

Neocolonial Englishes and Linguistic Inequality: Marshallese language and education in the diaspora

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Abstract

We argue that Marshallese children’s language experience in migrant communities in the U.S. reflects neocolonial linguistic inequities, and that their language is a *neocolonial English*. We focus on language use among Marshallese children in one family, embedding a case study of linguistic form with a larger discussion of the language ideologies and policies that surround Marshallese children. Although Marshallese children in the U.S. primarily use English, they are marked as English learners (EL) in school, at rates above and beyond other groups. An analysis of these children’s English reveals that they produce many non-standard morphosyntactic features, features that are consistent with Marshallese English (ME), a world English used in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). Both the colonial past and neocolonial present—particularly neocolonial migration—have influenced this linguistic form. We call the children’s English neocolonial not only because of its form, but also because in schools their language is subject to the language policies of the U.S. federal government, the children’s former colonizers, policies that also shape language ideologies that erase the colonial past and neocolonial present. This analysis helps explain the linguistic inequities faced by neocolonial migrants in schools and beyond.

Keywords: *neocolonial migrants; neocolonial Englishes; Marshallese; ideology; educational inequity*

Introduction

(1)ⁱ

- | | | |
|----|--------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Annie: | But I’m sick |
| 2 | | [₁ Here one |
| 3 | | long time ago] |
| 4 | Jina: | [₂ All of us been sick] |
| 5 | Elise: | Oh what happened? |
| 6 | | What did you get? |
| 7 | Jina: | We throw up cause we been um |
| 8 | | We been |
| 9 | Annie: | [₁ I keep getting sick] |
| 10 | Jina: | [₂ cause we been uhm] |
| 11 | | been playing at night |

Annie and Jina were two school aged members of the large Marshallese community of Barnestown—a working-class city in the central United States (U.S.).ⁱⁱ Throughout this interaction, Annie and Jina fluently combine linguistic resources. First, they use forms tied to American English varieties: *All of us been sick* (line 7) reflects the typically African American language (AAL) zero modal auxiliary, in which *have* is variably excluded (Kohn et al., 2021). But their English also reveals influence from Marshallese, a nuclear Micronesian language: lines 2-3 include a direct calque from the Marshallese *juon* which can denote either the number ‘one’ or the indefinite article (Bender et al., 2016, p. 202). Some of their English is consistent with the form of English used in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI): in lines 1, 7, and 12 Annie and Jina mark the past through “one long time ago” and then use the present tense or bare forms, a pattern also common in the RMI (Buchstaller & Willson, 2018, pp. 373–374). While such features could be called a postcolonial English, they are combined with local varieties of English and produced in not the postcolonial environment but the former colonial nation: the United States.

We argue that these children’s language is a *neocolonial English*, and that their linguistic experiences in schools reflect *neocolonial linguistic inequities*. A type of postcolonialism, *neocolonialism* refers to ‘control of states by external powers despite the formal appearance of constitutional independence’ (Bray, 1993, p. 334; see also Bealey, 1999; Chilisa, 2005; Young, 2016). We describe the children’s language use and experience as *neocolonial* because 1) their linguistic form is a result of past colonial and current neocolonial control; 2) the children are subject to language ideologies that erase this neocolonial influence; and 3) they are subject to language policies of the U.S. federal government, their former colonizers.

Through an analysis of language use in Marshallese communities in the U.S., we develop a theory of neocolonial Englishes and linguistic inequity in schools. This theory likely applies not just to Marshallese, but to migrants from the geographic region of Micronesia as a whole. Marshallese share colonial histories with Palauans and Micronesians, while the colonial history of English in Guam and the Marianas is even more extensive (Hezel, 1983; Thomas, 1984; Thompson, 1941; Underwood, 1989). All such migrants likely experience neocolonial linguistic inequality not only on the mainland, but also in Hawai’i and Guam (Spencer, 2019). Spencer (2012) estimated that 50% of the population of some schools on Guam are (non-Chamorro) Micronesians. Finally, this study reflects back on education in the Pacific itself, and whether regions such as the RMI are themselves incorporating Marshallese-English into the school system or continue to prioritize standard American as the ideal. Thus, “neocolonial Englishes” and “neocolonial languages” provide theoretical models for understanding linguistic experience and inequity for Marshallese and Micronesian children in schools in the U.S., its territories, and Oceania as well.

Neocolonial languages and neocolonial migration

Neocolonial theory tries to capture how technically independent states still experience colonial control. Some describe neocolonialism as ‘deliberate’ modes in which nations ‘maintain their domination’ (Kelly & Altbach, 1978, p. 30); others see it as a less deliberate process through which ‘politically independent people’ are bound ‘voluntarily and perhaps through necessity’ to a Western power (Thomas & Postlethwaite, 1984a, p. 13). Neocolonialism functions through

foreign aid programs, technical advisers, publishing firms, financial systems, non-profit and human rights organizations, educational institutions, and more (Bray, 1993; Milligan, 2004; Mulenga, 2001; Papoutsaki & Rooney, 2006; Quist, 2001; Thomas, 1993; Thomas & Postlethwaite, 1984b; Watson, 1994; Wickens & Sandlin, 2007).

Defined by policy and ideology, neocolonialism entails continued control by the colonial power and an ideological invisibility of that control (Bray, 1993). Similarly, Irvine and Gal (2000) have argued that linguistic differentiation is fundamentally ideological. Centrally, linguistic differentiation often involves practices of erasure and contrast (among others)—producing both people and their ways of speaking as supposedly distinct. While all acts of linguistic differentiation involve such ideological divisions, neocolonial ones may take a particular form. Specifically, just as neocolonialism refers to invisible external control—incorporating ideology and policy—we argue that neocolonial language experiences are influenced by neocolonial control that is ideologically invisible. Such an approach provides a way to analyze how and why inequality manifests in the way it does for a particular people, particularly, as we will show, in language policies and ideologies that are widespread in schools.

World Englishes theory has pluralized and legitimized the many Englishes around the world, showing that Englishes vary in forms and functions, as well as their political histories and status (e.g., Bhatt, 2001; Bolton & Kachru, 2006; Crystal, 2003; Kachru, 1997; Melchers et al., 2019; Platt et al., 1984). One key influence on both linguistic form and its' political status is a nation's experience with colonialism, producing what Schneider (2007) has called "postcolonial Englishes".

