

Language as Currency: Perpetuating and Contesting Notions of English as Power in Globalized Korean Contexts

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It's mainly because I look Korean: [people] expect me to speak Korean and they expect me to speak it well— [even if] they speak English pretty well, they'll still want me to speak Korean; even if I try to speak to them in English, they'll talk to me in Korean.
(research participant)

This paper describes how students use language as a currency with which to navigate institutional structures and negotiate “fitting in” to social structures of higher education, paying particular attention to South Korea (hereafter Korea) and the English-speaking West. This paper emerged from a qualitative research study examining identity construction in students from internationally mobile Korean families; participants had lived abroad with their families for at least three years before university and subsequently attended universities in Korea, the United States, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Hong Kong.

Context: Globalization, International Mobility, and Internationalization of Higher Education in South Korea

While the macro-level interactions of nation-states and multi- or trans-national corporations are common in discussions of globalization, its essence is transmigration and interconnectedness—the movement of information, resources, and people across physical and virtual spaces. In the context of higher education, Philip Altbach and Jane Knight (2016) defined globalization as “the economic, political, and societal forces pushing 21st-century higher education toward greater international involvement” (p. 105). This definition highlights the often-confused relationship between globalization and internationalization in higher education, where internationalization encompasses the educational landscape's response to the forces of globalization (Altbach 2004).

South Korea as a Context for Globalization

South Korea provides a unique context to observe the influence of globalization's transmigration and

interconnectedness as well as the internationalization efforts emerging in response. Following the Korean War (1950-1953), the state managed incremental development through the 1970s and 1980s, leading to political stability through democratic elections in 1987 and peaceful transition of power in the early 1990s; this stability facilitated astonishing economic growth and rapid technological innovation during the past three decades, and Korea emerged as a significant player in the twenty-first century global landscape. Increasing mobility mirrored this economic development as some Korean families began living abroad as expatriates for business, religious work, or study. Korea's educational landscape shifted as structural and social phenomena emerged in response to globalization. Government policies in the early 1990s “appropriate[d] globalization for nationalist goals” (Shin 2006), that is., to make Korea competitive on the world stage. This national competition on a global scale mirrors fierce competition within Korean education, where parents' primary responsibility is to provide educational opportunities for their children and children seek to honor their family by gaining entrance to a (preferably elite) university, thereby fulfilling the family's duty to bring honor to the nation—the Korean people. The marriage of educational success with family honor and national (ethnic) pride gives unique potency and meaning to education in traditional Korean culture; these deep-seated cultural values inform present-day educational structures and family decisions emerging in response to globalization.

Internationalization: Educational Structures, Social Phenomena, and English

In the Korean education ecology, structures contributing to students'—and therefore the nation's—competitive “edge” are not only tolerated but flourish; the marker of this “edge” is English. Internationalization efforts (Kim and Choi 2010, Byun and Kim 2011, Palmer and Cho 2012) affect existing structures and contribute to social phenomena, ultimately reinforcing the notion of English as power. Informal structures in Korea include shadow education

or *hagwon* (Kim 2004, Kim and Lee 2010) as well as extracurricular competitions and quotas enabling some students to bypass the exam-driven university admission process. Formal structures include policy and curriculum as implemented through educational institutions, including the 2009 Presidential Decree No. 21308 increasing Korean students' access to international K-12 schools (Choi 2004) as well as English-medium instruction (EMI) at all education levels and an increasing number of EMI courses (Byun et al 2011, Jon and Kim 2011, Jang 2017), degree programs, and international colleges within Korean universities. Formal and informal structures create a context in which families make decisions, and social phenomena have emerged alongside—and in response to—these policy and institutional internationalization efforts. One such social phenomenon is early study abroad (Park and Bae 2009, Song 2011, Kang and Abelmann 2011, Shin 2014), with its accompanying transnational family structures (Kim 2010, Lee 2010, Finch and Kim 2012) and “wild geese” fathers who stay in Korea to work while children are accompanied abroad by their mother (Lee and Koo 2006). Other phenomena include internationally mobile families (Song 2012) and the growing conundrum of returnee students whose difficulties in re-entry ripple out from their personal struggles (Lo and Kim 2015) through their families, teachers and schools (Song 2016), and society as a whole.

