

“They ain’t using slang”: Working class students from linguistic minority communities in higher education.

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### **Abstract**

An impact of globalisation on higher education has been an increase in diversity in the student population in universities in English dominant settings. The increasing diversification has impacted on the linguistic ecology of higher education, resulting in a wide range of linguistic repertoires among the student body. In some institutions, particularly those situated in urban areas, the multilingual classroom may well be the norm. Bi/ multilingual university students form a heterogeneous group, encompassing temporary sojourners and members of linguistic minority communities resident in the host country. These students’ linguistic, cultural, ethnic and social class backgrounds impact on their knowledge and experience of using academic language in higher education. In this article, I examine academic language in relation to a group of working class undergraduate university students from linguistic minority communities in the UK. I focus on the ‘socio-symbolic functions’ (Morek and Heller, this issue) of academic language for the participants in the context of an academic writing programme. I consider their ascribed institutional identity, as remedial users of academic language, and their inhabited identities as bi-dialectal users of English, native speakers of English and as multilingual subjects. I discuss how the participants’ ascribed institutional identity erased their bidialectal and multilingual capital and argue that higher education needs to attend to the inhabited identities of working class linguistic minority students in efforts to foster the development of their relationship to academic language.

Key words:

Higher education, identity, academic language, social class, multilingualism, linguistic

minorities

## **1. Introduction**

In this article, I examine the ‘socio-symbolic functions’ (Morek and Heller, this issue) of academic language. The socio-symbolic is concerned with the relationship between language and identity and the identity positions that are afforded by an individual’s linguistic repertoire within a particular context. In this case of this article, I am concerned with examining the socio-symbolic functions of academic language in the context of higher education with undergraduate student participants from linguistic minority working class backgrounds who had been referred to an academic writing programme. Morek and Heller point out that there are a variety of terms for referring to the language(s) used for teaching and learning in educational settings (see Introduction this issue) and use academic language (hereafter AL) to refer to the academic discourse practices that are ‘assumed to be functional for the purposes of learning, knowledge construction and education’ (page). In this article AL refers to the standardised and prestige varieties of English and literacy practices (both oral and written) that are used in higher education in English-dominant settings (taken to be the UK, Ireland, the USA, Australia, Anglophone Canada and New Zealand) for the purposes of knowledge transmission and knowledge construction. Undergraduate university students need to develop a relationship to AL that enables them to engage in ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in their disciplinary community of practice and to be ascribed the identity of ‘legitimate speaker’ (Bourdieu, 1977) in the academic community.

AL in higher education settings has received attention in the literature on English for Academic Purposes (e.g. Bruce, 2011; Hyland, 2006; Swales, 1990) and academic literacies

(e.g. Lea & Street, 2000; Lillis & Scott, 2007). This literature has focused primarily on AL in relation to the needs of temporary sojourners in English-dominant settings rather than the needs of domestic university students, particularly those from working class and/ or linguistic minority communities. Additionally, as Morek and Heller (this issue) make clear, the socio-symbolic functions of AL have not merited much attention to date; this is particularly the case with regard to higher education (but see Ivanic, 1997; Marshall, 2010; Martin, 2010; Preece, 2009b, 2010; Simpson & Cooke, 2010).

In this article, I focus on the socio-symbolic functions of AL for a group of working class undergraduate university students from linguistic minority communities in a university in London. All had been referred to an academic writing programme on the basis of a diagnostic academic literacy screening administered to first year undergraduate students on entry to the institution. The participants had grown up in a bi/multilingual environment using English and one or more of the 350 languages documented as in use in the homes of London's school children (Eversley et al., 2010). The participants brought a diverse array of languages into higher education including languages and dialects from the Indian sub-continent (e.g. Tamil, Punjabi, Urdu, Gujarati), Africa (e.g. Swahili), the Caribbean (e.g. Jamaican Creole) and the Middle East (e.g. Arabic). The participants were also bi-dialectal users of English in that they routinely used AL and London English<sup>1</sup> (LE) (Harris, 2006), the vernacular variety of English in use in the Thames Estuary in the UK.

Bourdieu and Passeron ([1965] 1994) make the point that AL is an elite code that has been socially constructed within the realms of academia and science for the purposes of furthering

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<sup>1</sup> There are a variety of terms for referring to the non-standard variety of English in use in London, including 'London English' (Harris, 2006), 'Multicultural London English' (Cheshire, Kerswill, Fox, & Torgersen, 2011) and 'post-estuary English vernacular' (Block, 2014). For the purposes of this article, I shall use London English.

abstract and theoretical scholarly ideas. This is in stark contrast to LE, which is a non-elite vernacular code that has emerged from the working class communities of the East End of London. LE encompasses features of Cockney (the dialect of English associated with traditional white working class East Enders) and items from the linguistic repertoires of working class migrant communities who reside in the East End of London, particularly those from the Caribbean and South Asia (Cheshire, et al., 2011; Harris, 2006). Documented features of LE include:

- T-glottalling in which glottal stops / ʔ/ replace /t/  
e.g. be[ʔ]er instead of be[t]er
- TH fronting with /f/ used to replace /θ/ and /v/ to replace /ð/  
e.g. [f]ing instead of [θ]ing and bo[v]ered instead of bo[ð]ered
- past participle to replace some irregular past simple tenses  
e.g. he [done] it instead of he [did] it
- ain't to replace negative present simple use of the verb 'be'  
e.g. he [ain't] coming instead of he [isn't] coming
- double negatives in an utterance  
e.g. it doesn't do [nothing] instead of it doesn't do [anything]
- innit to replace standard tag questions  
e.g. it's difficult, [innit]? Instead of it's difficult, [isn't it]? (Harris, 2006).

Research among London school students indicates that they are well aware of the differential status of AL and LE in UK society, which they characterise as a “posh-slang” binary (Harris 2006, Rampton 2006). As we will see, this binary is also in use among university students and mediates their relationship to AL.

