

“I had dual feelings”: Ideological heteroglossia and subjectivity of rural South Korean English teachers

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ABSTRACT

Many emerging qualitative studies employ Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of heteroglossia -- the variety of dialects, registers, or ideologies that circulate within a society. Scholars use heteroglossia to discuss competing interpersonal language ideologies in East Asia (Kim, 2017; Jenks & Lee, 2016), and map dynamic intrapersonal language teacher identities (e.g., Seo, 2023). However, few (if any) analyses discuss the complex intrapersonal interplay between competing (g)local English language ideologies – particularly in rural areas (May, 2014). This study therefore explores the ideological inner tensions of one secondary-level English teacher living in the rural Jeollanam-do province of South Korea. *How do Korean secondary-level English teachers position themselves between competing English language ideologies in rural South Korea?* Through quasi-ethnographic interviews drawn from a larger project, this study analyses heteroglossia and voicing through reported speech. Reported speech, or “putting words into others’ mouths” (Wortham & Reyes, 2015), can (re)produce and evaluate multiple ideological positions through single utterances. Findings illustrate one teacher’s ideological position of “dual feelings.” Such feelings frame tensions between neoliberal ideologies of tracking (Byean, 2015), test-centred methodologies, acts of ideological resistance (Park, 2022a), and students’ indifference to English (what Shin and Lee [2019] call *yeongpoja* or “English Abandoner.”) By disentangling this intrapersonal heteroglossia of ideologies, this study sheds further light on the neoliberal subjectivity (Park, 2021) of Korean English teachers on the periphery of globalization.

Keywords: *discourse analysis, heteroglossia, English language ideologies, South Korea*

INTRODUCTION

Emerging turns in sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological inquiry challenge metronormative (Green, 2013; May, 2014) binaries of linguistically and ideologically diverse cities and correspondingly homogenous rural areas (e.g., Ferguson, 2022; Liu & Ma, 2023; Yang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2021). This study furthers this scholarly turn by focusing on ideological heterogeneity among English teachers in rural South Korea (Korea), a country often typecast as homogenous (Han, 2007). While Jee & Li (2023) compare the experiences of two urban and rural (as a proxy for social economic status) Korean English teachers from the perspective of teaching English as an International Language (EIL), this paper centres the rural, understudied province of Jeollanam-do (Lee & Yin, 2021) and broadens its lens to focus on ideological heteroglossia. It aims to do so by following the discourse pathways (Wortham & Reyes, 2015) of one teacher describing her conflicting “dual feelings” while teaching English at a rural vocational high school. But first, this paper’s focus on ideological heteroglossia, demands definitions for both terms.

Language Ideologies

Scholars commonly define language ideologies as “any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein, 1979, p. 193). Kroskrity (2004, p. 498) simplifies this definition to “beliefs, or feelings, about languages as used in their social worlds.” Irvine (1989, p. 255), however, invokes the political economies of such social worlds by linking language ideologies to the “loading of moral and political interests.” Speakers forge these linkages between language and sociopolitical positionalities through processes of iconization, or when languages or linguistic features fuse onto social groups as inherent or essential qualities (Gal, 1998, p. 328). For example, Wee (2006, p. 349) discusses the iconization of English in Singaporean language policy as a carrier of Western values counteracted by the mother tongues of Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. In other words, the mother tongues are not contingent on different cultures, but treated as essential and inalienable qualities of each culture.

In the Korean context, Park (2009) identifies three key English language ideologies driving Koreans’ relentless pursuit of English education: necessitation (English as a required skill for all Koreans), externalization (English as an external language in opposition to a Korean identity), and self-deprecation (Koreans as irreconcilably bad speakers of English). His later work, however, incorporated notions of political economy to discuss English as a constantly deferred promise for social inclusion and social advancement (Park, 2011), as well as English as a medium of pure potential fueled by the neoliberal notion of language as a neutral abstract tool of communication (Park, 2016). Park (2021) then advanced this entanglement between English and neoliberalism (itself an ideology that emphasizes individual responsibility and self-improvement and deemphasizes government oversight and support [Harvey, 2005]) (see also Pennycook, 2022). Park (2021, p. 30) defines Koreans’ pursuit of English as a form of neoliberal subjectivity, which produces “an idealized prescription of how we are expected to live our lives” while erasing (Irvine & Gal, 2000) the contradictions rife within “the actual emotions, anxieties, desires, and hopes we experience under the material conditions of neoliberalism” (Park, 2021, p. 30). Many studies on language ideologies in Korea, however, focus on urban areas. This study, therefore, aims to both compare and combine instantiations of Park’s ideologies through the heteroglossia of an English teacher working in rural Korea.

Heteroglossia

Language scholars have translated and adopted heteroglossia from the work of literary critic and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, p. 291) who wrote that “language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socioideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present.” To put it another way, with a variety of voices and positions circulating in a community at any given time, “consciousness must actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 295).

