



Park, J. S. (2021). *In Pursuit of English: Language and Subjectivity in Neoliberal South Korea* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press. (202 pp.), \$155 US (Hardcover), ISBN: 9780190855734

The purpose of the book *In Pursuit of English: Language and Subjectivity in Neoliberal South Korea* by Joseph Sung-Yul Park is to demonstrate the connection between English and neoliberalism in South Korea through the lens of subjectivity. Park argues that, within the context of South Korea's neoliberal transformation, English language learning is positioned not only as an economic asset, but also as a moral obligation. It is the moral dimension and affective experience of language users that produces and reinforces both neoliberal power structures and English hegemony in South Korea.

This book has a broad scope, addressing neoliberal policies and language education policies at the state level. This book consists of nine chapters, with Park examining the theoretical foundations of neoliberalism (Chapter 2), the historic processes of South Korea's neoliberalization (Chapter 3), the roles of institutions such as education systems, media, and major corporations influencing language experiences (Chapters 3-6). Following this, Park evaluates the significance of affective stances of anxiety (Chapter 6), linguistic insecurity (Chapter 7), and precarity (Chapter 8). Park uses ethnographic methods and theoretical analysis to make his argument. This book critiques the association of English with neoliberalism purely through the commodification of English and language learning and intervenes by connecting English to neoliberalism through subjectivity and the production of language users as human capital.

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## Summary

In Chapter 1, ("Introduction"), Park begins by outlining how different countries have developed English language learning programs to remain competitive in global economy, highlighting the global language shift towards English and the global socio-political shift towards neoliberalism. The introduction emphasizes the importance of analyzing subjectivity in political-economic research in order to better understand the semiotic processes that lead to English dominance in neoliberal states. The introduction establishes the layout of the book, previewing the key ideas that will be relevant in each of the proceeding chapters of the book.

Chapter 2, ("Language and Subjectivity in Neoliberalism"), defines the practices of neoliberalism relevant to producing idealized neoliberal English using subjects. Park discusses neoliberalism as it manifests in complex, dynamic ways, as an ideological condition promoting market-based freedom through deregulation, privatization, financialization, flexibilization of labour and reduction of welfare and socialist policy. Chapter 2 explores the key theoretical frameworks underpinning neoliberalism and subjectivity, such as the Marxist approach which looks at the precarity

of labour and political-economic relations, and Foucault's notions of governmentality and the technologies of the self. Park argues that English language learning functions as a technology of the self, molding individuals into ideal subjects of capitalist social orders.

In Chapter 3, ("English and Neoliberalism in South Korea"), Park presents the ethnographic context of this book by providing a historical overview of neoliberalism in South Korea (especially with regard to the role the United States and other key political figures had), English fever, and the affective stances of South Koreans relating to their subjectivity in language learning. This chapter discusses the cyclical relationship between corporate demands for English proficiency, middle-class parental investments in children's language education, and government policy reforms reflecting societal inclinations towards English. Some of the policy changes Park gives examples of include educational reforms such as the shift to emphasis on commodifiable skills, opening of specialized private schools, encouragement of publishing in English at universities, and recruitment of native English speakers from inner circle countries to teach in South Korea. This chapter emphasizes the role of emotions, discussing the sense of *junuk* or shame that occurs as English is constructed as desirable for modernization, yet unattainable as racialized figures of white native speakers are imagined as the linguistic authority over Korean non-native speakers.

Chapter 4, ("Language as Pure Potential") examines the affective stance of desire, focusing on how historical processes of modernization and globalization shape the pursuit of English. Park discusses how the desire for English varies across social classes, impacting the way English is pursued and valued. Park argues that Korean's perceptions of English reflect their self-perceptions, and so the desire for English is also a desire for self-actualization and social mobility. English is associated with the potential for more, simultaneously naturalizing the logic of human capital development. The discourses surrounding English and economic relations establish moral elites, where those with a higher socio-economic status are associated with higher levels of morality, and better language ability.

In Chapter 5, ("Language Learning as Technology of the Self"), Park analyzes the role of the conservative press in Korea as it frames English language learning as a moral responsibility tied to self-development in the neoliberal world. Many people in South Korea are critical of English as it is seen as a language of socioeconomic inequality, with the upper class having the ability to invest in English language learning in a greater capacity. Park gives the examples of, those with more economic capital being able to send their children to prestigious domestic private schools, or send children abroad to learn English, which will increase their linguistic and social capital. The conservative press endorses success stories of English language learning to promote intense investment and effort in learning English, creating the figure of the morally elite language learner and proposing that English language learning is the ultimate form of self-care and self-development.

