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# Linguistic entrepreneurship: Common threads and a critical response

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**Abstract:** The impact of neoliberalism on language education has recently attracted scholars' attention. Linguistic entrepreneurship is a conceptual lens through which neoliberal implications for language learning and use can be investigated. This commentary offers comments on common threads of themes running through the four articles in this special issue. While neoliberal ideas provide people with hopes and desires to socioeconomically succeed through management of their linguistic resources, the neoliberal system reproduces inequalities for language learners, teachers, and users as well as for multiple languages. However, the perceived superior status of English that often serves as the foundation for linguistic entrepreneurship is considered to be a social imagination, given the complexity of global geopolitics and the multiple directions of global human mobility. Also, the neoliberal engagement with linguistic entrepreneurship—such as commodified language learning or writing in English for academic publication—often deviates from the genuine aims of learning and research. Such deviation also applies to our own scholarly activities. This recognition encourages us to explore how subversive actions can be made possible for not only language learners/users but also researchers ourselves.

**Keywords:** English-medium instruction, language ideology, neoliberalism, women

## 1 Introduction

In language education research, there has been increased attention to the impact of neoliberalism on language-in-education policies and educational practices (e.g., Flores 2013; Holborow 2015; Kubota 2011; Phan 2017; Philler and Cho 2013). The notion of linguistic entrepreneurship (De Costa et al. 2016)—the theme of this special issue—is constitutive of neoliberal ideology of language, which posits that

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strategic management of linguistic competence, as an integral part of human capital in the knowledge economy, leads to individual socioeconomic successes. Under neoliberalism, individuals—no longer protected by the state-sanctioned safety net—are expected to garner knowledge and skills on their own responsibility in order to survive and thrive economically in increasingly competitive societies.

The effects of neoliberalism and linguistic entrepreneurship on the ways in which language is used, learned, and taught are mediated by ideology (individual and societal beliefs) and the political economy (the material conditions in capitalism) (Block 2018; Holborow 2015). The ideologies and political economy underlying language education have long been discussed and debated, even before neoliberalism became a popular topic of inquiry. For example, the criticisms of linguistic imperialism of English, which challenge the global hegemony of English (Phillipson 1992), continue to be a relevant critique in the contemporary neoliberal society. This is due to the growing popularity of teaching English as a global language in many parts of the world as reflected in English-medium instruction (EMI), which provides learners with significant exposure to English (Macaro et al. 2018). These trends can be problematized as ideologies of the *monolingual fallacy* and the *maximum-exposure fallacy* (Phillipson 1992). Furthermore, neoliberal ideology promotes plurilingualism through learning various languages in addition to English. Although this educational emphasis appears to support liberal pluralism, it perpetuates social and economic inequalities in new ways (Flores 2013; Kubota 2016). These issues of neoliberalism and linguistic entrepreneurship underlie the discussions of the articles in this special issue.

In this commentary, I will pull out four common threads of the themes running through the articles and add my response. These themes are: (1) hopes and desires that are instigated through linguistic entrepreneurship; (2) inequalities experienced by minoritized people; (3) the myth of English as the sole language for international socioeconomic success; and (4) enhancing one's worth as a hidden aim of linguistic activities, which deviates from the inherent or ideal goals of such activities. These themes demonstrate that, although neoliberal ideas of linguistic entrepreneurship provide people with hopes and desires for socioeconomic success, the neoliberal system reproduces inequalities with regard to gender, ethnicity, class, and nationality. Furthermore, the perceived value of a globally dominant language (e.g., English) can be a social imagination, given the complexity of global geopolitics and the multiple directions of global human mobility. The articles also show how linguistic entrepreneurship replaces an ideal aim for learners' and researchers' linguistic engagement with other aims that foreground a neoliberal pursuit of socioeconomic advancement. As this last theme applies to our own scholarly activities, I will conclude my commentary by raising a question about researchers' complicity with neoliberal entrepreneurship.

## 2 Hopes and desires

Neoliberal linguistic entrepreneurship accompanies hopes and desires to gain socioeconomic mobility and achievement. All four articles touch on this affective dimension. Some of the desires seem rather idealistic, whereas others are instrumental. The articles by Li and De Costa (on Chinese professors) and Phyak and Sharma (on Indigenous Nepali students) illustrate how English proficiency among those groups is linked to an imagined economic promise, and therefore commodified. In the case of Nepali English-medium private education, even *English* itself seems commodified as a thing to be yearned. In the cases of South Korea and Singapore, language(s) other than English are in focus. Sohn and Kang's article addresses the South Korean government's desire to integrate *damunhwa* mothers into the domestic labor market, as well as the mothers' desire for economic integration by capitalizing on their bilingual skills. In contrast, the case in Singapore, as presented by Starr and Kapoor, demonstrates that learning Mandarin in supplementary programs is absorbed into the broader neoliberal accountability system that compels parents to ensure that their children obtain competitive scores on the exit test, which determine their future socioeconomic success. Here, the parents' desire is more about their children's competitiveness than everyday communication in Mandarin. The parents' desires and anxieties are thereby exploited by private supplementary programs.

