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# Shame on me: the individual whitewash of a social stigma underpinned by language ideologies

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**Abstract:** Language ideologies are a powerful way of perpetuating inequalities, as peripheralized speakers who have internalized the lack of legitimacy attributed to them often end up reproducing censure rather than resisting it. Foregrounding the affective dimension, this paper explores the role of shame as a fulcrum articulating the individual with the collective in the perpetuation of linguistic stigma. To do so, it presents excerpts of autobiographies written by university students that reveal the impact of language idealization on the subjectivities of those who, by deviating from the norm, forge subaltern identities. As victims of language shaming are often unaware that their suffering is due to ideologies, but instead blame it on personal failings, rather than challenge the linguistic vigilantes who harass them, they silence themselves. The paper discusses how the inherently social nature of the construction of otherness and stigma is obscured by the individuality of shame and presents an educational intervention with which to scaffold students to overcome language shame.

**Keywords:** accentism; language biographies; language education; language ideologies; shame; stigma

**Resumen:** Las ideologías lingüísticas perpetúan potentemente las desigualdades ya que, quienes han interiorizado la falta de legitimidad que se les atribuye, suelen acabar reproduciendo la censura en lugar de rechazarla. Este artículo, que hace hincapié en la dimensión afectiva, explora el papel de la vergüenza como nexo que articula lo individual y lo colectivo en la perpetuación del estigma lingüístico. Para ello, presenta fragmentos de autobiografías escritas por estudiantes de universidad que revelan el impacto de la idealización del lenguaje en las subjetividades de quienes, al desviarse de la norma, forjan identidades subalternas. Como las víctimas de la vergüenza lingüística no suelen ser conscientes de que su sufrimiento se debe a ideologías, sino que lo achacan a fallos personales, en lugar de desafiar a quienes las

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acosan, se silencian a sí mismas. El artículo analiza cómo la naturaleza intrínsecamente social de la construcción de la alteridad y el estigma queda oculta por lo individual de la vergüenza y presenta una intervención educativa con la que intentar rebatir la vergüenza lingüística.

**Palabras clave:** vergüenza; acentismo; estigma; ideologías lingüísticas; educación lingüística; biografías lingüísticas

## 1 Foreword

“Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me” is a saying urging us to distrust those who have already hurt us once, to prevent them from doing it again. Stumbling repeatedly on the same stone, however, is common, and prescriptive language ideologies are stones into which speakers keep on bumping time and again. Even if linguists have been warning for decades about them as not only irrational but also harmful, most speakers keep on taking such ideologies at face value. Unlike other forms of bias, discrimination on linguistic grounds is still socially acceptable (Dovchin 2019; Milroy and Milroy 2012; Sener 2021) and tends to go unnoticed, serving as a cover for other prejudices. Albeit subtle, language ideologies (Preston 2013; Woolard 2021) are a very powerful way of perpetuating inequalities, since peripheralized speakers, having internalized their lack of legitimacy, end up reproducing scorn rather than resisting it. Instead of rejecting judgment and surveillance, speakers often guilt themselves and end up self-censoring to go undetected and avoid shame. This, however, is a perverse re-victimizing dynamic: as speakers flee participation in environments in which they (rightly) believe they will be judged, they end up placing themselves in an increasingly vulnerable position from which it is difficult to overcome subalternity. Stigmatization thus comes full circle with a self-fulfilling prophecy that further reinforces negative stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes.

This happens to non-native speakers and to native speakers “with an accent”, i.e., those exhibiting features deviating from an idealized standard, hence associated with denigrating stereotypes; with the countryside and, therefore, being a redneck; with the working class and, therefore, conceptualized as uneducated; with marginalized youth, etc. These speakers, not conforming to the written and unwritten norms of an abstract standard language, often feel ashamed and limit their agency (Ahearn 2010; Tseng 2021) to preserve face, because “deficit attitudes towards speakers using non-standardized forms can lead to those speakers feeling insecure and facing threats to their identity” (Cushing 2020: 433). For decades, and recently too, native-speakerism (Slavkov et al. 2022; Tan et al. 2021) and accentism

(Dragojevic et al. 2021; Drummond and Cole 2019; Paterson 2019) have been challenged in the literature. Accent discrimination, an intersectional manifestation of broader power structures with intralingual, interlingual, and translingual dimensions (Dovchin and Dryden 2022) reveals the existence of inequalities on racist, sexist, and classist grounds (Cantone et al. 2019; Donnelly et al. 2022). However, it is often hidden by benevolent-seeming regional prejudices, and accentism is still under-represented in the literature (Baratta 2017) despite the personal, interpersonal, and intergroup consequences of accent stigma (Birney et al. 2020). In spite of academic problematizations, lay people are still exposed to the normative ideology of monolingualism (Kubota 2020), and the beliefs that idolize standard speakers, native and/or “accentless”, as authoritative role models are still in place in everyday life. Standard language remains a “constructed and re-constructed mythical beast” (Lippi-Green 2012: 56) that, despite its imaginary character, continues to strip thousands of speakers of legitimacy.

Against this backdrop, this paper foregrounds the affective dimension, which has gained increasing traction in the debate (Busch and McNamara 2020; Dewaele and Saito 2022; Dovchin 2020; Habermas 2018; Liyanage 2023; Pratt 2023; Worff and De Costa 2017). Focusing on shame, this paper analyzes how the inherently social nature of the construction of otherness and stigma becomes hidden by the individual facet of shame. In trying to accompany university students to realize many of their language-related insecurities lie not in themselves, but in ideologies of which they are often unaware, our research project (<https://www.equiling.eu/en/>) has found that exhibiting vulnerability allows interlocutors to show empathy, reposition themselves, and enact an agentic modification of social practices, i.e., what Ferrada et al. (2019) refer to as “affective agency”. Along these lines, this paper analyzes the role played by shame as a fulcrum articulating the individual with the collective in the perpetuation of stigma (Goffman 1963). Linking the affective dimension to the study of inequality, the paper argues that a language education that reveals the ideological underpinnings of shame can contribute to a more equitable sociolinguistic order that does not discriminate against people on the basis of the way they speak. Language biographies have shown they can help do this, as they activate the link between personal experience, language practices, and emotions. In going beyond the bounds of description, biographies make it possible to detect underlying beliefs of which speakers are usually unaware. Therefore, they are a valuable tool that can contribute to sociolinguistic education, soothing the emotional wounds of those who have been judged by using speech as a battering ram. For this reason, this paper presents excerpts of autobiographies written by university students living in Madrid, who give an account of their linguistic repertoires and trajectories. These narratives, often marked by stigmatization, reveal how ideologies presenting languages as idealized abstractions have a deep impact on the subjectivities of

speakers who deviate from the norm, and contribute to forging subaltern identities. However, if properly scaffolded, students can discover the underpinnings of language ideologies, expand their range of speaker models, and gain agency.