Chapter 6, ("The Biopolitics of Language Learning") addresses the formulation of youth as a limited resource under neoliberalism, especially with regard to language learning. Younger children are considered to be more adept at language learning, so parents find it crucial to manage their children's learning to capitalize on this and encourage children to develop their English/language skills as much as possible before they reach adulthood. The view of the self as human capital creates moral affect as children will view themselves as more valuable or of greater worth if they have greater English-speaking abilities. The view of youth as a limited resource instills anxiety in both children and parents as they have to constantly be conscious of how they are managing themselves in a way that is for their future benefit. This chapter explores early English education programs, norms of completing school abroad, and the concept of biopolitics, to demonstrate how neoliberal values of human capital development are embodied by children in their language learning.

Chapter 7, (“Deferring to the Other”), discusses the linguistic insecurity that is experienced by 12 male mid-level managers in multinational corporations. These managers connect their career aspirations to their linguistic competence, and through interviews with these managers, Park discusses the tensions between their confidence in their language ability and insecurity in their deference of authority to white native speakers. The colonial ideology of racialized native speakerism reinforces the neoliberal project of constant self-development that neoliberal subjects are expected to pursue, as English is promoted as a commodifiable skill but also as belonging to native speakers first and foremost.

In Chapter 8, (“Becoming Precarious Subjects”), Park explores the notion of precarity, analyzing the rise of work that is insecure, unstable, and unpredictable. Precarity becomes naturalized as the promise that learning English will lead to job security and social status is constantly deferred due to the definition of linguistic competence constantly shifting. This is highlighted in Park’s discussion of the how assessments of language ability, such as the Test of English for International Communication, are constantly changing to reflect the neoliberal job market’s demands. The constant recalibration of criteria for what is considered a valuable skill invalidates worker’s qualifications and perpetuates insecurity and feelings of anxiety.

Chapter 9, (“Conclusions”), finishes the book by summarizing the arguments for the relationship between English and neoliberalism through subjectivity. The structures of control in neoliberalism are reproduced by subjectivities of English such as Korean English learners hopes and fears about how learning English will impact their futures in a socially and economically precarious context. The argument of this book is that it is important to understand the subjectivity of language learning within specific political-economic contexts, looking at the ways neoliberalism has manifested in the desire for English and insecurity of linguistic competence in language learners in the context of neoliberal South Korea.

## Evaluation

Overall, *In Pursuit of English* is well written and conveys the importance of conducting further research on subjectivity in language learning. This book is relevant to researchers who are studying affect and emotional significance to language learning, and the impact of neoliberalism on affective stances towards language learning. This book is especially important to researchers for its relevance in interdisciplinary fields, including but not limited to anthropology, sociolinguistics, and education. Research-practitioners or professionals who teach English as an additional language, especially in the context of South Korea, may find it helpful to read this book to gain insights into the subjective experiences of learning and sociocultural dimensions of language ideologies like native speakerism that might otherwise not be considered in their practice.

However, while this book effectively analyzed the social categories of race, class, and age, it would benefit from recognizing intersectionality and paying attention to the potential gendered differences in subjectivity. Due to the nature of the context Park was analyzing, Park’s analysis focuses solely on male managers, leaving women’s subjective experiences unexplored. Examining women’s experiences in this context could provide perspective into the nuance of subjectivities and affective stances towards language learning. Future research should address this gap to provide a more comprehensive understanding of subjectivity, language learning, and neoliberalism in South Korea.

## **Conclusions**

Throughout this book, Park effectively establishes the connection between language learning and human capital production through neoliberal subjectivity. By critically challenging the dominant narrative of English as inherently and universally economically valuable, Park shifts our focus to the affective dimensions of language learning in South Korea that shape the perceptions of English as necessary for self-worth and belonging in society. The lived experiences of language learners discussed in this book reflect the ongoing negotiations of identity and value in a neoliberal context, where language becomes embedded in individuals' aspirations and anxieties. In an increasingly globalized world, Park invites us as researchers to develop a greater understanding of how language learners' ideological constructions of language are shaped by specific material, social, political, and historical contexts.