



Gender, Neoliberalism and Distinction through Linguistic Capital: Taiwanese Narratives of Struggle and Strategy

Mark Fifer Seilhamer

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Mark Fifer Seilhamer's book, *Gender, Neoliberalism and Distinction through Linguistic Capital: Taiwanese Narratives of Struggle and Strategy*, is a long-awaited monograph that speaks to the individual incentives, strategies, and struggles of English learners who seek to stand out through English proficiency in many Asian countries. With a focus on a small group of young women in Taiwan and their English-learning life histories, Seilhamer draws on Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) notion of distinction to critically analyze the ways in which linguistic abilities, just as a cultivated taste in food, serve to perpetuate social stratification. Given the social and cultural capital of English in Taiwan, these women's storied experiences show that their sustained effort at perfecting English abilities derives from the desire and anguish to ace the "distinction game" (p. 3) not only in the classroom setting but also the neoliberal marketplace. Furthermore, Seilhamer challenges the explanatory power of a class-focused Bourdieusian approach in discerning what he terms "habitus permeability" (p. 17)—the fluidity of these individuals' actions in crossing and adapting to various cultural fields (habitus) where rules for the distinction game are differently defined. To bypass this limitation, he cautiously incorporates the concept of "intersectionality" from feminist scholarship (Crenshaw, 1989) and the methodological intervention of "narrative inquiry" (p. 50). In doing so, Seilhamer offers a unique "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the four young women for whom, despite their various backgrounds, motivations, and challenges, English is not only a tool for the distinction game but also a life-long self-development project. For him, these four women's autobiographic narratives present more than simply individualistic reports of their past; rather, when taken together, these stories constitute a cohesive, multi-layered master narrative through which neoliberal subjects translate their English learning into a meaningful self-improving process, one that ensures them to constantly stay distinctive, competitive, self-reliant, flexible, and marketable.

Despite the similarities between Taiwan and other Asian countries in pursuing English proficiency, Seilhamer conscientiously combs through various social-political factors that make the Taiwanese case a valuable asset to a more comprehensive understanding of individual agency in the Bourdieusian distinction game. Taiwan's complicated relationships with the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have induced strongly felt collective anxiety among the Taiwanese populace towards Taiwan's status in the international arena. Voluntary participation in the international community through economic activities, Seilhamer suggests, became an effective remedy to mitigate this "Taiwanese anxiety" (p. 29). Thus, at the individual level, unlike people in other crisis-hit Asian countries, the

Taiwanese appear to more willingly and proactively “champion internationalization and embrace neoliberalism, along with its associated ‘virtues’ of competitiveness, flexibility and self-reliance” (p. 29). Under this climate, English has been valorized not only as cultural goods displaying the speaker’s social standing within Taiwan, but also as symbolic capital indexing their high-achieving involvement in the global economy. This public acceptance of and submission to English as the primary means for “connecting with the world and gaining/maintaining ‘a competitive economic edge’” (p. 39) has facilitated the use of English as a gatekeeping mechanism for education and employment by both the state and the private sectors. It is the collective angst and longing for international recognition, and the individual anxiety and aspiration towards education and professional success, that prompted the Taiwanese, including the four young women in Seilhamer’s study, to pour in significant resources to pursue English proficiency.

Qualitative research is never short of utilizing quoted narratives in understanding participants’ lived experiences. However, Seilhamer submits that these quotations often resemble “collections of disembodied voices” that serve “the purpose of illustrating a particular theme or point, without concern for the individuals behind the words” (p. 50). In contrast, his employment of “narrative inquiry” powerfully demonstrates its methodological advantages in discerning his focal participants’ autobiographies as meaningful reconstruction of past events rather than simple recounts of disconnected incidents. As such, each of these storied episodes contributes to a grand narrative of how his participants progressively improved themselves through various past successes and setbacks. Thus, with its focus on the narrating subjects and their narrated experiences, narrative inquiry allows Seilhamer (and the reader) to witness, and participate in, the exploratory journey of his four focal participants to understand their English acquisition and its role in the construction of their neoliberal identities from early childhood through early adulthood. Within the span of a year since the first interview with Seilhamer in 2009, some women joined the workforce while others proceeded to pursue a college degree. As they retold their past stories to Seilhamer at different times and locations, these young women constantly reinterpreted the meaning of these experiences in relation to their current state. For Seilhamer, these revisions, whose truth value is of less concern, underscore the commitment of these women to “projecting a particular identity” (p. 53).

