

Review

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English Language Ideologies in Korea: Interpreting the Past and the Present by Jinhyun Cho

<https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2019-0005>

This book offers a very timely examination into the effects of globalization and neoliberalism from the perspective of one group of professionals who have been deeply affected by each of these phenomena – South Korean English interpreters and translators. Using the site of interpreting and translation as the basis of a qualitative study of 31 participants (30 of whom are female – a telling fact in itself), *English Language Ideologies in Korea: Interpreting the Past and the Present* by Jinhyun Cho is a condensed version of her PhD thesis. Her book traces how historical factors and attitudes have resulted in this cohort being seemingly rendered particularly vulnerable to these two modern phenomena. Against this background, Cho places herself as the central protagonist of her study to question why at 23, and not being able to speak a word of English, she set herself the two monumentally difficult tasks of mastering the international lingua franca and to then train as an interpreter and translator in the hyper-competitive Seoul university system. She did this precisely when South Korea was experiencing its first negative encounter with globalization – the financial crisis of 1997/1998, as South Korea's economy suffered significantly, as did opportunities for employment. While Cho's questioning of these decisions form the basis of her study, from an outsider perspective to take such a leap of faith at such a time may prompt one of two responses representing opposing world views. Firstly, is such a strategy an entirely responsible and appropriate response to the new globalized, neoliberal landscape? Or, is investing one's entire future on that hope that fluency in English will be the necessary panacea to social and economic claustrophobia grounded in reality or based on a high-stakes dream?

The second question lies at the core of Cho's study, which to the uninitiated may at first appear to have a seemingly obvious answer – her choices were indeed sensible. South Korea is a small, resource-poor state that began emerging from its closed, military-dictatorship status thirty years ago as a 'developing

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nation.’ Surrounded by neighbours who at best could be described as closed, it then embraced globalization and the accompanying lingua franca to become a member of a broader world community to ensure its economic survival, an experience arguably shared by many developing nations – but not in its level of intensity. As if sensing such a response, Cho makes the valid point that in attempting to discover meanings attached to English as a global language, scholars may risk simplifying the requirement to establish how local particularities are ‘inextricably tied’ to the development of particular ideologies of English in ‘specific contexts’ (p. 173).

By placing cherry-picked ‘local particularities’ over seven chapters, Cho guides the reader through a journey of the most significant set of events in Korea’s history that have resulted in current attitudes in response to internal and external causes. Importantly, these themes reveal how participants have internalized these to ‘function’ in a globalized, neoliberal environment which may make such a resulting struggle difficult. Of equal importance, her findings reveal that these effects have gone largely unquestioned or unchallenged within South Korea. This book, therefore, provides a detailed snapshot of one specific cohort’s experience of these two phenomena in one nation with its own unique past, although the results may be relatable to individuals from any number of professional cohorts also struggling to find a sense of belonging in this new world order. Chapter One sets the scene, introducing why the Asian financial crisis sparked English fever, its downside and why the dream and reality of learning English intersect in Korea using translation and interpretation as the site of her examination. In questioning her own unswerving motivation to dedicate herself to this career path, she introduces two of her biggest themes –its presumed status and multiple forms of capital that may result and its popularity, particularly among women. One major strength of this book is the way the reader is hand-held as the author scaffolds her themes as she continually develops her argument. In Chapter Two, therefore, the exploration of ideologies of global and local English focuses on English embedded in neoliberal globalization and conceptualized in French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical framework of capital, field and habitus followed by an examination of the motivation of Asian female English learners to acquire English in response to restrictive local gendered attitudes and stereotyping. That these two themes are inextricably linked becomes clear as her investigation unfolds.

Chapter Three clearly articulates the history and development of Korea’s interpretation of its relationship with the United States as protector and in characteristic cherry-picking style using social and economic class as her means to illustrate how this situation evolved. Her explanations are efficient and clearly espoused. Firstly, the corresponding need for translators and

interpreters in the Korean government resulted in only members of this elite being selected to complete the gruelling training process. Concurrently, American missionaries established private English schools which enjoyed rapid expansion due to demand by ambitious Koreans. At that time, the Chosun caste system relegated 90% of the population to commoner status, however the increasing number of English-Korean translators and interpreters achieving both a title and wealth through English alone legitimized it as the 'golden tongue' for the masses in a country reduced to an 'arena of competition among great imperial powers' (p. 46). Secondly, Cho skilfully personalises how English language ideologies in Korea were shaped, focussing on three prominent, progressive male Korean intellectuals who returned from study English experiences in the United States, each with a vision of how English and western culture, including Christianity, would help Korea develop. She then uses this same highly successful technique to focus on experiences from the 'new women's movement' and in particular how the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945 was a fertile breeding ground for women eager to escape traditional Confusion confinement to the domestic role through American missionary education for Christian New Women as compared to overseas-education for secular Korean woman. This biographic approach to storytelling works well, enabling a more bottom-up and therefore empathetic understanding over a possibly more remote explanation that may run the risk of judgment. This leads into her next important theme – again clearly explained. Class division created by those who have been able to sojourn abroad to gain English skills, versus those who have not. In post 1945 Korea, American culture soon dominated Korea's cultural and education landscape that fostered a dependence on America through the Military Government. Knowledge of English was the most valuable form of capital attached to wealth and power with interpreters and translators being accorded membership to the elite with English as the barometer of economic and social capital for upwardly mobile Koreans. Sojourning in the United States was the most effective way to achieve membership of the upper class. And where there is class, there is division that has only been accentuated in the following decades.