The following sections start with an account of identity, AL and social class that inform the data analysis. I then outline the methodology for the study on which this paper is based along with the research context, Millennium University, a pseudonym for a ‘new’ university (i.e. granted university status in 1992) in London. I note how Millennium established an academic writing programme in response to concerns in the sector about the poor retention of undergraduate students entering university from non traditional university backgrounds. I examine the dominant institutional ethos that informed the programme and argue that this ascribed an identity as remedial users of AL to those on the programme. Extracts of data are presented to illustrate how the participants reproduce their ascribed identities and negotiate it by inhabiting identities that offer more powerful positions from which to speak, namely: the bidialectal user of English, the native speaker of English, and the multilingual subject. I conclude with a discussion of how these identity positions enabled, or not, the participants’ relationship to AL.

## **2. Material and methods**

### **2.1 Identity, Academic Language and Social Class**

I draw on poststructuralist accounts of identity in which identity is viewed as a fluid and emergent concept located in discourse, rather than as a set of essentialised characteristics determined by genetic make up or the process of socialisation in childhood. Informing this perspective is Foucault’s (1974: 49) conceptualisation of discourse as:

‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak... Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention’.

From a Foucauldian perspective, identity emerges through individuals negotiating positions in the discourses to which they have access. Weedon (1997: 32) refers to this as a process of adopting ‘subject positions’ or ‘ways of being an individual’ while Davies and Harré (1999) put forward a view of positioning as facilitating the construction of coherent narratives about the self. Identity is viewed as ‘contextually situated’ (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005: 605), in that subject positions (such as remedial learner) arise in a particular setting and are shaped by the social relationships in that setting. It is also ‘ideologically informed’ (ibid) as subject positions are imbued with sociocultural norms, assumptions and values about, for example, the status and prestige of particular languages and dialects in society.

Blommaert’s (2006) view of identity is particularly helpful for considering the socio-symbolic functions of AL in institutional settings. Blommaert conceptualises identities as ‘inhabited’ (also referred to as ‘achieved’) and/ or ‘ascribed’ (also termed ‘attributed’). Inhabited identities are those an individual claims for him/ herself in the discourses to which s/he has access whereas ‘ascribed’ positions are imposed on the individual by others. In relation to higher education, there are two issues worth noting; firstly, that for a university student’s inhabited identity to become recognised and accepted in the institution, it has to align with their institutionally ascribed identity. This means that universities need to engage in critical reflection on students’ inhabited and ascribed identity positions and consider how to build a dialogic relationship between the world of the student and that of the institution. Secondly, it is important to recognise that both ascribed and inhabited identities can act as either an

enabling or disabling force on a student's academic development. For example, in cases where university students lack familiarity with AL, they need to take advantage of opportunities designed to scaffold their AL development, particularly those offered by academic writing specialists. However, where institutions view academic writing programmes as sites of English language remediation, rather than AL development, they are likely to ascribe the students on the programme remedial identities. It is my contention that the ascription of a remedial identity is likely to be face threatening, particularly for British-born university students because it stigmatises their use of English in front of their peers and categorises them publicly as in danger of failure. Wall (2006: xii) asserts that the framing of academic writing as a remedial activity contributes to students on such programmes experiencing them as a 'public admission of failure'. As Wall argues, no learners, let alone university students, want to be ascribed a 'remedial' identity. It is my view that this identity ascription may well disable the development of a more positive affiliation to AL. Likewise, as I have discussed elsewhere (see Preece, 2009a) inhabited identities that are highly oriented to popular cultural practices, such as laddishness, may also disable students' relationship to AL, in that participation in laddish practices, such as looking "cool", are largely incompatible with participation in academic practices designed to display seriousness, intellectual endeavour and a scholarly identity.

In a seminal work on AL, Bourdieu and Passeron ([1965] 1994) put forward a view of AL as a cultural construct that reproduces 'class ethnocentrism' when used in an uncritical and unreflective manner in the education system. Commenting on the classed nature of AL with regard to university students, Bourdieu and Passeron argue that:

'Obvious in the literary disciplines but more subtle in the sciences, the ability to

manipulate academic language remains the principal factor in success at examinations. Here we encounter one of the most important, though also the most hidden, mediations between the social origins of children and their scholastic fates. The linguistic setting of the family influences a broader range of behaviours than those captured by language tests. Performance on every test of intellectual skills which requires the decipherment of manipulation of complex linguistic structures depends on an apprenticeship in language which is unequally complex, according to family background. Moreover, what we inherit from our social origins is not only a language, but – inseparably – a relationship to language and specifically to the value of language’ (ibid: 21).

Two key points to draw from Bourdieu and Passeron are that AL is no one’s ‘mother tongue’ and that the cultural resources and social capital that expose children to AL are differentially distributed. This differential distribution impacts on a child’s developing relationship with AL in that professional and middle class families often have more material resources to expend on AL than their working class counterparts and are also likely to encourage their children to cultivate and value AL highly. This contributes to a situation in which children from middle class families are likely to find that their linguistic repertoires are valued and reinforced by schooling whereas children from working class and/ or migrant families are likely to find that theirs are regarded as defective and in need of remediation. Bourdieu and Passeron argue that the disjuncture experienced by working class children continues from schooling into higher education.

Block (2014) gives a comprehensive historical overview of the conceptualisation of social



class to discuss social stratification and social inequality in industrialised societies. Block makes two particularly helpful observations about the conceptualisation of social class for this article. The first entails Block's argument for a Marxist perspective on class as an economic phenomenon that informs 'the bases of much of what goes on in our lives and our interactions with politics, cultural worlds and institutions like the legal system' (p. 56). This perspective is helpful for ascribing classed identities to university students in UK society. Ascribing a working class identity to students, such as the participants in this article, is based on an assessment of their origins and education, in humble conditions in some of the most deprived urban areas of the UK; lack of access to material wealth, limited resources require them to work their way through university and remain at home often in overcrowded conditions with no private space, and parental occupational status, their parents have unskilled or low skilled jobs or are unemployed. These students generally narrate their participation in higher education as a story of upward mobility in which they seek to improve the economic base and social class positioning of their family in UK society in terms of higher levels of income, higher status occupation and improved housing.

