

Traces of Coloniality in Colombia's Linguistic Landscape: A Multimodal Analysis of Language Centers' English Advertisements

Traços do colonialismo no cenário linguístico da Colômbia: uma análise multimodal dos anúncios em inglês dos centros de idiomas

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ABSTRACT: English has spread throughout the world and with it the number of language centers (LCs) selling not just English courses, but also colonial views of English as the language of being, knowledge and power through a myriad of linguistic landscape (LL) resources. Parting from this assumption and framed on decolonial and LL theories, this multisite case study set out to investigate the colonial mechanisms and ideological strategies employed by English LCs located in Bogotá and Medellín (Colombia) to present English this way, and how these were actually put in place. Data for the study included pictures of the façades of 15 LCs located in these cities. These were analyzed using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) framework for multimodal analysis. Results suggest that LCs use a series of colonial mechanisms and ideological strategies, such as epistemic violence, homogenization, and legitimation, which are put in place through the use of different semiotic resources.

KEYWORDS: English; language centers; coloniality; decoloniality; ideologies; linguistic landscapes.

RESUMO: O inglês se espalhou pelo mundo e com ele o número de centros de idiomas (LCs) que vendem não apenas cursos de inglês, mas também visões coloniais do inglês como a língua do ser, do conhecimento e do poder por meio de uma infinidade de recursos de paisagem linguística (LL). Partindo dessa perspectiva, com base nas teorias decoloniais e LL, este estudo de caso multissite se propôs a investigar quais foram os mecanismos coloniais e as estratégias ideológicas empregadas pelas LCs inglesas localizadas em Bogotá e Medellín (Colômbia) para apresentar o inglês dessa maneira, e de que forma tais estratégias foram construídas. Os dados para o estudo incluíram fotos das fachadas de 15 LCs localizadas nessas cidades. Estes foram analisados usando ferramentas propostas por Kress e van Leeuwen (2001) para análise multimodal. Os resultados sugerem que as LCs utilizam uma série de mecanismos coloniais



e estratégias ideológicas, como violência epistêmica, homogeneização e legitimação, que são postas em prática por meio do uso de diferentes recursos semióticos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: inglês; centros de línguas; colonialidade; decolonialidade; ideologias; paisagens linguísticas.

1 Introduction

English has spread throughout the world at such a pace that it is now conceived as the language of the “new work order” (Gee; Hull; Lankshear, 2018, p. xiii). Responding to this spread, and to international pressures by corporations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in the last two decades, many Latin American countries such as Chile, Ecuador and Mexico have changed their language policies to make English the language taught in schools and universities (González; Llurda, 2017).

These mandates have created an unprecedented need for English across these countries, which many private and public organizations are filling by opening language centers (LCs). This is one of the reasons why, by 2019, Colombia had more than 757 LCs spread throughout the country, especially in main cities such as Bogotá and Medellín (*Ministerio de Educación Nacional [MEN], 2019*). These centers, also called language institutes, academies, and schools, are all part of what is now called the Institutions for Work and Human Development (*Instituciones para el Trabajo y el Desarrollo Humano*), which is a title given to institutions that “offer work preparation or academic programs which are flexible and cohesive with the needs and expectations of people, society, labor market and productive sector demands” (MEN, 2020, our translation).

The centers are so numerous that they now fill the linguistic landscape (LL) of main cities with their myriad advertisements in the form of billboards, door displays, window displays, façades, posters, and so on. Below are some examples.¹

Figure 1 – Door Display in Mall in Medellín



Source: Personal archive.

Figure 2 – Window Display in Medellín



Source: Personal archive.

¹ The names of the LCs have been blurred to comply with anonymity regulations for publication of images from websites.

As most advertisements, these do not merely sell a product, in this case, English packages. They also sell ideologies of English and what it can provide to its users: a different mindset, travel, prestige and so on. These ideologies are very much in line with those imparted by the Colombian government through its web pages and various forms of communication (*e.g.*, forums, memos, notices, online short articles, PowerPoint presentations), in which English is presented as the language that will provide status and allow citizens to be more competitive in the global market, as reflected in the following quote:

Being bilingual is essential in a globalized world. The use of a second language means being able to communicate better, open borders, understand other contexts, appropriate knowledge and make it circulate, understand and make ourselves understood, enrich ourselves and play a decisive role in the development of the country. Being bilingual means having more knowledge and opportunities to be more competent and competitive, and to improve the quality of life for all citizens (MEN, 2005, our translation).

The ideologies are also aligned with those criticised by decolonial literature (Quijano, 2014), which proposes that Anglo-Europeans construct themselves as “the self” and everyone else as “the other”. In this unequal relationship “the self” is superior to “the other” in all matters (Quijano, 2014). Indeed, in these advertisements, people who do not know English are positioned as the ones who are still not complete, still not in possession of all the knowledge and things to which they could aspire.

This is highly problematic if we consider the great potential that LL resources have to influence people’s minds and behaviors. As Shohamy and Waksman (2009, p. 326) point out, LLs construct meanings but also “manipulate” them using a variety of devices. These devices include key compositional aspects of texts, such as color, placement, angle, and frame lines (Kress; Van Leeuwen, 2006). However, they also include a series of ideological strategies (Thompson, 1984) and “colonial mechanisms” (Pulido-Tirado, 2009; Ávila Pacheco, 2010; Zárata, 2014), such as dissimulation, reification, legitimation and normalization (ideological strategies), epistemic violence, whitening and homogenization (colonial mechanisms), which will be described in the theoretical framework.

Despite their potential to influence people’s minds, LCs have not really been studied in relation to how they do this or the colonial mechanisms that they employ to do it. Indeed, a review of studies on LCs conducted in the last ten years worldwide reveals that these studies have focused on various topics such as LC teachers’ beliefs (Ghasemolandi; Hashim, 2013); teaching practices and styles (Faruji, 2012; Kazemi; Soleimani, 2016; Osorio; Insuasty, 2015; Pishghadam; Saboori, 2011; Raja, 2013); students’ motivations and levels of satisfaction (Giao, 2018; Saqlain; Islam, 2014); and students’ beliefs and preferences in terms of teachers (Fragozo; Monawar, 2012), methodologies (Khattak *et al.*, 2011), learning environments (Jannati; Marzban, 2015) and LCs themselves (Haghighi; Norton, 2016). They have not focused on the LL resources produced by these centers, or the mechanisms used by them to present English as the language to be learned. In fact, we only found two studies on LCs that reflect a similar interest: the study conducted by Brito, Guilherme and Costa (2017) on the discourse of publicity of foreign LCs in Brazil, and the one conducted by Nuske (2019) on the ideologies of English constructed in conversational school advertisements in Japan. However, these studies had wider objectives: to explore the type of discourses that inform advertisements on web sites and to uncover “the visual and verbal elements through which particular ideologies of English proficiency and its benefits are constructed” (Nuske, 2019, p. 1).

