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Ecological orientations to sociolinguistic scale: Insights from study abroad experiences

Abstract: The sociolinguistics of globalisation, as an emerging paradigm, focuses on the impact of mobility on the linguistic capital of mobile individuals. To understand this, Blommaert advocates a scalar approach to language arguing that some people's repertoires "will allow mobility while others will not" (2010. *The sociolinguistics of globalization.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 23) and proposing *high scale*, *low scale* orderings. In this paper we introduce an ecological orientation to sociolinguistic scale that challenges the fixity of a high/low scale distinction by conceptually drawing on the notions of *flat ontology* (Marston et al. 2005. Human geography without scale. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30(4). 416–432) and *exchange value* (Heller. 2010. The commodification of language. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39. 101–114). We do this in relation to Study Abroad (SA) contexts, which offer spaces for investigating how mobility influences the exchange value of individuals' linguistic repertoires. The study speaks to a broader project in social research which emphasises the agency, subjectivity and criticality of the individual and stresses the complex and rhizomatic nature of social interaction. Drawing on moment analysis (Li. 2011. Moment Analysis and translanguaging space: Discursive construction of identities by multilingual Chinese youth in Britain. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43. 1222–1235), we examine the experiences of two study abroad students in the UK. These include tellings of critical and reflective *moments* through which we interpret their experience of how the interplay of language, place and ecology of interaction results in constant, dynamic changes in the exchange value of their English repertoires. Our contribution is to show how an ecological orientation and a flat, rather than stratified, ontology enables insights into language use and globalisation in a way that empowers multilingual, mobile individuals.

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1 Introduction

This paper responds to Blommaert's (2007) call for sociolinguistic research that enables better understanding of society, rather than reducing society to linguistic description. Our contribution relates to a recognition in social research more broadly that human interaction is characterised by complexity, contingency, and unpredictability (Bybee 2006; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008; Ellis 2011). At the same time, interactants have agency, subjectivity, and criticality (Canagarajah 2012). Given these features of interactions and interactants, we view language use in social life as a complex, discursive practice that defies regularity, maxims, and/or generalisability. Such an understanding has the potential to empower individuals and emancipate them from constraints framed around the linguistic expectations upon them as they move across time and space. This has pedagogical implications for language educators and language learners alike.

The context we investigate here points to innate complexity. Study Abroad (henceforth SA) students are academic sojourners from other countries who travel abroad – in our case to the UK – to follow programmes of academic study at Universities and other Higher Education Institutions. SA experiences have potential to be, as Block (2002) puts it, critical experiences: "periods of time during which prolonged contact with an L2 and a new and different cultural setting causes irreversible destabilisation of the individual's sense of self" (2002: 4). The destabilisation brought about by SA critical experiences can provide invaluable input for understanding language use and mobility in globalised and globalising settings. Aligning with a sociolinguistics of mobility and globalisation (Blommaert 2010), we agree with Uitermark (2002) that mobility is a powerful factor through which social, political, and cultural categories are built and rebuilt; we further emphasise that mobility goes beyond corporeal displacement and attends to how new connections and practices are established, activated, and maintained. Investigating the mobility inherent in SA enables understandings of how individuals respond to and engage with the emerging linguistic, cultural, social, educational and political contexts around them, in the meeting places (Massey 1995) where their mobility leads them. It also enables study of the impact of mobility on the changing perceived value of their linguistic repertoires.

English language learning in academic contexts for SA students, and how access to academic literacies and discourses might be supported in Higher Education Institutions, is an established concern of Applied Linguistics, as

attested by the extensive literature on EAP, English for Academic Purposes (e.g. Jordan 1997, Hyland 2006). Some allied work has examined the informal English language development of SA students as they attempt to settle into daily life in an English-dominant country (Badwan 2017). Since the emergence of the social turn in the study of second language learning (Block 2003), research on SA has progressively recognised SA students as "whole people with whole lives" (Coleman 2013: 17). For example, the work of Benson et al. (2013), which focuses on second language identity in SA narratives, asserts that sociolinguistic inquiry should aim to capture situated experiences of individual sojourners in different contexts to understand the multifaceted-ness of second language learners' identities when they embark on and engage with Study Abroad. Similarly, Marginson (2014) calls for a paradigm shift which departs from a trend in research on international students that looks at their processes of adjustment to local requirements yet tends to perceive these processes as a one-way street. Rather, he calls for the need to explore the self-formation journeys of international students and asserts that "[a]s the sojourn continues, many change the way they live … and even their personal beliefs" (2014: 12).