We argue that many linguistic experiences (language use, policies, and ideologies) are tied to not only postcolonial but also neocolonial structures. For example, Tupas (2004, p. 55) argues that Philippine English in the Philippines should be redefined from a "postcolonial language to a neocolonial one", particularly because English in the Philippines is tied to continued U.S. military control."

Specifically, one central influence on linguistic experience is what we call "neocolonial migration". An arena of neocolonial control is the frequent migration of postcolonial subjects to the former colonial center (Czaika & De Haas, 2014). Hooghe (2008) found that colonial ties had a greater impact on migration to Europe between 1980 and 2004 than either economic incentives or pre-established migration networks. Importantly, "former U.S. dependencies", like the RMI, "are particularly oriented toward their own colonial sphere" (2018, p. 177). Such migration produces large indigenous communities in the former colonizing nation, communities whose uses of English are influenced by linguistic change in the colonial past, undergo change in the current place of migration, and become subject in schools to the ideologies and policies of those colonizers who they supposedly left behind. We argue that we should consider the experiences of migrants—linguistic, educational, and otherwise—as shaped by this neocolonial history.

Although migration is a central neocolonial project, scholarly analysis of post and neocolonial linguistic experiences tends to be focused on the home country context (e.g., Eades, 2008). There

is extensive work on Pasifika Englishes in New Zealand but the speakers of these Englishes—Tongan, Samoan, Fijian—are not from countries colonized by New Zealand nor do they have open border relationships with New Zealand in the same way as the U.S. does with the RMI (Starks, Donna et al., 2015). Maori is an exception, of course, but Maori are not migrants to New Zealand. Philippine English, in turn, is described and analyzed mostly in the Philippines (e.g., Borlongan, 2016; Osborne, 2018; Pefianco Martin, 2014). But Filipinos have also engaged in neocolonial migration with influences on language structure and use (Jubilado, 2016).

Theoretical approaches to migrant and bilingual students' language practices in classrooms in the U.S. and other countries do not entirely capture the colonial and neocolonial control that influences Marshallese migration and linguistic experiences. For example, some might argue that the children's flexible use of multiple resources reflects translanguaging (Otheguy et al., 2015). But translanguaging theory does not explain the high degree of consistency of English use in Marshallese communities in both the U.S. and RMI that we document below (see also Jaspers, 2018; MacSwan, 2020 for critiques). In addition, scholars have long documented that first and second generation children in the U.S. quickly become fluent speakers of varieties perceived of as English (Orellana et al., 1999). But, their uses of English are more typically described in the literature as either assimilating to English uses found in the U.S. or as unique to U.S. communities—such as Chicano English (Peñalosa, 1980; Santa Ana, 1993). In this case, as we discuss below, these Marshallese children's uses of non-dominant forms of English are clearly consistent with the world English form developed in the Marshall Islands itself.

Our phrase “neocolonial migrants” builds on the category of “involuntary” or “native” minority/immigrant (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Ratliffe, 2018; Warikoo & Carter, 2009). Our term points not only to the fact that Marshallese migration is partly involuntary, but also directly references Marshallese citizens' liminal legal status in the U.S., the perception (by themselves and others) of the Marshallese community as an immigrant community, and the continued U.S. control that effects Marshallese migration, language, and education in both nations. The linguistic inequities they face in schools in the U.S.—the schools of their former colonizers—are also directly linked to post and neocolonial influences on form, and neocolonial ideological erasure of this influence.

This article focuses on Marshallese. But many other people likely fall into this category, including migrants from Micronesia, Guam and the Marianas, American Samoa, the Philippines, or even Puerto Rico who have had similar historical linguistic experiences and related neocolonial influences on migration (Bautista & Bolton, 2008; Biewer, 2020; Britain & Matsumoto, 2015; Esquivel, 2019; Ilina, 2018; Jubilado, 2016; McFarland, 2008; Nickels, 2005; Tupas, 2004). This topic is particularly pressing since the population of the Marshalls, Micronesia, Guam and the Marianas, and Palau have all decreased in the last decade due to outmigration to the U.S., while the respective population of these migrants in the U.S. and its territories—specifically Guam—has grown dramatically (Stewart et al., 2017; S. Wilson et al., 2021). Consequently, neocolonial linguistic inequity allows us to understand the diaspora from the Micronesian region more generally, as well as how to make education in the diaspora more equal.

Marshallese as neocolonial migrants

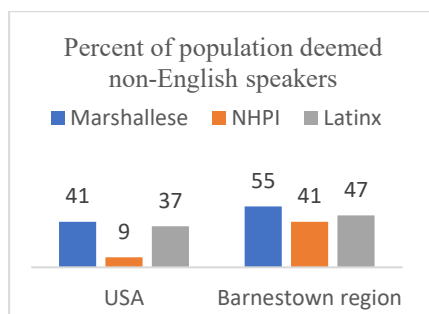
The post-independence political relationship between the former Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (the region that includes the RMI) and the U.S. is a textbook example of neocolonialism. America took control of the region during World War II as a trusteeship—essentially colonialism by another name (Hezel, 1995). In the Marshallese archipelago in particular, the U.S. military appropriated three atolls: one as a military base, and two as nuclear testing sites, where the U.S. tested 67 nuclear bombs including the world’s first above ground hydrogen bomb. The health and economic consequences of nuclear testing and fallout have been immense and long-term (Abon & Riklon, 2017; Barker, 2013). After independence, the U.S. entered into a Compact of Free Association (COFA) with the RMI (and several former colonial Pacific Islands), which included among its provisions continued U.S. military control over Marshallese waters, monetary payment to the RMI, and the visa-free entry of Marshallese into the U.S. to work (Daniel, 2004; C. Heine, 1974; Walsh & Heine, 2012). Duke (2017, p. 424) calls this arrangement “neocolonial” given “the sovereign status of the nation” combined “with ongoing dependency and political subjugation in relation to military power from abroad.”

Both its colonial history and the neocolonial present influence language and education in the RMI (Kupferman, 2015). English was introduced to the RMI first by American and British whalers in the 1800s, then American missionaries, and most recently institutions during the Trust Territory (Low et al., 2005). This long history created linguistic change: Marshallese has many English cognates; English in the RMI has Marshallese substrate influence (Abo et al., 2009; Buchstaller & Albanides, 2017; Buchstaller & Willson, 2018). Attitudes toward bilingualism in schools shifted over the years: in the early days of American control primary schools were in Marshallese and secondary schools in English; in the 1960s English became ‘the medium of all instruction’; in the 1970s bilingual education became more prominent once again. From independence on, English was dominant from Grade Three and sometimes Kindergarten (Low et al., 2005; Nimmer, 2017; Pine & Savage, 1989, p. 85; Thomas, 1984; Thomas & Postlethwaite, 1984a). In 2015 the Marshallese Ministry of Education produced a language policy aimed at reorienting the school system away toward Marshallese, but that does not discuss Marshallese English (Marshall Islands Journal, 2015).