As for LL studies, the review reveals that there are plenty on English in the LL of countries such as Costa Rica, Congo, South Korea, Morocco, Wales, and of cities such as Mallorca, Addis Ababa, Suzhou, Amsterdam, Brussels, and Medellín. However, these studies are mainly focused on other issues, such as the English language occurrence or presence (Buckingham, 2018; Edelman; Gorter, 2010; Lawrence, 2012; Mora *et al.*, 2016, 2018), how it interacts with other languages (Bruyel-Olmedo; Juan-Garau, 2009; Coupland, 2012), its purposes (Kazanga, 2012; Lanza; Woldemariam, 2014; Mora *et al.*, 2016; Vandembroucke, 2016), or the particular features of the language (Sergeant, 2012; Songqing, 2015; Mora *et al.*, 2018).

Finally, in spite of the growing interest by scholars in exploring the coloniality of English, studies on colonial/decolonial discourses and practices in ELT – at least those that can be found in Spanish and English Colombian databases – have also focused on other topics, such as interrogating the relationship between coloniality/decoloniality and pre-service teacher education (González, 2007; Jordao, 2016; Pessoa; Silvestre; Borelli, 2019; Roux, 2019), problematizing the coloniality of the ELT field *per se* (London, 2001; Castañeda-Londoño, 2019) and investigating coloniality/decoloniality in language policy (Hurie, 2018; Silva Pardo, 2019; Rodríguez, Edviges; Miller, 2019) and in ELT practices in the classroom (Estacio, 2017; Hsu, 2015; White, 2019).

Given this gap and the tremendous influence that LL resources may have on the collective minds of people, scholars from two different cities and universities in Colombia joined together to design a multisite case study which intended to respond to the following questions: (a) what are the colonial mechanisms and ideological strategies employed by English LCs located in Bogotá and Medellín (Colombia) to present English as the language of being, knowledge and power?, and (b) how are these actually put into place? To respond to these questions, a series of pictures of LC façades were collected and analyzed using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) framework for multimodal analysis. The following sections provide details about the theories on which the study is based, the methodology used, the results of the study, and some conclusions and implications.

2 Linguistic and Decolonial Theories

This study draws on two main bodies of theories: LL theories and decolonial theories of language. The following subsections provide a brief overview of some of the key concepts drawn from each.

2.1 LL Theories

LL is a field that focuses on the study of multiple modes, such as sounds, images and graffiti (Pennycook; Morgan; Kubota, 2013, p. x); and on multiple media, such as billboards, signs, graffiti and “all sorts of other inscriptions” (Blommaert, 2013, p. 1) located in the public space of both urban and rural areas. For LL scholars, it is important to explore these resources not only ethnographically, but also locally, historically, and in relation to mobility (Pennycook *et al.*, 2013, p. xii), as they tell a lot about the ideologies of the

people that inhabit those places, as well as how these “are continually being contested and renegotiated” (Moriarty, 2014, p. 464). Besides, they can provide a window into people’s identities, beliefs and the different agendas they hold, and how these “are battled, negotiated, and dictated” (Shohamy; Waksman, 2009, p. 321). Nonetheless, LL texts are not only reflective of these aspects. They also create them. This is why it is important to analyze the socio-historical, political and cultural contexts of LL texts as well as the purposes, beliefs, ideologies, and discourses behind them (Pennycook, 2009).

Although, as mentioned in the introduction, LL studies on English have focused on other aspects, some of these studies have reported the use of the colonial mechanisms mentioned above, namely those of homogenization, legitimation and normalization. In a study on strategies used by both proponents and opponents of legitimating South Estonian in LL texts such as national dailies and weeklies, local papers, and professional and academic periodicals, Koreinik (2011), for example, found that several (de)legitimation strategies were used by opponents of the initiative, including authorization, instrumental rationalization, iconization, erasure, and intergroup polarization by negative other-presentation. Similarly, in a study on the creation of a linguistic identity in the public space of the city of Harar in Ethiopia, Yigezu and Blackwood (2016) found that, through the use of symbols, external agents such as UNICEF and UNESCO “not only authenticate the message of the text, but also legitimize both the practice of using Harari in the public space and, by extension, the part that the Harari language plays in Harari identity” (Yigezu; Blackwood, 2016, p. 138).

As for processes of cultural and linguistic homogenization, these are reported in the studies conducted by Alomoush and Al-Na’imat (2018) and by Kelly-Holmes (2010). In their study of commercial and touristic settings at the Arab Middle Eastern city of Petra (Jordan), Alomoush and Al-Na’imat (2018) found that in spite of the many international languages featured in the LL of the city, English had become a symbol of development, modern social norms, and open-mindedness, becoming the main spreader of colonial ideologies and cultural homogenization. Kelly-Holmes (2010), on the other hand, in a study on McDonald’s “i’m lovin’ it” international campaign, discovered that the campaign simultaneously propitiated homogenization and heterogenization through the use of a series of strategies, including those of differentiation (the creation of a “unique selling proposition” for a brand or product) and segmentation (dividing up global markets and consumers in order to create smaller markets that are loyal to this differentiated product or brand) (Kelly-Holmes, 2010, p. 478).

Finally, the use of normalization is seen in the LL studies conducted by Gorter, Aiestaran, and Cenoz (2012) and Lado (2011). In a study about how the languages used in signs posted in Donostia/San Sebastián, in the Basque country, were related to language policy, Gorter, Aiestaran, and Cenoz (2012) observed that the process of ‘normalization’ of the minority language was tackled mainly through the imposition of norms for the recognition and use of the language – an effort that basically failed since Spanish continues to be the dominant language. Similarly, in a study that investigated whether the LL in the Valencian Community reveals the linguistic and ideological conflicts of the area, Lado (2011) noticed that efforts made by the government to normalize Valencian, the minority language, through the promotion of the language in schooling, secessionist ideas, and Catalan-based rules, also failed for the same reason.

2.2 Decolonial Theories of Language

The study draws on Pennycook's (1998) work on the relationship between English and coloniality and on the ideas of some decolonial Latin American scholars. In his book *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*², Pennycook (1998) collects a great deal of discourses and discourse practices to unveil how English and colonialism are intertwined. One of his main arguments is that colonialism is itself a site for cultural production, which means that it is in the complex web of relationships between the colonizer and the colonized that discourses and practices are produced. In other words, it is not that, by means of colonization, discourses and practices are introduced to the colonies, but that they are actually developed there. The colonizer needs the colonized and it is only there, in the construction of the self and of the other, that colonialism takes shape. This understanding of colonialism challenges the concept that colonialism has to do exclusively with economic and political exploitation.

