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“English is my only weapon”: Neoliberal language ideologies and youth metadiscourse in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This study explores language ideologies among adolescents attending a South Korean English academy. Current research on language ideologies and English learning has primarily been conducted in countries where English is predominantly spoken, or among adult learners. This study explores these dynamics in South Korea, a country where English is not widely spoken, yet plays a key role in educational and economic opportunity. We analyzed written questionnaires from 27 adolescents positioned as “near-native” English speakers within their English academy. Our analysis documented specific audiences participants invoked in their reflections on English learning, which included adults, peers, language policies, and a hypothesized community of “native English speakers.” We then explored the range of purposes for which participants discussed the use of English across these audiences. Throughout the sample, participants positioned English use in relation to economic status, perceived intelligence, and employability in both global and local contexts. We found participants were keenly aware of their ability to strategically leverage English to both accommodate and resist these dynamics across multiple audiences. We argue that participants’ understanding and leveraging of neoliberal language ideologies illustrates the need to explicitly address these dynamics within global English learning. Furthermore, these findings demonstrate adolescents’ agency, creativity, and metalinguistic awareness toward language and its use.

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As use of the English language continues its global spread, many nations have promoted English learning as a means toward broader integration with a hypothesized global community. However, this embrace of English learning involves more than exposing learners to new words and grammar rules, extending into the ideological and power-laden dynamics of language use and policy (Bourdieu, 1999; Pennycook, 2017; Wodak, 2012). While there has been a proliferation of scholarship exploring the intersections of English, power, and ideology, this research has primarily been conducted in countries where English is predominantly spoken (Vasilopoulos, 2015). Less empirical work has explored the ideological implications of English learning and identity in countries where English is considered a “foreign language.” Even though English in such countries is rarely used for everyday social and professional interactions, they are sites where English is understood to represent important linguistic capital for individual and national advancement in an era of neoliberalism and English-dominated globalization (Y. G. Butler, 2015; Kubota, 2011; Phillipson, 2008). Such countries are also pro-

jected to see the highest growth in the number of English learners in coming decades (British Council, 2006; Crystal, 2012). Research on the intersections of power, ideology, and language education, therefore, has much to gain from explorations of these contexts, their unique histories, and their interactions with the English language.

One country that has embraced English learning to a degree arguably “unparalleled elsewhere in the world” (J.J. Song, 2012b, p. 14) is South Korea (hereafter “Korea”), where the average student will undergo approximately 20,000 hours of English education from kindergarten through university (Education First, 2014). Coupled with the country’s notable history of educational intensity, some have characterized this vigorous pursuit of English learning as ‘English Fever’ (Krashen, 2003; J.K. Park, 2009; J.S.Y. Park & Bae, 2009). Numerous scholars have cautioned against the ideological implications of such seismic linguistic shift in Korea and beyond, but few have sought to empirically document how these macro-discourses of language, ideology, and power are expressed among learners themselves. Studies that do focus on learners in these contexts tend to prioritize adult learners or university-aged students. Youth and adolescents, however, are the population most impacted by English learning through hours of study, academic pressure, and family expenditure on private English education, particularly in

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Korea (Ahn & Baek, 2012; Hu & McKay, 2012; Seth, 2002). Furthermore, students learning English during or preceding adolescence are interacting with this language at a critical developmental stage (Harklau, 2007; Meeus, 2011; Jensen, 2003). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how macro-level forces of power and ideology are experienced and expressed by Korean youth, and the implications of these experiences for English language education more broadly. We explore these dynamics across a group of adolescents deemed “successful” English learners and ask how, and for whom, these youth leverage English within their written metadiscourse on experiences and motivations around English learning.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Language ideologies

We ground this work in the study of *language ideologies* (González, 2005; Mar-Molinero & Stevenson, 2016; Razfar, 2006; Silverstein, 1979, 2004; Verschueren, 2012; Wei, 2016), which we define as systems of belief, performed in context, at the intersections of language and social power structures. The study of language ideologies traces a lineage through linguistic anthropology (Kroskrity, 2004; Wortham, 2008), often beginning with Silverstein’s (1979) description of language ideologies as “beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (p. 193). The field foregrounds the socially situated nature of language, studying language as inseparable from the historical, economic, and socio-cultural contexts of its use (Irvine, 1989; Martínez, 2013). This framing draws attention to the relationship between language and power (Blommaert, 2005; Bourdieu, 1999), or the ways in which language is leveraged to maintain or disrupt particular social and institutional hierarchies. Through such a focus, a language ideological lens can be used to productively explore systems of belief that both impact and are impacted by language use (Van Dijk, 2000).