This colonial situation resulted in a world English—Marshallese English (ME). Buchstaller and Willson (2018, in press) describe ME as an “outer circle” variety where English has an important within-country official function (Kachru, 1997). Following Schneider (2007), one could also define ME as a “postcolonial English”. ME has a number of syntactic and phonetic features influenced by substrate influence from Marshallese (Buchstaller, 2020; Buchstaller & Willson, in press). Post-COFA, Marshallese migration to the U.S. skyrocketed (Jetñil-Kijiner & Heine, 2020), producing a large community of neocolonial migrants. In the past decade the RMI population has decreased by 26% due to outmigration, and the Marshallese population of the Barnestown region has increased by roughly 126% (EPIC/AJ, 2014; Hezel, 2013; McClain et al., 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020; S. Wilson et al., 2021).ⁱⁱⁱ Marshallese citizens’ status in the U.S. reflects the ambiguous nature of neocolonialism: Marshallese are “non-immigrants without visas” authorized to work (USCIS, 2019). While Hawai’i or California were the first migration destinations, since the

90s migration has shifted toward “new immigrant destinations” in the Pacific Northwest and the South and Southeast, including Barnestown.

Many minoritized children—in the U.S. and elsewhere—experience various forms of linguistic inequity (García, 2009). But the sources, nature, and scale of these inequities are not all the same (Umansky et al., 2020). Among both migrants and Pacific Islanders in the U.S., for example, Marshallese stand out as particularly minoritized. In Hawai’i and Guam, Marshallese and Chuukese experience discrimination in schools that other Pacific Islanders do not (Nimmer, 2017; Smith & Castañeda, 2021; Spencer, 2012; Talmy, 2006); nationally, Marshallese have startlingly low BA rates: 3% (compared to the next lowest rate of 10% for Samoans) (EPIC/AJ, 2014). In Barnestown, Marshallese have the lowest high school graduation rates and the highest rates of being retained as English Learners than any other group (SDE, 2018; school district, personal communication, February 5, 2019; Floyd-Faught, 2019). Despite the historic presence of English in their homeland, Marshallese are also categorized in national statistics as limited English proficient above and beyond other groups (see graph 1, data from EPIC/AJ, 2014). Viewing Marshallese children’s linguistic experience as neocolonial sheds light on the historical fingerprints that influence how they speak and how others interpret their language.



Studying language in Marshallese communities in Barnestown

Since the 1990s, Barnestown’s demographics have rapidly changed as migrants from around the world, including a large population of Marshallese who came to work in the poultry industry, turning Barnestown into a ‘new’ immigrant destination (Marrow, 2011). Previously more than 90% white, in 2019 Barnestown’s school district was roughly 37% white, 43% Hispanic, 13% Pacific Islander (mainly Marshallese), and 1% African American (District, 2019).

Berman conducted fieldwork in Barnestown in the summer of 2018. Berman, who has previously spent extensive time in the RMI as a teacher and ethnographer, spent much of her time with families whom she knew previously in the RMI. The fieldwork was designed as a pilot investigation of Marshallese children’s languages and experiences in Barnestown, with the goal of developing a focused study for a larger project. Consequently, data collection included a variety of activities: observations and recordings of elementary school children’s language use and experiences in school, interviews with educators, ethnographic research with families, interviews with Marshallese community members, and photoelicitation interviews with Marshallese children. We focus here on the photoelicitation interviews, interviews with teachers, and ethnographic

research. We use the former for morphosyntactic analysis, and the latter for language policy and ideologies.

The original goal of the photoelicitation interviews was to encourage children to talk about their lives; upon analysis the interviews also revealed valuable morphosyntactic data. Berman provided the four children with disposable cameras for one week. After developing the photos, she returned to videorecord conversations with the children about the photos. The interviews took place in a backroom of the children's house, with permission from the children's guardians. Multiple children were present. Berman speaks both Marshallese and English and switched between both, giving the children the option of responding in whichever language they preferred.

Tereshenko transcribed the interviews using Du Bois' (2006) delicacy hierarchy with a concern for the first three delicacy levels. Berman transcribed and translated the Marshallese sections. Tereshenko roughly coded for any forms of non-dominant morphosyntactic forms of English. Roeder reviewed and cleaned up the morpho-syntactic coding, including interpretation of influence from U.S. varieties of English and discussion with Berman of substrate influence from Marshallese. Roeder also organized the features and examples into the categories discussed throughout. Berman and Roeder wrote the current article.

Below we frequently compare features of Marshallese English to constructions in Marshallese. Sources for the Marshallese data are either the Marshallese English Online Dictionary or the Marshallese Reference Grammar (Abo et al., 2009; Bender et al., 2016), or data from Berman's extensive database of over 100 hours of audio and video recordings of un-elicited everyday interactions in a village in the RMI, recorded between 2009 and 2013 (Berman, 2019). When a Marshallese example indicates the speaker, it is from Berman's database.

First and second generation English speakers

Jina, Annie, Tomi, and Mike present as fluent speakers of a variety of English with similarities to ME as described in the RMI. They all completed all of their schooling in the U.S. Siblings, eleven-year-old Mike and nine-year-old Jina migrated separately: Mike in 2012 at age five; Jina in 2011 at age two. Both have visited the RMI. Annie and Tomi were born in the U.S. According to their mothers, Annie has never left while Tomi visited the RMI briefly when she was six months old. While Annie and Tomi's parents did not supply their children's birth years, both girls were also in elementary school. Annie was in first grade, and all three girls said that Jina was the oldest of the three while Annie and Tomi were younger.^{iv}

Jina, Annie, and Tomi discussed the pictures they took; Mike lost his camera so was not technically an "interviewee" but was present the whole time. Two additional children were present—Bob and Dijini. The children claimed that Bob was Tongan-Marshallese and spoke neither Marshallese nor English. Dijini, roughly two years old, also did not talk much, although the four older children occasionally directed commands to both her and Bob. Finally, with the possible exception of Bob all of the children were related to each other and, at the time, lived together in the same house (see Figure 1). The children said that Bob was also a relative, but no one was able to explain the exact kinship connection.