The second entails the conceptualisation of social class as a 'lived experience'. Block illustrates how Bourdieu's (1984) concept of 'class habitus', defined by Block as 'class-related dispositions derived from experience' (p. 58), has been seminal to understanding class not only as an economic phenomenon but also as an experiential and culturally inscribed phenomenon involving taste, aspirations and attitudes to which individuals are socialised from birth. As Carrington and Luke (1997: 101) put it, Bourdieu's habitus connects the body to the social world in ways which are classed, cultured and gendered. This includes the development of language practices through which an individual's dispositions 'mediate pronunciation,

accent, lexical, syntactic and semantic choice'. It is these dispositions that inform language affiliations and encourage views of AL as “posh”, removed from everyday experience and representing middle class sensibilities, and LE as “slang”, that is representing the everyday and vernacular world experience of a youthful, multicultural and urbanised sensibility oriented to the values of popular working class culture, in which as Block explains:

a lack of academic capital reflects a different kind of class habitus, one which confers onto individuals lower status and prestige in society as a whole while also conferring greater status and prestige in the working class cultures into which they are socialised (p. 61).

In the following sections, we will see how being a user of AL involves negotiating an identity that indexes social class in particular ways.

## **2.2 The Study**

The following data are drawn from an ethnographically oriented study conducted with 93 first year undergraduate students (45 women and 48 men) who were enrolled on an academic writing programme, on which I was a tutor at the time of the study, at Millennium University. The academic writing programme was established as part of Millennium's Widening Participation provision, a term coined in the UK for the recruitment and retention of students from groups that have historically been under-represented in higher education. In the UK context, the focus has been on three underrepresented categories<sup>2</sup>: students from families with working class occupations, state school pupils, and those living in UK post codes with a low percentage of 18-19-year olds in higher education (Higher Education Statistics Agency,

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<sup>2</sup> In many cases, these categories overlap

2013). In common with many other post-1992 universities in the UK, Millennium had recruited significant numbers of WP students but was experiencing high levels of drop out and exclusion among its WP cohort. The academic writing programme, taken as a compulsory module for credit, was a key intervention intended to improve the prospects of WP students in the institution.

The aim of my study was to theorise the participants' experiences of transition into higher education from the perspective of language and identity. In particular, I was concerned with examining the participants' relationship with AL as from my experiences of teaching on the AWP, the participants frequently appeared unfamiliar and ill at ease with AL. I approached the study as a small scale qualitative case study, or the 'study of an instance in action' (Adelman, Kemmis, & Jenkins, 1980). The 'instance' focused on the participants in my classes and involved two stages. The first stage was during the programme and involved making field notes immediately after each session, collecting audio-recordings of spoken interaction of group work activities in the classroom and administering a questionnaire to explore in more detail what I deemed to be significant issues emerging from the field notes and audio recordings related to the participants' social background and the language and literacy events in their home environments and prior schooling. The second stage took place after the conclusion of the AWP and when I was no longer teaching the participants. This involved conducting two rounds of interviews with eight participants at the start and end of their second year of studies to explore the issues arising from the first stage of the research. The interview participants included vocal students who had dominated classroom proceedings and claimed to speak for the group along with less vocal participants who had frequently appeared marginalised in classroom interaction. The audio recordings of group work and interviews were transcribed using staves (Coates, 1996), for interaction in which there were a high

number of overlapping turns, and play-script, for interaction in which turn-taking conventions were followed (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). The transcription conventions can be found in the Appendix.

I approached the data as socially constructed and viewed it through a feminist poststructuralist lens (Baxter, 2003; Weedon, 1997). This involved an analysis of the ‘*participants*’ categories’ (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006: 57), in which I examined the data to see how the participants characterised their relationship with their undergraduate counterparts, with AL and with the other languages and dialects in their linguistic repertoires. A number of themes emerged from the data; some of the most common will be discussed in the following sections. Following this, I turned to what Benwell and Stokoe (2006: *ibid*) refer to as ‘*analysts*’ categories’, in other words my analysis of the socio-symbolic functions that were invoked by the participants’ narratives about their linguistic repertoires and their relationship to the undergraduate cohort and AL.

Following Cameron et al (1992), there was not always a neat distinction between participant and analyst categories. Many language educators occupy both positions, as a participant and as an analyst in their research. This is the case in this study where I was both a participant in the research setting, controlling the subject matter and the organisation of the sessions and invested with institutional authority as the English language lecturer, and an analyst of the data generated in the research setting, in which as an applied linguist I was interested in the ‘theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue’ (Brumfit, 1995: 27). Reflecting on how the data were shaped by the social relations in the research site, it was noticeable that during the first stage of the study, the participants drew attention to the lecturer-student dynamic with some taking the opportunity to challenge the

institutional authority invested in academic staff and to question their placement on the academic writing programme. However, by the second phase of the research, the lecturer-student relationship appeared less stark, possibly as the interview participants had successfully completed the programme and progressed to their second year of studies; I was no longer involved in teaching them and we had established more rapport. During this phase of the research the participants were prepared to discuss episodes in their life histories related to their social, educational and linguistic backgrounds in some depth and in ways that would not have been feasible in the confines of classroom interaction.

In the following sections, I focus primarily on the socio-symbolic functions of AL for the participants. I start with extracts of data to illustrate how the participants typify their encounters with AL in higher education and comment on how this reproduces them as compliant subjects of their ascribed institutional identity as remedial users of AL. I then examine three inhabited identities that enabled the participants to speak with more powerful voices: the bidialectal user of English, the native speaker of English and the multilingual subject. In the final section, I discuss how conducive these identities were to developing the participants' relationship to AL.

### **2.2.1 The Remedial User of AL**

As discussed, the academic writing programme was established as part of Millennium's WP strategy and was viewed as part of the solution to improving the retention and progression of students from WP backgrounds. The AWP was established within an institution that regarded 'language-as-problem' rather than 'language-as-resource' (Ruiz, 1984) in that the linguistic diversity embodied in a largely bi/ multilingual WP student cohort was problematised rather

than embraced. The institution primarily focused on the negative, such as student deviations from the norms of the prestige variety of English and shortcomings in academic literacy practices; there was little, if any, acknowledgement of the multilingual capital that the WP cohort brought into the institution. In order to remedy language deficiencies, the institution required incoming undergraduate students who had received their schooling in the medium of English to take a diagnostic academic literacy test during induction, the results of which were used to categorise students as either in need of the academic writing programme or exempted from it. Those referred to the programme were obliged to take a credit bearing module in academic writing in lieu of an optional module in their discipline during their first year of studies. Over time, the practice of screening newcomers and referring some to the AWP came to be associated with streaming and contributed to perceptions of the programme as a site of English language remediation, and those taking the programme as remedial language users. The remediation discourse proved extremely difficult to counter despite the best efforts of the academic team involved in the design and delivery of the programme.