Cho then brings the themes of class and gender together by emphasising the division between *haewaepa* (those who gained their education overseas and thus deemed to have excellent English skills) versus *guknaepa* (the locally educated) or those who could use English as an upper class divide marker versus those with little choice but to adhere to the time-honoured belief that English was key to an individual's success. For those whose lives were characterized by class marginality and a lack of resources, the only available option to acquire the desired language capital was by becoming an English-Korean

translator and interpreter. Cho then links two key themes. Such a viewpoint was reinforced by a media that continuously glamorized this profession, particularly for women who were marginalized in the Korean employment market, leading to the industry's feminization. Concurrently, in the mid-1990s, as part of its globalization strategy, English became framed as a key to individual/national/global competitiveness and the pursuit of English became fiercer than ever before. It should therefore come as no great surprise that that neoliberal ideology disseminated through mediatisation that English-Korean interpreters are presented as the embodiment of ideal personhood as English language learners. These individuals are presented to the populace as linguistic masters who have single-handedly manifested success through personal efforts only.

Chapter Four builds on the notion of neoliberal personhood in English, a concept she emphasises has become very popular in South Korea. Given our now clear understanding of Korea's historic inferiority complex, as manifested through its deferring to the United States and more recent embracing of globalization through English fever, the reader can more readily understand why *haewaepa* are accorded so much more respect than *guknaepa*. This is further explored as confirmation of the wonderfulness of sojourning in a foreign land as an act of liberation, independence and resulting increased confidence. Here, participant testimony is introduced in depth, revealing that both groups experience the need to compete in the marketplace with each having internalized an unachievable set of societal demands as achievable, a concept seemingly at odds with the dream of neoliberalism. How such a seemingly unsatisfactory result has been arrived at is explored in Chapter Five from three perspectives – women whose pursuit of English is to write normative gender biographies, for female emancipation and to actualize outward mobility through English. Cho now has our trust and it is surely needed as Chapter Six explores the shift away from language proficiency alone to 'adding value' for female interpreters and translators in a saturated market as 'infotainers' and freelancers (with the accompanying downward pressure on working rights and rates of payment) to enhance their competitiveness. Further accompanying adjustments include the need to smile, be young and of good appearance. Whereas interpreters from previous generations would get up early to prepare, the trend has moved to getting up early to focus on one's physical beauty 'with professional help' (p. 164).

And so, the reader has come full circle. Chapter Seven concludes Cho's thorough investigation of how we have arrived at a reality so removed from the dream. Through a thorough and comprehensive examination of events in the past which have shaped modern South Korea, Cho is able to sum up that the answer to her core question was long ago obscured by a set of circumstances that have rendered South Koreans particularly susceptible to an internalized

neoliberal personhood resulting in the continual seeking of linguistic perfectionism. More importantly, her study has proven that the gap between the perceived dream of South Korean English translators and interpreters and reality has grown increasingly wide, is largely invisible to the general public and reinforces a vicious cycle of English fever that continues to intensify in South Korea.

To conclude, the age-old adage of ‘don’t judge a book by its cover’ is an understatement when referring to this work. There can be no doubt that this book has direct relevance to readers of *Multilingua* as its scope directly correlates with this journal’s interest in publishing high-quality empirical yet theoretically-grounded research from ‘hitherto neglected’ sociolinguistic contexts worldwide. Cho’s book fills a significant gap in the literature on English fever, globalization and neoliberalism in South Korea. Its major strength is in its detailed unfolding of linked, under-researched themes, particularly South Korea’s historical perception of itself which informed its emergence onto the world stage, why English fever continues unabated and the overriding relevance of gender when examining the experiences of translators and interpreters of English there. This book will clearly be of interest to readers of topics including bi and multilingualism, language education and policy, inter and cross-cultural communication, translating and interpreting in social contexts and critical sociolinguistic studies of communication in globalization. However, its potential influence is broader – a case study in one particular context where historic factors and events have rendered one population particularly susceptible to the effects of globalization and neoliberalism. Ultimately, the experiences of Cho’s participants and her findings will be relatable to individuals well beyond the South Korean interpreting and translation community. This renders *English Language Ideologies in Korea* as a potent warning that regardless of internal motivation, not all externally-based dreams come true.