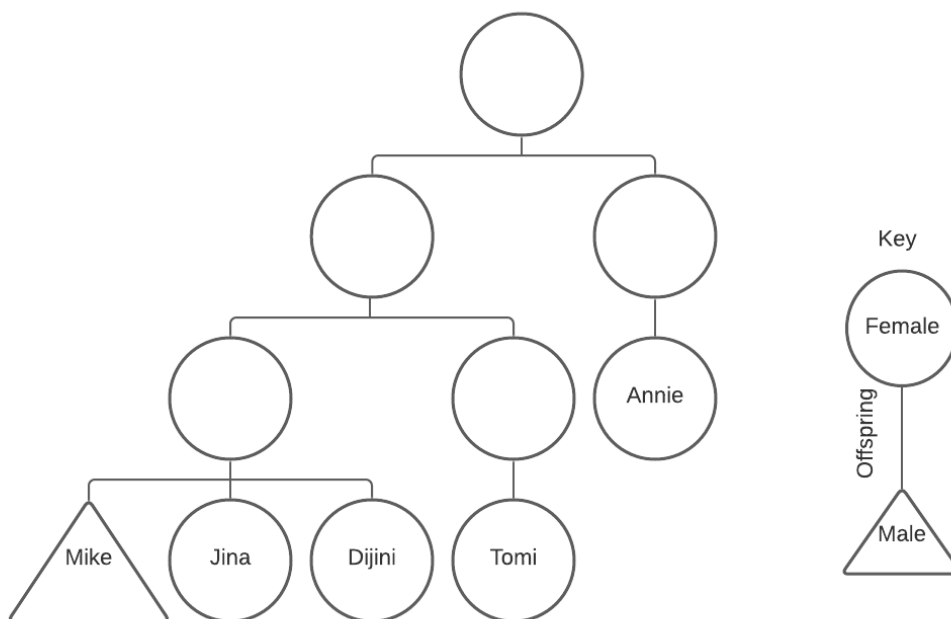


Figure 1: Kinship Chart

Unlike their parents, Tomi, Mike, Jina, and Annie all demonstrated preferential usage of English with not only Berman but also each other. “Jina!” Tomi said, “your dad is gonna to put our picture [1 all over there].” A similar preference for English appears when speaking with Berman, as seen in (2). After Annie hesitates to speak, Berman suggests in Marshallese that Annie could speak in Marshallese. Annie responds in English, exemplifying a recurrent pattern of responding to Marshallese in English.

(2)

- 1 Elise: kōmaroñ ba lo Majel ñe pidodo ippam bwe
you can say it in Marshallese if it is easier for you because
- 2 kōkōñaan ba ke...ke Majel ke pälle?
do you want to talk in...Marshallese or English?
- 3 Annie: I like her cause she's my cousin and

Jina, uniquely, displayed some accommodation, occasionally responding to Marshallese in Marshallese. Jina also instigated Marshallese occasionally, but usually switched quickly back to English. The predominant pattern was for the children to interact exclusively in English, both with Berman and each other.

Neocolonial forms

Below we discuss some morphosyntactic features the children produced. We describe them as neocolonial because some features are clearly continuous with Marshallese-English in the RMI,

while other features reflect the influence of local American English varieties. They are thus tied to past colonial control in the RMI *and* language shift produced by neocolonial migration. Throughout, the children moved back and forth between these features and those more typical of dominant American English.

Continuity with Marshallese-English in the RMI

We first discuss features that are continuous with forms of English used in Marshallese communities in the RMI. While some of these features are also common in American English varieties, some of the features we discuss—such as gender neutrality—are not common in varieties of English found throughout the U.S. All of the features in this section have both been documented in English in the RMI and have likely substrate influence.

Nouns and pronouns

The children regularly marked person and number on nouns through context instead of inflection, as marked possession through “asyndetic linkage” as in ME in the RMI (Buchstaller & Willson 2018, 378). They also neutrally moved between gender pronouns, something that Jina and Mike’s father did once as well (Table 1).

Table 1: Nouns and Pronouns^v

<i>Feature</i>	<i># of spkrs</i>	<i>Barnestown English</i>	<i>ME in the RMI</i>	<i>Marshallese Rule</i>	<i>n</i>
Plural (zero pl. -s)	3	Jina: “I got <u>two</u> <u>sister</u> and one <u>brother</u>”	“My <u>parent</u> were” (B&W 376)	Plural marked on post noun determiner (BC&P 186)	8
Possession (zero poss. -s)	2	Annie: “my mom keep <u>Bob</u> <u>picture</u> two <u>time</u>”	“My mother and <u>father</u> house” (B&W 378)	Possession marked with classifier following noun (BC&P 193)	12
3ps gender pronoun (free variation)	3	Jina: “we're the ones who love god and <u>she</u> <u>he</u> made us and we pray for him”	“My daughter ...<u>his</u> husband” (B&W 375)	Pronouns unmarked for gender BC&P 171)	18

Tense/aspect/mood

The children regularly used the bare verb for both the past tense and the third person singular present tense (Table 2), reflecting English in the RMI in which “verbs often occur in the present simple or unmarked verbal forms” (Buchstaller & Willson, in press, p. 9). As with uses of English in the RMI, they often marked TAM through context and/or pre/post verb markers. The predominance of *take* in this data set is probably because the interviews were about the pictures that the children took.

Table 2. Verb forms

Feature	# of spkrs	Barnestown English	ME in the RMI	Marshallese Rule	n
Bare form for reg. past	4	Tomi: “they <u>move</u> three times”	I went to the office and I <u>say</u> (B&W 374)	TAM for non-finite verbs marked on auxiliary verb preceding main verb (BC&P 150-151) ^{vi}	10
Bare form for irreg. past (“take”)	3	Jina: “When I was little I <u>take</u> care of my grandma because she was sick”	You already <u>take</u> this recipe? (B&W 375)	Same as above	29
Bare form for irreg. past (other)	3	Tomi: “When I was five years old and I was turning to six and I <u>have</u> chocolate cake”	Long time ago we <u>go</u> there swimming (B&W 374)	Same as above	9
Bare form for 3ps present	4	Mike: “but she always <u>bother</u> us”	When the canoe <u>sail</u> forward (B&W 373)	Same as above	31
Zero copula (∅)	3	Mike: “oh yeah she ∅ two years old” Jina: why ∅ they not doing this way?	This ∅ my school room (B&W 373)	No copula with definite nouns, two noun phrase sentences (BC&P 239, 269)	6
functional shift	3	Tomi: “I was <u>picturing</u> them” Annie: “he um <u>weekend</u> with them”	Calendar the data (B&W 2 14)	Roots function as verbs and nouns (BC&P 116) Direct calque from Marshallese <i>pija</i> (picture)	10

The children also frequently constructed verbless sentences without the copula, reflecting Buchstaller and Willson’s (2018, 373) argument that “zero copula appears to be the norm” in English in the RMI (Table 2).