In the current study, we focus on SA students as agentive individuals within an ecology, with the ability to articulately describe such a critical period of development, growth and becoming. In this paper we meet Palestinian student Amjad, and Dalal from Saudi Arabia, students on one-year full-time taught postgraduate programmes in a UK university. The new insights, experiences and encounters associated with SA as experienced by Amjad, Dalal and others on a similar trajectory render it an ideological environment (Medvedev 1978: 14) that nurtures the emergence of diverse perspectives, and features the prominent role of the *other* in the way we understand the self. Here, we align with Harvey (2017) and Delp (2004) who draw on Bakhtinian perspectives of *ideological becoming* (cf. Bakhtin 1981) to explain that the collection of meanings constructed through dialogues and interactions are part of how individuals negotiate their positioning and develop new understandings of selfhood. Indeed, the moments we present in this study feature clearly the role of a fictional or real other, in how the participants talk about their experiences of situated language use where topics, interlocutors and power dynamics vary.

Following this introduction, we present a foundational discussion of scale and place in sociolinguistic research. Here we stress the appropriateness of an ecological orientation in a sociolinguistics of globalisation and mobility. After that, we discuss the potential for the notion of *exchange value* (Heller 2010) to bring fluidity and complexity to understanding sociolinguistic scales. We then sketch out our analytical approach, which draws upon Li's (2011) *moment analysis*, which, we maintain, has a strong potential for highlighting the

criticality and reflectivity embedded in the emic perspectives of research participants. In elaborating the notion of moment analysis, we demonstrate the value it adds to an understanding of the complexities of language use brought about in Study Abroad experiences. The analysis and findings that follow are accompanied by a discussion of the significance of our work for empowering individuals. Like Kramsch (2009: 247) we assert that an ecological approach to language education "does not seek dialectical unity, or bounded analyses of discrete events, but on the contrary open-endedness and unfinaliz-ability". This openness can be a mechanism for emancipating language learners from the constraints imposed by the notion of territorial boundedness (Blommaert 2005) that assumes homogeneous speech communities. SA students engage with heterogeneity: our ecological approach highlights how – in their new environments – language and cultures are in contact, resulting in different and dynamic exchange values for their linguistic repertoires.

2 Flat ontology and an ecological orientation to sociolinguistic scale

The construct of sociolinguistic scale draws attention to the hierarchical spatial relations which are made visible through the study of language in use, in contexts of mobility. The *scale* metaphor, developed from social geography to theorise a sociolinguistics of globalisation (Blommaert 2007, Blommaert 2010), has been useful for identifying issues of hierarchy and authority in the interpretation of the communicability and semiotic mobility of linguistic resources. Blommaert (2010) explains that when individuals mobilise, they move across spaces filled with norms, expectation and codes. This usually entails movement from local to global scales (as in the case of SA students). The relationship between the local and the global is indexical: meaningful interaction at higher scales is achieved by maintaining the norms and expectations of those higher scales. This is done by *scale jumping*, described by Blommaert (2010: 33) as "the capacity to lift momentary instances of interaction to the level of common meanings." Those who fail to meet such expectations – i.e. who fail to scale-jump – are perceived as having linguistic repertoires of lower scale.

A scalar metaphor underpins the World System perspective (Wallerstein 1991) which, during the 1990s, was the basis in social geography for understanding spatial relations. In the view of geographers more recently, such as Agnew (2011), the World System view emphasises those spatial relations at the risk of de-emphasising place, situated specificity and complexity. Likewise in sociolinguistics, as Prinsloo

(2017) notes, scalar perspectives are problematic for the over-attention paid to relations between centres and peripheries, the consequential emphasis on spatial relations in language hierarchies, and the lack of a focus on "local or placed linguistic specificity or complexities" (2017: 374). In this critique, the "universalising labels to describe language practices" (Flores and Lewis 2016: 98), such as those which associate high scale with 'native speaker' norms, would be seen as overly-simplistic: the idea that linguistic norms associated with native-speaker use and usage (particularly standard, middle class varieties) are located at global, higher level scales disregards complexity, dynamism and consideration of local ecology and place. In response, Canagarajah and De Costa (2015) argue for using scale not as a category of analysis where scalar grids are imposed, but as a category of practice whereby scale is treated as a verb. This position reflects the dynamic nature of interaction and the process of (re)negotiating power structures, evident for example in processes of rescaling (Kell 2011). Conceptualising scaling as a process resists the rigid locating of individuals' linguistic resources in pre-determined vertical positions in the global hierarchy.