Prior to Pennycook's work, Latin American authors such as Mignolo (2011), Dussel (2003), Escobar (1998), Grosfoguel (2007), Maldonado-Torres (2011), Lander (2003), and others started to problematize the binary construction of the world from a Western perspective. Their very first discussions, in the 1990s, gave rise to what is known as the "decolonial turn". This is a set of epistemological positions that challenge western views of the world and proclaim that the end of colonial administrations did not do away with coloniality; therefore, post-coloniality was a fallacy. According to Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel (2007, p. 13, our translation), Latin America switched from "modern colonialism" to "global coloniality", which was facilitated by how countries from the center re-organized labor relationships with the peripheries, how they established racial and ethnic hierarchies, and how these were maintained by supranational organizations like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, among others. In this global coloniality, the Western/capitalist/modern/patriarchal/colonial world-system divides the world in whites/non-whites, where the whites are associated with development, power, and enlightenment, and the non-whites with underdevelopment, pre-modernity, and ignorance. These representations of the self and the other have legitimized the various forms in which global colonialism takes place and is reproduced even by the elites in the countries of the periphery, constituting what González Casanova (1965) called "internal colonialism".

At this point, it is important to establish the difference between colonialism and coloniality. The former refers to a political and economic relationship where the sovereignty of a nation resides in another nation. Colonialism precedes coloniality. The latter, on the contrary, refers to a pattern of power that emerged from colonialism. It is not limited to a power relationship between two nations but also to the way labor, knowledge, authority, and intersubjective relations are articulated through a world capitalist market and the idea of race (Ávila Pacheco, 2010; Quijano, 2014). Coloniality survives colonialism and is still in place.

The asymmetrical structure between colonizers and colonized, along with the Western/ capitalist/modern/patriarchal/colonial world-system construction of the world, gives rise to the "coloniality of power" (Quijano, 2014). This is a phenomenon through which dominant countries organize the international labor market around a racial/ethnic hierarchy where "superior races' occupy high-paid jobs while inferior

² Note that Pennycook is using here "Colonialism" as a synonym of "Coloniality" which, as will be seen below, is quite different in the decolonial turn.

“races carry out the most coercive and worst remunerated jobs” (Castro-Gómez; Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 16, our translation). It is fed by at least three forms of coloniality: the coloniality of knowing, being, and power. The coloniality of knowing is produced through “the generation, administration, and distribution of knowledge” (Zárate, 2014, p. 103) by powerful countries. Indeed, they have the means not only to produce knowledge but also to impose it over less powerful ones. The coloniality of being is realized through the construction of the “other” as unintelligent, savage, and inferior, and through the construction of their feelings, beliefs, and practices as irrelevant. According to Zárate (2014), once the “other” accepts and naturalizes this construction, the “being” has been colonized or placed in the zone of non-being. Finally, the coloniality of power is achieved through control of the economy, the international division of work, salaries, labor market, employment, and hiring conditions, among others. These are subtle ways in which powerful countries and powerful supranational groups naturalize the capitalist ideas about the distribution of goods among people. Once people accept them as given, the coloniality of having takes place (Quijano, 2014).

To achieve these forms of coloniality, dominant groups use different, and in many cases subtle, colonial mechanisms, such as the following:

Epistemic violence: The arrival of the Spanish conquerors to the Americas was characterized by the physical violence they exerted over the native inhabitants of this territory. However, that was not the only form of violence. They also exerted epistemic violence, which is characterized by the invisibilization of the “other” and their ways of knowing through different forms of oppression and domination. Those initial forms of epistemic violence did not cease with the independence movements. On the contrary, they have found new ways to perpetuate inequality and legitimize other forms of violence such as symbolic violence, cultural violence, and structural violence, all of them with different degrees of subtleness (Pulido-Tirado, 2009).

Whitening: According to Ávila Pacheco (2010), the modern/colonial/capitalist/patriarchal world-system has not only constructed, in a clearly differentiated hierarchy, the places of the world as center vs periphery but also as white vs nonwhite. This racial construction has expanded into other forms of “whitening” that have to do with displacing ways of being and knowing of the non-white and imposing those of the white.

Homogenization/Assimilation: This mechanism can be defined as the process by which a dominant culture, using its economic, social and political power, assimilates another. Cultures are by nature heterogeneous, diverse, multiple, and their richness resides in these aspects. However, cultural contact always ends in asymmetrical relationships (Zárate, 2014). By means of homogenization, particular traits and practices of one culture are erased and replaced by the new one. In decolonial terms, people from local cultures are led to rebuild their personal and cultural identity according to the western model, and to lose their selves, their essence, and their sense of belonging.

These colonial mechanisms are very similar and can be said to complement Thompson’s (1984) ideological strategies. Based on Seliger (1976), Thompson (1984, p. 78) describes ideologies as “action-oriented sets of beliefs which are organized into coherent systems” that guide political actions, and basically rule the lives of individuals and societies. According to him, to spread these ideologies, people use three main strategies:

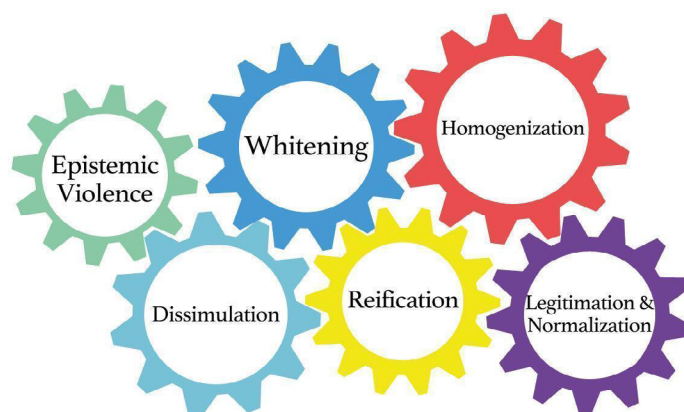
Legitimation: Drawing on Thompson (1984), Janks (2010, p. 37) describes this as “the process by which relations of domination may be established and maintained”. Its objective is to demonstrate the legitimacy of its claims, and to do so, it appeals to three kinds of processes: (a) rationalization, which consists of providing an argument followed by a set of reasonings to justify something; (b) universalization, which is used by privileged groups to present themselves as interested in serving the interests of the majority, and (c) narrativization, which implies the use of different ways of constructing “stories” that supposedly represent the ways of being of whole groups.

Dissimulation: According to Janks (2010), this is a process that hides the real meaning of dominant groups’ interests or motivations. Citing Thompson (1990), Janks (2010) claims the main discourse strategies for dissimulation are euphemism, displacement, and trope. Euphemism refers to putting in a positive light something that has a negative meaning. Displacement requires changing a word or phrase’s context of use and transferring its original meaning to stand for the opposite. Trope comprises the use of metaphors and metonymy to enhance meaning potential.

Reification: This consists of making people believe that the current state of things is natural because it has always been like this. As stated by Janks (2010, p. 38), “reified things just are – their socio-historical origins are concealed”.

Neither the decolonial mechanisms nor the strategies mentioned above happen in isolation. They happen simultaneously, forming a sort of gear, as seen in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3 – Ideological Strategies and Colonial Mechanisms



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Pulido-Tirado (2009), Ávila Pacheco (2010), Zárte (2014), Thompson (1984), and Janks (2010).