Individual ideologies within this plurality of socioideological space can be classified as either centrifugal forces (ideological positions that diversify away from or resist the macro-level ideological centre of gravity) or centripetal forces (ideological positions that consolidate or pull towards the macro-level centre of gravity). Kim (2017), for example, uses these forces to conceptualize the way multilingual university students in Seoul both affirm and resist language ideologies at different times, such as by centripetally reifying ideologies of native speakerism (Holliday, 2015), or by centrifugally resisting ideologies of English as a hegemonic lingua franca by relying on Korean-Japanese translingual practice (Canagarajah, 2013). Jenks and Lee (2016) explored English ideological heteroglossia among Hong Kong university students, arguing against

the “single linguistic narrative” (p. 390), or linguists’ impulse to discuss language ideologies as monolithic within demarcated boundaries of nation-states. Rather, they call for scholars to “focus more on the heteroglossic nature of ideologies that constellate within and beyond a particular region” (p. 400).

This study picks up this call by both focusing on an understudied rural region of Korea, and by considering the heteroglossic variation of ideologies circulating among teachers in that region. While length requirements limit this paper to the heteroglossic variation given by one participant of a larger study, this study aims to shed light on English ideological heteroglossia in rural Korea by answering the following question. *How does a Korean English teacher living in a rural Korean province negotiate heteroglossic English language ideologies?*

METHOD

To answer the above question, this paper focuses on an ideological dilemma experienced by Minji (pseudonym), a Korean English teacher working in a rural vocational high school. Minji studied English language education at a regional national university and passed a competitive regional examination to become a teacher in Jeollanam-do. She spoke about her ambitions to become an English teacher after receiving a favourable score on the College Scholastic Aptitude Test (CSAT) as a third-year high school student. She then spoke about how her interest in English grew as she enjoyed “learning new vocabulary rules” and “memorizing new vocabulary words.” At the time of writing, she has worked in two different high schools in a rural county in Jeollanam-do – a vocational high school aimed “to make students get a job [in defence or culinary arts] after graduation” as well as an academic high school aimed at preparing students for university admission. In total, she has been teaching for five years.

This case stems from a larger project comparing the linguistic ideological positioning of 14 Western expatriate English teachers and 12 local Korean English teachers. I conducted semi-structured interviews (Rolland et al., 2019) with each teacher, focusing on attitudes and practices of English within Korean education and Korean society. Interviews took place on Zoom in mostly English with occasional moments of Korean translingual practice (Canagarajah, 2013) to resolve “trouble sources,” or liminal breakdowns in communication and understanding (Kimura and Canagarajah, 2020, p. 644). Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Minji’s interview in particular lasted 50 minutes. Zoom’s automatic transcription software produced a transcript that I edited and refined during the listening process. While I edited some excerpts with ellipses (...) for brevity, I did not edit excerpts for grammatical errors or dysfluencies (i.e., with the term [*sic*]) to avoid native speaker bias (Cheng et al., 2021).

Analysis began with thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to discover key ideological themes that emerged in participants explanations, narratives, and accounts. Next, analysis for this paper set Minji’s account of having dual feelings as a critical moment (Kimura and Canagarajah, 2020), which then served as the focal point of discourse pathway analysis (Wortham & Reyes, 2015). This study focused on pathways of reported speech, or putting words into the mouths of others outside of the present speech event to evaluate others or produce social action. In the context of this paper, Minji’s use of reported speech allows her to index ideological heteroglossia by voicing and evaluating ideological positions that are not her own. Bakhtinian-inspired scholars often call this “double-voicing” (e.g., Silverstein, 2021).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

“I had dual feelings.”

The strongest indication of ideological conflict arose when Minji describes the “dual feelings” she experienced as a rural high school English teacher.

But I had dual feelings as an English teacher. I thought I had to be more responsible in students' English level. I- I liked that students enjoyed the class, but I- every time in the class, I felt a little bit burden that I have- do I have to teach more? Or do I have to stop here? Because they will lose interest like this. So so making certain pace in every time for- in every lesson was difficult for me.

By following the contrastive conjunction “but,” Minji articulates her “dual feelings” as a conflict between wanting her students to “enjoy the class” and feeling “a burden” to teach more or to “be responsible to their level,” combining to form concerns about “making pace.” These feelings seem to position Minji between top-down curricular pressures and bottom-up understandings of her students’ needs. To better contextualize Minji’s sense of conflict, we can trace the indexical link of “the class” and the deictic “they” (in reference to students) to better understand Minji’s school setting and students.

“I just gave up learning English.”

Tracing the indexical “the class” and the deictic “they” back further in the interview, Minji describes perceptions of her students in vocational high school.

Mm- in reality, in Korea usually the students who goes to go to vocational high school are not smart students or who has the highest score in their academic record usually the low-level students go to vocational high school.

By mentioning students attending vocational high schools as “not smart” or “low-level,” Minji invokes what Byean (2015) calls the neoliberal ideology of tracking. By tracking students with ascribed low levels of English into vocational high schools, Korean English education policies highlight the positioning of English as the purview of ideal neoliberal subjects. Such an ideological positioning bifurcates students at academic high schools centred around test preparation as ideal and students at vocational high schools, by extension, as less than ideal. However, Minji also hedges her position through the phrase “in reality,” signalling that she herself may not fully endorse such an ideology despite its perceived ubiquity in the macrolevel culture.