There is nonetheless "politics to scale" (Marston et al. 2005: 426), with reper-cussions in social life. In developing their understanding of scale as dynamic, Canagarajah and De Costa (2015: 3) maintain that "though we acknowledge the need to be open about the relationship between scales, we see that power relationships are real and need to be addressed". We too recognise this and share a similar caution. The danger of taking hierarchy for granted, though, is that such discourses of globalisation can disempower people as agentive individuals. Thus we continue to acknowledge the usefulness of the scale metaphor while arguing for an ontological orientation towards scale that is open to ecological features that invite contingency and unpredictability.

This brings us to our proposal for an analysis of language use in SA contexts embedded in a *flat ontology*. In their critique of scale in human geography, Marston and colleagues propose a flat ontology to scale "where the dynamic properties of matter produce a multiplicity of complex relations and singularities that sometimes lead to the creation of new, unique events and entities, but more often to relatively redundant orders and practices" (2005: 422). Our adoption of the notion of a flat ontology enables an initial position that treats linguistic and communicative resources and repertoires as equal and problematizes the supremacy of what are traditionally categorised as global, high scales. As we see later, rather than presupposing hierarchy, an alternative analysis can focus on the contingent and dynamic nature of the differing value of individuals' linguistic and communicative resources.

A flat ontology helps us perceive place not as 'location' but as 'meaning' (Entrikin 1991). Whereas the former treats place as a space that can be viewed

objectively (as on a map or from a window), the latter views place subjectively based on individuals' experiences, emotions and activities. In other words, rather than treating places as spaces with fixed ascribed meanings, we talk about places as unpredictable spaces whose meanings are socially (re)constructed. This understanding aligns with arguments for treating places as relative in the sense proposed by Ingold (2005: 507), that they "are not static nodes but are constituted in movement, through the comings and goings of people". It is this coming-and-going that brings to the fore the ecology of interaction (who, what, where, why, with whom), or what Marston and colleagues (2005: 422) refer to as "the dynamic properties of matter".

By embracing a flat ontology within an ecological orientation towards scale, therefore, we aim to achieve two things. First we resist the centricism associated with 'global, high scales' as discussed above. Second, we emphasise the role of ecological features in constructing possibilities. Through this, we can comment on and interpret sociolinguistic practices that might be but are not always structured according to traditional social hierarchical orders and categories.

3 Exchange value

This alternative conception of scale is supported by our attention to the notion of *exchange value*. This rests on an economic metaphor within a neoliberal epistemology (Flores 2013) that applies the notion of capital to language as well as to education, culture, social attributes and even humans. Bourdieu (1977) proposed linguistic capital, whereby knowledge of a certain (variety of a) language can have a high exchange rate in a certain market. Once this language dominates the market "it becomes the norm against which the prices of other modes of expression ... are defined" (1977: 652). English is currently viewed as a high-value commodity, the learning of which is perceived by many millions around the world as key to individual prosperity. Users of English can regard it as a distinction marker in the exchange market. Non-users of English are thus tempted to invest in learning it. This entails a concomitant investment in their social identity (Norton 2013): the aim is to obtain a range of symbolic and material resources, which in turn contribute to raising social and cultural capital.

Extending the metaphor, Nino-Murcia (2003 in Seargeant 2012: 9) describes English as a "dollar" [which is] "the currency for social and geographical mobility in the world" today. However, this dollar does not have a stable rate of exchange, as its value differs according to where it is used, to whom it is given/addressed, and all of this depends on wider socio-political and socioeconomic contexts. To paraphrase Blommaert (2005) some language varieties do not travel well (cf.

Simpson and Cooke 2009). What matters politically is understanding who defines the "values of linguistic commodities or more broadly who regulates the market" (Heller 2010: 103). Applying the 'dollar' metaphor to academic sojourners' linguistic capital, the values of sojourners' English will always be changing, dynamic, relational, and emergent; this emphasises the fluidity and contingency of exchange value. The moments presented in this study contribute to our understanding of who regulates the market, and the role of agency in this process.

4 Moment analysis

Li (2011) argues for a paradigm shift in sociolinguistic research where the focus is not on patterns and regularities but on spontaneous individual actions and reflections. He advances the notion of *moment analysis* to "redirect the focus of analytic attention to such critical and creative moments of individuals' actions" (2011: 1224). Doing so, he maintains, allows researchers to uncover the subjectivity and criticality of research participants. Moment analysis enables our own departure from earlier approaches to sociolinguistic scale which focus on patterns or trends and expectations of loss or gain depending on what is being mobilised and who is mobilising. In contrast we engage with momentary interpretations of individuals, commenting on the dynamic changes in the exchange value of their linguistic repertoires.