The ascribed identity of a remedial user of AL often encouraged the participants to reproduce the power relations of the institution by concurring with the way in which the institution problematized their relationship to AL and with the institutional construction of the academic writing programme as a site for language remediation. Extract 1 typifies the way in which the participants reproduce their relationship to AL as problematic. The extract involves Khaled<sup>3</sup> (aged 18), a British Asian male from a Bengali speaking household, Dilip (aged 25) a British Asian male from a Gujarati-speaking family, Ling (aged 20), a British Chinese female from a Cantonese speaking household and Richard (aged 18), the sole Anglo participant in the study who was born and brought up in South London.

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<sup>3</sup> All participant names are pseudonyms

Extract 1

K=Khaled, D= Dilip, L=Ling, R=Richard

1. K: to what extent to you think of yourself as a reader and a writer of
2. academic texts/ say why/ <reading aloud>
3. (2)
4. D: I personally don't whatsoever/ er it's just a case of if the work is there
5. you have to do it/ and you have to read the texts/ but apart from that/ I
6. would not go out of my way to read academic texts/
7. K: erm/ I don't see myself as an academic reader or a writer that's why
8. I'm in this class so
9. (1)
10. R: yeah/ that's the same with me as well [yeah yeah
11. L: [I think it's the same for
12. everyone to be quite honest/ (classroom interaction)

Khaled adopts the role of interviewer and poses the question of how his peers view their relationship to AL (lines 1-2). The 2-second pause (line 3) suggests that there is not a straightforward answer to this question. Dilip breaks the silence with an utterance in which he problematizes his relationship to AL by claiming that he has no affiliation to AL 'whatsoever' (line 4) and that he is as a reluctant participant in tasks requiring the use of AL (lines 4-6). This disclosure facilitates the rest of the group in expressing ambivalence to AL and citing their attitude as the cause for their placement on the academic writing programme. Dilip, Khaled and Richard's use of first person pronouns (lines 4, 5, 7, 10) indicates a personal

stance whereas Ling goes on to claim that ambivalent feelings to AL are shared by “everyone” on the academic writing programme (lines 11-12).

Extract 2 presents another example of how the participants problematized their relationship to AL. Here, Tahir (aged 22), a British Pakistani male, is narrating his experiences of using AL in an interview with me.

#### Extract 2

1. That [subject] is probably the one that we did the most reading on and ... it
2. was really good quality English ... they ain't using slang, they use proper
3. English so we had to write in [proper] English ... so we used to spend most
4. of our time trying to revise the way they've written it and what they've
5. written ... but it was hard, that was proper hard (Tahir, Interview 2).

When talking about AL, Tahir elects to narrate his experiences of one of his first year subjects in which he was required to do extended reading and writing activities. In the course of this narrative, Tahir depicts AL as ‘really good quality English’ (line 2). His reference to AL as ‘proper English’ of ‘good quality’ reproduces institutional norms regarding the prestige of AL and alludes to the fact that ‘slang’ (i.e. LE) (line 2) is a stigmatised variety in the institution. Tahir’s use of pronouns is indicative of the unequal power relations to which he and his peers were subjected. The ‘we/ they’ binary positions Tahir and his peers as expert users of LE and in opposition to expert users of AL (in this case the authors of scholarly texts) (lines 2-3). The use of ‘so we had to’ (line 3) shows Tahir’s understanding of the power dynamics in higher education in which students are expected to make efforts to emulate AL norms. Tahir’s final



comment at this juncture (line 5) depicts the reproduction of these norms as arduous. In problematizing his language use, Tahir draws on his bidialectal English resources, perhaps to communicate his message with some degree of forcefulness, telling me that scholars ‘*ain’t* using slang’ (line 2) and that it was ‘*proper hard*’ (line 5) for students such as himself to code switch from the everyday vernacular to AL.

The final example of how the participants construct their language use as problematic comes in extract 3, in which three female participants are discussing their use of English in different domains. The extract involves Leela (aged 19), from a British Asian Gujarati-speaking family, Biba (aged 22) from a British Moroccan Arabic-speaking household and Awino (aged 32), a mature Kenyan student from a Swahili-speaking family. Awino arrived in Britain in her early twenties and worked for over ten years before entering higher education.

### Extract 3

L=Leela, B=Biba, A=Awino

1. B: at WORK/ I tend not to speak like that/ or at uni in lectures or
2. seminars/ I try not to speak “like that”
3. A: what do you mean “like that”?
4. L: [meaning-
5. B: [like this “d’you know what I mean?” <exaggerated Cockney>
6. L: [<laughs>
7. B: [“know what I [mean?”] yeah
8. A: [oh/ you try to speak properly/ [of course
9. B: [speak properly/ erm

10. BUT with your FRIENDS MAINly

11. L: [yeah

12. A: [yeah [yeah

13. B: [I speak slang/ it just comes out naturally

14. A: yeah

15. B: I try to prevent it/ but it's very difficult in that sense (classroom interaction)

Biba opens the interaction by telling her interlocutors how she makes efforts to censor how she talks in the public domains of work and higher education. The raised volume of 'work' (line 1) draws attention to the domain of use and contextualises the statement 'I tend not to speak "like that"'. Biba assumes that both Awino and Leela share cultural knowledge that LE is a stigmatised variety of English in professional contexts although Awino's question reveals that she has not understood the covert message (line 3). In order to convey the normative view of LE as a stigmatised variety, Biba adopts stylised Cockney (Rampton, 2006) (lines 5, 7). This provokes an immediate reaction from Awino whose response, 'you try to speak properly/ of course' (line 8), illustrates her understanding of the high status accorded to AL and the low status accorded to LE. Biba then juxtaposes the use of AL with that of LE (lines 9-15) through contrasting speaking 'properly' in the public domain with the use of 'slang' in the private sphere. She depicts 'slang' as 'coming out naturally' (line 13) and difficult to curb (line 15), suggesting that LE, unlike AL, is as part of her habitus and important to her inhabited identity. In common with Tahir in extract 1, Biba draws on her bidialectal resources, in this case through the use of stylised Cockney, to problematize her language use and communicate her message more graphically.