Many of these institutional structures and social phenomena reflect the “English fever” dominant in Korean society, where English has emerged as a means of competition—a form of capital (Bourdieu 1986), whether social, cultural, linguistic (Park 2011), or symbolic (Lee, Han and McKerrow 2010)—with researchers examining language ideologies (Park and Bae 2009, Lee 2016) and the English language through the lens of social class (Park and Abelmann 2004, Vandrick 2014.), privilege, and power (Shim and Park 2008). In his critique of English-language testing as a requirement for employment and promotion, Park (2011) echoed Shim and Park's (2008) hegemonic positioning of English as a gatekeeper in Korea's elite conglomerate companies. Park and Abelmann (2004) examined how Korean mothers viewed extra-curricular English education as a mechanism for social mobility or class maintenance; more than a decade later, Lee (2016) reinforced the notion that English functions as capital in Korea, where “native-like English reflected... high socio-economic status” and served as a “capitalistic instrument” of class preservation that would “help children get high-paying jobs” (p. 35). In fact, the phenomenon of early study abroad emerged to facilitate

children acquiring this native-like English, thereby gaining capital to ensure the student's—and family's—status upon their return to Korea (Lo and Kim 2015).

Higher Education: Globalization as Ethno-nationalism

Under the banner of internationalization, a notion rightly questioned by Ka Ho Mok (2007), John D. Palmer and Young Ha Cho (2011) and Vanessa R. Sperduti (2017), for its respective privileging of “Anglo-Saxon,” “American,” and Western knowledge paradigms), Korean higher education mirrors—and co-informs—social constructions of English as a language of power in the context of globalization. Not only is the ability to lecture and publish in English a consideration in faculty hiring and promotion, English proficiency is also a benchmark for students to gain admission to higher education through its inclusion on the entrance examination. In fact, at Yonsei University's Underwood International College, admission categories privilege international students and Korean students who have studied overseas for at least three years, with a special category for those students who received all twelve years of primary and secondary education outside Korea (Kim 2015). Given the dominance of English as a global language and the English-focused purpose of early study abroad, it is safe to assume these categories privilege applicants who already possess exceptional English skills compared to the applicant pool. These emerging admission structures in higher education align seamlessly with a February 2009 policy shift (Presidential Decree No. 21308) that effectively positions EMI international schools as “elite-class reproducing institutions” (Song 2013, p. 149) because they are accessible only to families of means. Previously, Korean passport holders were required to prove that they had lived overseas for five years in order to be eligible for admission to international schools in Korea; the policy reduced this requirement to three years and waived it entirely for some geographic areas. This shift makes international schools more accessible to Korean students—either as an alternative to early study abroad or as a relatively accessible option upon return—and permits graduates of international schools to apply for admission to Korean universities. Expanding EMI institutional structures, evolving state policies, and preferential university admission practices co-inform the notion that English is a competitive tool in the Korean landscape, perpetuating the early study abroad phenomenon and reinforcing class distinctions marked by language and access to education.

Although the privileging of English might imply the construction of an intercultural, diversified space within the university, the reality more closely reflects the state's co-construction of globalization as ethno-

nationalism which in 2011, Terri Kim described this as “ethnocentric internationalization”. It is this reality that informs both the curriculum and the experiences of faculty and students. Rennie Moon (2016) found that “notions of ethnic nationalism remain firmly entrenched at the level of university curricula” (p. 92). Terri Kim (2005) suggested that “principles of inclusion and exclusion” inform faculty and administration positionality, and Stephanie Kim (2016) found that marginalization and “disempowerment of Western faculty members” contributes to high turnover. Both Moon (2016) and Kim (2016) found that exceptional English ability was *socially* disadvantageous for some students at elite universities, as it stigmatized them as “academically weak... in comparison to traditional students” (Kim 2016, p. 2). (At these institutions, traditional students endure years of preparation for the grueling national entrance exam as a rite of passage to secure their admission; in contrast, many students at EMI international colleges bypass this rite of passage and gain admission based on their lived experience abroad.) These findings trouble the dominant discourse of English as a form of capital, implying that the lived experience of individuals may be more nuanced.

Methodology

A macro-level understanding of how globalization and internationalization have shaped mobility patterns and the educational landscape in Korea highlights the need for a thorough micro-level understanding of the families and individuals who live and make decisions within this context. Moreover, Kim (2016) and Moon’s (2016) findings highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of how individuals experience and navigate language politics in institutional and social spaces, and these findings contribute to the significance of this research.