A moment is "a point in or a period of time which has outstanding significance. It is characterised by its distinctiveness and impact on subsequent events or developments" (Li 2011: 1224). A specific moment is when participants deploy agency, assert subjectivity and criticality; moments are part and parcel of their becoming in the world, when they are understanding new ways to mean and to interpret their social existence. What distinguishes moment analysis from some (though of course not all) areas of narrative inquiry is its focus on reflectivity, criticality and sense-making on behalf of the participants. For Li, moment analysis might include meta-comments by language users themselves as they reflect on particular linguistic performances and practices, their own and those of others with whom they are interacting. Our own analysis aligns with this purpose, as our participants were encouraged – in research interviews – to step back into their near past to comment on specific moments in their interactions with others: their perceptions of what went well in interaction, what did not, and how they interpreted what happened. As researchers, our position echoes that of Smith and Osborn, who observed that participants "are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (2008: 53).

Moment analysis in sum enables us to capture personalised perspectives based on the individual experiences of SA participants reflecting on moments significant to their growth and understanding of the interplay of language, context, place, topic, interlocutors, communicative purpose and dynamics of power, i.e. the whole ecology of language use.

So far, we have discussed how the concepts of flat ontology, exchange value and moment analysis contribute to our understanding of an ecological orientation to sociolinguistic scale. To reiterate, we argue for an understanding of scale that firstly treats all linguistic repertoires as equal and opens room for negotiations in light of their ecological features; and secondly empowers individuals as agentive subjects capable of offering critical interpretations of their social life. In the following sections, we examine data presenting moments of reflection and interpretation during which language users talk about their experiences within the ecology of interaction and how these affected the perceived exchange value of their linguistic repertoires. Analyses of such moments provide insights into how they make sense of their becoming as new arrivals in their SA settings. They also shine a light on how the valuing of linguistic and communicative resources is dynamic and complex.

5 The study

The data presented in this study derive from semi-structured one-to-one interviews conducted monthly by the first author over a period of eight months. The two research participants were recruited face-to-face during welcome week within one month of their arrival in the UK, and were among eight participants in a larger study led by the first author (who had herself also been an Arab Study Abroad student). Interviews with all participants in the larger study were suffused with moments of reflection where they considered the exchange value of their linguistic resources at particular points. As such, our two focal participants present typical (rather than unusually telling) examples. Both participants were following a one-year, full time taught postgraduate (Masters) degree at a university in the North of England. They were told at the outset that the aim of the study was to understand their relationship with English upon arrival and over the course of their studies. They assumed, as did others, that our research focus was how their English proficiency might improve as a result of their sojourn.

The semi-structured interviews took place predominantly in Arabic, the linguistic preference of the research participants. Arabic, therefore, played a major role in building rapport between the researcher and the participants. In the data

translanguaging practices were evident, as participants drew upon broad language repertoires (Otheguy et al. 2015): they used what would be commonly understood as different varieties of Arabic – standard, colloquial and pan-Arabic, as well as varieties of English. The data extracts presented below have been translated into English by the first author, an expert user of Arabic. Words written in **bold** were originally spoken in English.

Within the larger project, several themes emerged including Study Abroad students' attitudes to learning English, reasons for academic sojourning, the impact of mobility on students' linguistic repertoires, as well as reflections on their previous English language learning experiences. The process of analysing the rich, longitudinal data entailed constant moving across modalities (spoken recorded interviews and written transcripts and translations) and across spoken repertoires. The data presented in this paper mainly reflect moments of criticality and reflection in the trajectories of the two participants who were trying to make sense of how their mobility affected their linguistic repertoires and practices.

Beyond official institutional ethical approval, the project draw on Neale and Hanna's (2012) notion of consent as an ongoing process. During the eight-month project period, the participants were reminded of the research focus, what else was expected of them, as well as their right to withdraw. In addition, permission to record their interviews at the outset of every wave of data generation was sought. Some data were generated during small conversations and off-recording moments, and the participants may not have been aware that these can still have the status of research data. Therefore, the first author took note of these data as 'memos' and wrote to the participant concerned to gain permission to use the data. Overall, conducting this longitudinal project highlights the difficulty of determining all ethical practices *a priori* (Neale and Hanna 2012) and justifies the need to think of ethics as a process rather than an institutional requirement prior to embarking on fieldwork.