These extracts illustrate how the participants' ascribed identity, as remedial users of AL, offered them a marginalised positioning in which they were obliged to present themselves as struggling subjects engaged in reproducing the language and literacy norms of the academic community as faithfully as possible, in keeping the different varieties of English in their repertoires firmly separated and in viewing the language norms of the academic community as superior to their preferred language norms. In the following sections, I turn to inhabited identities that enabled the participants to narrate their relationship to AL from alternative perspectives. The first of these inhabited identities is the bidialectal user of English.

### **2.2.2 The Bidialectal User of English**

The bidialectal user of English was an identity position that the participants routinely inhabited and one that offered them the potential to put their bidialectal linguistic resources to use in higher education. This inhabited identity facilitated an account of English in which the participants were able to relate LE to AL and to consider how one might inform the other. The first example relates to how the participants drew on their bidialectal resources to navigate the social terrain of higher education in which they were encountering people from a much wider social milieu than was the case during school. In extract 4, Leela, Biba and Awino are discussing how they use their bidialectal resources to make friends with other students at the university.

Extract 4

L=Leela, A=Awino, B=Biba

1. L: when we came 'ere [to Millennium] I mean/ if I saw a posh person I

2. actually spoke posh with them/ but if I saw somebody who was happy
3. with their slang/ I spoke slang with them and I think that's how you
4. socialise with them
5. A: yeah
6. B: it's how you adapt to different people [that's what adapting is about
7. A: [yeah/ you've got to adapt/ yeah
8. L: yeah
9. B: adapting to different people an' their cultures y'know/ an' their
10. backgrounds (classroom interaction)

Leela narrates her experience of entering the social world of Millennium using the 'posh/ slang' binary (lines 1-4). She categorises university students into two camps: "posh" people and those, like herself, who are "happy with their slang", implying that a characteristic of these individuals is that they are "not posh". Her claims to be able to identify individuals from both camps on sight and by hearing them talk index cultural values and norms associated with social class and what the middle classes (i.e. "posh") and the working classes (i.e. users of slang) are supposed to look and sound like. This narrative illustrates Blommaert's (2007: 4) contention that 'whenever we open our mouths, ... we ... place ourselves firmly in a recognizable social context from which and to which all kinds of messages flow'. It also demonstrates the potential of bidialectal resources in higher education. In this case, these resources are used to facilitate the formation of social networks and friendships through

alternating the use of AL with those identified as “posh” and LE with those identified as “happy with their slang”. The collaborative style of the interaction, achieved through back-channelling (lines 5, 7, 8) and co-constructing the narrative (lines 6-10 develop the topic introduced in lines 1-4), allows the participants to depict bidialectal resources as a tool for adaptability and cultural sensitivity (lines 6-10).

In extract 4, the participants’ use of the posh/ slang binary reproduces the norm of keeping standardized and vernacular dialects separate. Elsewhere I have discussed this as a manifestation of separate bidialectalism (Preece, 2011). Extract 5 presents another example of how the identity of the bidialectal user of English offered a more powerful positions from which to speak; this time from the perspective of ‘flexible bilingualism’, in which AL and LE are juxtaposed. This extract comes from an interview with Tahir in which we were discussing how he went about his academic work. In the following extract, Tahir is explaining to me how he had formed a study group with his friends:

Extract 5

1. There’s five of us so we . . . all sit down and we’re trying to [explain] . . .
2. the good thing is . . . whoever knows in that circle how to do it, he explains
3. to all of us and because we all know each other well, know slang and stuff,
4. we’d explain it in a way we will understand . . . whilst if the teacher
5. explains I might not get [it] . . . So I’d explain it in my terms to make sure
6. they understand it . . . showing the thinking, how I know how to do it (Tahir,

Interview 2).

Tahir represents the study group with his friends as a “circle” (line 2), implying a cooperative and non hierarchical set of social relations among peers that fosters the practice of peer scaffolding and collaborative learning. Tahir reports that he and his peers use ‘slang’ (i.e. LE) as a resource for decoding the AL that they encounter in scholarly texts and for co-constructing knowledge (line 3). As in extract 1, Tahir uses the ‘posh/ slang’ binary to characterise AL in opposition to the language practices of the peer group. However, unlike extract 4, in which the participants establish boundaries around AL and LE, here Tahir juxtaposes LE with AL. This use of flexible bi-dialectalism, mirrored on the concept of flexible bilingualism (Blackledge & Creese, 2010), enables Tahir to inhabit a teacher identity in which he is able to ‘explain [the text] in my terms to make sure [my friends] understand it . . . showing the thinking, how I know how to do it’ (lines 4-6). This powerful positioning bestows Tahir with the ability to engage in collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2000) with his peers in which he is able to ‘problem solve and build knowledge’. This is diametrically opposed to his institutional positioning as in need of language remediation.

As will be discussed, the institutional ascribed identity views the use of bidialectal resources as deviant whereas the participants’ inhabited identities, as bidialectal users of English, enables them to draw on bidialectalism as a resource for building a bridge between their life world and that of the institution. The next section considers another inhabited identity: the native speaker of English.

### **2.2.3 The Native Speaker of English**

The native speaker of English was an identity that the British-born participants frequently inhabited. Extract 6 illustrates how this identity enabled the British-born participants to differentiate themselves from students and staff that they identified as ‘foreign’ and present themselves as “naturally” knowing English by virtue of their birth and education in the UK. In extract 6 Biba, Leela and Awino are discussing the use of English by non-native speakers. This section of interaction comes after a lengthy exchange about cultural and ethnic heritage, in which Biba and Leela claim Britishness as part of their ethnic identity in contrast to Awino, who refutes Britishness despite having taken British citizenship.