## 2 Language shame, a block in the road to agency

Studies of language variation and change have long pointed out the misrecognition created by prescriptivism and the inequalities constructed by the focus on idealized speakers. Recently, attention has focused on hybrid repertoires and there is a concern for challenging “deficit” discourses that perpetuate racism (Alim et al. 2016; Baker-Bell 2020; Mena 2022; Rosa and Flores 2017) among other *isms*: “Monolingual and native speaker ideologies have their roots in social hierarchies of power and prestige, including systems of racism, nationalism, and elitism” (Higby et al. 2023: 5). The quest for equality in language studies, however, has not sufficiently addressed linguistic shaming, a mechanism that exposes “peripheral speakers as incomprehensible or as ridiculous impostors” (Piller 2016: 197).

Within linguistics, shame is not new to the literature. Research on language acquisition has mentioned the paralyzing fear learners experience when having to speak up in a language in which they feel insecure, and the symbolic value of English has been often criticized for disenfranchising those who do not speak it, or who speak it “with an accent”. The inadequacy of treating affect as an individual phenomenon has also been pointed out (Pavlenko 2005, 2013), and language shaming has been denounced as a practice “not only about illegitimate speech but about illegitimate speakers” aimed at controlling people and preserving hierarchies (Piller 2017). However, the paucity of studies dedicated to the causes and effects of language shame (Relaño Pastor 2014) is striking, and the difference between *shaming* (an inherently social activity performed by *shamers* or language bullies) and *shame* (the outcome experienced by the *shamee*, arguably both individual and social) remains yet to be ascertained. Drawing on Piller and Takahashi (2006) and Butler (2017), Liyanage and Canagarajah (2019: 2) define linguistic shame as “embarrassment in using a language resulting from the social discourses and practices that denigrate the identities and outcomes attached to such language use”. Thus understood, shame stands out as a reflection of the production and reproduction of unfair social systems through language, rather than as an individual emotion. Writer Amy Tan’s (1989) depiction of the stigma caused by speaking in ways lacking authority and/or authenticity is well-known:

When I was growing up, my mother's "limited" English limited my perception of her. I was ashamed of her English. I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. That is, because she expressed them imperfectly her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of empirical evidence to support me: the fact that people in department stores, at banks, and at restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her.

The feeling is not alien to thousands of speakers around the world who, instead of rejecting the status quo, reproduce the exclusions enforced on them and end up replicating prejudices about good and bad usage, about good or bad speakers, or silence themselves for lack of recognition. Some of my students are among them, and this paper aims to reflect on how to scaffold them to challenge such shame, and how to accompany them on their path to agency. Their voices will bear witness to the impact of the values we assign to ways of languaging. Those values, which we all learn as we are socialized, are the reason why so many learners feel ashamed when they speak a foreign language even if their accent does not compromise communication in any way, or why some others, the lucky few, are complimented on "not having an accent".

Historical linguistic corpora dating back to the Middle Ages already links shame to "non-achievement; not belonging to a prestigious group or belonging to a non-prestigious group; bad appearance; and lack of physical or mental capacities" (Tissari 2022: 308). However, as a result of standardization, a by-product of modernity, ideologies linking deviations from the norm with stigmatization (both enacted and felt) have become more pronounced, and speakers, not just their speech, have become increasingly marked. The following section presents excerpts written over the last decade by university students in Madrid. In their writings, they recall language-related instances of shame, and, at times, their experience is so disturbing that they decide to withdraw and avoid interaction. As a cautionary note, it is worth bearing in mind that student silence not always reflects language anxiety but is rather the consequence of a culture of learning valuing deference and discretion, a teacher-centered approach, or a lack of motivation, among other personal and interpersonal factors. On many occasions, however, it *is* the outcome of shaming, and it affects speakers in every aspect of their lives.

### 3 Enacting and unlearning language beliefs

As a positionality statement, I should point out that I will be writing in the first person because I understand introspection is part and parcel of the methodological approach with which to scaffold students in their process of counter-storytelling the hegemonic discourses shaming them. As a white, formally educated, middle-class,

middle-aged woman born and raised in Madrid, I have not always been aware of the oppressiveness of many discourses I reject today. For a long time, I was not even aware of their existence and circulation, nor did I realize how they affected my students. Now that I do, I want to help them discover alternative practices and beliefs with a focus on speakers and their well-being.

For some 25 years, I have been teaching language variation and change, in English and about English, in Madrid. Aware of the fact that students tend to believe in the magical properties of language, to avoid reification I stress languages do not do anything; people do, and, as a result, the languages we speak become different. Since there is no teleology, I argue, none of the alternatives is neither better nor worse, and judgment simply makes no sense. Over time, I have come to realize the reason my students do not challenge this statement is that, in English, they have not been trained to associate social meanings with language variation. They do, however, have a distinct idea of what good English sounds like. They also know they will probably never reach the epitomized native speaker they strive to sound like (most typically, Downton Abbey, upstairs), and they feel ashamed. I try to convince them not to feel embarrassed for having a foreign accent, with little success because it contradicts all they have learned since childhood. And the problem is not limited to the native/non-native debate: students have firm beliefs about variation in Spanish, and I find it very hard to convince them that language attitudes have nothing to do with language, but with ideologies, linguistic and otherwise. I have witnessed, in classes where interactions take place in the local language, used daily both inside and outside the classroom, how inquiring into students' linguistic biographies and language-related experiences was enough to open Pandora's box.

