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As an exploration of the ‘embodied, materialised, and politicised’ role of English, subjectivity and neoliberalism in South Korea, Park’s book is an important contribution to studies of language, affect and political economy. A key strength is its treatment of material, ideological and subjective aspects, which allows for an incisive unpacking of the relationship between English, subjectivity and neoliberal regimes, revealing nuances that are often obscured in narratives that paint the pursuit of English as primarily a result of rational calculations.

Adopting a multidimensional and multisited approach, the book draws on a range of data – from mediatised success stories to interviews with parents – to explore four key elements of neoliberal subjectivity: desire, morality, anxiety, and insecurity.

Through a conceptualisation of desire as a ‘socially constituted force’ (60), Park demonstrates how neoliberalism constructs English as a desirable object, which thereby crafts subjects who desire not only English but also the pursuit of English. Through what he terms the ideology of language as pure potential, we see how the construction of individuals as human capital is rationalised, and how English comes to be framed as ‘a language that allows the unbridled realization of one’s potential’ (72).

One consequence of this is the moralising of language learning, through which investment in English becomes ‘a responsible act of self-care and self-development instead of a site for the reproduction of [one’s] privilege’ (82). This both rationalises inequality and produces subjects who ‘willingly align’ (84) with neoliberal ideals, as the pursuit of English is re-signified as responsible management of the self, which creates fertile sites for the cultivation of deep-seated anxieties.

Drawing on the notion of biopolitics, Park demonstrates how these anxieties are managed through investment in English across one’s lifetime. Although not restricted to childhood, Park’s analysis of parents’ anxious management of their children’s education shines light on ideologies that construct youth as a limited period of ‘linguistic malleability’ (110) that must be capitalised upon before it is too late.

Such anxiety is exacerbated by linguistic insecurity emerging from older colonial ideologies of native-ness that serve the neoliberal project by ensuring that ‘perfect’ English remains just out of reach, thereby further fuelling ‘endless projects of self-development and self-improvement’ (147). Rather harrowingly, Park argues, the effects of this pursuit of English are not only restricted to the domain of language learning. Rather, the consequence of this moulding of subjectivities is the ‘naturalisation and internalisation of a precarious life’ (151).

While the book is firmly rooted in the historical and material conditions of South Korea, it extends an invitation to explore other contexts through the perspective of subjectivity (not, Park cautions, as variables), in order to examine how the pursuit of English interpellates us as subjects and anchors itself so deeply in our bodies and souls. As well as being an important contribution to scholarship on language and political economy, this is an accessible book that will make an excellent companion to any graduate course that seeks to encourage critical, political perspectives on English in the world.

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