The research study from which this paper emerged examined identity construction in individuals (N=13) who had lived outside Korea with their families for at least three years prior to graduating high school. Participant experiences aligned with the Third Culture Kid [TCK] construct, articulated and defined by David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken (2009) as “a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture” (p. 13). Participants were identified through social networking sites and alumni networks from international schools in Korea. After conducting a series of phenomenological biographical narrative interviews (Seidman 2013) with each participant, data were analyzed using a constant comparative approach

informed by grounded theory. A conceptual framework to describe identity construction emerged from data analysis, which included fracturing the data through line-by-line coding, categorization, and connection to emergent themes. This paper describes one aspect of participants’ lived experience; that is, how participants used language to navigate the institutional and social structures of higher education in the context of globalization.

Language as Currency: Negotiating Institutional and Social Structures

This section introduces the analogy of language as currency which emerged from data analysis to describe how research participants gained access to institutional structures and negotiated “fitting in” to social groups in the context of higher education in Korea and the English-speaking West.

Language as Currency: An Analytical Analogy

Language functions as currency—a negotiating tool whose value is determined by context and fluctuates in response to outside influences—with which individuals access institutional structures and navigate social structures. In this analogy, I imagined language proficiency as a continuum (from “no proficiency” to “native proficiency”) where the speaker’s position on the continuum—the value of a speaker’s language-as-currency—is assigned by the listener and informed by the context. Participants used language as an indicator of their ability to “fit in”—or to position themselves as distinct from others—mediated by ethnicity and lived experience.

First, language-as-currency allows the speaker to negotiate (provides “buying power” to do something) according to their ability or proficiency. Participants’ English proficiency made possible—“purchased”—their access to EMI higher education institutional structures, both in Korea and abroad (one participant described English as the “common denominator” for students in her EMI international college within an elite Korean university). However, navigating the *social* structures within this institutional structure was more complex as participants negotiated different kinds of transactions: participation in conversations (surface-level interaction), accomplishment of some task with another individual or group (cooperative and/or productive interaction), or “fitting in”—or not—to a social group (identification-level interaction). In fact, participant narratives largely described their struggle to “fit in”—using language to position themselves as distinct from the social structures they navigated—because the value

of their language-as-currency fluctuated as they moved across social and institutional spaces.

Second, like currency, language derives its value from the context: that is, it can be used only in situations where it is accepted as payment, and this requires a listener who is both able and willing to use the speaker's language. This aspect of the comparison between language and currency was particularly salient in dual language contexts, e.g., among Korean people living outside Korea. In these social spaces, listeners often privileged—preferred to accept as currency—Korean (an “unofficial” language relative to the context) over English (the official language of the institution or nation). (One participant described Korean students at her university in the UK: “[They] only hang out with each other [and] they always speak in Korean.” Another described the language-as-currency valuation that emerged in social interactions with ethnically Korean students enrolled at her state university in the US: “The Koreans wouldn’t speak in English, even if they could. They would speak in Korean.”) A group’s valuation of a single (or preferred) language-as-currency was ultimately a choice of who could “fit in”; in these social groups, language emerged as an indicator of something *shared*—ethnicity, lived experience, and ultimately, identity.

Finally, the value of a speaker's language fluctuates, informed by ethnicity and lived experience. Listeners’ decisions about which language they were willing to accept were explicitly mediated by the speaker’s ethnicity - that is, whether they were Korean. One participant described interactions with Koreans living outside Korea, saying, “Once they know you’re Korean, they won’t speak to you in English—they want to talk in Korean: they’ll reply in Korean, even if you say something in English.” The same participant explicitly described listener’s decisions about which language to accept as mediated by her Korean ethnicity: “It’s mainly *because I look Korean*: [people] expect me to speak Korean and they expect me to speak it well—[even if] they speak English pretty well, they’ll still want me to speak Korean; even if I try to speak to them in English, they’ll talk to me in Korean” (emphasis added). These language tensions reflected a deeper identity conflict upon her return to Korea, particularly when some listeners’ co-construction of ethnicity, cultural values, and identity prescribed their expectations of her behavior without regard to her US citizenship or upbringing: “There are some people [in Korea] that don’t think I should be different... they expect me to become Korean, not to be me for who I am. They tell me, ‘You’re Korean so you need to do this the Korean way.’”