These desires held by multiple players in intersecting ways echo the multilayered nature of desires, involving learners, parents, institutions and governments (Motha and Lin 2014). Some of these hopes and desires seem rather idealistic or even out of reach, whereas others contradict the genuine purpose of language learning for communication. From a perspective of critical teaching and learning of English as an additional language, Motha and Lin (2014) argues that providing learners and teachers with opportunities to scrutinize their desires from ethical and justice-oriented perspectives would allow them to choose how and what to desire and make informed decisions about their action. However, neoliberal entrepreneurial desires held by multiple players—from the government to the learners—are entrenched in capitalist interests, policies, and structures, which are hard to escape. Fundamental change for more sensible educational policies and practices requires policy revisions that are achieved through democratic processes. This follows that unless people live in a truly democratic society where their voices influence decision making at the institutional and state levels, rearrangement of desires may be difficult to come by.

### 3 Inequalities experienced by minoritized people

Neoliberal language ideologies reproduce linguistic inequalities. Although recent research in applied linguistics and state-level policies including those of the European Union have promoted plurilingualism (Flores 2013; Kubota 2016), languages that are not regarded as economically viable are still marginalized. Thus, maintaining and developing Indigenous language skills in multilingual countries becomes at risk. Nepal is a case in point. As Phyak and Sharma demonstrate, despite the government's promotion of mother-tongue-based multilingual education up to Grade 3, the popularity of EMI in both public and private education, which overlaps with the aforementioned fallacies (Phillipson 1992), negatively affects the maintenance of indigenous languages. Moreover, low-fee private schools, even those with diminished instructional quality, allure low-income indigenous parents into educating their children in English. What is alarming is not only the potential shift from multilingualism to English monolingualism in society—a phenomenon that has actually been taking place in Singapore—but also the reduced quality of education provided to the children through such modes of EMI. This negatively affects the students' development of both academic ability and English language skills robust enough to make them marketable in the globalized economy (Bhattacharya 2013; Sah 2020). This also reflects an enduring effect of colonialism, which maintains class divisions historically shaped based on connections forged with colonial powers through English in the British Empire and beyond, by affording the ruling elites to exercise linguistic entrepreneurship while barring non-elites from access to not only acquisition of their heritage language but also the language of power.

Gender inequality is seen in the case of the South Korean study. As Sohn and Kang point out, *damunhwa* mothers' unique bilingual competence does not automatically lead to their stable employment as language teachers. This challenge is certainly gendered. First and foremost, *Damunhwa* mothers' presence in rural South Korea was created by global and domestic gender inequity (e.g., unequal gender expectations, a male-dominant labor market, the economic displacement of women leading to marriage migration). This gender inequality further intersects with the neoliberal proliferation of precarious employment options.

One peculiar issue pointed out by Sohn and Kang is the co-existence of linguistic entrepreneurship and linguistic nationalism in South Korea, which compels *damunhwa* mothers to exercise their linguistic entrepreneurship by deploying their bilingual resources and to simultaneously acquire mainstream Korean language and culture. This is important since although English is considered to be the

most useful language for upward socioeconomic mobility in the domestic and global marketplace, it does not fulfill all the demands of everyday communication in Korea and many other countries. I will turn to this issue next.

## 4 The myth of English as the sole language for international socioeconomic success

The promotion of English language teaching and learning in Nepal is based on the premise that English proficiency will guarantee future socioeconomic success and mobility. This belief is constitutive of the neoliberal ideology of human capital and it is held worldwide. While this premise may actually reflect a reality if the future employment is found in English-dominant countries, regions, or fields, not all jobs are located in those contexts. Thus, languages deemed socioeconomically advantageous are not necessarily English. For instance, my research focusing on Japanese multinational corporations and Japanese employees with working experiences at subsidiaries in China, South Korea, and Thailand revealed that languages used in those workplaces included Japanese, English, and the local language, although Japanese use predominated in South Korean workplaces. While the latter case seems to indicate a legacy of Japanese colonialism, the overall point here is that English is hardly the sole language for such transnational work for elite corporate workers (Kubota 2015).

For non-elite migrant workers, acquiring the local language in fact becomes essential. For example, the *damunhwa* mothers had to learn Korean in order to live, work, and raise their children. Although the number is small, non-*damunhwa* Nepali women also live and work in South Korea. Between 2008 and 2018, 6.1% of approximately 50,000 Nepali workers who passed the Korean language test required by South Korea's employment permit system (EPS), were women (Shakya and Yang 2018). Under the EPS, these workers obtain permission to work in the manufacturing or agricultural sectors in South Korea. These non-elite workers must learn Korean rather than English.