6 The research participants

Here we present brief pen-portraits of the two participants and then discuss reflections from their moments where they try to interpret the ongoing changes in the exchange value of their linguistic repertoires as they perceived them. The discussion is also interspersed with our own interpretations of how their moments problematize sociolinguistic scale theorisation, so pointing to the strength of moment analysis as an appropriate analytical strategy, and providing a clear example of its deployment.

Amjad (pseudonym) is a 24-year old Palestinian student on an MA Human Resources Management course. His parents taught him that English is 'better' than Arabic because it means being 'modern' and it offers opportunities for work and travel. He wants to be 'distinguished', which is why he chose to do his business undergraduate degree through English as the medium of instruction at a time when most business students took the Arabic route. After his graduation, he was the only student to be appointed as a lecturer at his university because of his command of English. His university students looked up to him and referred to him for advice on how to improve their English. Amjad felt that he was a successful person and was satisfied with his work, study, and English skills. This self-satisfaction and confidence were not maintained when he came to study in the UK.

Dalal (pseudonym) is a 27-year old Saudi student on an MA English/Arabic Translation course. She started learning English at the age of 7, and was taught in private schools until she joined university. Upon graduation, she had an administrative role in a university in Saudi Arabia. At school and prior to coming to the UK, most of her exposure to English was to US varieties. This caused her to worry about her ability to understand different accents in the UK. She was admitted to a Master's course at a university in Scotland which she turned down because she had been told that the accent there is very 'difficult'. She commented, 'I am here in Yorkshire and I am struggling. Imagine if I went to Scotland'. Dalal is a quiet student who does not engage in many social activities. Her responses often reflect elements of second language anxiety and fear of communication breakdowns.

6.1 Moments from Amjad's interviews

Within a month of his arrival, Amjad was asked to comment on the impact of his geographical mobility on his perception of his English proficiency:

> I: What do you think of your English skills after moving to study in the UK?
> A: The competition is higher and I feel that I am still weak. In my country and among those of low level I felt distinguished but when placed among people whose language is used in study and everywhere else I feel I need more and I lack something.

One way in which this moment might be interpreted is by applying a low-scale, high-scale logic by explaining that Amjad is talking about English at a local scale in Palestine vs. English at a higher scale in the UK. However, this scalar analysis is problematic if we pay closer attention to 'in my country and *among those of low level*, I felt distinguished'. Here, he explains how he perceives the value of his English to be relatively high (not necessarily the highest) *in comparison with* other Palestinian speakers of English. Some other Palestinian speakers of English might have more advanced linguistic proficiency which could render his English in Palestine to be of a lower exchange value in relation. Amjad's words show criticality and awareness of the effect of ecological variables such as

who his interlocutors are (as well as where they are) on the perceived exchange value of his linguistic repertoire.

He also mentions that native English speakers whose language is used in study and everywhere else make his English attract a lower exchange value, also invoking the ecological factor of the 'who' of interaction. This feeling, however, was not sustained throughout Amjad's sojourn: on his course he achieved some of the highest scores amongst his fellow students, and he developed an awareness that being a native speaker of English is not the only predictor of academic success.

This interpretation becomes clearer when we examine data generated in an interview with Amjad two months after his arrival:

> I: Can you think of situations when communicating in English was slightly more challenging for you?
>
> A: When I need to go to hospital God forbid how can I understand the doctor. I have nothing not one medical term. I have not been to a GP here and if I go to places like courts or police stations I have no words to use there.

This moment demonstrates an awareness of how ecological features such as the topic of interaction, the interlocutors, and the social norms expected in specific settings and interactional domains influence an individual's perceptions of their language abilities. In the medical and legal institutional contexts Amjad mentions he expects that he would not be able to communicate effectively. This is not because of his language proficiency as he broadly and generally understands it but the way it relates to the cultural/pragmatic norms, registers and specialised terminology that speakers need access to if they are to communicate successfully within particular institutional discourses. Hence we argue that a high/low scaling theorisation would be quite restrictive here as it tends to focus on linguistic abilities (e.g. knowledge of standard, middle class varieties which are seen by many as timeless and of high scale). An ecological orientation not only attends to general ability for use, but also pays attention to socio-pragmatic and intercultural competencies, and to an awareness of appropriate and effective language use within specific discourses, which together significantly influence individuals' perceptions of the exchange value of their language, as seen in Amjad's reflective moment above.

