

The link between linguistic subordination and linguistic inferiority complexes: English as a second language migrants in Australia

International Journal of Bilingualism
1–17

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DOI: 10.1177/13670069211035561

journals.sagepub.com/home/ijb

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Abstract

Aims and objectives/purpose/research questions: This article aims to explore the link between linguistic subordination and linguistic inferiority complexes in the context of English as a second language (ESL) migrants in Australia. We address the following research questions: (a) To what extent and how do ESL migrants in Australia suffer from linguistic subordination? (b) To what extent and how is this linguistic subordination linked to linguistic inferiority complexes for ESL-migrants in Australia? (c) What are the main social implications of the link between linguistic subordination and linguistic inferiority complexes for ESL migrants?

Design/methodology/approach: The study involved the participation of 150 participants who were observed using linguistic ethnography. The participants engaged in interviews and focus group discussions so that we could explore the psychological consequences of linguistic subordination that they encountered.

Data and analysis: The interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and analysed with consideration to the context, as well as the participants' utterances and paralanguage. The study followed alternative quality criteria.

Findings/conclusions: Many ESL migrants in Australia face linguistic subordination for the way they speak English. Consequently, these migrants suffer from linguistic inferiority complexes – psychological and emotional damages, which result in self-marginalisation, self-vindication, loss of sense of belonging, social withdrawal, fear, anxiety and the erosion of self-confidence. We find that there is a direct link between linguistic subordination and linguistic inferiority complexes.

Originality: This article addresses a gap that exists regarding the link between linguistic subordination and the development of linguistic inferiority complexes, discusses how this has real-life consequences for ESL migrants, and explores how this may be overcome.

Significance/implications: ESL migrants need support so that they can cope with their experiences of linguistic subordination, thus helping them better deal with issues related to

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linguistic inferiority complexes. In addition, the broader society needs greater education on how their comments and actions can affect the wellbeing of others.

Keywords

Linguistic subordination, linguistic inferiority complexes, ESL migrants, Australia

Introduction

Many English as a second language (ESL) migrants' linguistic features and repertoires in Australia differ from Standard Australian English. Consequently, these ESL migrants suffer from *linguistic subordination*, language ideology which poses nation-state monolingual and cultural homogeneity to the detriment, discrimination and misrepresentation of marginalised groups whose linguistic repertoires are being devalued and stigmatised. Examples of linguistic subordination include the ideologies of pre-determining that certain linguistic practices are (in)correct (De Costa, 2020), labelling the ESL users as non-proficient English speakers, regardless of their actual proficiency (Dovchin, 2020b), and the use of stereotypes to reduce migrant identity to one of a foreign non-native speaker of English (Tankosić, 2020). This leads to ESL-migrants being *othered* as outgroup figures and *abnormal* English speakers with "ugly" accents (Blommaert, 2009), which results in their social stigmatisation (Foo & Tan, 2019). These forms of linguistic subordination breed identity suppression, and maintain the dominant society's existing linguistic, cultural, and hierarchical ideologies. The idealisation of Standard Australian English, in terms of its *logic*, *history*, or *aesthetics*, through the diminishment of other English varieties, leads to cultural and monolingual homogeneity of the host society, while maintaining the power and dominance of people who have historically held it (Lippi-Green, 2011).

This power imbalance that stems from stigmatising linguistic features can have real-life consequences for ESL-migrants: that is, the direct consequences of linguistic subordination can lead to the development of *linguistic inferiority complexes* – the psychological and emotional damages inflicted on the victims, which result in serious psychological and emotional consequences (Dovchin, 2020a; Piller, 2016). These complexes go beyond normal feelings of inferiority and can result in the cultivation of significant mental health issues such as paranoia, fear and anxiety (Dovchin, 2020a), as well as depression and suicidal thoughts (Bhatia, 2018), which inhibit communicative expression of ideas, needs and desires, and can lead to social withdrawal and difficulties in language acquisition (Sevinç & Backus, 2017).

In order to address the issues and consequences of linguistic subordination experienced by ESL migrants in Australia and gain a deeper understanding of their linguistic inferiority complexes caused by subordinating life events, we explore three main research questions in this paper:

1. To what extent and how do ESL migrants in Australia suffer from linguistic subordination?
2. To what extent and how is this linguistic subordination linked to linguistic inferiority complexes for ESL-migrants in Australia?
3. What are the main social implications of the link between linguistic subordination and linguistic inferiority complexes for ESL migrants?

Linguistic subordination

While ESL-migrants' mobilities across the globe allow them to change their country of residence and often even citizenship in search of a better life, it scarcely prepares them for sociocultural and linguistic integration in the host community. The vertical space of various countries is characterised

by sociocultural and political indexical distinctions, which cast linguistic diversities onto already established patterns of value-attribution, and eventually transform them into *linguistic subordination* (Lippi-Green, 2011; Piller, 2016). Linguistic subordination, as the language ideology, is based on the linguistic mystification by the dominant authority, which perpetuates superiority, generates misinformation, trivialises target language and idealises the standard, while marginalising ideological deviations, and subordinating ESLs through prize and punishment in their language accomplishments (Dovchin, 2019a; Lippi-Green, 2011). As such, linguistic subordination ideology is being perpetually imposed on ESL-migrants. It occurs when one dominant language practice inferiorises another less dominant one in a space characterised by preferable linguistic actions – ‘The variant I prefer is superior on historical, aesthetic, or logical grounds’ (Lippi-Green, 2011, p. 70).