Extract 6

A=Awino, L=Leela, B=Biba

1. A: I love English and I would love to speak it without you know/ very
2. strong accent/ and I would love to pronounce [this properly
3. L: [y’know I love your
4. Kenyan accent [though
5. B: [BUT CAN I JUST SAY SOMETHING?
6. A: yeah
7. B: your English is very good/ I don’t see /er [you say that you’ve got a=
8. L: [any faults
9. B: =problem with it/ [but I don’t see you
10. A: [ACTUALLY/ I write better than I speak
11. B: I don’t see/ the way you’re speaking/ I can understand you fully/ I
12. don’t have a problem the way you’re speaking=

13. A: =all right/ there you go then
14. B: your accent's [very clear
15. L: [I LOVE her accent
16. B: [seriously/ [believe me/ I've come across a lot of people where
17. their accent is completely (0.5)
18. L: [<laughs>
19. A: [AH:./ that's really very touching
20. B: [very hard to understand
21. A: [you don't understand
22. B: yeah/ you [really have to listen to understand what they say
23. A: [yeah
24. B: even like/ erm (1.0) seminar tutors here
25. L: yeah
26. A: some of them/ yes yes
27. B: some of them/ their accent is extremely strong
28. A: mm mm
29. B: an' you really have to concentrate
30. A: yeah
31. B: to understand what they're trying [to say/ [it makes it a bit more
32. harder
33. A: [absolutely
34. L: [some of them have strong
35. Indian accents/ very hard to
36. A: mm
37. B: and compare yours to them [an' you're like twenty tons better



38. A: [an' you just think/ "oh my"]
39. B: take it from someone that's been born and bred 'ere
40. A: [absolutely
41. L: [<laughs>
42. B: [<laughs>
43. A: okay (classroom interaction)

Awino opens the interaction with a declaration of her strong affiliation to English (line 1). She then reproduces her institutional remedial positioning by claiming to speak English with a 'strong accent', suggesting an idealised native speaker as a role model for pronunciation (lines 1-2). Leela goes on to state twice that she 'loves' Awino's accent (lines 3-4, 15). The reference to Awino's accent as "Kenyan" (line 4), the volume of love (line 15) and the repetition of her feelings about Awino's English enable her to differentiate Awino, as a non-native speaker of English, from her and Biba, as native speakers of English. Following the interruption (line 5), Biba goes on to co-construct the voice of the native speaker via her pronouncements about Awino's proficiency in English and her assurances that Awino has a good level of English (lines 7-12). Biba and Leela then turn their attention to members of academic staff (lines 16-36). In a series of collaborative turns, Biba and Leela co-construct these tutors as non-native speakers of English with 'strong accents' that impede intelligibility. Leela's claim that it is difficult to understand Indian English (line 35) does not appear plausible given that she is a British South Asian who lives with Gujarati speaking elders and regularly visits the Indian sub-continent. It seems more likely that, similarly to Biba, she is using the power invested in the voice of the native speaker of English. This is realised in the final turns of this extract (lines 37-43). Biba builds up to a powerful declaration of native speaker status with her utterance 'take it from someone who has been born and bred 'ere'

(line 39). The ‘here’ in this utterance refers to the UK while the LE pronunciation of ‘here’, with the dropped /h/, locates her as a working class Londoner. The choice of phrase ‘take it from someone who has been born and bred ‘ere’ bestows Biba with an air of authority, of someone who knows about English by virtue of her birth and breeding as a Londoner.

The native speaker identity enables Biba and Leela to draw on what Taylor (2010: 12) terms a ‘born and bred narrative resource’ to authorize their talk about the English of those that they deem to be non-native speakers. As Taylor argues, this narrative enables individuals to differentiate between ‘people who authentically belong somewhere and others who are newcomers or outsiders’ (ibid: 13). This discourse allows Biba and Leela to present themselves as authentically British and to differentiate themselves from tutors to whom they ascribe foreigner identities; in the case of Leela this includes tutors with whom she may share a cultural and/ or ethnic heritage. As the following extract illustrates, the native speaker identity enables the participants to treat English as a homogenous entity in which AL and LE are conflated. This masks their difficulties with AL and makes it possible for them to imply that they have command of English by virtue of having been ‘born and bred’ in the UK. As the following extract illustrates, it also enables them to resist their ascribed identities as remedial users of AL and to question their placement on the academic writing programme.

Extract 7

S=Sanjay, O=Osmaan

1. S: I think me ... I don't need to do this class anyway/ yeah/ I don't know
2. why I'm in it
3. O: yeah?

4. (2)
5. O: some mistake/ or something went wrong/ innit?
6. S: something went wrong/ <laughs> / reading wise I think I understand
7. all the texts/ my English is quite good I'd say
8. (1)
9. I can read all the papers/ and all the usual shit (classroom interaction)

In extract 7, Sanjay, a British Asian from a Gujarati and English speaking family, is discussing his placement on the academic writing programme. In the interaction up to this point, Sanjay has established that English is his 'main language' and he depicts it as the language that he uses 'everywhere'. In the opening utterance, Sanjay refutes the institutional decision to place him on the academic writing programme (lines 1-2). The intonation of Osmaan's 'yeah?' (line 3) suggests that he is waiting for Sanjay to elaborate. As Sanjay does not resume, Osmaan continues by supporting Sanjay's assessment, although he is careful not to apportion blame to either the institution or Sanjay (line 5). Sanjay repeats Osmaan's utterance 'something went wrong' (line 6) and goes on to present himself as a proficient user of AL (lines 6-7). Following a 1-second pause (line 8), Sanjay draws on his bidialectal resources to communicate his message more forcefully. In this case, by using taboo language to depict AL as 'shit' (line 9). This stance disables Sanjay from developing his relationship to AL and with the tutors responsible for developing his use of AL on the academic writing programme. As will be discussed, the native speaker identity enabled the British born participants to resist their ascribed identities; however, it was not conducive to developing a relationship to AL. In the following section, I will turn to another commonly inhabited identity: the multilingual subject.

### **2.2.4 The Multilingual Subject**

The inhabited identity of the multilingual subject enabled the participants to give a holistic account of their linguistic and cultural repertoire, including their heritage language(s). This is typified in extract 8 in which the participants are discussing the languages that they use at home and with friends. The interaction involves Kavi (aged 21), a Tamil male who arrived in the UK as a Tamil refugee from Sri Lanka at the age of 11, Sita (aged 19), a British-born Tamil female whose family had also sought asylum in the UK, Tano (aged 23), a Ghanaian male who had been in the UK for two years at the time of the research and Hibba (aged 22), a British Asian female.