Figure 3 is an attempt to graphically show that, although coming from very different traditions, one from coloniality and the other from ideology, these mechanisms and strategies complement, enhance, and expand each other in a sort of gear where each piece is articulated to the other, and, although at times

one might be more salient than the other, they all function in a dynamic way. That is, the movement of one gives way to the movement of the other. Additionally, the boundaries among them are blurry and difficult to spot. In sum, colonial mechanisms and ideological strategies seem to work as a whole towards a common purpose: the imposition of one particular world view.

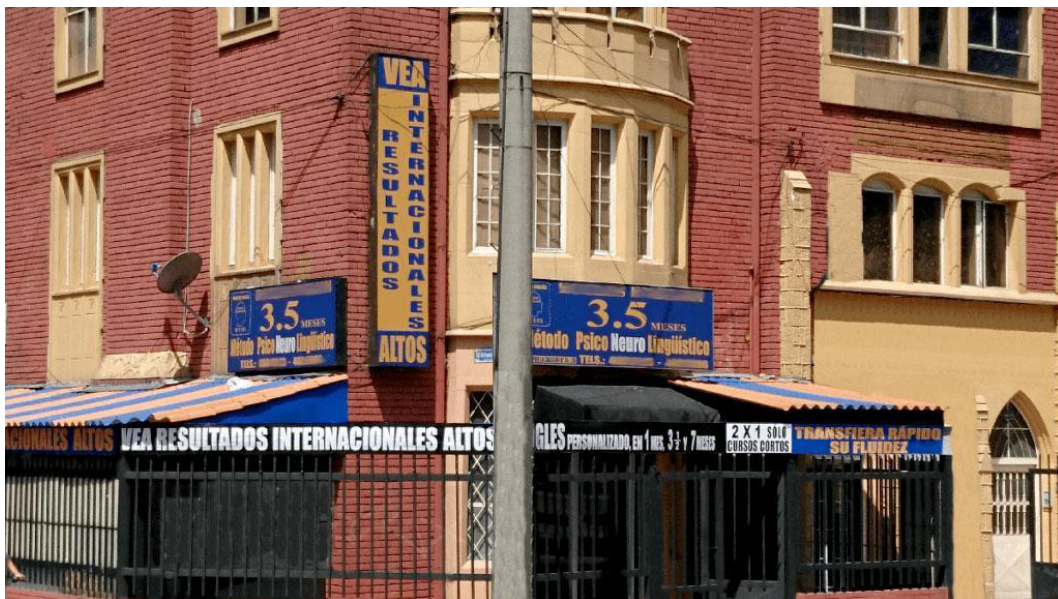
3 Method

The study presented here can be classified as a multiple case study (Yin, 2011), as it analyses a real-life phenomenon (ideological and colonial mechanisms employed by LCs) in multiple sites (15 LCs in Bogotá and Medellín). The following subsections describe the main means used for data collection and analysis.

3.1 Data Collection

Data for this study included pictures of 15 LC's façades. These were often composites of several LL resources (e.g., billboards, banners, window displays and posters), as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 – Pictures Depicting Several LL Resources



Source: Personal archive.

The LCs were located in Medellín (9) and Bogotá (6) and were selected based on convenience, as only those LCs that were of easy and safe access were visited. Of the 15 LCs, seven were located in high class neighborhoods, two in middle class, four in middle-low class, and two downtown. Also, five

claimed to be schools, five academies, three language centers, one an educational institution, and one did not have information in this regard. Finally, despite the difficulty to find the owners of these centers, we were able to confirm that eleven were nationally owned. There is no data for the other four. Besides, since data collection, one LC (LC5) has abruptly closed its doors and one has been disavowed by *Secretaria de Educación del Distrito* (SED) in Bogotá, which published an article warning about the unlawful use of its name by the center (SED, 2016). Table 1 summarizes the LCs characteristics.

Table 1 – Break Down of LCs Analyzed

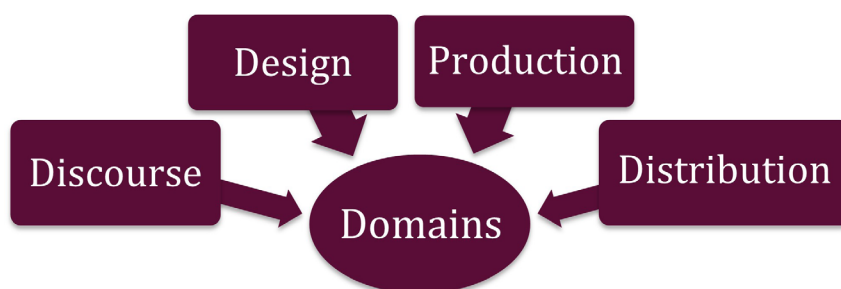
Centers	City	Neighborhoods	Type of institution	National or international
15 LCs	6 Bogotá 9 Medellín	7 High class 2 Middle class 4 Middle-low class 2 Downtown	5 Schools 5 Academies 3 Centers 1 Institute 1 does not say	11 National 4 unknown

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) framework for Multimodal Discourse Analysis. The framework assumes that all texts are multimodal in nature, which means that in them, meaning is articulated through different semiotic modes such as sound, text, color, images, textures, etc. As such, it proposes to analyze pieces holistically, *i.e.*, looking at all semiotic modes as connected, not separated from each other, and as jointly contributing to meaning-making. In addition, it invites analysts to consider context, history and power relationships (Kress; Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 10) and to look at four different domains: *Discourse, Design, Production, and Distribution*. Discourse refers to the ideas, beliefs, and concepts that are transmitted through a text. Design has to do with the way the different elements of the text (*e.g.*, frame lines, colors, shapes, shots, angles, distance, position) work together to convey the message. Production is the actualization of the design, or how it takes tangible shape. Finally, distribution refers to the way the piece is preserved and distributed (Kress; Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 87).

Figure 5 – Framework for Multimodal Analysis



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001).

Following this framework, we distributed the images among the authors of this article and made individual analyses of the ideological strategies and colonial mechanisms that we saw taking place in each image, trying to take into account elements from each of the domains. These findings were recorded in a chart that contained all the images and mechanisms. Once the chart was completed, we got together to discuss the analysis made by each author of the assigned images, to make sure that we were carrying out a similar kind of analysis, and to help each other see aspects that one might have missed. Then, we corrected the chart and proceeded to write our findings. These findings are presented in the following section.

4 Colonial Mechanisms, Ideological Strategies and Semiotic Resources Used by the LCs

The analysis of pictures allowed us to make two important discoveries regarding the two main research questions. First, all of the colonial mechanisms and ideological strategies explained above are present in the analyzed pictures, with rare exceptions. Second, they are put in place through the use of different semiotic resources. The following subsections illustrate these findings.

4.1 Colonial Mechanisms and Ideological Strategies Present in LL resources

Findings suggest the colonial mechanisms and ideological strategies explained above are somehow interweaved in all the analyzed pictures, with one exception. Indeed, there is only one mechanism or strategy that is not evident in two of the analyzed pictures (LCs 8 and 12): legitimization/normalization. That is probably because neither of the two centers made use of any of the common multimodal devices used by other LCs to put the mechanism into place: names such as academy and school, government seals and decree numbers, images of flags or landmarks, dates, and time in the market. Below is an example of the prevalence of all the mechanisms and strategies in the images.