Finally, the Barnestown children also exhibited functional shift, such that the nouns *picture* and *weekend* are used as verbs. This occurs in the English in the RMI, where “individual words can — dependent on the syntactic context — function as an adjective, a noun or a verb” (Buchstaller

and Willson in press, 5–6). This exact form of “picture” was frequently heard by Berman when living in the RMI; and seems to be clearly shared between the transnational communities. Syntactic flexibility likely has substrate influence both generally and in respect to the word “picture”: In Marshallese, many roots function as both nouns and verbs, while other nouns and verbs are derived from each other (Bender, Capelle, and Pagotto 2016,). This is also true of some English cognates in Marshallese such as *pija*, which comes from the English “picture”. The noun *pija* means “artistic or photographic creation” (including movies), while the verb with the same form (*pija-*) refers to the act of creating a picture, photograph, or movie (Bender et al., 2016, 143–44). In ME in the U.S. and the RMI, the formerly English cognate returns to English from Marshallese, with substrate influence from Marshallese grammar.

Although only one example of *weekend* as a verb appears in this data, Berman also heard this from other children in Barnestown beyond those in this study. Here, *weekend* functions as a verb to mean ‘spending the weekend’ or ‘spending the night’. Marshallese children, in the RMI and Barnestown, regularly sleep at relatives’ houses for several days to visit with other family and friends or to help (Berman, 2014a). In this community in the U.S., the children used *weekend* as a verb to describe this practice, reflecting substrate influence and Marshallese cultural practices.

Prepositions and articles

The children’s preposition use departs from dominant American English, reflecting what Buchstaller and Willson (2018, 376) call an “idiosyncratic” use of prepositions in English in the RMI (Table 3). In our data and in data on English in the RMI we see some regularity: interchangeably using “in”, “on”, and “at”. This likely reflects the Marshallese use of the preposition “i” as a marker of location at a particular time, which translates as all three English prepositions. Similarly, the preposition *ñan* is a directional goal preposition, which we can see in the example from the ME in the RMI below.

Table 3. Function words: Prepositions and articles

Feature	# of spkrs	Barnestown English	ME in the RMI	Marshallese Rule	n
Free variation between <i>In</i>, <i>on</i>, <i>at</i> as locational punctual prepositions	3	Mike: “Is this <u>in</u> youtube?” Annie: “I was <u>at</u> the bathroom”	“I live in the Marshall Islands <u>in</u> an island called Majuro” (M&W) “We’re not <u>at</u> Bikini” (M&W)	Locational Punctual “i” (= in, on, at) (BC&P 190-191)	4
Other preposition variation	3	Jina: he live in hotel but he go <u>to</u> there in weekend	I want to work <u>to</u> my country here (B&W 376)	directional goal “ñan” (to) (BC&P 190-191)	6
Zero indefinite article (∅)	3	Tomi: Allen you’re not wearing ∅ shirt Annie: I have ∅ swimming pool	That’s how it makes ∅ big change in our island (M&W)	Indefinite article not obligatory (BC&P 270)	12
Zero definite article (∅)	3	Jina: and that’s why I want to go back to ∅ Marshall Islands	I live in ∅ Marshall Island (M&W) tables next to ∅ trees (B&W 2 8)	Definite article not obligatory, follows noun (BC&P 186)	6
“one” for indefinite article	1	Annie: <u>one</u> long time ago	one waters (B&W 2 17)	Marshallese juon refers to ‘a’ or ‘one’	1

The children also frequently dropped the definite and indefinite article, and Annie used *one* as an indefinite article (Table 3). In addition, instead of including the definite article when specifying numbers of people as in ‘the two of us’ or ‘the three of us’, Marshallese pronouns can be inflected for number and correspond to the entire phrase (Bender et al, 2016, 173). This creates a close comparison between Marshallese (6) and Marshallese-English in Barnestown (6a).

(6) Kilini: E-rro?
3ps-two
Them two?
The two of them?

(6a) Jina: I take care of ∅ two of them cause I love them

The phrase “∅ Marshall Islands”, appearing in both Barnestown and the RMI, also reflects how one says ‘the Marshall Islands’ in Marshallese with the single word *Maje!* and no article. In fact,

in the Barnestown data Jina codeswitches and uses *Maje!* in an English sentence, similarly structuring it without a definite article (7).

(7) Jina: I like *Maje!* cause we don't get sick there

Questions

The children produced questions in which *do* and/or auxiliary verb/copula inversion are unnecessary and *wh*-words vary in location, reflecting the form of questions used in English in the RMI (Table 4).

Table 4. Questions

<i>Feature</i>	<i># of spkrs</i>	<i>Barnestown English</i>	<i>ME in the RMI</i>	<i>Marshallese rule</i>	<i>n</i>
<i>“Do” and other auxiliaries unnecessary</i>	1	<i>Jina: What church ø you go to Mike?</i>	<i>Where you buy? (B&W 378)</i>	<i>Question particle placed in various parts of utterance (BC&P 280-282)</i>	1
<i>Embedded questions remain in situ</i>	2	<i>Annie: Yeah do you know <u>who is this?</u></i>	<i>How long you guys been here? (B&W 378)</i>	<i>Same as above</i>	4

Features potentially unique to Marshallese English in the USA

Many of the above features are common in some varieties of American English, including minimal inflectional marking on nouns and pronouns, zero copula, and bare verbs in the past tense (Arends et al., 1995; Kohn et al., 2021; Plag, 2008; Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). Other features are atypical, suggesting the existence of a transnational community and a shared use of a form of English between these spaces. These include functional shift/syntactic flexibility, non-obligatory articles, locational punctual prepositions, and pronoun gender neutralization. Functional shift seems to be very closely tied to Marshallese substrate influence. All children produced this pattern frequently with the word “picture”, while weekend has been heard extensively among children as a whole. Variation between *in*, *on*, and *at* for locational punctual prepositions reflects the preposition “i” in Marshallese that serves this function. It is similar to, but more expansive than, the Chicano English use of *in* for *on* (Fought, 2003a, p. 100), suggesting again that it is tied to the Marshallese transnational community rather than Chicano English influences. Non-obligatory articles are also extensively distributed throughout the data set, and they are atypical for American English varieties. Finally, pronoun gender neutralization is something that is clearly continuous with both English as spoken in the RMI and with Marshallese substrate influence, was

produced numerous times by all children (and their father), and is not replicated in other common American English varieties.^{vii}

Features attributable to American English varieties

At the same time, there are some morpho-syntactic features of the children’s speech that are not, as far as we know, continuous with forms of English in the RMI but appear to be the result of contact with non-dominant varieties of American English, including AAL and southern English^{viii}. We focus on five features (Table 5).