Viewing language as a practice makes us realise that how we utilise language in a specific context is a consequence of our perception of that context (Pennycook, 2010; Sultana, Dovchin & Pennycook, 2013). In that way, the dominant society manifests ‘nativism’ as a preference, so that anyone who does not exhibit desirable linguistic characteristics is treated as unequal. Linguistic subordination, as a *monoglossic language ideology*, imposes the standard monoglot as the model all speakers should aim for (Blommaert, 2010; Flores & Rosa, 2015), where every deviation may potentially result in exclusion, discrimination and degradation. ESL-migrants’ linguistic features often reveal their ethno-cultural identities, which eventually leads to social comparisons, ‘in which the in-group [dominant society] is perceived as better than that of the out-group [ESL]’ (Bhatia, 2018, p. 423). Therefore, linguistic subordination often co-occurs with *linguistic racism*, which, in addition to language-based discrimination, also discriminates against minorities’ ethno-racial, social, and cultural background (Tankosic & Dovchin, 2021). In other words, linguistic subordination becomes, not exclusively but predominantly, directed at marginalised groups, whose linguistic repertoire uncovers their identity, hence simultaneously making them victims of linguistic racism.

Communicative and linguistic repertoires of ESL-migrants, as less privileged communities, are often characterised as ‘non-standard’ and ‘improper’, which is why they are often subjected to ‘stigmatization’ (Bhatia, 2018, p. 424). Their English becomes a sign of ‘deviance and foreignness which construe[s] particular populations and practices as illegitimate and out of place’ (Rosa, 2016, p. 165). Sociocultural, linguistic and political centres often use language as a critical tool for mainstreaming ESL-migrants (Blommaert, 2010) with the overarching aim to achieve safety in homogeneity, while perpetuating ‘soft marginalization’ (p. 154) of their linguistic practices. They control the dominant linguistic and cultural capital, whereas a lack of it leads to subordination in institutional and noninstitutional contexts. In other words, the need to retain monoglossic hegemony helps the dominant society stay in power while controlling preferable capitals. ESL-migrants’ linguistic diversity threatens the socio-political clout of dominant nation-states, playing against their acceptable moulds. It is often the case that it is not the actual language proficiency but the assumption of it that represents the barrier to ESL-migrants’ social participation and can lead to linguistic subordination (Piller, 2016). ESL-migrants’ accents are, for example, characterised biologically (age of acquisition; first language influence) and socially (social marker; group membership) (Bhatia, 2018). It is because of their social characteristics that biographical accents are often perceived as ‘bad’ and ‘ugly’ in comparison to the ‘invisibly normal’ ‘zero’ accents of the dominant society, hence, making migrants victims of ‘accent vilification’ (Bhatia, 2018, pp. 421–424).

Lack of intelligibility is often pushed forward as the main reason for negative accent evaluation. However, previous research, which evaluated the level of different accent comprehensibility, showed that mixed accent groups achieved a higher intelligibility than dominant speakers (Smith & Nelson, 2006), while it is the prejudice of biographical accents that prevents dominant speakers from actually hearing what others are saying (Lippi-Green, 1994). Biographical accents can often

have a negative impact on credibility and employability (Lee, 2018), and cause mocking and social exclusion (Dovchin, 2019b; Tankosić & Dovchin, 2021). ESL-migrants in Australian institutional and noninstitutional settings are often judged, stigmatised, and bullied for speaking *broken* and *inadequate* English (Dovchin, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a). The supremacy of global English, along with the enactment of subordination, also brings psychological consequences for ESL-migrants, as learning English for them also means becoming aware of their marginality in English and falling behind the ‘imagined ideal of “perfect” homogenous English’ (Piller, 2016, p. 203).

Linguistic inferiority complexes

While linguistic subordination represents a serious, ideologically driven discrimination against ESL-migrants, it is the effects of it that have alarming consequences for their psychological and emotional wellbeing. Linguistic subordination often leads to the development of *linguistic inferiority complexes*, as it instigates feelings of being in a never-ending race to achieve the unachievable and unreal – the idealised monoglot standard. Linguistic inferiority complexes refer to the psychological and emotional damages inflicted on the victims of linguistic subordination, which result in self-marginalisation, self-vindication, loss of social belonging, social withdrawal, fear, anxiety, and the erosion of self-confidence (Dovchin, 2020a; Piller, 2016). Such damages stem from the homogeneity of hegemonic English and emerge once a person’s linguistic abilities and communicative practices are diminished or rejected by others. Linguistic inferiority complexes are developed when migrants’ social identity and language practices are misrecognised by the dominant society, who ‘mirror[s] back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves’, which causes them to ‘suffer real damage, real distortion’ (Taylor, 1994, p. 25). Monolingual mindsets throughout the community suppress the culture and identity of ESL-migrants (Tankosić, 2020), which leads to a lack of acknowledgement of their proficiency of both English and their other language(s). This leaves them with feelings of linguistic invisibility and inferiority (Dobinson & Mercieca, 2020; Dovchin, 2020c).

Learning and continuously attempting to be a locally accepted English speaker gives ESL-migrants a feeling of impotency or ineptitude that makes them think that their English is *terrible*. Such psychological obstacles emerge when ‘a person finds himself in a situation where his abilities and attitudes are denigrated or rejected by other people’ (Kenchappanavar 2012, p. 1). Linguistic subordination, which emerges in negative interactions with interlocutors, who laugh at or mock speech of ESL-migrants and deliberately misunderstand their accent, can eventually wear down the confidence of ESL-migrants (Blommaert, 2009) and lead to linguistic inferiority complexes – feeling alienated, embarrassed and lacking credibility and truthfulness. This can lead to consequences for any ESL-migrant, as linguistic inferiority complexes prevent them from a fluid integration in the host society and hinder normal life events, such as searching for jobs, applying for rental properties as well as going shopping and socialising (Dovchin, 2020b).

