages reproduce regressive language ideologies such as native speakerism, users’ experiences on the platform can result in them questioning these same language ideologies—as evidenced by cases such as Young-jun and Jae-gook.

The findings did not identify strong evidence that the banal nationalism being (re)produced on OTPs websites is being directly challenged by conversational cosmopolitanism. This may not be overly problematic—banal nationalism can represent a starting point for individuals to later develop more cosmopolitan perspectives. For example, Tange’s (2022) study of the World Scout Jamboree revealed that young people’s cosmopolitan orientations emerged from their engagement with banal representations of national culture. Likewise, in a study of online intercultural exchange, Collins and Armenta Delgado (2019) found that students’ essentialist understandings of other cultures serve as “points of departure” in learners’ engagement with difference and eventual yielded a critical cosmopolitan orientation. Thus, whether OTP webpages’ discourse reproduces essentialist and nation-centric understandings of language and culture may ultimately be of less importance than whether OTPs provide users with opportunities and experiences for their language ideologies to evolve. Put another way, if a clickable image of the *Sagrada Familia* motivates learners to join an OTP and learn Spanish—and then go on to gain more nuanced perspectives of language and culture from their experiences on the platform—then banal nationalism may have served a useful purpose.

Much of the literature on digitally-mediated intercultural communication has rightfully stressed the critical role played by trained facilitators (e.g., Ware & Kramersch, 2005; O'Dowd, Sauro & Spector-Cohen, 2020). However, this study offers preliminary evidence that, in at least some cases, OTPs can support positive intercultural interactions even when teachers lack training in facilitating intercultural exchange. Further research is needed to determine just how prevalent these positive interactions are. It is possible that users' positive interactions encouraged them to take part in this study. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that this study's finding cannot be generalized. Instead, this study intends to provide some preliminary evidence of OTPs potential for fostering positive intercultural interaction, and also draw scholars to an empirically compelling but highly underexplored research context.

Despite users' overall positive perceptions of their interactions on OTPs, users would likely benefit further if OTPs provided them with pedagogically informed resources to help them improve their intercultural communication. At the same time, scholars should be wary of too easily dismissing OTPs in terms of their potential for helping users to develop tolerance and openness—crucial traits of intercultural speakers (Jackson, 2011). After all, OTPs tend to be much cheaper and more readily accessible (for most users) than many other forms of language and cultural learning, and as a result have the potential to dramatically expand the number of people who can directly engage with people from foreign linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Crucially, OTPs' comparatively low cost (users can sign up a single lesson) significantly lowers the barrier to entry for language learning in comparison to alternatives such as a semester-long class at a college or language center. Low cost is also important for challenging dominant language ideologies because it allows learners to “experiment” by taking lessons with teachers who diverge from the native-speaker ideal, and to do so at a low cost. For example, had Jae-gook and Young-jun not had opportunity to “try out” single, low-priced lesson with non-native speakers, then neither might have ever had reason to question the native speakerism that is dominant in South Korea (Jenks, 2019).

Research is needed to gain a clearer picture of if, how, and when OTP users engage in “shallow surfing of diversity” versus “deep exploration of difference” (Kramersch, 2014, p. 47) and how OTP users can be assisted to transition from the former to the latter. Future research should

longitudinally follow both learners and teachers from the start of their journeys on OTPs to better understand how users' language ideologies are challenged or reinforced throughout their language learning journeys. Such research is crucial because it remains unclear to what degree users' embrace of banal nationalist and conversational cosmopolitan language ideologies is linked to their experiences on OTPs rather than preceding their joining OTPs. Further research is also needed to disentangle how different language ideologies may overlap and evolve together. In sum, OTPs represent a critical site for future research on intercultural communication in the digital age.

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