Interestingly, according to Nepali government data covering the period between 2008/09 and 2016/17 (Ministry of Labour and Employment 2018), the majority of Nepali economic migrants, mostly men, worked in Malaysia (30%) or Gulf Coast Conference (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE) (56%). While English is widely used in GCC countries, it is not the sole language for communication, and it is certainly not expected of a large number of unskilled migrant workers, mainly from various regions in Asia, who usually undereducated and thus lack proficiency in English (Ahmad 2016).

This makes us wonder what would happen to the indigenous children in low-fee EMI private schools in Nepal, who are not receiving quality instruction to strengthen their academic competitiveness. Would most of them be able to study in higher education and obtain well-paid jobs? With a post-secondary enrollment rate of 12.41%,<sup>1</sup> not many of these children would be able to fulfill their parents' dreams. If they eventually decide to work in Malaysia or GCC countries, how would they perform linguistic entrepreneurship in English? The dominant myth of English as a language for international communication can make the already misguided hopes of economic success through linguistic entrepreneurship even more problematic.

## 5 Enhancing one's worth as a hidden aim

Similar to *damunhwa* mothers and Nepali children, Chinese scholars in Li and De Costa's study and Singaporean children in Starr and Kapoor's are expected to demonstrate their worth in their competitive environments by developing linguistic skills. Yet, these two cases signify the hidden aims of their linguistic engagement. More specifically, the act of learning Mandarin or publishing in English is not only about learning for communication or publishing for academic inquiry—they also serve a different aim that ultimately takes such uses of language far away from the inherent goals of education or academic research.

The Mandarin enrichment centers in Singapore, especially the ones targeting Chinese heritage children, advertise their programs by emphasizing academic benefits and other affective and dispositional advantages. However, Starr and Kapoor point out that the utility of Mandarin proficiency as a heritage language in Singapore—i.e., everyday use of the language—is not mentioned. Instead, the promotional discourses of the Traditional and Modern Traditional centers (mainly targeting educated Chinese Singaporean parents, many of whom are speakers of English) focus on alleviating these parents' anxiety toward their children's test performance in Mandarin, a subject they are required to take at school as Chinese Singaporeans. Thus, the main focus of learning Mandarin is on obtaining higher scores on tests, or even the parents' own satisfaction of fully engaging with the entrepreneurial project of their children's education, rather than reclaiming or strengthening cultural and linguistic heritage.

The two cases of Chinese professors reported by Li and De Costa also reveal the entrepreneurial and instrumental nature of engaging in scholarly publications in English. The neoliberal policies of Chinese universities force these scholars to

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1 <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/np>.

produce first-class publications in English for their career success and mobility, which also enables home institutions to raise their international rankings. Their scholarly competence is equated to the number of publications in English in international, or more precisely EuroAmerican, peer-reviewed journals. This is not unique to China—it is a phenomenon that also takes place in other neoliberal societies (Altbach 2013). Yet, these expectations and practices are inconsistent with the commonly-understood purpose of research. Ideally speaking, the aim of publishing in academia is to disseminate new knowledge generated by research that pursues innovation and discovery. Also, research is often conducted in order to identify real-world problems and propose how they could be solved. However, scholarly work under neoliberal entrepreneurship has indeed become largely about winning a number game by outperforming others for the sake of personal socioeconomic advancement (Kubota 2016). Although university professors are also laborers who must earn their living from their academic activities and playing this game may be inevitable for them, the neoliberal academic order obscures the real purpose of conducting research and instead prioritizes the number game. Individual scholars are held responsible for surviving the game and rewarded by their institutions that are also in competition with each other for recognition and prestige. Success in this competition brings the institutions greater monetary resources. As this reality diverges vastly from the principled aim of scholarly activities, our own scholarly activities are also entrenched in this neoliberal structure, a topic that I want to explore to conclude this commentary.

## **6 Conclusion: Questioning our own academic entrepreneurship**

At neoliberal universities, the principal aim of research is often obscured and distorted into scholar's self-seeking achievements for socioeconomic gains. Research framed in this way is concerned more with producing a large volume of scholarship published in prestigious journals than developing a scholarly knowledge-base that is read by other researchers and practitioners, eventually influencing the transformation of the systems that produce the challenges faced by our society. The notion of linguistic entrepreneurship offers a lens for studying the ways that neoliberal ideologies about language and human capital, together with other hegemonic forces such as colonialism and imperialism, shape people's experiences of learning and using a language and reproduce a system of competition and inequality. This lens also offers us as researchers an opportunity to reflect on the impact of neoliberal ideologies on our own engagement in academic work. It

reminds us that our intellectual work is also embedded in this neoliberal system, hegemonically forcing us to develop and exercise our academic entrepreneurship, as well as linguistic entrepreneurship because our academic work is always mediated by our use of language. Being deeply entrenched in this system, our academic activities become complicit in the competitions for rewards, rather than serving as a foundation for solving problems identified in research through intellectual activism (Kubota 2020). Future research on linguistic entrepreneurship can further investigate where resistance against neoliberal ideologies of language may exist for people, how equity can be achieved, and how subversive actions can be made possible for language learners/users and researchers ourselves.

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