The example comes from LC3, a LC located in a wealthy neighborhood in Medellín, which is indicative of the type of audience this advertisement is intended for: middle and upper middle-class people with sufficient economic capital to pay for the classes and to afford traveling to the Global North. As shown below, the façade of this center is a composite of several LL resources: a big and a smaller banner, a high relief symbol of the world on top of the smaller center's name, a poster, and a window display.

Figure 6 – Example of LC showing all the Colonial Mechanisms and Ideological Strategies



Source: Personal archive.

Together, these LL resources provide a very good example of how LCs make use of all the colonial mechanisms and strategies at their disposal to sell English courses. Let's take the banner on the upper part of the building and the poster in the lower part, for example. The upper part of the façade shows the name of the center, and underneath it, the phrase “inglés rápido y efectivo” (‘quick and effective English’). The phrase seems to serve three different purposes: (a) to confirm the legitimacy instilled by the name, reassuring clients that the English offered is not just of any kind, but the kind that is ‘effective’; (b) to reify the English taught, and (c) to dissimulate other ulterior purposes the center may have for teaching English. Indeed, the words ‘quick and effective’ act as reifiers since they both objectify English and make it sound like some kind of good that can not only be purchased but also obtained over the counter. They also act as dissimulators in at least three ways. First, they suggest that the center’s aim is primarily to teach English when, in fact, as Alarcon (2017) reminds us, all these LCs are primarily about obtaining financial profit and spreading dominant northern ideologies in the southern part of the globe (Ramjattan, 2019). Second, they suggest that learning English is easy and quick, as if learners only needed to enroll in their programs to “acquire” a “good” command of the language. Third, they obscure the economic and intellectual investment needed to learn an additional language, as well as the time required towards this purpose. Ultimately, the words are there to lure potential “customers” into buying LC’s courses because, as stated above, their interest is merely an economic one.

Moving downwards from the above-mentioned phrase, we see a high-relief world symbol surrounded by the words “Metodología LC3” (‘LC3 Methodology’), suggesting that the center has developed its own methodology. The ensemble is repeated in the poster below the symbol and represents, once again, not only epistemic violence but also whitening. It represents the first in the sense that, as pointed out by Kumaravadivelu (2003), the mere concept of method is a colonial concept since it suggests that there is a single best way of teaching/learning English and that way is the one used by this LC. Local ways

of teaching, which to a large extent also come from the Global North, are discarded. It denotes whitening in the sense that it suggests that local non-white ways of knowing and using/learning English do not work and that we need to adopt other ways, namely, those proposed by Americans, British or white people.

Below the high relief world symbol, in the poster, we see the command “estudia inglés” (‘study English’), the phrase “centro de idiomas desde 1970” (‘Language Center since 1970’), and an image of what seems to be three young Caucasian students.

Figure 7 – Zoom in of Poster in LC3’s Façade



Source: Personal archive.

Together, these multimodal resources denote epistemic violence, legitimation, whitening and homogenization, correspondingly. Epistemic violence can be observed in the fact that it is English, not the local languages, which is supposed to allow the center’s users the projection and the personal and professional opportunities to which they aspire. These opportunities are mentioned in the door display next to the poster, through phrases such as “proyéctate para el future” (‘project yourself into the future’) and “brindándote [*sic*] las mejores oportunidades a tu vida personal y profesional” (‘offering the best opportunities for your personal and professional life’). The clear implication from these is that local languages are pretty much useless when it comes to personal and professional advancement. As for legitimation, this is achieved not through the use of an English name, but through a display of the year the LC was founded: 1970. The year suggests that they have a trajectory teaching English and, given the number of years, maybe even the absolute truth in terms of how to teach English. This fact is reinforced in the door display next to the poster through the phrase “45 years of experience”.

Figure 8 – Zoom in of Window Display in LC3's Façade



Source: Personal archive.

In regard to homogenization and whitening, these are achieved through the images of people both on the poster and on the door display next to it. A quick look at the images reveals these are all very similar in their physical complexion: they are all Caucasian, young people, their body shape complies with the Western norm of being slim, fit, and looking well nurtured. Also, their attire seems polished, casual but put together. These young people signal throughout all these elements that they belong to a middle or upper-middle class. Although in Colombia some youngsters could identify with the people in the poster, a lot more could not and are not represented as potential clients. This image follows the pattern of other advertisements in Colombian publicity where the majority of people portrayed are white, young, and wealthy, unless, of course, publicity is addressed to minorities or underprivileged groups; then, phenotypes show indigenous and Afro descendants to index poverty. Here, as in other ads, the idea promoted is that we all can aspire to look white, clean and young like that if we just bought the product being offered, in this case, English. In other words, the images not only homogenize people, their ambitions and the way to fulfill their dreams, they also bleach their projected future image to make it more appealing to the Colombian audience.

The image at the lower part of the door is particularly noteworthy, as a woman in her late 20s or early 30s is shown with a very corporate outfit. Her straight hair is pulled at the back, which is very characteristic of the bodies that have been disciplined according to the aesthetics of the Global North. The image homogenizes potential female clients, telling them this is the aspiration that all of them should have and that could be “achieved” by speaking English. It also fabricates the image of the desirable woman: white, slim, dressed in pastel colors, and with her hair modestly pulled back.

Finally, on the upper part of the door display, we can see the phrases “Te abre las puertas al mundo” (‘It opens the doors to the world for you’), ‘project yourself for the future’, and ‘offering the best opportunities for your personal and professional life’. Meanwhile, at the bottom, we can perceive some seals from the Colombian Institute of Technical Standards and Certification (*Instituto Colombiano de Normas Técnicas y Certificación* – ICONTEC)³. As the phrase ‘quick and effective English’ mentioned above, these phrases also play an important role in the reification of English as a good that can be used to acquire other goods, in this case, access to a world of opportunities, or more explicitly, to a world of privilege, success, money, technology, and so on. The ICONTEC seals play the same role as the phrases ‘45 years of experience’ and ‘language center since 1970’: they confer legitimacy to the center and signal that this institute meets quality standards.

However, when we talk about standards, we enter the field of epistemic violence again, because what is generally taken as the standard is the dominant culture and its ways of being and existing in the world, as evidenced by the use of international English tests rather than local ones in this and all the other LCs. Local knowledge is not even considered as a certification option because local knowledge is completely invalidated.

4.2 Semiotic Resources

A second very revealing finding of this study concerned the kind of semiotic resources that are used to put each of the mechanisms and strategies into place. Below we present a summary of these and some concrete examples from the LCs’ façades pictures.