The testimonies presented here were written by students in an undergraduate multilingual program at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Each year, about 100 undergraduates are admitted to the program, of whom half may choose English as their major, and the other half, French or Spanish. Besides their main language, all students take a second language (Arabic, Chinese, German, or Japanese) throughout the program. In the absence of an explicit language policy except for the promotion of English, the university is monolingual in Spanish. For many students, this is their everyday language, but many are regular speakers of other languages. Madrid has traditionally attracted migrants, formerly from different regions of Spain, today from different parts of the world too (especially Latin America, Morocco, and Eastern Europe). The program, partly because it is taught in several languages, attracts students from different regions of Spain, and 10 % come from other countries. Classes in and about English are always conducted in English, as all students access higher education with a B2 level. In primary and secondary schools in Madrid, the language of instruction is Spanish, but many state-funded and virtually all charter schools have implemented a CLIL approach, and all students start learning English at an

early age. However, it remains a school matter, not a language students use daily. Although they access music, series, and video games in English for leisure, they hardly speak the language, and doing so remains a challenge for them because they are afraid of making mistakes and feel embarrassed about their accent (Patiño-Santos and Poveda 2023). This is also true of university students majoring in English, as they tend to practice speaking less than other skills.

European Cultural Identities, the course from which the testimonials come, is a compulsory course taught in the second semester of the first year. It presents a transdisciplinary introduction to the construction and representation of identities from a range of viewpoints. Philosophical, sociological, and anthropological insights into identity are complemented with geographical and historical approaches to Europe as a cultural construct, and sociolinguistic and political inquiries into its linguistic diversity. Each block is taught by a lecturer from a different field, with me in charge of addressing language diversity and identity construction. As a warm-up to the course, students are requested to write who they are. The philosophy lecturer in charge of the block tabulates the results and, among the items that typically come up, are being a student, birthplace, and personality, but hardly any language-related items (except among those originally from elsewhere). While discussing the tabulated results in class, the lecturer highlights the significance of the things students did *not* mention, taking them for granted, and students rewrite their self-description. At that point, they often expand the range of items central to their identity and spend more time reflecting on them. Language-related items, however, remain very occasional.

Later in the course, however, when students address linguistic diversity, language becomes activated as an identity factor. To explore language-related conflicts, of which most students are not aware, they are asked to discuss whether co-official languages other than Spanish should be allowed in national politics in Spain. To prevent students from dismissing other points of view, I ask them to identify three reasons those on the “opposing side” might argue. Among the reasons in favor, students often mention the need to maintain diversity, amend historical injustices, and respect regional identities. Among the reasons against it, they claim *choosing* not to speak the language of the interlocutor is disrespectful, and expensive, because of translations. The debate usually ends up in a tie. Most students tend to reject language being used “as a political weapon”, and those from Madrid are often surprised by the articulate opinions of classmates from bilingual regions where sociolinguistics is part of the curriculum. After numerous discussions, and once the link between language and identity has been established, students are asked to write their linguistic autobiography. The main aim of the assignment (Table 1) is to make students critically reflect on their linguistic repertoires, analyzing the values they attach to languages. The task is part of a broader scheme aimed at enhancing

**Table 1:** Language biography task (my translation).

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The European Language Portfolio (ELP) stresses the importance of language autobiographies in promoting language awareness. Explore the link <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portfolio/the-language-biography> and reflect on how your identity is related to the languages, varieties, and language practices that are, have been or you want to be part of your repertoire.

Think about language-related experiences (by “language” you can also refer to dialects, varieties, or accents) you have had at different times or places, the reasons why you want to learn some languages rather than others, the doors languages have opened or closed for you...

Then write your linguistic autobiography (maximum 1,000 words) explaining where, when, in what context, and with whom you speak each of the languages, dialects, varieties, or accents in your repertoire. You can also write about the languages you would like to learn (and why), the languages you used to know but are forgetting (and why), or the languages you don't speak but are able to recognize.

Write in the first person, do not hesitate to include personal anecdotes, and try to relate your experiences to the contents learned throughout the course (even better if you link it with notions addressed in other units of the course). You do not need to follow any model, just reflect on your linguistic practices and on how your understanding of your identity has changed after analyzing the role languages play in our life trajectories. If you want, you can include drawings or diagrams to show your repertoire, your family's repertoire, or of people who play an important role in your life.

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awareness which involves carrying out different hands-on activities throughout the block: discussions on the causes and consequences (individual and collective) of language-related news in the press; contrastive analyses of the repertoires of class members, and the presence or absence of these languages and varieties in the linguistic landscape; and, finally, analyzing their own linguistic trajectories while writing their biography.

In assessing the task, to be completed by the 50 students in the English track, I consider their degree of reflexivity. On the side, I manually note those students who report having changed their beliefs or who recount traumatic critical incidents. Because of the focus on shame, the latter is the source of data for this paper. Also included is a fragment written many years ago, Excerpt 1, retrieved from an extensive corpus of essays I have been collecting over the years. I realized some students, never many but always a few, choose to disclose emotional issues when discussing the role of language in their identity construction. Therefore, I decided to keep track, to find out if a pattern emerged or any tendencies consolidated, and to ask those who had produced very personal essays for permission to quote them anonymously.

Over the years, I have observed how the narratives written by students whose early socialization took place somewhere else, or who come from migrant families, differ from those written by students born and raised in Madrid, whose speech tends to be associated with the educated norm (Pinto Pajares 2021). The latter do not tend to



pay attention to the impact of language in the construction of their identity. However, translocalized students who grew up in other languages and/or varieties often reflect on how their repertoires affect their interpersonal relationships and self-conception, deploying troubled trajectories where issues of face and agentivity emerge. The fragments excerpted from student narratives will be a departure point for advocating a language education that overtly addresses shame, an emotion persistently displayed by students who, living in between two worlds, feel judged because of the way they speak.