During the same interview, Amjad mentions that he received the highest mark in his class for one of his university assignments and he was proud of such an achievement. He had expected that his 'British' classmates would always get the highest marks because of – in his perception – their expert language use.

However, his experience of achieving higher marks for assignments written in English inspired him to draw a distinction between 'studying contexts' and 'other contexts': he describes the latter as problematic because they involve unfamiliar terms, cultures, pragmatic norms and systems. Being able to achieve high marks in 'studying contexts' has made him attach a higher exchange value to his own academic English repertoire. Again, examination of Amjad's reflective and critical moments enable insights into the dynamic, fluid, and ever-changing exchange value of an individual's linguistic repertoire.

In a later interview with Amjad, 5 months after his arrival in the UK, we asked him if he continued to notice changes in the value of his English and whether he had an explanation of why such changes might have occurred. In response, Amjad maintained that his English in the UK would still attract different exchange values, from his perspective. He attributes this to his changing interlocutors as well as to the purpose of talk:

> Maybe it depends on the person I talk to: if I understand them easily I feel reassured and relaxed but if I struggled to understand them I stay tense throughout the whole interaction. I am really surprised that this happens with me. Why do I feel that my English is excellent but later I feel that I have problems … I am very proficient with my **classmates**. I struggle with people who have **managerial and academic positions** at university … Sometimes these situations are easy and in other times they are not. Generally my communication with my **classmates** is very successful. I don't know why. I hope someone can explain what happens.

Amjad's comments show how encounters with different interlocutors in a variety of social contexts affect how he perceives the value of his English. He points out that when he understands others easily or when he is familiar with others, he communicates fluently and confidently. In the presence of people who are, from his perspective, of a higher status, he becomes more anxious and thus less fluent and more conscious of his English repertoire and its perceived deficiencies. For him, these are examples of when communication is less successful. They are situations when his English is perhaps momentarily – for him – of a lower exchange value.

The study of Amjad's talk about moments shows how varied interlocutors and social settings together comprise different interactional scenarios as well as prompting different levels of language anxiety, which ultimately affect the perceived exchange value of the individual's English repertoire. We also learn from this example how language anxiety affects a speaker's fluency and willingness to communicate, which in this case is directly connected to this speaker's view of himself, his confidence and his linguistic abilities. By treating language anxiety as an ecological factor in communication, we agree with van Lier that "an ecological approach to language learning avoids a narrow interpretation of language as words that are transmitted through the air, on paper,

or along wires from a sender to a receiver" (2000: 258). Rather, as Kramsch puts it, an ecological approach appreciates communication as "not just items of vocabulary or communication strategies, but embodied experiences, emotional resonances, and moral imaginings" (2006: 251).

Amjad's words show the extent to which he is aware of how the ecology of interaction (interlocutors, topics, functions, anxiety levels, power distance, etc.) and his own expectations of the repertoire which he has to draw upon interact with how he feels about using his language and with how he expects to behave in particular settings. In other words, our ecological orientation to moments enables us to attend to these multiple features and their impact on Amjad's experiences in and with language. His moments are fleeting reflections and interpretations which he uses to try to make sense of why his English continues to attract different exchange values. Our examination of such attempts at making sense of his social world add their own value to our problematisation of sociolinguistic scale.

6.2 Moments from Dalal's interviews

As a student of translation, Dalal has an academic awareness of language and context. However, this does not necessarily help her communicate more effectively. In fact her awareness makes her very conscious of how she uses English, which in turn heightens her language anxiety. When, after she has been in the UK for two months, we asked her about using English for academic purposes inside the classroom (in lectures and seminars), she reflected on her lack of active participation:

> Here I do not participate a lot in classes especially the classes where we have other British students. I feel **intimidated**. I feel I am not confident about what I say so I stay silent

This moment exemplifies a sense that persists throughout Dalal's academic sojourn period, and she repeatedly raised this issue over the course of the research. Dalal often talked about how her interlocutors and how the culture of communication intimidated her. She was particularly silent around other 'British' students: this was not necessarily related to her language skills (which she understood in terms of pronunciation and grammatical and lexical precision and accuracy) but to other factors such as socio-pragmatic competence:

> We are used to 'formal' expressions. All our education has been academic and we don't use the normal way people use in streets. We should focus on less formal conversations and how people talk and ask in less formal occasions. They should prepare the students that there is a difference between the academic usage of the language and the day-to-day English. We were taught that what we learn works everywhere.