#### Extract 8

K=Kavi, S=Sita, T=Tano, H= Hibba

1. K: I spe- I can speak Tamil sort of
2. S: yeah right <laughs>
3. K: can you speak any language? I can speak Tamil
4. T: wha- what language is that?
5. K: that's a Sri Lankan language
6. T: obviously yeah I can speak my Ghanaian [language so yeah
7. K: [Ghanaian language
8. he can speak THREE langua[ges
9. H: [I speak FOUR languages
10. K: [FOUR languages
11. T: [oh::: <ironic tone>

12. H: Arabic er Urdu Hindi
13. K: right
14. H: and Punjabi
15. K: can you write can you can you write them?
16. H: yeah
17. K: yeah you're writing them all?
18. H: yeah
19. K: I can WRITE in Tamil but not fully fluent
10. S: I'm fluent in that [I can I can
21. H: [you can read?
22. K: yeah I can read
23. S: I'm [fluent in that
24. T: [proper proper reading?
25. H: like if I gave you a newspaper would you read it from cover to
26. cover?
27. K: yeah I can read some articles (xxx) NOT how I read English (classroom interaction)

Kavi opens the interaction by announcing that his linguistic repertoire includes Tamil, although he mitigates his expertise by adding 'sort of' (line 1). The tone of Sita's response (line 2) sounds teasing and it seems likely that this is a reference to their shared heritage as part of the Tamil diaspora in London. Kavi then asks Tano what languages he speaks and repeats his utterance about Tamil (line 3). Tano's clarification request (line 4) results in Kavi linking Tamil to Sri Lanka, alluding to the Tamil diaspora in London and his family's cultural and ethnic heritage in Sri Lanka (line 5). Tano collaborates with Kavi by mirroring his

utterance with “I can speak my Ghanaian language” (line 6); this also serves to signal his Ghanaian cultural and ethnic origins to his peers. In Kavi’s overlapping turn (lines 7-8), the raised volume of ‘three’ and the tone of his utterance suggest admiration of Tano’s multilingualism. At this juncture, Hibba interrupts to announce that she speaks ‘four languages’ (line 9). The interruption and the raised volume of ‘four’ suggests a competitive move and a bid to present herself as a multilingual and multicultural subject; this is reinforced by the subsequent listing of the languages in her repertoire (lines 12-14).

This is followed by exchanges (lines 15-27) in which the participants compare their levels of bi/ multi-literacy. Kavi and Hibba take control of the floor as they assess which of them can be considered to possess the greater level of expertise with Kavi eventually conceding that he has a greater command of reading in English than in Tamil (line 27). During these exchanges Sita represents herself as literate in Tamil (lines 20, 23) although her expertise remains unacknowledged by Kavi or Hibba. Hibba, on the other hand, manages to command the attention of her peers with her claims to be multi-literate. Despite the competitive nature of the interaction, the tone remains jocular throughout. The interaction suggests that when linguistic minority students are given opportunities to talk about their linguistic repertoires, this facilitates the shared narrative of bi/multilingualism and the inhabiting of the multilingual subject identity as the norm. When inhabiting the multilingual subject, the British-born participants did not draw on their status as British ‘born and bred’ to comment on the English of their non-British born counterparts suggesting that this position elides differences between first and second generation migrants. However, as will be discussed, this identity did not foster discussion of the potential links between the participants’ multilingual repertoires and AL.

### **3. Discussion**

The participants on the academic writing programme illustrate Blommaert's (2007) contention of the ways in which languages do not travel well from the 'periphery' to the 'centre' in contexts of 'superdiversity' (Vertovec, 2006). As Blommaert comments, those coming from the 'periphery' frequently find that their linguistic repertoires receive less than a warm welcome from those in the 'centre'. Blommaert discusses how bi/ multilingual individuals marshal the linguistic resources at their disposal in an effort to communicate meaning. This multilingual 'voice' is located in the social world and as such, it is subject to cultural norms, values and assumptions about particular ways of talking and writing. From this, we can ascertain that not all voices are equal and particular kinds of voice are valued more than others in institutional contexts. As Blommaert contends:

'an illiterate person has a different potential for voice from a literate person; ... a multilingual person has different potential from a monolingual one; ... someone who speaks the prestige variety of a language has a different potential from someone who speaks a stigmatised and marginalised variety of the language' (ibid: 5).

Blommaert argues that educational institutions are characterised by 'imposed normativity'; this has the effect of freezing the voice and requiring individuals to 'speak [and] write *in this particular way*' (ibid). This characterises the experience of the participants at Millennium University; the linguistic diversity that they imported into higher education from working class migrant communities in the UK was marginalised and they were ascribed an institutional identity as a remedial user of AL. This ascribed identity involved demarcating the monolingual AL traditions of the Anglo-American academic community and the bi/multilingual traditions of the participants and accepting the unequal power relations

between these traditions without critique. This ascribed identity erased the participants' bidialectal and multilingual capital, rendering it invisible in the institution, and contributed to a learning environment that was not conducive to developing institutionally sanctioned practices for using the participants' linguistic repertoires as 'valuable linguistic-communicative instruments' (ibid: 29). This state of affairs resulted in the institution missing valuable opportunities to explore ways in which it could build bridges with the worlds of the working class linguistic minority students in its midst and enable them to take steps towards becoming a 'legitimate speaker' (Bourdieu, 1977) in higher education and UK society.

The institutional ascribed identity encouraged the participants to reproduce cultural and classed assumptions about AL as a carrier of prestige and social status and LE as a stigmatised variety, at least within the confines of educational institutions. The ascribed identity gave little space for a critique of the high status accorded to AL or the negative connotations associated with LE in higher education or in society more widely. While speaking from this ascribed identity, the participants reproduced middle class norms regarding non standard varieties of English, claiming that they did not 'speak properly' and were in need of language remediation. This was graphically illustrated by Biba's use of stylised Cockney (extract 3) to indicate to her fellow classmates the disjunction between her ascribed and inhabited identities and the ways in which her ascribed identity obliged her to censor and suppress the language of her inhabited identity while in institutional settings. It also fostered a narrow view of the remit of the academic writing programme, as a site for fixing language deficiencies. Despite making use of bidialectal resources while speaking from the position of their institutionally ascribed identity, the participants reproduced the cultural and classed assumption that dialects must be kept separate and used in the 'correct' domain with AL used in the public realm and LE restricted to the private sphere.