The accumulation of linguistic inferiority complexes may cause further severe psychological issues such as depression, paranoia, suicidal thoughts, anxiety attacks, substance abuse, and eating disorders (Dovchin, 2020a), with MRI studies showing noticeable psychological and neurological impacts arising from linguistic subordination (Bhatia, 2018). For example, ramifications of linguistic inferiority complexes led a South Korean student in Australia to develop suicidal ideations as she started feeling like a *loser* whose poor English is a disappointment and *betrayal* of herself, her parents, friends, and a lecturer (Piller, 2016). Linguistic inferiority complexes, which emerge as a consequence of linguistic subordination, represent a serious threat for individuals and society.

Linguistic ethnography

This study follows linguistic ethnography (LE) qualitative methodological framework to explore the psychological consequences of linguistic subordination experienced by ESL-migrants in Australia. LE was used to observe and analyse ethnolinguistic realities, behaviours, perspectives, and experiences of ESL-migrants in their real-life setting (Blommaert & Backus, 2013; Singer, 2009). The combination of linguistic and ethnographic views allowed us to understand the everyday sociocultural and linguistic experiences of ESL-migrants, and how language can be used to dominate their everyday realities and psycho-emotional states. Interdisciplinarity and flexibility of data collection in LE enabled us to discover main themes through the sensory analysis of the ethnolinguistic setting (Copland & Creese, 2015) and integration into the lives of ESL-migrants (Shah, 2017). Our methodological framework is guided by previous research on linguistic subordination and its psychological consequences (Dovchin, 2020a).

We employed two methods of data collection – semi-structured interviews and focus group interactions (Copland & Creese, 2015) – to gain an understanding of sociolinguistic and cultural experiences of ESL-migrants in Australia. This study represents a segment of two larger ethnographic studies with 150 ESL-migrants in Australia. For the purposes of this research, selected participants have been interviewed and engaged in discussions in the period from April 2019 until March 2021 in Australia. Formal semi-structured interviews allowed for natural and flexible interactions with participants, where meaning was negotiated and questions were a guide. They provided opportunities for the engagement with the participants' sociolinguistic and cultural experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to understand real-life stories of linguistic subordination and uncover its consequences. For this research we selected interviews with five ESL-migrants (aged 18–51 years).

Although interviews have been the preferable method in LE studies, they have limitations in terms of interviewees' apprehension and misremembering (Copland & Creese, 2015). To account for such limitations, this study combined interviews with interactional data from the focus group discussions. Focus group discussions create a flexible and natural setting in which participants talk among themselves, share experiences and ask questions, while being observed by the ethnographer in terms of their reactions and way of speaking (O'Reilly, 2009). The four participants in this study were a part of a larger focus group discussion of 10 participants, with three facilitators running the session. The majority of the facilitators in the focus group were also ESL-migrants, who could empathise with participants, make them feel safer in speaking in English, make the setting welcoming, and also share their own narratives as ESL-migrants in Australia.

All participants experienced some kind of linguistic subordination in Australia because of their English practices and have consequently developed linguistic inferiority complexes. Their demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. English was used in the interviews and focus group discussions; nevertheless, participants were encouraged to express their thoughts in whichever language they found comfortable. Data in English were transcribed using *Trint* software, which ensures data safety. Due to word limits, only two data extracts and several in-textual participants' interview segments are presented in this paper.

The study interpreted interview and focus group discussion data sets 'productively, contextually and discursively' (Pennycook, 2007, p. 53) as they happened within a larger contextual meaning framework. Analysis based on the contextual tools provided a thorough understanding and interpretation of sociolinguistic and historical meanings integrated within ESL-migrants' experiences. Data were analysed in their entirety with a focus on the participants' utterances and their paralinguistic (Dovchin, 2019a; 2020c). This study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) set of alternative

Table 1. Participants' demographic information.

Name	Background	Education	Profession	Current occupation	Method
Alexandra	Ukrainian	Postgraduate degree	Social psychologist	Library technician	Interview
Alla	Ukrainian	Postgraduate degree	Sports	Child-care coordinator	Interview
Cheng	Chinese	High school	n/a	University student	Interview
Kevin	Indonesian	High school	n/a	University student	Interview
Serene	South Korean	Two university degrees	Social worker	Aged carer/cleaner	Interview and focus group
Judy	Chinese	University degree	Education	Teacher	Focus group
Delbee	Mongolian	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Focus group
Sora	Japanese	Vocational training (TAFE)	Customer service/sales	Aged care	Focus group
Facilitator 1	Sri Lankan/Australian	Postgraduate student	Student/teacher	Student/teacher	Focus group
Facilitator 2	Mongolian	Postgraduate degree	Academic	Researcher	Focus group
Facilitator 3	Australian	Postgraduate degree	Student	Student	Focus group

TAFE: Technical and further education.

quality criteria – credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and reflexivity – to maintain the trustworthiness of this study, validly present participants' recollections, and to confirm the transparency of biases. Considering that the discussion theme might cause a sensitive reaction from some participants, reflexivity of researchers in terms of their role and an approach to participants was given great attention. This study was conducted by two researchers who come from an ESL background, and one researcher who is Anglo Australian. Such diverse backgrounds allowed us to have a better insight into real-life experiences of our participants, and to control our biases while ensuring objectivity.