1.2. Performativity

As ideological discourses are context-bound, language ideologies should not be understood as fixed in nature or conflated with essentialized indications of an individual’s core being or identity. Rather, language ideologies are malleable, with individuals drawing on different ideological orientations at different times based on a range of individual and contextual factors (Rosa & Burdick, 2017). In this way, it becomes productive to consider notions of *performativity* (J. Butler, 1990). Understanding language as performative disrupts notions that language indexes one’s “authentic” self, and instead recognizes identity as malleable and contingently expressed through contextualized linguistic performance (Gal, 1992; Pennycook, 2003). Naturally, the notion of performance necessitates a consideration of an audience. Language practices that can be leveraged in certain situations will not work in others, so individuals constantly navigate a complex landscape of language-in-use with linguistic dexterity and audience awareness (Durán, 2017). Therefore, we draw on the notion of performativity to emphasize the ways in which language ideologies may shift in relation to various audiences.

1.3. Neoliberal language ideologies

Neoliberalism, a doctrine under which market exchange guides human ethics and action (Harvey, 2007), constructs a particular “audience” for which language ideologies are performed. Researchers in a variety of fields have theorized how neoliberalism constructs specific ideological demands of the global workforce, compelling individuals to “produce themselves as having the skills

and qualities necessary to succeed” (Walkerdine, 2003, p. 240) in a competitive global economy in which social safety nets are eroding or altogether absent (Du Gay, 1996; Gee, 1999; Hirtt, 2009; Rose, 1999; Jesook Song, 2011a; Walkerdine, 2003). This individualized notion of self-branding has a profound impact on the relationship between language and ideology (Kroskrity, 2016), including the commodification of multilingualism and heritage language maintenance (Flores, 2013; Heller, 2003). As J.S.Y. Park and Lo (2012) describe,

Under neoliberalism, language and communication are no longer seen as fundamentally linked with identity, and instead increasingly viewed as a detachable, malleable, and marketable resource or skill. (p. 150)

Language is thus framed as an objectified form of capital that can be possessed and used to access educational prestige, desirable employment, and social mobility (Pavlenko, 2001). Language becomes a tool for economic competition in a capitalist system, particularly when the language in question is English, considering its emblematic association with globalization through imperial and economic conquest (Phillipson, 1992, 2008).

The framing of English as a “foreign” language in certain contexts facilitates a view of English as “owned” by an external group of so-called native English speakers (NESs). In addition to being an oversimplified dichotomy of language use (I. Huang, 2014), the ownership implication has long been understood as establishing a power dynamic in which NESs are romanticized as role models and English learners as perpetually “defective communicators” (Firth & Wagner, 1997, p. 285). The notion of NESs as model English speakers and teachers—what Phillipson (1992), Canagarajah (1999), and others have called the *NES fallacy*—intersects with neoliberalism to frame the recruitment of NES teachers as an educational necessity (Aneka, 2016; Canagarajah, 2013; Scales, Wennerstrom, Richard, & Wu, 2012; Sung, 2013). This ideation is racialized, as the NES fallacy associates idealized, so-called “standard,” English language practices with whiteness and Anglo-American citizenship (H. Kim, 2011; Kubota & Lin, 2009; Lippi-Green, 2012). Thus, the ability to “pass” as a NES (Motha & Lin, 2014), becomes a desirable, though often unattainable, goal of English learning, bolstered by the neoliberal logics of native speakership and whiteness as economically marketable.

Neoliberalism in the context of globalization has produced a particular set of language ideologies that render English proficiency a pathway to material prosperity and global connectedness. Kubota (2011), Pavlenko and Norton (2007), and others draw on the notion of *imagined communities* (Anderson, 2006) to describe ideations of English-speaking groups who typify this cosmopolitanism. Kubota (2011) characterized this imagined community as “a captivating space removed from [English] learners’ daily life filled with exotic sounds, words, culture, and a person with different facial features and skin color” (p. 486). Neoliberalism drives the marketability of this ideation, establishing a power dynamic that is particularly consequential in education as students’ access to academic, economic, and professional opportunity becomes limited by the degree to which their linguistic capital aligns with that of the idealized English community.

2. Metadiscourse

Ideological constructs like neoliberalism or language ideologies are not necessarily amenable to simple quantification, observation, or measurement (Fitzsimmons-Doolan, Palmer, & Henderson, 2017; Kroskrity, 2004). However, González (2005) suggests that language ideologies manifest through metadiscourses about “the purpose and use of language, about learning about language,

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