Dalal came across as someone who wanted to speak accurately and appropriately all the time; her orientation to this ideal increases her language anxiety and her awareness that the English repertoires she studied as part of her formal English language education were different from, and indeed more restricted than, the range of repertoires she was expected to use in the UK. This realisation could potentially lower the exchange value of Dalal's English in less formal interactions.

In addition, Dalal's social network mainly includes other 'international' students on her course. When we asked about this after four months of starting her course, she explained that:

> Someone with **broken English** is better because at the end I will understand what they want to say. Most of native speakers do not take into consideration that we are **foreigners** so they need to speak slowly and choose simpler words. Communication is harder with them and I will keep on saying excuse me and this will embarrass me. I don't like to be in these situations that's why I try to avoid them

Here, what is traditionally viewed as 'high scale' English does not necessarily hold great social capital in a given context and at a given time, and certainly not for Dalal here. Thus what might be considered high-scale English (i.e. an educated native-speaker variety) cannot be unconditionally assumed to be timeless, widespread and ever-valid. Dalal problematized this notion by indicating that she prefered to interact and work with other 'non-native' speakers of English. Such a predisposition raises the capital of the non-native English varieties which would be seen (through a lens of linguistic prescriptivism and sociolinguistic stratification) as sub-standard or low-value varieties.

Acknowledging the potentially high value of 'low-scale' English is a largely overlooked phenomenon (as noted by Canagarajah 2014). Effective intercultural communication in social interaction in SA contexts of course requires more than linguistic competence, and encompasses the type of socio-cultural knowledge that enables one to interact with interlocutors from different backgrounds. Likewise when Canagarajah (2014: 776) notes "my own teacherly non-native identity … is friendly to international English", he is indexing the richness of his own social capital, underpinned by his 'non-native' identity. However, this richness is not to be taken for granted, as its value and utility are dependent on the ecological factors involved in the communicative event, and hence his emphasis on the value of his non-native identity with reference to 'international English'. Such a view attends to the ecological features of communication and takes into account individuals' linguistic repertoires, social capital and intelligibility, as well as the contingency of ongoing interaction. On a similar note, Dalal explained that she was used to dealing with

'foreign' visitors in Saudi Arabia who were 'native' speakers of English, but on such occasions she is positioned differently:

> I was the one who was helping because the **native speaker** is a **foreigner** and I know the traditions and rules and I can help

Such a statement reflects Dalal's awareness of how the exchange value of someone's linguistic repertoire does not only relate to their level of nativeness. She clearly emphasises the role of understanding the social norms and local cultures. She has the requisite social capital on such occasions and therefore 'can help.'

We asked Dalal to comment on situations where she experienced some communication breakdown and the reasons behind them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given what we know of both her anxieties and her preferences in communication, she mentioned occasions when she was speaking to locals in her new city about unfamiliar if everyday non-academic matters:

> When I talk about something I do not know, for example, when I called the **city council** to talk about the **council tax**. The person on the phone was talking about the law and I did not understand it and I did not know how to make him understand that I do not know the system. On the other hand, situations like in restaurants or shops are easier because I am used to the kind of conversations that take place there so I am less nervous

Again, this response reiterates the importance of cultural and socio-pragmatic competence. Dalal draws a distinction between situations of familiar cultural expectations e.g. restaurants, shops, and those with culturally unfamiliar topics (in this case, the legal intricacies of council tax payments). Her communicative abilities attract different exchange values depending on her knowledge of the system, in this case the discourse of local government funding.

Like Amjad's moments, the moments in Dalal's interviews contribute to our own understanding of how the exchange value of language is also affected by individuals' familiarity with social norms and expected behaviour in specific contexts. These sense-making moments are attempts at interpreting the participants' experiences with shifts in language value which are not simply determined by a single factor like geographical mobility and the confrontation of an imagined, fixed/finished, 'low-scale' variety of English with a timeless, widespread, singular/fixed 'high-scale' variety. Indeed, Dalal's moments have helped us deconstruct the notion of 'high scale' English and have led us to consider who makes a decision about what high scale English is, and how we can raise awareness about questioning traditional conventions grounded in ideologies of appropriateness and prestige.