The link between linguistic subordination and linguistic inferiority complexes

Linguistic subordination and depression. In Extract 1, Alla (35) from Ukraine, discusses experiencing a lengthy period of depression that stemmed from linguistic and employment difficulties. After arriving in Australia in 2011 with her now ex-husband, she describes her problems with finding work, and explains the psychological consequences of being criticised for her language practice, and constantly watched and supervised at her new workplace in case she makes any language mistakes. She also describes how she developed feelings of being used and fobbed off because of her sociolinguistic background.

Extract 1

1. **Researcher:** Since you came to Australia, have you ever felt depressed?
2. **Alla:** Yes.
3. **Researcher:** Self-worthless? Or?
4. **Alla:** Yes. For first two years, umm. . . Let's say for first eight months I've been finding a job.
5. **Researcher:** So, finding a job was one of them.
6. **Alla:** Yeah, that was the main, that was the hardest part and my first job was, I was working at, I was working at aged care. And they told me, you have to work one month for free like a volunteer. And,

- after we will see if we'll give you job, so I was working for one month for free and they still didn't give me a job and I again worked there for free until they offered me a position there. So, I couldn't understand that. Like, in any country, probably where we would go, we would never work for free.
7. **Researcher:** Yeah.
 8. **Alla:** Like for more than a month at a job. It's like taking advantage because they know you don't have any, you don't have any choice. [very loud voice]
 9. **Researcher:** Yeah.
 10. **Alla:** You don't know. You don't. You don't have an experience, like they asked everywhere for an Australian experience, and it was like, I can't have, I can't have any.
 11. **Researcher:** Okay, so because of that you were depressed because you couldn't find a job?
 12. **Alla:** I couldn't find a job, but [long pause] the job that I found, it's also like it was like the position that I was having like in my country, like I had a lot of years of experience. And here, I have to. It doesn't matter how many years of experience you have. You start to have like, I had to start, for example, from beginning.
 13. **Researcher:** From scratch.
 14. **Alla:** And at the workplace, they because of my. . . When I start to work obviously my language. Was so like, it was bad. But I. . . Yeah. . . I couldn't explain lots of things, like when I'm trying to explain something, I can't explain, so they were just sometimes just look at me and like [showing with hand] put the hand like 'turn around'.
 15. **Researcher:** OK, so obviously language was a very difficult, challenging part when you first arrived, language barrier. Right?
 16. **Alla:** Yes. Yes.
 17. **Researcher:** And then you think you got better and better once your English started improving.
 18. **Alla:** Yeah, my English started to improve, but yeah, I think I had like, probably around like two years of depression here, like when I just got here. It was like. . .
 19. **Researcher:** Yeah. So how did you get over it? Did you have any help or did you go and talk to people, or?
 20. **Alla:** No. I, I just, I think I stayed like in the house. I think in two years it was like it was locked out of my life, just like, like nothing happened. After I found a job, it was like just learning, like what people do, it's like, it's like you were just born.
 21. **Researcher:** Yeah.
 22. **Alla:** Learning everything from the start. Learning, what people do like I was worried sometimes if I was at work and people were doing something, I was just watching them, oh interesting, can I do that too? Like. Little things like. . .
 23. **Researcher:** Yeah.
 24. **Alla:** Because I was so scared that if I did something wrong, they will complain about you and I had people like complaining about me if I did something because of not knowing. Not just because of I wasn't, didn't know. They obviously complained to my boss about that. And I was always. . . I was always had like someone's watching me all the time. You know, it's like you always have someone like you worry to move.
 25. **Researcher:** Yeah.

After coming to Australia, Alla developed psychological problems. They started when she was unable to find a job for eight months (line 4), but continued when she was pressured into volunteering at an aged care centre under the perception that she would get the job after a month of work (line 6). Alla explains throughout her interview that one of the reasons she could not find a job was due to her English language practice. When she was finally employed, her co-workers shooed her away because of her English skills, 'I can't explain, so they were just sometimes just look at me and like put the hand like "turn around"' (line 14). The use of body language rather than a verbal response in this context implies that their view of Alla is of someone who is linguistically inferior to them, and is potentially unable to engage in a proper interaction. Simultaneously, linguistic subordination is

evident in a sense that her co-workers did not give Alla enough support or time to express herself properly, but rather dismissed her as incapable of speaking. Experiencing institutional stigmatisation for speaking inadequate English (Dovchin, 2019a) can have detrimental consequences for ESL migrants who are still working to adapt to the society and a new way of life. Therefore, after she finally started receiving her salary, experiences of linguistic subordination led Alla to start feeling massive linguistic inferiority complexes (line 14), as she notes, ‘obviously my language was so like, it was bad. [. . .] I couldn’t explain lots of things, like when I’m trying to explain something, I can’t explain’. Alla’s inferiority complexes made her feel as if she had to learn everything from scratch, and her pre-Australian life experience was completely neglected (line 20). In other words, lack of linguistic and cultural capital prevented her from ‘becoming a bona fide citizen’ in Australia and ‘performing well in the job’ (Ng, 2007, p. 108). She also started feeling *excessive anxiety*, as if she were walking on eggshells at her workplace – ‘Because I was so scared that if I did something wrong, they will complain about you’ (line 24). Alla mentions how her ESL-identity has been susceptible to her Australian employers as they privilege ‘local’ and ‘Australian’ experience, while excluding newly arrived ESL-migrants like Alla (line 10). Consequently, like many other ESL-migrants in Australia, Alla started investing a lot of effort into improving her English (line 18). Overall, the initial shock of not being able to find a job because of her lack of linguistic and cultural capital, the linguistic subordination at her workplace, and the pressure of improving her English – all together – coincided with Alla’s depression, which lasted two years (line 20).