Reading the testimonies does not allow us to conclude unequivocally that changes have occurred as a result of the awareness-based intervention program, to begin with, because the signs are subtle. It must be kept in mind this is a short block and not all students share the same positionality. However, I believe the fact that some students choose to verbalize their insecurities, their self-censorship, and their shame is significant in itself and points to change. As already noted, students readily admit they are embarrassed to speak in English and blame it on the limited opportunities they have to practice their oral skills. However, they have a much harder time admitting they are ashamed of speaking what many call “my mother tongue”. When I ask at the beginning of each course what languages and varieties the class members speak, it takes a while for languages other than the ones they are studying to surface. In such cases, I choose not to insist, but I set up discussion activities I know will make speakers of other languages feel interpellated. At that point, voices arise in support of various (heritage) languages and of different varieties and accents. The fact that there are students who decide to take it up again in their final essay makes me think that bringing it to light has allowed a loophole for change to open up; that something buried has emerged as a result of a newly gained awareness. It is well known that, once norms are internalized, it is the subjects themselves who tend to censor themselves. The mere fact that they are gradually ceasing to do so seems to show a gap opening up to create the conditions for a more inclusive sociolinguistic order. In my experience, emotion is an optimal departure point because, once mobilized, it becomes a powerful drive.

### 3.1 Students voicing the toll of language shaming

Accounts of self-identity are often colored with affective traits that reveal how identities are construed upon the basis of emotion (Stets and Turner 2006; Trainor 2006). This seems particularly true in the case of the in-flux identities of those who live in a language or variety other than the one in which they were first socialized. Among them, the clash between linguistic repertoires and emotion brings legitimacy issues to the fore in selective self-presentation and interactional stance-taking.

The struggle triggers identity construal processes in which one's own language and culture get questioned, which does not seem to occur among "standard natives". As a result, new and often conflictive identities are forged and/or enacted, as shown by the narratives presented here, originally in Spanish (all translations are mine).

The first fragment, extracted from an essay named *Manifesto renouncing the mother tongue*, was written by a student who decided to give up her language, Romanian, when her family migrated to Spain. This testimony had a great impact on me when I read it. In fact, then I began to reflect systematically on the emotional damage suffered by students whose practices deviate from the hegemonic canon. The impact, I learned later, was not mine alone: years later, in a hallway, the student told me she had thought a lot about this assignment, she had even gone to therapy, and was happy to tell me that, if she had to write it again, she would no longer write the same thing. I asked her to do so, and she agreed, but, alas, she never did.

Fragment 1	<p>Al llegar aquí con nueve años [...] no entendía ni una sola palabra, no conocía a nadie y durante un curso entero me sentaba sola en clase y no salía al patio en el recreo [...] Desde entonces y hasta ahora sigo manteniéndome firme a mi decisión. Para mí, la lengua con la que vivo es el español, mi cultura es la española y España es el país en el que vivo. Todo lo opuesto a mis padres. Uno de los mayores conflictos en mi familia es precisamente mi españolización absoluta. Para mi familia es como una especie de traición a todo aquello que yo soy y puede que en parte lo sea, pero es que ellos no saben lo que se siente al ser el niño sin identidad.</p>	<p>When I arrived here at the age of nine [...] I didn't understand a single word, I didn't know anyone and for an entire school year I sat alone in class and didn't go out to the playground at recess [...] Since then and until now I have remained firm in my decision. For me, the language I live with is Spanish, my culture is Spanish and Spain is the country I live in. The opposite of my parents. One of the biggest conflicts in my family is precisely my absolute Spanishization. For my family, it is like a kind of betrayal of everything I am, and maybe partly it is, but they do not know what it feels like to be the kid without an identity.</p>
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This testimony, in which the student links wholesale adoption of the hegemonic language to belonging, was one of the first in which I encountered language-related wounds. In subsequent years, I continued to find equally painful incidents among students who struggled with another language or recalled critical incidents in and

about their own. This is one of the few occasions on which students recount a voluntary renunciation of their language: more often, students tell their migrant parents or grandparents did, for their children to integrate and have more opportunities in the host society. Here, it is the student who, confronted with a monolingual ideal, and notwithstanding her family's reproach, decides to distance herself from Romanian, which she identifies with uprooting. Landing in a place with little tolerance for language coexistence marked the trajectory of this student, who decided to strive to be better in Spanish than her classmates "so that it didn't show", in line with what Piller (2002) calls "passing". Fragment 2 also shows efforts to disguise and impersonate someone else. It was taken from the biography of a Dominican student who by then had been living in Madrid for seven years. Here, she is recalling how back home, she felt discriminated against for speaking the "peasant" variety of her locality.

Fragment 2	<p>Te lo repiten tanto que llegas a creer que sí eres menos por hablar de determinada forma. De forma consciente o inconsciente, los que hemos sido catalogados como "campesinos" luchamos por neutralizar ese acento, esa /i/, de "refinar" nuestra manera de hablar, pues un título universitario no luce tanto si quien lo ostenta habla con /i/. Es común el comentario de "Seguro que compró el título" o "¿Cómo es que un profesional habla tan mal?"</p>	<p>They repeat it so much that you come to believe that you are less for speaking in a certain way. Consciously or unconsciously, those of us who have been labeled as "peasants" struggle to neutralize that accent, that /i/, to "refine" our way of speaking because a university degree does not look so good if the person who holds it speaks with /i/. It is common to hear the comment "Surely she bought the degree" or "How can a professional speak so badly?"</p>
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While the first excerpt recounted a traumatic arrival abroad, this shows discrimination at home, and how those marked by their rural accent try to counteract rejection by modifying their speech. The text, written by a racialized mature student, attests to the way varieties are used to question people's worth and confirms that language-related feelings of inferiority do not only occur when learning foreign languages. Hierarchies of value also happen within a language, impacting the subjectivities of those who decide to self-discipline not to be singled out. This is also the case in the following two fragments, written by Spanish students, neither migrants nor racialized, but who could not escape the stigma either, because of the regions where they came from. Fragment 3 was produced by a student from Murcia, a Spanish-speaking region in southeastern Spain; Fragment 4 by a student from

Extremadura, a Spanish-speaking region in southwestern Spain. Both regions are often mocked for their way of speaking, scorned as ugly, hillbilly, or illiterate. The same is true of speakers from Andalusia, in southern Spain, and the Canary Islands, also far from the peninsula center where Madrid is. In fact, large segments of the population in Spain are subjected to linguistic stigma, because of their “accent” or for being speakers of a minoritized language. In Madrid, however, where speakers from different backgrounds come together, this is rarely talked about, and it is often taken for granted that peripheral speakers speak “funny” or simply “badly”.

