This study investigates the role of language ideology in the development of L2 sociolinguistic competence by examining how advanced L2 learners acquire dialectal variation during study abroad (SA). Drawing on 14 months of ethnographic data that document US students learning Spanish in Cuzco, Peru, I address the following research question: how are local language varieties treated in SA settings? My analysis implicates a number of interrelated ideas and beliefs about language that restrained students’ exposure to local dialectal features across SA educational settings and discouraged their practice on racial and classed lines. I argue that these discriminatory ideologies are key to understanding why students showed little evidence of acquiring local dialectal features. My findings help to raise fundamental questions about the ideological dimensions of L2 variation as well as the role of linguistic discrimination in shaping what it means to become a competent L2 speaker.

Geeslin & Gudmestad (2008), George (2014), Knouse (2012), and Pope (2016) have pointed to an underexplored role of language ideology in L2 sociolinguistic development during SA which relates directly to L2 exposure and the nature of students’ relationships with local communities. Data from Spanish SA programs in Cuzco are ideal for analyzing these connections, especially given that local dialectal variants index racial and socioeconomic identities that differ considerably from both students and their teachers. Formal Spanish studies in the classroom contrasted with student homestays and work with indigenous communities marginalized because of their Quechua-influenced Spanish. Ethnographic studies are an appropriate and rigorous way to analyze ideological dimensions of L2 learning in these settings which aid in contextualizing divergent findings from previous quantitative studies of this larger topic (c.f. George 2014, Raish 2015; Duff 2011).

I present my findings with two data sets: 1) a qualitative grounded-theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) analysis of classroom discourse, including representative examples of how two Quechua-influenced dialectal variants were taught to students (the double genitive su casa de Juan, ‘his house of Juan’; evidential use of the PluPerfect) and 2) a quantitative variationist (Bayley & Preston 1996) analysis of five students’ speech across three discourse contexts (classroom interactions, formal presentations, conversations with indigenous locals) examining linguistic variants that they identified as representative of the local variety of Spanish. My analysis first illustrates how the language teachers relied on racist and classist ideologies to socialize students to speak only Standard Spanish and recognize local dialectal variants as inappropriate targets that index “incompetent Indians.” As the teachers eschewed the use of these variants in the classroom and beyond, students did not practice them elsewhere, but rather displayed the sociolinguistic competency that was expected of them and with which they were complicit.

Future examinations of L2 variation are advised to foreground language ideologies and their role in shaping how learners experience linguistic variants and practice them across contexts of language use. Such contextualization invigorates our understanding of the acquisition of variable L2 forms and structures as a social practice in which learning language ideologies serves to constitute the development of sociolinguistic competence.