Overall, Alla’s experience of feeling used through having to work for free to ‘gain experience’ that she already had, being shooed away by others, having others complain to her boss about her behind her back, and being watched for mistakes, all because of perceived linguistic and cultural inadequacy, are examples of her subordination. That Alla has to volunteer for more than a month in order to gain much prized work experience in Australia, indicates that many Australian employers value and prefer nativism, which leads to inferiority of those who do not hold this attribute, and feelings of superiority for those who do (Bhatia, 2018). This nativism also leads to Alla’s experience of linguistic racism (Tankosić & Dovchin, 2021) as others perceive her English as out of place, illegitimate, and a clear sign of her migrant background (Rosa, 2016), as it negatively affects her employability and perceived credibility (Lee, 2018). These workplace rejections fostered a hegemonic English environment, stigmatising and marginalising Alla and showing her a demeaned image of herself (Taylor, 1994). This left her feeling worthless and ‘locked out’. Two years of depression coincided with Alla’s social withdrawal and a lack of confidence in her abilities, where she states that she stayed at home and had to relearn everything. Overall, the processes of finding employment, as well as multiple forms of linguistic subordination that Alla experienced when she eventually found employment, strongly contributed to her feelings of depression and isolation.

Linguistic subordination and self-shame. While depression and social withdrawal are common symptoms of linguistic inferiority complex, self-shame and embarrassment are also regularly encountered by many ESL-migrants. Alexandra (51) is a Ukrainian immigrant woman who arrived in Australia in 2013, after marrying an Australian man. Although Alexandra holds a doctorate degree in social psychology, she was not linguistically prepared for life in Australia, as her Australian English skills were not sufficiently developed for a new communicative environment. After realising that without English she cannot professionally advance, Alexandra started developing her language skills through self-learning.

Alexandra’s journey of adapting to professional and social life in Australia has been characterised by experiences of linguistic subordination, which directly influenced her psychological and emotional wellbeing. After completing technical and further education (TAFE) in Australia, Alexandra managed to find a job in a public library. She expressed her surprise in finding a job, as

she said that job options were scarce where she lived, but she felt certain it was because of her good resume. When she started working as a library technician, Alexandra developed feelings of discomfort at her workplace, because she was subjected to exclusionary behaviour by her co-workers due to her biographical Ukrainian English accent and ‘improper’ (Bhatia, 2018) English skills:

I felt something is wrong around me. You know. You have that feeling like no one supports you. [. . .] For some reason I feel uncomfortable, psychologically uncomfortable here. [. . .] Some treat you like that because of your accent. [. . .] The problem is they just didn’t want to see me there, because they have different plans for different people. (Alexandra)

Alexandra also describes how she brought up this discomfort with her manager, who instead of helping, told her that racism exists in Australia. Faced with this lack of support and covert ostracism at her workplace because of language – ‘people just didn’t want stranger between them’ (Alexandra), Alexandra experienced one form of linguistic subordination in the public library. Having her biographical accent perceived as incomprehensible and as deviating from the norm, meant that Australians treated her differently and possibly even as guilty of her *foreignness* (Bhatia, 2018; Rosa, 2016). In other words, she felt that she was being labelled by Australians as the *other* (Devos & Banaji, 2005) because her English practice made her different from local Australians. Scrutiny of Alexandra’s *limited* English skills and biographical accent by her co-workers and employers, made her perceive her communicative English as never good enough for Australian standards. She felt that her linguistic superdiversity was continuously condemned, so she started feeling tormented regardless of making ‘a deliberate effort to change [her] accent and trying to fit in according to the norms of the dominant group’ (Bhatia, 2018, p. 426). In the end, Alexandra felt so uncomfortable at how Australians excluded her and did not accept her English at work, that she left the library after three months of employment.

After experiencing linguistic subordination in the public library, Alexandra developed linguistic inferiority complexes in the form of low self-confidence, as well as fear and anxiety of speaking with local Australians (at grocery shops, restaurants, public transport, social situations), which have been translated to her everyday social life. She identifies herself as bad at *small talk* and explains how linguistic subordination caused her to avoid talking to local Australians altogether and feel linguistically poor and inferior, evoking strong emotions of shame:

I have a problem with small talk. But again, it’s not, again, it’s about psycholinguistics probably, because it’s, we have no such like, small talk, talk about anything, and about what a waste of words and [nervous laugh]. I don’t know, different vocabulary and different level of communication. Like I, or probably because usually if we go somewhere, there is husband and usually he just took initiative. (Alexandra)

Alexandra also discusses another example where she experiences strong anxiety and fear when she needs to speak with her husband’s Australian friends:

For example, if we’re with some other families, my friend- my husband’s friends, I just prefer, just to keep silent. [. . .] Just, I can then say a few words, but because the topics they discuss, they are so different from what, from my life and about Australia, about. . . It’s probably lack of, lack of knowledge of cultural knowledge. And again, they have different interests from mine, like about some mechanical stuff blah, blah, blah. (Alexandra)

Alexandra is continuously trying to fit in, as she describes improving her English as one of her main hobbies, and something she has to do to feel more comfortable. However, her constant trying and failing, met with scrutiny by her co-workers, resulted in the development of

linguistic insecurities. Her lack of confidence to talk to ordinary people appeared as a response to something that Eisenberger et al. (2003) refer to as ‘social pain’. Social pain, induced by social exclusion, anxiety and subordination, which Alexandra experienced in the public library because of her biographical accent and unorthodox English practice, is induced in the same area of the brain and processed like physical pain (Eisenberger et al., 2003). Victims of linguistic subordination experience social pain, and *forget* how to behave in informal social situations with unfamiliar people. Alexandra identified communicative language as the main reason why she lacked linguistic confidence. Thus, in her case, *small talk*, as an informal discourse, is hindered by communication apprehension (Horwitz et al., 1986), which is based on her concern about being perceived negatively by others.