Epistemic violence, the invisibilization of the “other” and their ways of knowing, is put in place mainly through the use of names, commands, offerings, adjectival phrases used to modify English, and images of people. In terms of the names of the centers, we find that all of them, except for one, have names in English, which suggests an attempt to indicate that the English they teach is not from here but from English-speaking countries, and is therefore, of good quality. Particularly significant among these names is the one adopted by LC5, which openly states that they are originally from an inner circle country, even though the LC was owned by Colombians who ended up defrauding people of their money and closing up suddenly, as reported in a national newspaper⁴, only to open up a new center under a different name. We also find names taken after English-speaking countries, such as that of LC1, which are deceiving since there is not really a particular way of teaching English that can be attached to a country. By suggesting that people learn languages in a unique way, these LCs undermine other western and nonwestern ways of teaching which might be just as or even more efficient. Finally, there are centers, such as LC13, whose name is essentially an appeal to Americans for guidance. These construct Spanish-speaking Colombians as dependent at best and ignorant and backward at worst, while constructing English-speaking people as savvy, the ones who can lead the way and tell you what to do and how.

³ *The Instituto Colombiano de Normas Técnicas y Certificación* (ICONTEC) is a private organization created to certify the quality of companies in different economic sectors.

⁴ Arteaga, J. P. La academia de inglés que dejó “gringos” a más de 800 estudiantes. *El Mundo*, Medellín, jun. 2019. Disponible en: <http://bit.ly/3wby95k>. Acceso en: 1 feb. 2020.

As for commands, expressions such as “understand the world”⁵ by LC2; “be unstoppable, be bilingual” by LC4; “habla inglés” (‘speak English’) by LC9; “sea competitivo” (‘be competitive’) by LC14; “estudia inglés” (‘study English’), “proyéctate para el futuro” (‘project yourself into the future’), “capacítate en un segundo idioma” (‘train yourself in a second language’) by LC3; “actualízate, habla inglés” (‘update yourself, speak English’) and “be happy” by LC7; “descubre un mundo sin fronteras” (‘discover a world without borders’), “da un salto cuántico en tu vida personal” (‘take a quantic jump in your personal life’) by LC5; and “look at the world differently”, “speak a different lingo”, “learn a language, go places” by LC8; all suggest that it is only through English, not through other western or indigenous languages, that people can do or get these things.

Also, although less overtly, epistemic violence is projected in two kinds of offerings. The first offering relates to some supposedly innovative methodologies, such as “Metodología LC3” (‘Methodology LC3’) (LC3), “Metodología y Tecnología CANADIENSES” (‘CANADIAN Methodology and Technology’) (LC14), “Nuevo Método de Aprendizaje” (‘New Learning Method’) (LC6), “Método Inglés Efectivo” (‘Effective English Method’) (LC15), and “Método Psico-Neurolingüístico” (‘Psico-Neurolinguistic Method’) (LC11). These methodologies are each presented as the one true way to learn English, mostly when, as in the case of ‘Methodology LC3’, they appear next to an ICONTEC logo, which is supposed to guarantee standards of quality, or when they are written partly in capital letters as is the case of ‘CANADIAN Methodology and Technology’. The second offering refers to international exams or certifications, as is the case with LCs 6 and 11, which offer “resultados internacionales altos” (‘high international results’) on the TOEFL and TKT tests, correspondingly. By doing so, they feed into the idea that the countries from the inner circle are the ones who own the language and, therefore, the only ones authorized to administer exams or provide language certificates.

Epistemic violence is also carried out through adjectival phrases used to modify English, such as “a world without frontiers” (LC5), “comunicación moderna” (‘modern communication’) (LC7), “tu clave de acceso al mundo” (‘your key to access the world’) (LC13), and “te abre las puertas al mundo” (‘opens the doors to the world for you’) (LC3). All of these phrases suggest that it is English, not any other local or additional language, that can guarantee these benefits. Finally, epistemic violence is evident in images of students with a book in their hands (LC7 and LC9). Such images suggest that only academic knowledge is of value, and other ways of knowing (*e.g.*, experiential, pragmatic, local) are neglectable.

Homogenization, the process through which particular traits and practices of one culture are erased and replaced by the new one, is also achieved through the use of some expressions, particularly commands, but most saliently through the use of colors and people’s images. In terms of commands, we can see that some, such as “understand the world” (LC2) and all the others cited above, assume that people have the same objectives and dreams in life, and that they can all achieve them the same way: by learning English. Proof of this assumption is found in an advertisement for LC5, which explicitly states “aquí materializamos tus sueños” (‘here we make your dreams come true’), indicating that everyone has the same dream. In decolonial terms, through these commands, images and colors, people from local cultures are led not only to speak another language, but to shift their dreams and to rebuild their personal and cultural identities in ways that fit western ideals.

⁵ Phrases that were originally in English were not translated.

As for images of people, homogenization is achieved through both their appearance and their actions. In terms of appearance, we can see that most of the people portrayed are attractive, well-dressed middle-class youngsters who share phenotypes of healthy, happy, and economically well-off people. Although some make an attempt to include different skin colors (LC9), most of them do not (LCs 2, 3, 4, 7, and 12). This suggests an attempt to make people all look the same and to infringe upon them that similarity is better than difference and that by learning English, they are all going to have the same benefits and be as happy, as white, and as educated as the people in the pictures. In terms of actions, most people are portrayed either traveling (LC2), or studying (LCs 3, 7, and 9). This not only sends the message that to travel for pleasure or for study purposes should be everyone's aspiration but also assumes that all young people have the means to make such trips; that is to say, that all young people enjoy economic comfort.

Finally, homogenization is achieved through the use of colors. Indeed, in at least seven of the fifteen centers (LCs 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, and 12), white, blue and red predominate, signaling alignment not only with the UK and US flags but with certain values associated with these countries, such as cleanness, purity, order (white), warmth, energy, salience (red) and higher status, divinity and calm (blue) (Machin, 2016). The colors invite everyone to adopt these same values, which are in sharp contrast with those held by people from the south (*e.g.*, messiness, colorfulness, excitement), as reflected in their façades, clothing, ads, graffiti, and so on.

Whitening, the strategy of imposing those ways of being and knowing of the white and displacing those of the non-white, is also presented in prompts to learn English such as those described above, as these prompts urge people to learn the language of those in power so that they can be as successful. In addition, whitening is noticed in images of people with phenotypes (*e.g.*, white skin, blond hair, blue eyes, tall, skinny) that do not correspond to those of most Colombians, as the images represent the aspiration that they need to have and which they would only get if they spoke English. This is particularly evident in the image from LC12, a center in a low-middle class neighborhood in Bogotá. The advertisement shows how through learning English, and not just any variety of English but the variety spoken in this LC, people from the neighborhood can achieve the clothes, the physical appearance, and the lifestyle of the people in the picture.

There is also whitening in the offerings of the supposed innovative methods mentioned above, and in the offering of international exams (LCs 6, 10, and 11), since these are displacing local non-white ways of knowing and both evaluating and replacing them with white US or British testing/assessment patterns. With the methods in particular, it is suggested that whoever participates in these classes, somehow will be able to become, if only partially, Canadian, American or English, and stop being just Colombian.