Through narrative inquiry, Seilhamer is able to not only chronicle the personal achievements and struggles with English of his four key participants, but also generalize these storied idiosyncratic experiences to the Taiwanese public and their ‘Taiwanese anxiety’ towards neoliberal internationalization (p. 192). For each participant, he devotes a chapter detailing their life episodes from early childhood to the present day in which English continuously plays a role in (trans)forming their identities. Gigi “the Intellectual” (Chapter 5) saw English as “a door to the world” (p. 85), considering that perfecting her English abilities helped to create a worldly intellectual self-image. Gigi’s conversations and travels with her Italian boyfriend and other foreigners, all mediated through English, introduced her to worldviews and ‘sophisticated knowledges’ (about philosophy, politics, etc.) that her “superficial” Taiwanese friends could not offer (p. 87–89). Audrey “the Social Butterfly” (Chapter 6) took English as “a tool for community access” (p. 114), through which she gained both financial independence and memberships in expatriate communities. Audrey’s interest in socializing with foreigners increased her linguistic and cultural fluency, provided employment opportunities with these individuals, and nurtured her self-distinctiveness, all of which in turn consolidated her belief in English in materializing these accesses. Rachel “the Ideal Neoliberal Subject” (Chapter 7) associated English (and to a lesser extent, French) with “upward mobility” and “higher income” (p. 131). Rachel believed that, just as her English-learning journey thus far has presented her with unique opportunities unobtainable to her peers with similar working-class family backgrounds—including extended trips to Europe sponsored by her former French boyfriend—it would also help her stand out in the competitive job market and

eventually land her dream job in France. Shannon “the Competitor” (Chapter 8) reserved her competitive self only to the fields where one’s English abilities are evaluated and ranked. While Shannon’s obsession to remain “the best at English” (p. 144) did allow her to strive to glow with pride and pleasure, it also brought despair and frustration detrimental to her “English ‘expert’” (p. 151) identity when her peers outperformed her with higher grades in English classes and (placement) exams.

At first sight, the four women’s autobiographic narratives provide only loose, sporadic examples of how neoliberalism has impacted the lives of Taiwanese people. Each participant offered snippets of incidents in which English abilities and practices had contributed to their construction and maintenance of a particular identity at a particular time-space. When read separately, the experiences of Gigi, Audrey, Rachel, and Shannon are not easily generalizable to the larger Taiwanese public inasmuch as their personal backgrounds, struggles, and aspirations are concerned. Only when these four young women are understood as a group confronted with life-changing differences between school and work, Seilhamer writes, could we begin to understand how their meaning-seeking and -making actions through English in fact speak directly to the ‘Taiwanese anxiety’. Their practices to convert English as “cultural capital to social and symbolic capital to achieve distinction in the Taiwanese fields they inhabited” (p. 178), is a direct reflection of the Taiwanese populace’s desire to not only gain access to, but also position themselves in the larger international community.

Moreover, for Seilhamer, gender plays a significant role in smoothing and maximizing the capital conversion that these young women partook through the use of English. On the one hand, similar to Kelsky’s observation of Japanese women’s transnational cosmopolitanism (2001), Seilhamer notes how his participants deployed their “gender capital” (p. 19; p. 180–186) in establishing (romantic) relationships with foreigners and navigating through these expatriate communities that are otherwise inaccessible to Taiwanese women who do not speak English. On the other hand, Seilhamer connects the willingness of these young women’s families to pour in resources to nurture their English abilities to a gendered language ideology that “*only females are good at languages*” (p. 189, emphasis original). As such, foreign language skills are believed to help women edge men out in schools and workplaces. Thus, in line with Bourdieusian theory, Seilhamer suggests, these four young women sought and took advantage of the ‘added value’ (symbolic capital) of their English proficiency (linguistic capital) largely thanks to their parents’ investments and their early socialization into various habituses where English is highly valued. From very early on, as their narratives indicate, these young women exhibited metapragmatic awareness of the indexicalities that speaking English would entail, prompting to their “habitus permeability” (p. 187), that is, rapid assessment and rapid adjustments to the norms regarding when and how to use English within a particular habitus.

Despite the ‘thick description’ of the four young women’s struggles and strategies with English in the neoliberal Taiwan, Seilhamer’s book is paradoxically limited by the methodological adoption of narrative inquiry and the class- and gender-based approach. As such, the generalizability of his study to not only the larger Taiwanese populace but also other Asian contexts requires careful treatment. For example, Seilhamer pays little to no attention to men from the same age group (he does, however briefly, offer these young women’s views of middle-aged men holding managerial positions; see p. 188–191). Nor does he include individuals from less and even more privileged social-economic backgrounds to truly address the critiques against Bourdieusian theories of distinction and habitus. Some sociolinguists may find Seilhamer’s use of linguistic capital and habitus unsatisfying, as English operates more as a discursive realization of language ideologies and less as a social practice. His narrative inquiry prevents him from observing how these young women actually carry out capital conversion practices in everyday life, and from cross-examining such practices with their self-reports.

Seilhamer indeed is a talented storyteller (as he humbly asserts in his own autobiographic report in the book; see p. 59–61). Not only has he convincingly retold the stories of his participants “in a

manner that truly allows the reader to get to know each of them” (p. 50); he has also impressively parsed out the underlying motives, desires, and insecurities of these individuals to want to be distinctive. Seilhamer's contributions go beyond Taiwan studies and shed light on second-language education, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and cultural studies more broadly. A wide range of sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological courses featuring symbolic capital and world Englishes would find the book a valuable resource. Mark Fifer Seilhamer illuminates us on the potentials in addressing individual motivations and investments in language learning through the lens of the participants' lived experiences.

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