The feeling of being linguistically stigmatised because of her linguistic practices resulted in psychological and emotional burdens in her performance settings. Despite naming language as a potential reason for her discomfort during small talk, Alexandra also tries to justify it with linguistic differences between English and Ukrainian – ‘it’s about psycholinguistics probably, because it’s, we have no such like, small talk, talk about anything, and about what a waste of words and [nervous laugh]’; however, her nervous laugh reveals that such assumptions are a coping mechanism developed during previous experiences of linguistic subordination. Alexandra’s paralinguistic complex in the form of low self-confidence and accompanying coping mechanisms are exhibited through avoidance behaviours (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012) – the avoidance of small talk while relying on her husband to take a lead in informal conversations.

Communication with the non-stigmatised society makes Alexandra feel additionally self-conscious. Her linguistic inferiority complex in the form of fear and anxiety from communication with local Australians, makes her think that they, like her previous co-workers, will negatively evaluate her English practice (Horwitz et al., 1986) and perceive her as less intelligent and unworthy of their attention because of her biographical accent:

Again, and because you can’t represent yourself, because of language, people can think that you are stupid, you are silly, you don’t deserve good treatment because of your accent. [. . .] Or to, or probably even to use your accent as a reason that you don’t suitable for something. (Alexandra)

We notice from Alexandra’s story that, because of linguistic inferiority complex, exhibited through fear and anxiety from casual conversations with local Australians, she developed silence, which she tries to downplay by finding justifications for her social withdrawal – a lack of Australian cultural knowledge; different interests. Staying silent throughout social encounters with her husband’s friends and their families is an example of social withdrawal, which refers to a voluntary isolation from social encounters and entails ‘consistent display of solitary behaviours such as shyness, spending excessive time alone, and avoiding peer interaction’ (Barzeva et al., 2019, p. 865; Piller, 2016). Her silence appears as a response to ‘the risk of losing face’ (Tatar, 2005, p. 288). In that way, Alexandra’s silence may refer to something that Bao (2019) calls *reticence*. Reticence suggests ‘subordination or a potential handicap’ in activating interactional skills in performing different language actions (Bao, 2019, p. 28), and it usually designates reserve in interaction which might be connected to affective characteristics like shyness and communication apprehension (Evans, 1996). Masking her reticence as an ignorance of Australia’s sociocultural histories even after living in Australia for 7 years and being married to a local Australian, feeling a constant fear that she would be perceived to belong to a lower scale of social hierarchy, represents Alexandra’s social, cultural, and linguistic inferiority complex. Her fear and anxiety of speaking to local Australians, as well as consequential reticence are linked to her feeling of discomfort, because

‘people can’t understand’ her, and feeling that there is a ‘gap between [her] level of English and how [she] can represent herself, and what [she is] as a person’ (interview with Alexandra).

Overall, Alexandra’s linguistic inferiority complexes, which began with her negative interactions with Australians in the public library and then continued on to her social interactions, have led to avoidance behaviours, preventing her from fully participating in Australian social life. Alexandra’s struggle to interact with local Australians, due to their implicit and explicit idealisations of Standard Australian English, a lack of acknowledgement of her proficiency in English and her other languages, and a lack of accommodation for her different knowledges and repertoires, leads to Alexandra being treated as an inferior member of Australian society. These hegemonic interactions work to diminish Alexandra’s existence in Australia, showing her as a demeaned figure and cultivating her linguistic inferiority complexes of self-shame and low self-confidence (Taylor, 1994), representing a heavy emotional and psychological burden which affects the quality of her life.

Linguistic subordination and anxiety. While Alexandra’s linguistic inferiority complex is exhibited through self-shame, low self-confidence and fear of having casual interactions with local Australians, the linguistic inferiority complex of another participant, Serene, also caused by linguistic subordination, prevents her from having normal interactions even in a linguistically diverse environment, as she displays strong anxiety when addressing people in English. Serene, who is from South Korea, arrived in Australia in 2018 with her husband (also from South Korea), with the aim of starting a family. While Serene has two university degrees and has been learning English for 3 years, she has struggled to find work in Australia due to language barriers and her bridging visa conditions. To overcome this, she volunteers doing care work for the elderly, attends multiple English classes, and does an English/Korean language exchange. While she studies English extensively, she expresses her shyness in speaking with Australians due to difficulties with their pronunciation. In addition to her linguistic struggles, resettlement also created difficulties for both her and her husband – ‘We were suffering from new culture – to settle, to find a rent, house, and find a job. So sometimes we can be very depressed . . . isolation because of English’ (interview with Serene).

Serene has had many negative linguistic interactions and experiences, which have deeply shaken her confidence in using English. She believes that whenever she speaks English with an Australian, she can ‘feel Australians’ “boring face” (referring to *bored face*) and she perceives that they ‘don’t want to listen’ (interview with Serene). Serene also states that she often feels like she is ignored when she is at the supermarket, so she uses the self-service checkout in order to avoid interactions with others. Underlying this unwillingness to listen to Serene is the unspoken accusation that she is too difficult to comprehend, which leads to Serene feeling linguistically subordinated and excluded from participating in Australian society (Piller, 2016). Serene also becomes a victim of linguistic racism (Tankosic & Dovchin, 2021), as it may not only be her language that is scrutinised, but also her ethno-racial background, which becomes apparent even before she starts speaking. In her case, linguistic racism and linguistic subordination co-construct one another and lead to stigmatisation of the one thing that is still not legally acknowledged – language.