The ascribed remedial AL user identity was at odds with the inhabited identity of a bi-dialectal user of English, which enabled the participants to negotiate a more positive relationship between AL and LE. This identity problematised the idea that LE hinders the participants' relationship to AL. Their interactions indicated that LE was a valuable resource for establishing peer group relations and constructing a bridge into academic work. This resonates with Rampton's (2006: 316) "vernacularisation of school knowledge", in which adolescents use posh and Cockney stylisations as a way of mediating school work and getting down to the task at hand. Given the closeness in background and educational experience of the participants in these studies, it seems likely that this strategy has been transferred from London schools into higher education. Importantly for these participants' prospects in higher education, the bidialectal user of English encouraged the marshalling of linguistic and cultural resources in an effort to build bridges between the life world of working class linguistic minority students and the professional and middle class occupants of academic departments.

This identity also enabled the participants to inhabit the position of a novice scholar in a way that was palatable to them. Rather than the traditionally conceived 'master-novice' academic relationship, in which the novice is perceived as being socialised into the expert's world, the novice scholar associated with the bidialectal user of English is a hybrid space. This hybridity encompasses the world of the participants and the institution and makes use of both flexible and separate bi-dialectalism as tools for knowledge construction, problem solving and mediating social relationships. For working class linguistic minority students, the bidialectal user of English appears conducive for scholarly enterprise and the development of a tenable relationship to AL and as such is worthy of further examination and exploitation by higher

education. This identity may also hold resonance for users of World Englishes, particularly those educated in outer circle and post colonial settings.

In contrast, the native speaker of English appeared to disable a more positive identification with AL, particularly in relation to intercultural communication. This identity drew on a ‘born and bred narrative resource’ (Taylor, 2010) which enabled the British born participants to speak about English from a position of expertise and to resist their institutional positioning. It also encouraged the participants to ‘other’ individuals that they deemed to be foreign by differentiating between ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ English speakers. This differentiation does not appear conducive to promoting higher education agendas, such as fostering intercultural communication among students from a diverse range of nationalities and cultural and ethnic backgrounds and facilitating an international experience for university students in English dominant settings. Additionally, the ‘born and bred’ narrative encouraged the representation of English as a homogeneous entity. The conflation of dialects in extracts 6 and 7 enables the British born participants to speak as expert users of English and downplay their difficulties with AL. This was an untenable position as all the participants needed to develop their expertise in AL to ensure their progression and academic success.

Finally, the multilingual subject enabled the participants to make their linguistic and cultural repertoires visible in higher education and to construct linguistic diversity as the norm in their everyday lives. However, unlike the bidialectal user of English in which the participants related AL to LE, the multilingual subject did not facilitate discussion about the relationship between heritage languages and AL. Instead, the participants reproduced the notion of separate bilingualism (Blackledge & Creese, 2010). Separate bilingualism portrays languages as distinct entities for use in particular domains and as needing to be separated. Descriptions of this separation include the ‘two solitudes’ (Cummins, 2005), ‘parallel monolingualism’ (M.

Heller, 2006), and ‘two monolinguals in one body’ (Gravelle, 1996: 11). Li Wei and Wu (2009) describe this as a policy of OLAN (one language only) and OLAT (one language at a time) in educational settings. It seems that higher education in English dominant settings may well be replicating the OLAN policy by missing opportunities for promoting critical reflection on the potential of heritage and community languages for developing a relationship to AL that transcends native speakerism, encourages the inhabiting of a transnational identity (Block, 2006; Li Wei & Zhu Hua, 2013) and is conducive to intercultural education and the internationalization agenda in higher education.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this article, I have examined the socio-symbolic functions of AL for a group of working class linguistic minority undergraduate students in higher education in an English dominant setting. The data illustrate ways in which the participants reproduce their ascribed institutional identities as remedial users of English. This positioning is powerless in that it obliges the participants to reproduce institutional norms regarding the status and prestige of AL and the stigmatised perceptions of LE, their preferred variety of English, in an uncritical manner. It also erases the participants’ bi-dialectal and multilingual capital in higher education by viewing this as a hindrance and obstacle rather than as a valuable resource. It is my contention that this ascribed institutional identity does little to foster a positive relationship to AL. The data also illustrate ways in which the participants negotiated their ascribed institutional identity by inhabiting alternative identities that afforded them more powerful voices. It seems to me that two of these identities: the bidialectal user of English and the multilingual subject offer the potential for enabling the development of a more positive relationship to AL for university students from working class linguistic minority communities and are worthy of

further investigation. These inhabited identities offer the potential for creating transnational space in higher education and the opportunity for working class and linguistic minority university students to contribute their experiential knowledge to higher education agendas such as intercultural education and internationalisation. The native speaker of English, on the other hand, does not appear to be a particularly constructive identity position for the scholarly enterprise. Despite enabling the British-born participants to resist their institutionally ascribed identity, it created an unproductive differentiation between linguistic minority students who were British born and educated and those who were first generation migrants or temporary sojourners from non Anglophone settings. It also fostered the perception of languages as homogenous entities, thus enabling those participants who were British born to claim that they were fully conversant with English (and by implication AL) by virtue of being 'born and bred' in the UK.

Universities in English dominant settings face many challenges in dealing with the linguistic and cultural diversity in their midst. The first steps are to acknowledge and critique the ascribed and inhabited identities of a linguistically and culturally diverse student population and to reflect on institutional interventions that can be made to support the development of the relationship to AL for bi/ multilingual students (see Preece, 2009b). When these students are from working class linguistic minority communities, institutions need to pay particular attention to ensuring that their interventions are sensitive to face and address social inequalities that, as Simpson and Cooke (Simpson & Cooke, 2010: 71) argue, 'permeate the lives of students like [these]'.

## **Appendix**

### **Transcription Conventions**

- / indicates the end of a chunk of talk.
- illustrates an incomplete word or utterance.
- ? indicates question intonation.
- : indicates elongation of a vowel sound.
- “ ” indicates the speaker is adopting the voice of another person or a stylised accent.
- (3) indicates pauses of one second and longer timed to the nearest second and the number of seconds put in brackets.
- [ indicates the point where speakers overlap.
- [ indicates the point where speakers overlap.
- = indicates no audible gap between utterances.
- (( )) around a word or phrase indicate some doubt about accuracy of transcription.
- ((xx)) indicates part of utterance is indecipherable.
- < > indicates additional comment by myself as the transcriber on what is happening at the time or the way in which something is said.
- CAPITALS indicate raised volume.

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