Table 5. Influence from other non-dominant varieties of American English

<i>Variety</i>	<i># of spkrs</i>	<i>Feature</i>	<i>Barnestown English</i>	<i>n</i>
AAL	1	Zero relative pronoun (\emptyset)	<i>Jina: This is the girl \emptyset let me take a picture of her</i>	4
AAL	3	Habitual “be”	<i>Annie: she always <u>be</u> nice to me</i>	4
AAL	1	Zero auxiliary “have” in completive aspect	<i>Jina: Yeah, we \emptyset been to his house</i>	3
Southern	2	“y’all”	<i>Mike: what do you mean <u>y’all</u> be nice together?</i>	4
General	3	Past tense “was” leveling	<i>Tomi: <u>they was</u> celebrating</i>	9
General	3	Singular 3 rd person “don’t”	<i>Annie: Yeah she does...no <u>she don’t</u></i>	5

Three features seem to be tied to AAL—deletion of a subject relative pronoun, zero auxiliary *have* in completive aspect, and habitual *be*. Habitual *be* is attested in youth speakers of Chicano English in Los Angeles and New York (Fought, 2003b), due to influence from AAL. The area of Barnestown where the study participants live and go to school has a large Latino/a/x population, but a minimal Black population. Bucholtz (2004, p. 131) also argues that AAL features have become a “cross-ethnic marker of youth identity among young people of color.” We do not know the source of these features in the participant children’s ME.

There are also numerous examples in the data of other non-dominant American English features. These include the word *y’all*, a marker of second person plural common across varieties of southern English, which appears four times across two speakers. Non-dominant subject-verb agreement was also observed, including past tense *was* leveling (e.g., *We was taking a picture*),

which appears nine times across three speakers, and singular third person *don't* (e.g., *The clock keep ringing but he don't wake up*), which appears five times across three speakers.

Neocolonial influences on language form

Some features of these children's speech appear to not be found in the RMI but rather are common in various American English varieties, suggesting language shift as a result of neocolonial migration. At the same time, their language displays substantial continuity with English as produced in the RMI, with many features that are not common in American English varieties. This continuity reflects colonial and neocolonial influences on language in the RMI, as well as neocolonial migration. These forms, as we will see below, also appear foreign to mainstream American educational institutions and assessments. Tied with the migration and colonial history, the result are neocolonial language ideologies and policies that affect children's experiences and opportunities.

Neocolonial language ideologies

Conversations reveal ideologies of Marshallese children's language practices that erase colonial and neocolonial linguistic influences while also marking their linguistic production as exotically different. While the sample was small for this project, similar ideologies are reported in other literature on Marshallese students in school systems throughout the U.S. These ideologies are partly tied, as we will see, to the federal language policies we discuss later, policies imposed on school districts.

During research in 2018, Berman found that no one—Marshallese or non-Marshallese—thought that Marshallese-English as an English variety existed. Given that it had barely been described as such by academics, this is not surprising. Marshallese also portrayed linguistic insecurity. One Marshallese adult referred to the English spoken by Marshallese as “broken”, another discussed how Marshallese children and adults knew that their English was not the same as that spoken by others. A Marshallese liaison talked about one student who dropped out because she said that English was hard and Americans talk too fast. This idea that Marshallese uses of English are “bad” competes with simultaneous claims that Marshallese are mistaken as poor English speakers because they are very *jook* [shy] about speaking English in front of others (Floyd-Faught, 2019; H. C. Heine 2002, 2004, pp. 166–67). This *jook*—something that both Marshallese and educators in Barnestown discussed—leads children and adults to refrain from doing anything that leads an individual to stand out, including speaking English (Berman, 2019).

Such views connect to widespread interpretations of Marshallese students—in the RMI or the U.S.—as having poor English skills as well as perceptions that this supposed lack of English is a barrier to learning and achievement in school (Floyd-Faught, 2019, p. 137; H. C. Heine, 2002; Kamai, 2015; Robinson, 2018, pp. 75, 78; Talmy, 2006; UN & Unesco, 2015; Watts, 2011; Willson, 2015). Watts (2011, p. 48) reports that a U.S. teacher told him that “Marshallese kindergarten students, as a group, have the least developed spoken English skills.” In an analysis of Micronesian students' experiences in college in the 1980s, Leinwand (1981, p. v) wrote, “The major academic problems discussed by the students and faculty were difficulty with the English language...” Multiple teachers in Barnestown claimed that Marshallese children take a surprisingly long time

to become proficient in English, more than their Latinx and other migrant students. For example, one negatively compared Marshallese students to her students from Laos, arguing that after only a year in Barnestown the Laotian students' English was "pretty good". Many Marshallese also view their community's English skills as poor (although none compare them to Latinx or Laotians). Marshallese Ph.D. (and former president) Hilda Heine (2004, p. 171) states in her discussion of Marshallese students that "English language proficiency [is] a major issue and a cause for high school dropout", viewing COFA students as having "low levels of English competency" which is a challenge for schools (H. C. Heine, 2002, p. 5–6).

Marshallese students' speech is ideologically perceived as exotically different—i.e., emphatically not English. Several speculated that perhaps Marshallese students struggle because their language is so "different" from English. As one said, "It's hard for them to make that connection in learning the language because it's so much different than ours." Reflecting on their large populations of Marshallese and Latinx students, two teachers presented Marshallese as *more* different from English than Spanish, and therein lies the challenge. Said one, "Whenever there's Spanish like, there's a little bit more of a connection there, with just the languages. You know, cognates or whatever it's called." This ideology appears to be widespread, Floyd-Fought (2019, p. 136) reports on an educator who said something almost exactly the same: "Spanish has a lot of cognates, or words that are nearly identical in English and Spanish. There are similar roots and phrasing patterns. That is simply not the case for the Marshallese language."