Stemming from the negative interactions Serene has experienced with Australians, she concludes that while she enjoys listening, she is resigned to the idea that she will never properly speak English, which leaves her feeling frustrated and voiceless. In the example below, where Serene attends a focus group discussion with other ESL-migrants from various backgrounds, the first statement that she makes to her group is again about how she is linguistically subordinated through being ignored, leading to a linguistic inferiority complex of having a lack of confidence in communicating in English:

Uh . . . My problem is confidence [laughs]. When, when I talking about with real Australian, so um, the Australian show me a little bit ignores. ‘Oh, you can’t speak English, oh you don’t know this word, oh?’ [makes annoyed sound]. I forgot, totally forget. So, I can’t speak. (Serene, focus group discussion)

Serene does not say how many times she has experienced situations of such linguistic subordination, but the insinuation is that it has happened on several occasions, as she speaks of it like a general occurrence. Comments and questions about her English practice – ‘oh you can’t speak English, oh you don’t know this word, oh?’ – appear condescending and act as a direct attack on what Serene lacks in her language ability, and Serene shows she understands their implications by the annoyed sound she makes. This form of linguistic subordination is designed to make Serene feel like she is incomprehensible (Piller, 2016), and as a consequence, Serene has developed linguistic inferiority complexes of foreign language anxiety and low self-esteem. Serene suffers from foreign language anxiety to such an extent that she has mental blocks and forgetfulness that lead to negative self-talk (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), where she feels that she physically cannot speak English to Australians. These negative impacts mean that Serene does not have a sense of agency when using English, which cripples her self-esteem and leaves her feeling voiceless. Her high anxiety also leads to avoidance behaviours (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012), such as when she is at the supermarket, and directly affects her ability to communicate in English (Back et al., 2020). These issues stem from her unsuccessful linguistic interactions with English speakers, which after repeated pragmatic failures, have Serene perceiving that Australians are bored, ignore her, and patronise her whenever she speaks English. Anxiety also contributes to her identity construction and social positioning within Australian society as ignored and invisible (García-Mateus & Palmer, 2017), and ties in with her comments in her earlier interview, where she states that she will never be able to speak English.

As the focus group discussion progresses further, Serene’s anxiety intensifies. The other members of her group are speaking animatedly and confidently about their experiences learning and speaking English in Australia, when one of the workshop facilitators asks Serene for her opinion. Perhaps Serene does not feel open with sharing her opinion on this matter; perhaps she is caught unprepared, or perhaps the thought of addressing a large group of people in English is too uncomfortable or stressful. The ultimate result is that she is so anxious at the prospect of addressing the workshop participants that she starts crying, a clear non-verbal plea for help:

Extract 2

1. **Serene:** If I start talking, I . . . maybe cry.
2. **Multiple participants/facilitators:** Ohh! Why?
3. **Facilitator 1:** You’re doing good.
4. **Judy** [reassuring]: It’s fine.
5. **Serene:** Oh! Oh! [pants]
6. **Facilitator 2:** Sorry, what’s your heritage, what’s your background?
7. **Serene** [speaks quietly with a quiver in her voice, downward inflection on ‘Korea’]: South Korea.
8. **Facilitator 2:** South Korea, ok. Why would you cry?
9. **Serene:** Ohh! [Sounds distressed.] Carry on, ohh, carry on uh! [gasps for two seconds]
10. **Facilitator 3:** So Serene is a very special person -
11. [Serene gasps/sobs for two seconds]
12. **Facilitator 3:** She’s actually very, I’m trying to think of another way to put it, uh, another word for verbose. Once she starts talking, she won’t stop talking. She has a lot of very good things to say.
13. **Serene** [gasps for two seconds. She quietly whimpers]: No!
14. **Facilitator 2:** No, it’s ok, you don’t have to talk if you don’t want to.
15. **Delbee and Sora:** Yeah yeah yeah.
16. **Judy:** Yeah, don’t have to.
17. **Serene** [speaks softly]: I can’t. . . talk [whispers ‘talk’].

18. [Judy and Sora talk quietly.]
19. **Judy:** Yeah, it's yeah. It's challenging.
20. [Delbee addresses the group with her story.]
21. **Judy** [speaks in a soft, confidential tone to Serene]: I cried every day when I first arrived. So, it happens. I couldn't stop crying.

In Extract 2, Serene demonstrates the extent to which she cannot talk due to her anxiety, which ultimately leads to almost complete voicelessness. Serene is physically unable to speak – lines 5, 9, 11, 13 show that she is panting and gasping for breath. Serene is so anxious that she is unable to put her feelings into English, so she communicates the essence of her experiences in a language that everyone understands – crying – to show that she requires help and compassion (Ladegaard, 2014). Another member of the group, Judy, responds to this bid, reacting sympathetically to Serene's distress, speaking to her in a noticeably softer and quieter tone as an acknowledgement of her crying (lines 4, 16, 19 and 21). Serene is also supported by Facilitator 1 (line 3), Facilitator 3 (line 12), Facilitator 2 (line 14), and the participants Delbee and Sora (line 15), who all recognise Serene's anxiety and provide a safe space for Serene to express herself and emotionally release her anxiety, allowing the burden of the difficulties of being an ESL-migrant to be shared (Ladegaard, 2018). These shared verbal and non-verbal actions allow Serene to reveal her experiences profoundly and authentically, which is all the more important for Serene due to her belief that she is incapable of verbally expressing herself in English (Ladegaard, 2014).