Finally, whitening is achieved through the display of symbols from inner circle countries (Kachru, 1996), such as flags from the UK and US (LCs 1 and 6), the Eiffel Tower (LC2), the Empire State Building (LC4), the Clock Tower (LC6) and the Statue of Liberty (LC6), or all of the above (LC10), which is a way to validate only those varieties of English or French and those ways of acting, being and doing in the world, while negating, diminishing or invisibilizing others.

As for dissimulation, as expressed above, four main aspects are dissimulated in the LL resources analyzed: (a) the interests of countries from the center to spread the use of their language, and with it, their ways of being, knowing, and exercising power; and (b) the interests of the centers to gain financial profit, (c) the cost of learning another language, and (d) the time and effort that it takes. To dissimulate the first two, centers use the commands mentioned above. These phrases make it sound like it is not

about learning English and spreading the agendas of dominant English-speaking countries globally, much less about making money. It is about making dreams come true, upping the ante for oneself, becoming better. To dissimulate costs of learning the language, LCs use phrases such as “matrículas abiertas” (‘registration is open’) (LC3), and “matrículas permanentes” (‘registration is continuous’) (LCs 7 and 9), where the cost of registration is not given. The purpose is to have clients focus on obtaining those benefits, not on their cost. They also utilize phrases such as “financiación de los niveles” (‘levels paid by installments’), “descuentos en pago de contado” (‘discounts for payments in cash’) (LC6), “cuotas de 240.000=matricúlese ya!” (‘installments of 240.000=Register now!’) (LC14), “2 x 1 solo cursos cortos” (‘2 for 1 only in short courses’) (LC11), where, even though costs are admitted, they are presented as not a big deal, given all the perks and discounts.

Finally, to dissimulate the time and effort that learning a language requires and the myriad of factors that affect learning, at least one of the LCs uses the word “quick” in its name (LC10). The rest of the centers use time phrases such as “inglés personalizado en 1 mes, 3 1/2 y 7 meses” (‘personalized English in 1 month, 3 1/2 and 7 months’), “LC11 English - 3.5 meses” (‘inglés LC11-3.5 months’) (LC11), “10 horas de cortesía” (‘10 courtesy hours’) (LC12). Through them, people are falsely promised quick results and distracted from the huge investment they would have to make were they to decide to learn English. They are led to believe that learning happens automatically, that it is a simple process that requires no intellectual effort, no emotional, economic or time investment, no practicing opportunities, and none of the other myriad conditions that play an active role in learning an additional language.

Legitimation and normalization are evidenced again in the use of symbols such as flags and landmarks, and names such as academia and school. In addition, it is evidenced in the use of logos or seals from government certification agencies, and in references to resolution numbers, dates, and number of years in the market. As for names, at least five of the centers use the word academy in their name (LCs 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7) to provide prestige. Also, three use the word school (LCs 1, 13, and 14), even though they are technical institutes. Besides, at least two use a name of a country to legitimize its origin, as in “academia británica de idiomas” (‘British language academy’) (LC5), or the origin of its methodology (‘CANADIAN Methodology and Technology’) (LC14).

In terms of flags and other symbols, at least six of the centers display flags from the UK and/or the US (LCs 1, 3, 6, 13, and 15), signaling that they not only teach a prestigious variety of the language but also have the backing of the supposed owners of the language to teach it in Colombia. Moreover, five of the centers use traditional symbols such as the Eiffel Tower (LC2), the Empire State Building (LC4), the Clock Tower, and the Statue of Liberty (LC6), or all of the above (LC10), to denote that the variety of English or French taught in the center is a prestigious one, not any variety, and that they have the support of the country to teach it.

In regard to seals and resolution numbers, at least two of them use the Secretary of Education seals (LC3 and LC5), two provide resolution numbers (LCs 6 and 9), and one of them (LC5) provides both. Finally, in terms of dates, one of them (LC3) uses the phrases “mas de 45 años de experiencia” (‘more than 45 years of experience’), and “desde 1970” (‘since 1970’) to gain legitimacy through its trajectory.

Reification, or the way to attest that the current state of things is natural because it has always been like this, is achieved through the use of commands and accompanying images, through symbols like flags, and through information about length of courses and costs. As for commands, phrases such as

“understand the world” (LC1) and the other commands mentioned above, are used to reify English since, in all of these phrases, the fact that English is the most commonly used language in the world and the language to which all of these possibilities are linked is presented as natural, something that just is, instead of as a consequence of rampant invasions and imperialism perpetuated by dominant countries. Also, in all of these, English is taken as a commodity that allows people to acquire other goods such as better jobs, travel, employment projection, being up to date, and so on.

Images of youngsters hiking their way through the world (LC2), visiting the main tourist places (LC2), studying (LCs 3, 8, and 9), and pointing to the sky (LC4) contribute to both objectifying English as the neutral tool that allows people to do many incredible things and to putting aside, in the oblivion, the social historical facts that led this language to be the most widespread. The same is done through images of the world’s main landmarks both in the first frame (LC10) and in the background (LC6), as well as in symbols of the world (LCs 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, and 12), or of birds spreading their wings (LC15). As for length and financial information about courses, phrases such as those described in the dissimulation section reify English as a merchandise that can be bought and easily obtained over the counter. Finally, flags of the UK and/or the US – which as shown along this analysis are used to promote homogenization, whitening and other mechanisms – are also used in these ads to signal that English is a commercial good that belongs to these countries and is marketized by the LC.

In sum, LCs use a variety of semiotic resources to put colonial mechanisms and ideological strategies, such as epistemic violence, whitening, homogenization, dissimulation, legitimation, and reification, into place. These resources are not restrictive to one category. They serve several purposes simultaneously, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 – Semiotic Resources Employed for Each Mechanism

Mechanisms/ multimodal Resources	Epistemic violence	Homogenization	Whitening	Dissimulation	Legitimation and Normalization	Reification
Linguistic Resources						
Names of the centers	X			X	X	
Commands	X	X		X		X
Offerings	X		X			
Adjectival phrases used to modify English	X					
Adverbial phrases related to time and cost				X		X
Dates and time in the market					X	
Other phrases				X		
Other Semiotic Resources						
Colors	X	X				
Flags and landmarks			X		X	X
Images of people	X	X	X			X

Seals from government certification agencies and resolution numbers	X
Other symbols (the world)	X

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

An analysis of the table suggests two important aspects: first, the most common devices used are commands (4 times), followed by name of the center, images of people, flags and landmarks (3 times each), and by other symbols (2) and phrases related to time and cost (2). Contrarily, the least common devices are numbers expressing dates and time in the market (1) and seals from government certification agencies and resolution numbers (1). Second, epistemic violence is the mechanism that makes use of the larger number of multimodal devices (6). This is followed by reification (5) and by dissimulation and legitimation (4). Homogenization and whitening are the mechanisms using the least number of multimodal devices (3).

5 Conclusions: A Gloomy Panorama That Could Change

This study has shown that English LCs located in Bogotá and Medellín (Colombia) employ all of the colonial mechanisms discussed in the theoretical framework and at least three of the ideological strategies proposed by Thompson (1984) to present English as the language of being, knowing and power. To do it, they deploy a series of linguistic resources which include foreign names, commands, offerings, adverbial phrases related to time and cost, dates, times; and a series of other semiotic resources such as colors, images of people, flags, seals, and images of landmarks.