In addition to ethnicity, the speaker’s and listener’s lived experience—particularly whether any of their experience is shared—also inform the value of language-as-currency. One participant described the limited value of her English and Korean language to establish relationships because her language was decontextualized – that is, she did not share lived experience with the listeners (she had lived outside Korea from infancy until enrolling in university). With Korean students at her EMI international college in Korea, “The subjects of the conversation are very Korean: some historical background or some jokes or how hard middle school is, how hard high school is—I can’t relate to that.” She also studied abroad in the US as an undergraduate but encountered the same devaluation of her English because she lacked shared experience with American students (she had never visited the US before spending a semester there as an undergraduate): “I was surprised—I thought that because language is not a barrier I would fit in, [but] I didn’t fit in with the American students, I didn’t fit in with the Korean-Americans... even though the country had changed and [English] was a language that I feel totally comfortable expressing myself [in], I still came across the same problem.” Her lack of shared experience living in Korea or the US devalued her language-as-currency when she attempted to fit in: “I noticed differences in each of these groups—[not just] the language, [but also] the topics of conversations... [I] didn’t quite know where I fit in.” Another participant’s experience at a university in the UK mirrored this tension emerging from lack of shared experience. Describing her relationships with other Korean students abroad, she said, “I haven’t made lots of Korean friends here... I feel awkward hanging out with [Korean] students [who don’t have] an international background. I am Korean, and I am proud to be Korean, but [sometimes] I don’t feel Korean—I feel left out. I have trouble trying to identify myself.”

Language, Ethnicity, and Power

In general, English is valued in a globalized context; however, participant experiences suggested that the value of English was limited in Korean contexts—both within Korean institutional settings and in social spaces informed by Korean values or norms (e.g., interactions with Koreans living overseas)—*if the speaker’s English fluency was higher than their Korean fluency*. This valuation was directly related to ethnicity—that is, in Korean contexts (whether structural or globalized), *Korean listeners valued the currency of Korean language over the currency of English language if the speaker was ethnically Korean, regardless of the speaker’s lived experience.*

In this analysis, listeners were in a position of power to value or devalue a speaker's language-as-currency, particularly when the speaker and listener shared two languages; this power was balanced between speaker and listener when their language proficiencies were equal and when they shared ethnicity and lived experience. However, tension emerged when language, ethnicity, and shared experience were co-constructed, e.g., when a Korean listener expected an ethnically Korean person (as speaker) to share language fluency and lived experience—or cultural values—that they lacked. Although highlighting *difference*, the devaluation of the speaker's language-as-currency actually emerged as *deficiency*, contributing not only to the speaker's disempowerment but also calling into question their worthiness, family honor, belonging, and identity.

Implications and Conclusions

Internationalization of higher education in Korea warrants robust analysis and critique to evaluate its efficacy and minimize its pitfalls; yet the institutional structures and policies emerging in response to globalization *do* serve a purpose, distinct from the “globalization as nationalism” agenda or social reproduction intentions of families in the elite class, because they meet the educational needs of families who return to Korea after living abroad. Moreover, these institutional structures provide spaces within which students can forge relationships with others who share international lived experience. However, these structures—and the national conversation—are relatively dominated by early study abroad (a phenomenon fundamentally distinct from that of families living abroad for one or both parents' career purposes) and critical analyses of class, language, and power.

This paper contributes to critiques of English as a language of power by introducing the idea of language as currency rather than capital. While subtle, this distinction facilitates analysis of the ways English is structurally valued at the macro level and simultaneously devalued at the micro level of individual lived experience. Moreover, the language-as-currency analogy is sufficiently flexible as to analyze power dynamics in dual language environments, describe valuation of different types of language (e.g., devaluation of decontextualized language from a lack of lived experience), and analyze power dynamics of how language is used in social contexts.

Language emerged from this analysis as an indicator of lived experience (e.g., participants used English

ability to distinguish types of lived experience abroad and distinguish themselves from early study abroad students) and as a mechanism of inclusion or exclusion; it also functioned as a currency with which participants navigated institutional structures and negotiated “fitting in.” The value of their language-as-currency was assigned by the listener and fluctuated according to the context, particularly ethnicity. In dual language spaces where English was the “official” language, such as a Korean community abroad or an EMI structure in Korea, participants' Korean ethnicity devalued their English with ethnically Korean listeners. Thus, educators and practitioners in internationalized institutional spaces must be sensitive to the power dynamics of language, particularly where a language other than English may be valued as a marker of shared experience or cultural heritage but may also be used as a mechanism of social exclusion on the basis of ethnicity. Ultimately, globalization and internationalization not only influence nations but also society and institutions, shaping family decisions and fundamentally informing individual lived experience, language, and identity.

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