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| Fragment 3 | <p>Durante toda mi vida he estado escuchando bromas, chistes e incluso burlas e insultos sobre el acento murciano [...] Es mi forma de hablar y no la rechazo ni me avergüenza. Pero cuando constantemente recibes comentarios más negativos y con mofa que positivos, se crean unos complejos que antes no tenías, y que se intensifican cuando te toca irte a vivir a otra ciudad en la que suenas <i>demasiado diferente</i>.</p> | <p>All my life I have been hearing jokes, pranks, and even mockery and insults about the Murcia accent [...] It is my way of speaking and I do not reject it nor am I ashamed of it. But when you constantly receive comments that are more negative and mocking than positive, it creates a complex you didn't have before, and that gets intensified when you have to go to live in another city where you sound <i>too different</i>.</p> |
| Fragment 4 | <p>Desde que vivo en Madrid la gente me hizo pensar que no sabía hablar, que todo lo que decía era gracioso y que, además, mi acento era sinónimo de incultura. Por un momento lo creí. Creí que toda mi familia, mis vecinos y todos los habitantes de mi región debíamos volver a aprender a hablar o callarnos para siempre.</p>  | <p>Since I've been living in Madrid, people have made me think that I didn't know how to speak, that everything I said was funny and that, besides, my accent was synonymous with ignorance. For a moment I believed it. I thought that my whole family, my neighbors, and all the inhabitants of my region had to relearn how to speak or shut up forever.</p>  |

Note students not only report “feeling different”: they denounce having been teased and insulted, ridiculed, and labeled as ignorant. As a result, they lost self-confidence and internalized that, to be accepted as legitimate participants, they must alter their speech. This is language shaming at its purest forcing students to silence themselves

to survive in environments where the standard language ideology ranks high. Finding testimonials such as these among my students was a shock to me. I had long known students felt ashamed to speak English, but now some did not even want to speak *their* language because they had become self-conscious after having been exposed to shaming. I then realized the agency of students who were originally from elsewhere else was at risk as a result of emotional wounds that are never addressed because the focus is on the language and not on the speakers, and because the ideologies on which emotions are grounded tend to go undetected. Not even aware there is such a thing as “linguistic ideologies”, students blame themselves. As Cushing points out, “[l]anguage ideologies can become so entrenched that they come to be seen as ‘natural’ or ‘common sense’, masking the structural processes which work to create and perpetuate them” (2021: 322).

### 3.2 The naturalization of language ideologies among students in language degrees

To expose the language ideologies at the root of shaming practices, pedagogical proposals are needed to guide teachers in implementing awareness projects that challenge hegemonic discourses. The curriculum is gradually addressing ideologies (Kiramba 2018; Lew and Siffrinn 2019; Mirhosseini 2018; Rose and Galloway 2017; Savini 2021) and critical-pedagogy-based contributions are released with materials ready to be incorporated into teaching practice (Crookes 2022; Fine et al. 2019; Holguín Mendoza 2022; Kiczowskiak 2017; León-Howarth and Holguín Mendoza 2021; Slinkard and Gevers 2020; Volkmer 2018) although, to ensure success, materials should be carefully localized to target specific ideologies. The narratives written by my students, for instance, reveal the presence of the standard language ideology, and also of commodification (Fragments 5 and 6), but not very often of raciolinguistic ideologies. People who are not expected to speak a particular language (well) may be heard not to speak that language (well) irrespective of their actual proficiency (Piller 2016: 53). As a result, many Chinese, Latinx, and Moroccan speakers in Spain suffer linguistic stereotyping with classist and racist connotations (Moustaoui and Llompart 2022), and the very fact that language shaming is typically exercised on people who come from migrant-sending countries or regions seems linked to raciolinguism.

However, denigration for being a racialized speaker is less frequently reported in student accounts than humiliation for deviating from the standard canonical norm. Perhaps this is because raciolinguistic discrimination is intersectional, making it difficult to detect and denounce. Or perhaps it is a consequence of the very setting in which these narratives emerge: university classrooms populated by

students of a language major. As Pujolar (2019) points out in his analysis of the class distribution of (linguistic) agency, the most resourceful and successful language learners, those seeking to invest in languages as educational capital, tend to be more concerned with correctness. In language degrees in particular, where the emphasis tends to be on normativity rather than variation and change, students fall an easy prey to the standard language ideology, as evidenced by a recent large-scale European survey revealing that “students enrolled in arts and humanities subjects [are] inclined to value correctness higher than understandability” (Vogl 2018: 205). Besides prescriptivism and the standard language ideology, another belief students internalize without question is the utilitarian understanding of languages as commodities, as in the excerpts below, also showing the pressure to objectify knowledge through certification, the stratification of the language market, and linguistic nationalism.

- |            |  |   |
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| Fragment 5 | <p>Está claro que por muchas lenguas africanas o asiáticas que sepas no te va a servir de nada porque no son lenguas importantes. En plena era de globalización, la sociedad te exige como mínimo un B2 de inglés. Si no tienes este certificado te puedes ir despidiendo del trabajo que quieres conseguir.</p>   | <p>Obviously, no matter how many African or Asian languages you know, it won't do you any good because they are not important languages. In this era of globalization, society demands that you have at least a B2 in English. If you don't have this certificate, you can say goodbye to the job you want to get.</p>  |
| Fragment 6 | <p>Aunque somos capaces de apreciar el valor de todas las lenguas, también somos capaces de reconocer que no todas merecen la misma atención [...] A mí ni se me pasa por la cabeza aprender gallego o catalán, porque total, ¿para qué? [...] Pero, no me niego a aprender otros idiomas. Necesito y quiero ser capaz de llegar a otro lugar fuera ya de mis fronteras y comunicarme.</p> | <p>Although we can appreciate the value of all languages, we can also acknowledge that not all of them deserve the same attention [...] It doesn't even cross my mind to learn Galician or Catalan because what's the point? [...] But I do not refuse to learn other languages. I need and want to be able to get to another place outside my borders and communicate.</p> |

Aware of the social demands compelling citizens to learn English, which they know functions as a gatekeeper, students in Madrid embrace, indeed normalize, the ideologies elevating hegemonic languages. For them, English will always be a must, an asset in a competitive marketplace. To do well, they must enter the language certification business because, even with a multilingual degree, qualified agencies are needed to certify their language level and make it *real*. Some will learn additional languages for biographical reasons, to travel the world, or for leisure: to read (Japanese) manga, listen to (Korean) K-pop, or watch romantic (Turkish) series with the distinction of being able to access the original soundtrack. Few, however, will decide to learn a minoritized language or one with no added material value to it. Whether they feel ashamed or take pride in their language choices, students are not aware that their beliefs and affect are ideologically marked. Nor do they detect that the certainty with which they embrace some languages is another side of the same coin that makes them feel ashamed. Both are presented as common sense; both must be problematized.