The above ideologies are tied to federal policies, as discussed below, as well as a lack of widespread research into and communication about Marshallese language practices. Together, these have led to several levels of invisibility of the past and current colonial legacy on Marshallese children's linguistic structures. First, ironically, due to the American colonial history Marshallese actually has a lot of English cognates (Abo et al., 2009). This is particularly true in the school system, as one main colonial enterprise was creating and structuring schools. Many school-based lexical items—such as school (*jikuu!*), paper (*peba*), book (*bok*), pencil (*pinje!*), and more—are English cognates. Second, English is spoken by many in the RMI and taught in schools, making ME widespread. Finally, as we have seen, these children preferentially used English in a variety of situations. Similarly, in observations in school six other Marshallese children also preferentially used English with Berman. This invisibility of ongoing neocolonial ties that create these language practices reflects the invisibility of neocolonial politics.

Neocolonial language policies

The four children in this study, as well as other Marshallese and Marshallese-American children in Barnestown, are subject to the language policies of their former colonizer, the United States of America. These are statewide and federal policies imposed on the schools and educators. These policies interpret Marshallese children as non-English speakers in school, at a rate that seems to be above other minoritized students.

In these four children's case, their parents said that at least three of them—Mike, Jina, and Tomi—are labeled English Learners (EL) and go to afterschool English tutoring (we do not know whether Annie goes to tutoring or not). According to national policy, students who are retained past five

years in EL statuses are Long-term English Learners (LTEL) who are not progressing as expected (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, 2015). In the data provided by the district these four children attended, in 2018 31% of Marshallese ESL students were LTEL, compared to only 27% of the non-Marshallese ESL population. While Marshallese were 22% of the ESL population, they were only 10% of the reclassified population—students who have been judged English proficient (M. Bridgeforth, personal communication, February 5, 2019).^{ix} Similarly, at a high school in a region with a large Marshallese population in 2018, 90% of the Marshallese EL students, compared to 80 % of all high school ELs in the region, were LTEL (Floyd-Faught, 2019). While 22 percent of students in the district with a home language other than English were Marshallese, Marshallese constituted only 7.2 percent of students who exited EL statuses (Floyd-Faught, 2019, p. 82). While the reclassified EL number could be skewed if a higher proportion of Marshallese students are recent immigrants, the LTEL numbers should not be effected by such an issue. Finally, as we saw above, ideologically teachers also have a perception that their Marshallese students were retained in EL statuses longer than other students. For example, one said that many of her students had been in the U.S. for a long time but were still in intermediate EL status.

Teachers offered varying explanations for their, potentially accurate, perception that their Marshallese students are retained in EL statuses longer than other groups. Some of these explanations include the previously discussed belief that Marshallese is such a different language that it makes learning English difficult, as well as beliefs about supposedly “different” cultural and home practices that educators portrayed as contradictory to school learning (see also Spencer, 2012). While all of these reports must be seen as ideologies as opposed to analytic accounts of the phenomenon, interestingly teachers also pointed to specific linguistic features of the children’s Marshallese-English that we documented above, such as the lack of an ‘s’ affix. As table 5 shows, this ‘s’ affix is one of the most common differences between how the children in our sample spoke and the forms of English teachers expect. Said one teacher:

One Marshallese girl...she had the hardest time with s's at the end. Whenever she was reading and writing, even whenever we were reading out loud. If it was ‘cats’ she would say “the cat are running.” And I would say, “catssssss, catssssss.” And she could not produce that s at the end, even if we broke it up, ‘c-at-s cats’. She could not put that s at the end, it was the weirdest thing. I had another who was like that too. But at the end of the year one of them was able to say the ‘s’, and one of them wasn’t.

Unfortunately, teachers said, the assessments they are required to use mark these children as failing. Said another:

We're required to consider that a mistake....So when we're making determinations about how this child is reading....If every time they have a noun that ends with a ‘s’ they don't pronounce that ‘s’, that’s considered a mistake. So now after four or five mistakes you’re down a level...even though they’re not bad readers.

Here, we have a language form influenced by the colonial past, brought to the U.S. through neocolonial migration patterns, and then judged as inadequate by language policies developed by that former colonial nation.

Table 5. Inflectional marking in Barnestown data compared to teacher expectations

<i>Category</i>	<i>Teacher expectation</i>	<i>Marshallese English</i>	<i>n (uninflected)</i>
Noun	plural -s	<i>Jina: I got <u>two sister</u> and one brother.</i>	8
	possessive -s	<i>Annie: my mom keep <u>Bob picture</u> two time</i>	12
Verb	3 rd person sing. -s	<i>Mike: but she always <u>bother</u> us</i>	31
	past tense -ed	<i>Tomi: they <u>move</u> three times</i>	10
	progressive -ing	<i>Jina: She's <u>take</u> a picture of me</i>	1
	completive -en/-ed	<i>not observed</i>	0
Adjective	comparative -er	<i>Jina: She's <u>little</u> than me.</i>	1
	superlative -est	<i>not observed</i>	0

Some might dispute calling these policies neocolonial, since the children's parents are actively deciding to migrate to the U.S. and place their children in these schools. This desire to put children in U.S. education systems is a central reason Marshallese adults give for migration, close to equal to the search for employment and, at least in reports, more important than issues such as climate migration (Hess et al., 2001; McClain et al., 2020). But, as Kelly and Altbach (1978, p. 39) state, educational neocolonialism "is for the most part voluntary; no gunboats are ready to sail to defend the right of a Western nation to distribute college textbooks in the Third World"; no soldiers are forcing Marshallese to move to the U.S. and subject their children to English learner assessments.

When intentions and the location of the children's education is removed the children's linguistic educational situation appears profoundly colonial. In Thomas and Posthewaite's (1984b, p. 15–17) chart on the educational dimensions of colonialism versus independence, Marshallese children in U.S. schools fall almost completely in the full colonialism column. In this column, foreign colonists rather than indigenous peoples determine the purpose and curriculum of schools, control the administrative structure and staff, and shape the culture of the schools. Perhaps most importantly, in Thomas and Posthewaite's model, children of the foreign colonizers have the best chances in the schools, something that very closely reflects the plight of Marshallese migrants in U.S. school systems (Nimmer, 2017). Compared to every other ethnic group disaggregated by the data, Marshallese children have the highest rates of extended EL statuses, the lowest scores on standardized tests, and the lowest rates of high school graduation in the region, and this holds true for other studies as well (District, 2018; M. Bridgeforth, personal communication, February 5, 2019; Floyd-Faught, 2019; Watts, 2011).