These results are important for several reasons: first, they confirm that Colonialism may be gone but coloniality is still so entrenched in our bodies and minds that it is exerted not only by international companies but also by Colombians who, as we saw earlier, own most of these LCs and perpetuate coloniality to gain profit. Technically, Colombia is not a colony of the British empire, but it is a former colony of Spain, and the same binary constructions of the colonizer and the colonized still work, as Colombians have experienced the same consequences (or maybe worse) in terms of language policies, cultural practices, denial and invisibilization of non-white groups. However, as has happened in other countries (Pennycook, 1998), in Colombia, the construction of English as the language of prestige and power has not been only (or necessarily) the result of language policies or textbooks as much as it has been the result of popular culture. As Pennycook (1998) claims,

[...] what has often been overlooked is that those involved in language education are also inevitably surrounded by popular culture, by the everyday images of English. It may be these that are far more influential in the formulation of policies, curricula, practices, research agendas, and so on (Pennycook, 1998, p. 131).

Indeed, as we saw in the method section, most of the LCs analyzed are owned by locals who use all the resources at their disposal (*e.g.*, images, seals, symbols, phrases) to provide the impression that they have the support of the supposed “owners of the language”, namely the US and Great Britain, and therefore, can guarantee that the linguistic services they provide are authentic, original, accredited, of great quality, and so on.

Second, results are important because they expand on the work done by LC, LL and decolonial scholars on the mechanisms or ideological strategies used to impose Western ways of being, knowing, and power. Indeed, in terms of LC scholarship, the study expands on the work done by Brito, Guilherme and Costa (2017) as it reveals not merely the main discourses used by LCs in their websites (*e.g.*, empowerment discourse and motivational discourse), but also the ideological and colonial mechanisms employed (*e.g.*, dissimulation, legitimation, homogenization) to distribute these and other discourses through their banners, posters and window displays. It also expands on the work of Nuske (2019) in the sense that it presents not only how neoliberal ideologies of human capital and soft skills have penetrated these LC advertisements, as Nuske does, but also shows the particular semiotic resources employed by these LCs to further strengthen their colonial agendas.

In terms of LL scholarship, the study also expands on this work. Indeed, while Koreinik (2011) mentions references to history and academic discourse, instrumental rationalization, iconization, erasure, and intergroup polarization by negative other-presentation as (de)legitimation strategies; and Yigezu and Blackwood (2016) mention symbols such as the UNICEF and United Nations seals, as resources that are being used for legitimation purposes, this study unveils other legitimation resources such as names of centers, dates and times in the market, flags and landmarks, and resolution numbers. Also, while Alomoush and Al-Na’imat (2018) discuss English itself as a tool of cultural homogenization, and Kelly-Holmes (2010) focuses on the linguistic strategies of differentiation and segmentation, this study calls attention to other homogenization strategies used by LCs, such as commands, colors, and people’s images.

Additionally, while Gorter, Aiestaran and Cenoz (2012) and Lado (2011) discuss the widespread use of minority languages as a way to normalize these languages, this study unveils other semiotic resources that contribute to cultural homogenization and to normalization which go beyond the use of the language itself. These resources are commands, colors, and people’s images. Besides, this study points to new mechanisms and strategies not addressed by these other works, such as epistemic violence, dissimulation and reification, which are used by the LCs to make people switch their ways of being, knowing and acting in the world for others ways that are supposed to bring them more financial benefits, more social mobility, and more competitiveness in the job market, among other advantages.

Finally, the study expands on the work done by decolonial theorists as it helps further interrogate the relationship between coloniality and ELT, looking directly at how colonial mechanisms and ideological strategies mentioned by scholars such as Ayling (2019), Tin (2014) and Janks (2010) are prevalent not just in classrooms (Estacio, 2017; Hsu, 2015; White, 2019), and language policy (González, 2007), but also in English LC advertisements placed on the façades of high, middle and low class neighborhoods in big cities such as Medellín and Bogotá. Such advertisements are there to influence all kinds of audiences (children, teenagers, adults) and wrap them with their colonial mantle so that they do not dare become too different, too independent, too out of reach.

As Shohamy and Waksman (2010) state, it is important to unveil these forms of manipulation so that people are less vulnerable to these messages and less likely to fall prey to them. When it comes to important

aspects of their lives, such as their ways of being, knowing and exercising power, it is even more important that they do this as these aspects constitute their identities. Allowing others to influence these aspects is allowing them to influence who they are, who they want to become, and how they become that person.

In the advertisements analyzed, it was very obvious that the message was that those who do not speak English are lacking in many aspects of their lives: they do not have as many possibilities, they cannot be as successful, they cannot travel the world, go places, etc. These messages are not only demeaning of the languages people from the south speak, but also place them in the zone of not being, not knowing, and not holding any power. Another very important message was that to achieve these things, they needed to become “whiter”, namely, more aseptic, more compliant with the Western norm. Such messages are degrading of the millions of mulatos, mestizos and indigenous peoples inhabiting our cities, as they put whites in a superior place, and confer them qualities and attributes that are in fact common to all of us.

The messages, however, were not overt, they were covert, achieved through the use of a series of mechanisms and strategies masterfully deployed by means of different linguistic resources. They correspond to a series of practices promoted by the government for years, such as the importation and endorsement of foreign methodologies and tests, the importation of the so-called “native English speaker teachers”, the promotion of unequal working conditions for Colombian teachers compared to those of their foreign counterparts, and so on. LCs were just emulating these practices and spreading the same messages that the government has spread for years. This suggests the change needs to come from the government first, and it is not just a practical change, it is an ideological one, a change in the way English and other additional languages are seen by this entity, in the way it positions itself in regard to others, and in its aims and objectives. Once the government recognizes our ways of being and acting in the world, and our local languages as valuable, it will be able to shift the relationship that it has with the Global North and begin to portray its citizens, languages, and knowledge in ways that are less undignified. Similarly, it can portray the other in ways that are less exalting. We would like to think that once this happens, LCs will play along and be more democratic in spreading diversity through the teaching of many languages, as well as be more careful in the promotion of these.

In spite of its success in unveiling these mechanisms, the study had some limitations. First, it only included a limited number of centers in places of easy access in two cities in Colombia. Second, it only analyzed the façades of these centers. Finally, it left out LCs belonging to universities which seem to have a different, less commercial orientation. Further research could, therefore, incorporate a larger number of centers, from different parts of several cities in Colombia, to explore differences that might exist related to location in the city or to the city itself. It could also analyze other LL resources being used by these LCs, such as fliers, web pages and social media, as well as university owned and private LCs, to spot differences between the two types of centers in terms of how they try to influence people’s ways of being, knowing, and exercising power or being subject to power.

Authors' Contribution

Both authors worked collaboratively in all tasks, including: review of the literature, design of the study, data collection and systematization, data analysis, and writing of all the manuscript parts.

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