### 3.3 Unlearning language beliefs, unlearning language vigilance

Unpacking which language myths must be debunked in each context is not easy. As a departure point, however, the overarching myth that there is “one” good way to speak a language “properly” will probably be useful in most contexts. Focusing on the notion of “acceptability” rather than “correctness”; analyzing how the appropriate formulas vary from place to place and over time; or discussing what the chances are of sounding “proper” if not born into the right zip code may introduce the discussion about pressures to conform to the norm and start expanding the range of alternatives. As a matter of fact, distancing from the notion of “proper” may be of help, particularly in the case of learners of English as a world language (Codó and Riera-Gil 2022). Identifying relevant notions not usually associated with the language outside academia, such as “commodification” or “repertoires”, may also equip students with analytical tools with which to examine the beliefs they tend to reproduce. Once distanced from their own practices and beliefs, students can begin to analyze them and the newly acquired estrangement can become a cog in the unlearning process. Some distancing from binary yes/no models will make them judge less and feel less shame when they are judged, as they will understand that those who do are evoking an ideological framework.

Another important part of the unlearning process involves the deactivation of self-monitoring, a power mechanism whereby people regulate themselves by “governing themselves from within, taking as a reference external models and

norms” (Martín Rojo 2019: 182). Like thousands of other speakers around the world, students monitor themselves because having internalized the rules, they know they must live up to them. Sometimes they even monitor themselves to make up for sides of themselves that cannot be altered and for which they know they will be judged, such as their race or their social class; some other times because standard normativity imposes a burden on those who embody regional stereotypes or speak a variety not “native enough”. In all cases, the oppressive presence of an ideal speaker will make them feel inadequate. Pujolar (2021: 142), in analyzing the incorporation of subjectivity in early sociolinguistics, retrieves the notion of “self-hatred”, whereby members of a subaltern community devalue or demean themselves because they adopt the ‘value system’ of the dominant community that exercises its discrimination over the minority. Self-hatred, as found in student narratives, stands out as a consequence of linguistic vigilance serious enough to further investigate its potential as a framework to probe issues of language ideology.

In recent times, the emergence of research inscribing racialized language in the broader tradition of surveillance (Baker-Bell 2020; Browne 2015; Lyiscott 2019) has been followed by a body of work in critical sociolinguistics analyzing the monitoring of linguistic practices. A number of terms have been proposed, such as “vigilance” (Severin 2017) “policing” (Cushing 2020), or “linguistic bordering” (Khan 2022), but “surveillance” seems to be getting ahead as an umbrella term (Banville and Sugg 2021; Cushing 2023; Jaime-Díaz 2019; Martín Rojo and Márquez-Reiter 2019; Núñez 2018, 2021). Martín Rojo (2020: 177) relates the “disciplining of linguistic practices” to Foucauldian disciplinary regimes and, highlighting the effects of misrecognition and the imposition of speaker models, she underlines some are positioned as “inferior, excluded, completely different or simply invisible and, consequently, without the category of full interlocutors in social interaction”. This is particularly true in academic settings, as schools, “a major arena for the playing out of the standard language ideology”, Cushing (2021: 324) points out, “are one place where these linguistic boundaries get drawn up, enacted and entrenched, often through the ‘correction’ of students’ non-standardized spoken grammar which can lead to language-based prejudice, often at intersection points with race and class”.

Because of vigilance, sometimes even vigilantism, speakers realize deviating from the legitimate canon indexes a lack of belonging. As a result, they often decide to self-police, erasing differences and silencing themselves, to avoid being excluded. As Bonfiglio (2013) points out, imagined communities (in this case, of legitimate speakers) are sustained on exclusionary attributes triggering ethnolinguistic discrimination. If speakers adopt unattainable speaker models set up as hegemonic, and internalize the norms discriminating against them, they end up blaming themselves for not measuring up, not realizing they have fallen into a trap that goes far beyond them as individuals. For younger generations to realize that language



shame is a social construct rather than an individual flaw, we must take the debate to the classroom, so they become aware that linguistic ideologies exist and understand that much of what they feel, which they believe is something individual, is, in fact, the consequence of a complex social framework to which they do not have to give in, but which they can stand up to.

## 4 Moving forward (and bumps ahead)

To construct a sociolinguistic order that does not dent the subjectivities of peripheralized speakers, the inherently social nature of language stigmatization should be brought to light. Otherwise, the individual experience of shame is likely to undermine attempts at mobilizing agency, deactivating the urge to fight shaming. To do so, making visible the role of language in the creation and reproduction of inequalities can help challenge the conception of language as an idealized abstraction. Unlike other forms of segregation, linguistic discrimination has not yet taken shape in social discourse and therefore, even now the fight against inequality is at the forefront of the agenda, few could explain what linguistic injustice is. Paradoxically, everyone has witnessed, if not experienced firsthand, a situation when they have felt excluded because of the way they spoke. However, when discussing inequality, we never tend to put the focus on language. Such invisibility makes people remain unaware that there are, in fact, language-mediated inequalities, and that contributes to making those who suffer such inequalities blame themselves.

Few things are as intimately ours as shame, so much we tend to hide it because we attribute guilt to ourselves. But we should wonder why so many different people experience such similar problems. Do they all have a problem, or are they facing prejudices underpinned by ideologies of which they should not remain unaware? That is, is language shame a private problem, or is it a structural problem in disguise we should contribute to unmasking so as not to continue to feed it? Addressing inequality requires applying the concepts of critical pedagogy not only to gender and sexual orientation, race and class, but also to language, first-language contexts included.