Extract 2 shows just how debilitating anxiety is in Serene's life. Despite being in a supportive environment with others who know and understand the difficulties in communicating in a foreign language and living in a foreign country, Serene is unable to share her experiences in English – therefore, she uses crying as a non-verbal method to describe her pain. Serene's emotional outburst in this focus group session is the accumulation of months of settlement difficulties, language barriers, and linguistic subordination, where her English has been repeatedly denigrated as incomprehensible by local Australians (Kenchappanavar, 2012). Life in Australia while learning English has taught Serene that her English is not good enough and that she is 'marginal to the global system of English' (Piller, 2016, p. 196). This has led to the wearing down of Serene's confidence, contributing to feelings of voicelessness which are inextricably linked with her high levels of anxiety that further limits her ability to interact with others, culminating in the use of crying as a non-verbal tool to communicate.

Overall, what Serene, Alexandra, and Alla show from their descriptions and interactions with others is their belief, to varying degrees, that they are incomprehensible. This stems from negative interactions with local Australians who linguistically subordinate and reject their English as too difficult to understand, which leads to their social exclusion (Piller, 2016). This social rejection leads to their linguistic inferiority complexes of anxiety, depression, and low self-confidence, which results in their social withdrawal and interactional avoidance in certain situations. Alexandra is generally able to manage in most situations, and often has her husband to rely on for situations that she finds difficult such as small talk; however, she still avoids situations where small talk may be required, particularly in social situations with other Australians, and expresses feelings of self-shame and fear of being perceived as stupid. For Alla and Serene, who do not receive language support from an Australian spouse, the consequences are more severe. Alla withdrew from society for two years and suffered from prolonged depression, and Serene demonstrates that she has difficulty speaking English in most situations with unfamiliar interlocutors, regardless of whether she is interacting with monolingual English speakers or ESL-migrants, which then leads to a negative spiral of self-belief that she lacks English competence. These extracts show how debilitating linguistic inferiority complexes can be on the ability of ESL-migrants to live their day-to-day lives in Australia, inhibiting their ability to effectively integrate into Australian society.

Conclusion

This study reveals the complex nature of ESL-migrants' linguistic lives, as they try to adapt to novel linguistic and cultural aspects of life in Australia. Different accents, language practices, ways of speaking, and lack of Australian cultural capital often become devalued and stigmatised and lead to linguistic subordination – the language ideology which encourages linguistic and cultural homogeneity, while imposing idealised language practices onto the marginalised minorities (Canagarajah & Dovchin, 2019). The study shows that such ideologically driven linguistic subordination against ESL-migrants has a direct link to linguistic inferiority complexes as they suffer from negative psychological and emotional consequences such as low self-esteem, a lack of confidence, social withdrawal, and emotional breakdowns. These linguistic inferiority complexes greatly inhibit these migrants' abilities to live their day-to-day lives, often making existence in Australia insular, joyless, and anxiety provoking, with the participants actively avoiding situations which may require interactions in English that could lead to their subordination.

We, thus, argue that there is a direct link between linguistic subordination and linguistic inferiority complexes and this link needs to be considered as a mainstream issue in Australian society, with discussions on how local Australians contribute to this issue. The behaviours that the participants in this article encounter from Australians include impatience, exclusionary actions, and ignoring, that all fall under the overarching behaviour of a lack of empathy for others' linguistic experiences. These covert behaviours are difficult to expose, which is why we need increased dialogue and education in society about the damage that these behaviours can cause. It is possible that the Australians featured in this article do not realise what they are doing, particularly as these are not unusual or overtly aggressive behaviours. This is why ongoing conversations and courses with practical examples, that provide Australians with instances on how to interact with others who are not like themselves, may provide a foundation for combatting this discriminatory behaviour.

In the meantime, increased support could help ESL-migrants in coping with their experiences of linguistic subordination, thus helping them better deal with issues related to linguistic inferiority complexes. What these examples show is that ESL-migrants need safe spaces where they can express themselves to work through their stories of linguistic subordination and their linguistic inferiority complexes. This is demonstrated in Extract 2 featuring Serene's breakdown, where she received sympathy and empathy from other ESL-migrants. After multiple instances of linguistic subordination of being ignored and patronised because of her English, this safe space provided Serene with an outlet for her pain. Spaces where participants discuss their emotional problems and tell life-stories can lead to emotional transformations and reinterpretations of their narratives that help them change the course of their lives (Ladegaard, 2018). The fostering of safe spaces, where ESL-migrants can gather and share their experiences, may be useful in allowing these participants who have lost their voices in their new environments to re-find them. This can be done with participants who can give responses that acknowledge the participants' distress, through both verbal and non-verbal actions that show sympathy and empathy (Hepburn & Potter, 2007). Serene's breakdown, and the support that she receives from other ESL-migrants who share and understand her situation, demonstrate that spaces that allow ESL-migrants to share their experiences, can be spaces that enable feelings of self-sympathy after experiencing instances of linguistic subordination (Ladegaard, 2014). More research needs to be done on how safe spaces can assist in the linguistic integration of ESL-migrants in need of emotional release.

Acknowledgement

We wish to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editor Professor Ad Backus for their constructive feedback, which contributed significantly to the final version of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by Australian Research Council (grant number DE180100118), the Department of Home Affairs (grant number 4-AXFMHKT), and by Curtin University of Technology (AU)CIPRS and Research Stipend Scholarship (RES-58667).

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