7 Discussion

Focusing on the fluid exchange value of individuals' social and linguistic capital allows room for new insights into language and globalisation inspired by a focus on the agency, subjectivity and criticality of mobile individuals. In the moments examined in our data, we have seen how the social capital of 'non-native' English speakers might be greater among other 'non-native' English interlocutors, and how this exchange value is constantly subject to reassessment in the presence of other speakers who might be more proficient and interculturally competent. As a result, when addressing the question of what happens to the value of individuals' mobile resources when they move across time and space in a globalised world, it is crucial to consider their linguistic, social, and cultural capital in terms of their dynamic, mobile and relative, and contingent resources. Such resources are deployed in complex ways in unpredictable interactions which are affected by multiple ecological features such as the participants, place, time, topic and purpose of communication.

Our participants' moments did not feature inequality and hierarchy as starting points. That is to say, participants did not adopt a stance where they viewed their English as inevitably prone to attracting a lower exchange value simply because they were in the UK. While they certainly did invoke hierarchical relations, they were not restricted by them. They described how they exercise the agency to avoid certain types of communication, and have the critical capacity and subjectivity to comment on these and others. They were not passive subjects whose English was placed in vertical scales by their changing interlocutors, and nor were their English repertoires permanently located at lower scales because of their specific geographical mobility. Mobility for our participants, therefore, is not simply a case of crossing stratified spaces populated with norms and expectations with which they struggle to conform.

The exchange value metaphor, we maintain, creates room for fluidity and contingency. 'Non-native' speakers of English who move across geopolitical contexts do not have to assume that their roles and statuses are predetermined; nor do they have to suppose that they will always be restricted to low scales, unlike users of the more prestigious varieties which enable those speakers to jump scales. This realisation can empower mobile learners with the understanding that gaining geographical mobility does not necessarily entail losing semiotic mobility because social interaction is unpredictable and individuals can negotiate positioning in different contexts.

The study has also helped us to enrich our understanding of sociolinguistic scale, and created room for reflection and reflexivity. During our study, we

allowed SA students to talk about and reflect upon their language use and we paid attention to their interpretations of their successes and of the challenges that they faced. Through the lens of flat ontology, we departed from hierarchical scalar interpretations of language use, resisting reducing SA students to the status of non-expert language users faced with losing linguistic capital as they cross and negotiate scales. Through the ontology and epistemology of scale as a verb (i.e. scaling), all repertoires are understood as fundamentally equal, their value contingent upon a moment of interaction, and their deployment as dynamic. Therefore, we have developed a more liquid (Bauman 2000) approach to sociolinguistic scale, one that emphasises how language use in contexts of contact and mobility is characterised by temporality and an inclination to constant change under the influence of ever-changing ecological factors. This leads us to argue that uncertainty about language value becomes the only certainty.

8 Conclusion

This paper has considered how an ecological orientation to sociolinguistic scale allows language users to give voice to their own interpretations of their academic and social lives in a globalised setting. It has also allowed us to open a window on individuals' emotional and social states. This suggests a line of enquiry to complement other recent work on academic sojourning whereby Study Abroad students are treated as 'whole people with whole lives' (Coleman 2013). This is in line with the turn towards person-centredness in Applied Linguistics, as proposed by Benson (2019).

In academic language education contexts, to which this research speaks most clearly, we problematize the view – indeed the common belief – that a particular variety of language can be timeless and valued in every context. Language learners need to become aware of how language interacts with context and how the exchange value of individuals' linguistic repertoires is always relative and relational. If students are aware of this, they will be more prepared for negotiating meaning and sense-making when they embark on academic sojourning. Here, the English language education they encounter should not be restricted to equipping them with academic repertoires. Rather, it needs to focus on developing sociolinguistic awareness about the interplay of language and place, and the power of individual agency, in order to support students with developing voice (Harvey 2017). Focusing on the former without addressing the latter poses the risk of "leaving them with the false hope that they will succeed in the communicative challenges out there if they master the forms and texts we drill into them" (Canagarajah 2014: 784).

A further pedagogical implication of this work is that encouraging criticality and reflection among language learners can motivate them to make sense of their experiences with and in language. Instead of assuming that students might be at a disadvantage because they are 'non-native' speakers of English, we call on language educators to support their students' developing awareness that language has a relational exchange value and that value is not always based on being a 'native' speaker of a language, as demonstrated in this study. Notwithstanding this, there are contexts where our participants do perceive themselves to be disadvantaged because of their lack of access to the registers and discourses of particular domains of practice. We therefore hold that it is incumbent upon language educators in Higher Education Institutions to address this in their own practice, extending beyond a focus on academic discourse in order to address other social aspects of life students encounter outside the classroom. We would like to conclude by calling for an agenda for language education in sojourning contexts whereby mobile individuals are not silenced by place but become critical themselves, reflective and agentive.

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