### 4.1 From awareness to agency

Autobiographic narratives (Council of Europe 2020; Miyahara 2015; Nunan and Choi 2010; Pavlenko 2007) have proven a powerful tool with which to visibilize language as a source of discrimination and an optimal platform for detecting the presence of detrimental ideologies. In our research project, we decided to probe their potential

outside of class, in a workshop on sociolinguistic justice co-organized with an anti-racist student association. We knew some of its members as students of the degree described above and proposed a joint reflective activity. The workshop was attended by 6 students and 4 researchers. An excerpt from the online interaction allows us to advance the line of argument. So far, it has been argued awareness of ideologies is necessary to overcome language shame, and that to do so, ideologies must be explicitly addressed in the curriculum. Next, a second element in the process of dismantling language-mediated emotional harm will be presented: empathy as a catalyst for agency. Before Fragment 7 occurred, the participants had been recalling painful language-related experiences. As they listened to their pals, some realized they had enjoyed a privileged situation without even realizing it. Suddenly, they felt ashamed, to the point of not wanting to tell their autobiography, arguing not to have anything to say. At once, those who had been harmed urged them not to blame themselves. Below, Student 1, from Galicia (a region in northwest Spain where a minoritized language is spoken) points out that linguistic injustice is something everyone should know about. Student 2, from Madrid, who was reluctant to tell her story dismissing it as uninteresting, justifies herself by explaining she wanted to make room for those who had experienced unfair situations, but she is told not to feel guilty: “You’ve literally never been told”, her pal says, while Student 3, of Peruvian descent, points out that although some of them have been hurt, those who have been spared are not to blame, especially if trying to be part of the solution.

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| Fragment 7 | <p>Estudiante 1. Me sigue dando pena que se considere que solo es interesante para hablantes de lenguas minorizadas y no hegemónicas. Porque es un conocimiento que creo que debería ser accesible para todas en general. Porque convivimos, vaya.</p> <p>Estudiante 2. Totalmente. A ver, yo cuando he dicho eso es porque no he vivido quizá ese, eso que podéis haber vivido otras personas o ese sentimiento de, de decir, joe, igual dar más voz a vosotros que lo habéis vivido más, pero sí.</p> | <p>Student 1. I still feel sorry it is considered interesting only for speakers of minoritized and non-hegemonic languages. Because it is a knowledge I think should be accessible to everyone at large. Because we live together, don't we?</p> <p>Student 2. Totally. I mean, when I said that, it is because maybe I haven't experienced that, what other people, you may have experienced, or that feeling of, of saying, shoot, maybe I should give more voice to you who have experienced it more, but yeah.</p> |
|------------|---|--|

Estudiante 1. No, no, si yo entiendo tu, tu punto. Y, o sea, de verdad que lo entiendo y que coincido, pero al mismo tiempo creo que no deberías sentir culpa porque realmente tú ya has mostrado interés y es difícil llegar ahí cuando, es que, literalmente nunca te lo han enseñado. O sea, igual a mí que esto me interese no es porque yo sea, ¿sabes?, como moralmente superior por hablar otra lengua.

Estudiante 3. Es que [...] obviamente que hay personas más afectadas, también afecta esto a las personas que, digamos, viven en estos sitios en los que supuestamente están beneficiadas y que están beneficiadas parcialmente. Pero les hace también como cargar con este yugo de, como si ellos hubieran diseñado este sistema. para nada [...] [...] y menos si toman parte de este tipo de espacios.

Student 1. No, no, I, I get your, your point. And, I mean, I really get it and I agree, but at the same time, I think you shouldn't feel guilty because really, you've already shown interest and it's hard to get there when you've literally never been told. I mean, maybe, I'm not interested in this because I'm, you know, like, morally superior for speaking another language.

Student 3. The thing is [...] obviously there are people who are more affected, this also affects those who, let's say, live in these places where they are supposedly benefited and who are partially benefited. But it makes them also kind of carry this yoke of, as if they had designed this system. And not at all [...] even less so if they take part in this type of space.

As the student opening this dialog points out, the knowledge constructed in the interaction (where personal experiences had been analyzed under the light of language ideologies) is often not part of the knowledge pool of university students. This is a missed opportunity both for marginalized students and for those who speak hegemonic languages and varieties. Realizing the extent of their privilege, Student 2 promptly expresses empathy, quickly shared by every participant in the budding epistemic community. When speakers show vulnerability and exhibit the language-related emotional harm they have experienced, empathetic processes often occur that, coupled with reflexivity, may become a driver for change. At the end of this workshop, in fact, the students asked the research team for a resource kit with which to replicate the session outside the university, since they thought it had healing power. It seems worthwhile to further investigate what promotes agency, whether it

is awareness of the role of language in inequality production or experiencing first-hand one can alleviate the ordeal of others. Transdisciplinary research is also needed to transfer progress made in other fields to linguistics. In psychology, for instance, three main approaches to dealing with stigma have been described: education (to counteract underlying ignorance), protest (to raise awareness), and contact (to alleviate suffering through interaction). Of these, the contact strategy, combined with education, has proven to be the most effective formula (Matteo and You 2012). Both are present when discussing language biographies in collaborative settings.

## 4.2 Bumps ahead

Time and again, in class and out of class, I have witnessed how sharing intimate testimonials often generates empathy, which leads to more and more testimonials and to a feeling of empowerment that moves students to want to do something to resist the linguistic violence they have either witnessed or experienced. Unfortunately, the road to agency is much less expedient. Among the difficulties educators must expect, the first is limited time. Students graduate and disappear, so we must try to make an impact quickly, in the hope it will be the embryo of something down the road. The second difficulty is that emotionally-driven awareness-raising can only be done on a small scale. Although facts can be explained to a large audience, changing feelings from a stage seems unlikely. To mobilize agency and stance, something must touch the audience and that happens with emotions, but emotions cannot be handled in bulk.

The third and most challenging difficulty is the very fact that what we feel is, precisely, shame, which makes it difficult for someone to realize the problem is not within them, as individuals, but social. Academia has long known emotions to be a cultural construct, but no one will be easily convinced that the shame they feel *within* is not *their* problem, and this is where the whale bites its tail. Language is a mask that whitewashes rejections that otherwise could not be verbalized. In making rejection more palatable, the individual wrapping of shame whitewashes the essentially social nature of inequality and, in bringing the problem to the level of the inner self, prevents the mobilization of resources that could fight it.