From a perspective that views Marshallese students alongside other immigrants, one might wonder why such inequalities seem greater than for other immigrants; from a neocolonial perspective it seems obvious why the inequities that Marshallese face in U.S. schools (and society as a whole) are so particularly stark. The patterns discussed above are not unique: many minoritized fluent English speaking students are routinely misinterpreted as non-English speakers in U.S. schools and retained in EL programs for many years (Clark-Gareca et al., 2020; Mendoza-Denton, 1999; Rosa, 2019). But such outcomes also differ across ethnicities and groups: in one district Latinx students are less likely to be reclassified than Chinese students (i.e. perceived as fluent) even controlling for variables such as social capital (Umansky et al., 2020; see also Reyes & Domina, 2019). Similarly, Marshallese and Micronesian children are placed in EL statuses even when fluent in English (Kala'i et al., 2015; Kupferman, 2015), are evaluated by assessments as having particularly low levels of documented English proficiency (Floyd-Faught, 2019; H. C. Heine, 2002), and are retained in EL statuses for extensive periods of time above and beyond other ethnic groups.

Conclusion

We have presented the first account of language use in the Marshallese community in the U.S. These children's demographic history along with their preferential use of English suggest that they are native L1 English speakers, multilingual in Marshallese and several varieties of English. Although our close analysis of neocolonial forms is only from these four children, every feature listed has also been observed produced by other children in Barnestown, and teachers also ideologically reflect on such forms, suggesting that the features are widespread. The children's language practices demonstrate substantial continuity with ME in the RMI. Their practices also reflect other local varieties of non-dominant English, demonstrating the process of language shift as a consequence of neocolonial migration. In and outside of schools, despite these widespread and diverse English practices tied to colonial and neocolonial control, Marshallese children are interpreted and assessed as having poor English skills and as speakers of an exotically "different" language that has no historical or linguistic connections to English. Such ideologies are tied to federally imposed policies that seem to disproportionately place Marshallese students in EL and extended EL assignments, policies that may be linked to low graduation rates and perceived poorer educational outcomes.

The children's linguistic forms are produced by the colonial past and current day neocolonial policies at the national level that continue to embed English in the RMI and bring Marshallese to the U.S. as neocolonial migrants. They are also subject to ideologies that erase the colonial past and neocolonial present, and language policies that impose the beliefs and curriculum of the former colonizers onto the Marshallese community. This combination of forms, ideologies, and policies produces a linguistic experience that we call a *Neocolonial English*, and the children as *neocolonial linguistic subjects*. Such a neocolonial lens lends particular insight into the unique inequities Marshallese students face.

While we present here only one case study of Marshallese children, shaped by the specific political history of the RMI, the theory we propose will be relevant for other groups. Similar neocolonial policies likely also affect other neocolonial migrants to the U.S.—including migrants

from other parts of the geographic region of Micronesia—as well as migrants to the mainland from places that remain territories such as Guam or American Samoa.

In addition, while this theory has implications for Pacific Islander migrants in the U.S., it also raises awareness about Pacific forms of English more generally, thus reflecting back on education in the islands themselves. Increasingly, Pacific Island communities are embracing indigenous languages in schools and challenging English-only language policies. Guam, for example, has immersion programs for Chamorro, and requires Chamorro education in parts of elementary school; Hawai‘i is revitalizing Native Hawai‘ian, the RMI has shifted its language policy in theory (albeit perhaps not in practice) to prioritize Marshallese in school (Marshall Islands Journal, 2015; Underwood, 1989; W. H. Wilson & Kamanā, 2011). But throughout Oceania many varieties of English are spoken (Biewer, 2020; Britain & Matsumoto, 2015; Eades & Jacobs, 2006; Kuske, 2019). The forms of English expected in schools throughout the islands is American standard, with little focus on how vernacular forms of English may impact education in the islands, or how acknowledging local forms of English may make education in not just the U.S. but also the islands more equitable.^x Thus, this analysis lends depth to understanding the experiences—linguistic and otherwise—of not only Marshallese and Micronesian migrants, but Marshallese and Micronesians in schools in the homelands as well.

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ⁱ Transcription Key: [1, 2.]: Overlapping language

ⁱⁱ Several large Marshallese communities are spread across the central U.S., a region that includes Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri, Kansas, Illinois, and Indiana. Barnestown is a pseudonym used to protect the community, I have also changed some identifiable details such as specific demographic counts to protect the community.

ⁱⁱⁱ Official numbers are likely an undercount (Jaynes, 2013), while estimates suggest that migration increased exponentially since 2010 (EPIC/AJ, 2014; Taibbi & Saltzman, 2018).

^{iv} Age in the RMI is complex and can be tied to relative birth order, kinship status, abilities, and uses of language (Berman, 2014b, 2018, 2019). From a kinship perspective, Annie is the mother of Jina and Tomi. Despite this elder kinship status, the children explicitly called Jina “older”. They also reenacted this age hierarchy when Annie and Tomi deferred to Jina, and Jina regularly took control of speech and commanded the younger two children.

^v In the tables, “B&W” refers to Buchstaller and Willson, 2018; B&W 2 refers to Buchstaller and Willson, in press; M&W refers to Mizner and Worth, 2018; BC&P refers to Bender et al., 2016; and Berman refers to Berman’s notes.

^{vi} Person marking for finite verbs in Marshallese includes an affix, no suffixes are used (Bender et al., 2016, pp. 150–151).

^{vii} Non-obligatory articles and free gender variation are commonly found in World Englishes whose substrate language shares specific features with Marshallese (Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008, pp. 47–52, 55–56). However, they are not common in the American English varieties to which the children are exposed.

^{viii} Although Marshallese children in this area are in close contact with children of Mexican American heritage, we did not observe any features that can be uniquely traced to Chicano English in the current data set.

^{ix} The percentage is based out of Marshallese and non-Marshallese ESL students—the population of all current and former EL students.

^x Hawai'ian English Creole (Pidgin) is a potential exception (Saft, 2023).

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