Individual shame does not mobilize any action but rather paralyzes, but what if all those individual feelings of shame were to surface and be shared? Empathy could act as a catalyst, as in the #MeToo movement. However, as long as it remains within the private sphere, individual unrest will not challenge the status quo. Therefore, it is not so surprising to learn that Spain, a highly medicalized society where unrest is seldom channeled collectively, is the country with the highest number of benzodiazepine prescriptions in the world (UN 2021). Although it is difficult to imagine a

scenario in which speakers claim their right not to feel ashamed, classrooms remain a platform from which to let students know if they are bullied because of their way of speaking, it is not because there is anything wrong with it. Once they know it is not “their fault”, it is up to them to decide what to do, stick to the standard or not, change “their accent” or not, but not blindly. “Knowing” will not stop people from feeling ashamed, not overnight at least. But with a repeated process of thinking about something people can, in fact, imagine it differently, and finally, feel it differently. After all, that is the basis of cognitive-behavioral theory.

## 5 Concluding remarks

The years I have spent studying language change have taught me three requirements are needed for any change to occur. The first is time itself, as the process needs consolidation. This never happens overnight, so contesting language shame, if it happens, will take long because (i) understanding facts does not make emotions change, at least not suddenly; (ii) unlearning is more difficult than learning, especially to feel; and (iii) shame is not only an individual but also a social problem, so the solution must be both individual and collective. The second requirement is that there are at least two options. Otherwise, there is no choice and, therefore, no change is possible. When we raise awareness of the ideologies underlying language shame, we create alternatives that make change possible. However, the aim is not to increase individual confidence. As in any process of language change, the listener, who is becoming more and more salient, is as relevant as the speaker. Therefore, collective ideologies should be challenged so they become resources speakers and listeners use for languaging, not an obstacle. This can only happen through critical language education that fosters awareness. As Randolph and Johnson (2017: 108) put it, “[c]ritical pedagogy teaches students to become aware of how learning is constrained by ideologies embedded in language, social habits, and cultural forms that combine to shape the way we think about the world. These ideologies appear on the surface to be common sense, just the way things are, rather than structures that are deliberately skewed in favor of the powerful”. Although research in this area is scarce, Dragojevic et al. (2021: 69) claim, “both macro-institutional and individual-based interventions appear to have promise”, adding: “increased attention to the causal mechanisms underlying language attitudes (explanation) can facilitate the design and implementation of more effective interventions (change), which, in turn, can help reduce language-based prejudice and discrimination (consequences)”.

The third requirement for a process of change to occur is a trigger, a confluence of factors that sets the process in motion. This trigger will vary from one context to another since the beliefs materializing processes of shame will be different in

different places and at different times. A careful process of localization will therefore be necessary to unpack the beliefs to be unlearned in each specific context. However, in all contexts, it will be necessary to focus on the social, rather than individual, nature of the genesis of shame. Shame is inseparable from the notion of adequacy, which we learn socially, and which is based on norms rewarding homogeneity. Thus, any deviation from the yardstick sanctioned as “adequate” will trigger feelings of inferiority. Even without explicit humiliation by language *vigilantes*, the evocation of the norm is enough to damage the subjectivity of those who do not fit the mold in which they believe they “should” fit. However, that the process is often experienced in solitude should not lead us to believe it is something individual and therefore it is sufficient to modify individual attitudes to deal with it. On the contrary, to counteract it, the first step is to understand it is a process of discrimination, a social phenomenon by definition, and, therefore, to deactivate it, entire social structures must be redesigned.

In short, it is a matter of defusing the influence of the “monitoring gaze of a society constructed by homogeneous norms” in which humiliation “can be understood as a power strategy, as a form of reproduction of power structures and conditions of adequacy” (Magyar-Haas 2020: 58). Any attempts to broaden the range of speaker models should therefore highlight that linguistic shaming is not an individual, but a structural phenomenon. According to Ahmed (2015), the process of repetitively associating feelings with certain individuals who frequently experience them eliminates the connection between the emotion and the social and material conditions of its production and circulation and, as a result, a social emotion comes to be perceived as an individual quality. However, as Song (2018: 459) claims, “while social structure affects the emotional response and the construction of anxiety, understanding that this is the case may reverse the pattern”. To this end, linguistic biographies can be a useful tool, as they help to bring to light ideologies that, once exposed, can be analyzed. Sharing them with others also helps to mobilize emotions that can act as whistleblowers alerting speakers of the need to embark on a path of transformation, hence becoming catalysts for change.

This paper has presented the voices of students recounting the shame they suffered for the way they spoke and the impact it had on their subjectivities. After discussing how, although shame is felt as an individual emotion, it has a social genesis, we analyze how agency (often approached also from an individual perspective) seems to be mobilized in the presence of empathy, an emotion that requires interaction and thus transcends the individual level. It is therefore worth paying more attention both to the affective dimension and to the way in which models of speakerhood blend the individual with the collective, or not, to counteract the entrenchment of monolingual ideologies centered on an idealized speaker of a standardized, hegemonic variety that has displaced the vast majority of speakers

outside the core, making them feel inadequate. It is high time to bring to the forefront the emotional wounds stigmatizing heterogeneity because without emotional well-being, there is no agency, and without agency, there is no social justice. Homogeneity, while providing the perfect setting for exercising distinction, harms individuals who blame themselves for not speaking well enough. It is a “perpetual falling short of the imagined ideal of “perfect” homogeneous English” that accounts for psychological damages such as self-marginalization, self-vindication, loss of social belonging, and social withdrawal (Piller 2016: 203).

Undoubtedly, not speaking certain languages or varieties will always close doors, and speakers should know this. But they should also be aware of the ideological context framing the shame they feel, or make others feel, so they can destabilize the structure that makes countless speakers self-conscious. Language shame reveals self-loathing as a response to stereotyping and prejudice and, as such, is amenable to being deconstructed through language education. As Canagarajah and Dovchin (2019) put it, by discouraging shame educators can help students “understand the transgressive nature of their practices [and] critically analyze dominant language ideologies”, hence providing them with opportunities to wrestle with internalized values and beliefs. Linguistic attitudes cannot be taught, but they are in fact learned, and should therefore be part of the curriculum so the clash between repertoires, ideologies, and emotions does not continue to harm speakers at an individual and collective level.

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