Through reported speech, Minji also points to how vocational high school students have internalized this label of (dis)ability and (dis)interest in learning English.

And they lose their academic interest also. So- mm so all they say to me was English is too difficult and my English academic record in my middle school was too low, so I just gave up learning English. That's what they talked to me when they were first grade in vocational high school.

Through the reported speech of her students (or in this case, due to the composite nature of the quotes, constructed dialogue [Tannen, 1989]), Minji’s students fit what Shin & Lee (2019) call *yeongpoja* [English: “English abandoner”]. Minji indexes this figure of personhood (Agha, 2007) through constructed dialogue like “English is too difficult,” “my English academic record in middle school was too low,” and “I just gave up learning English.” Such constructed dialogue positions Minji (at least at that moment) as a classed perceiving subject (Park, 2022a) of low-achieving students tracked into vocational high schools.

Byean (2017) describes *yeongpoja* as a co-constructed identity label between teachers and students. In other words, by attributing students’ lack of learning to a lack of motivation, teachers

can abandon the need to teach the *yeongpoja* just as the student abandons their efforts to study. Shin & Lee (2019, p. 81) also note that *yeongpoja* “has class implications because it will be relatively difficult for an (upper) middle-class student to become *yeongpoja*.” This is in part due to students (and parents) of higher social classes having access to the economic and social capital of shadow education (private lessons offered to supplement public school education [Kim, 2015]).

By classing the *yeongpoja* label, scholars argue that neoliberal ideologies link *yeongpoja* to the personal failings of lower-class students while (upper) middle-class students with unequal access to shadow education maintain their positions as ideal neoliberal subjects (Byean, 2015, 2017; Shin & Lee, 2019). However, Park (2022b) repositions resistant *yeongpoja* students away from failed neoliberal subjects and toward agents who resist neo-colonial subjectivities by saying “enough” to English. Minji therefore positions her students as resistant *yeongpoja* through the composite reported speech of her students “saying enough” to English (e.g., “I just gave up learning English”), thereby also indexing her students’ low socioeconomic status.

“Don’t be stressed in learning English like that.”

Park (2022a, p. 351) discusses the immense difficulties of dismantling neoliberal coloniality, but also notes that in the struggle to imagine alternative possibilities and subjectivities, “every small moment must count.” Despite the excerpts above positioning Minji in partial alignment with dominant English-mediated neoliberal discourses of English, she seems to take a small step toward liberating her students by resisting the dominant English language ideology of necessitation (Park, 2009).

I just said, I don't want to- I don't want you guys to feel stressed about learning English because it's not like like even though you don't know any English word, you will graduate, and you will live your life so don't be stressed in learning English like that.

Through the deictic indexical “you guys,” Minji reports her own speech in response to her students’ performed *yeongpoja* stancetaking (Kiesling, 2022). In this recursive process of heteroglossic positioning between her students and herself, Minji resists the ideology of necessitation by reminding her students that they “will graduate” despite not knowing “any English word,” thereby identifying and nurturing an alternative subjectivity of her students’ relation to English (Park, 2022a, p. 351). As Byean (2015, p. 876) writes, “classrooms are complex social and cultural spaces - sites of struggle in which social relations are (co)reproduced, (co)appropriated, or even (co)transformed in ongoing and highly creative ways via the micropolitics of everyday school.” In other words, Minji’s microlevel gaze provides her purchase to focus on the local needs of her students in lieu of national macrolevel ideologies.

However, Park (2022a, p. 351) also notes that questioning entrenched neoliberal subjectivities is a difficult task. Macrolevel social structures like curricular mandates can thwart teachers’ goals of ideological resistance. In this case, however, the positionality of Minji’s students as vocational high school students creates affordances that side-step the CSAT (i.e., “the Korean SAT”), which dominates most secondary level English classrooms (Lee & Lee, 2016).

So for the students in vocational high school, I think most of the students doesn't they don't take the Korean SAT exam...So English is not main subject for them, I think...So when I worked in vocational high school, I feel- I felt less stressed about it to English, so I tried to make them understand just basic things like- When they want to learn

more about English after they graduate, they have to know cert- some basic rule in English like that... Yeah, that's what I taught and I tried to make them interested.

Paradoxically, through affordances of the tracking system of the Korean secondary education system, Minji's students were exempted from the exam-fueled English-mediated drive by Korean students to become ideal neoliberal subjects (Park 2016, 2022a, 2022b). By contrast, a participant in Cho & Kinginger (2022, p. 6) from the city of Daejeon hinted at this neoliberal striving in response to a reported dialogue between a parent and teacher.

One mother complained to the teacher, who later told the class that he had replied, "They're not studying for the CSAT; the CSAT is not everything, right?" I could not understand the conversation and still don't. We memorize English vocabulary to do well on the CSAT. What other goals do we have? (Cho & Kinginger, 2022, p. 6).

In other words, Minji's goal to alleviate her students' stress around learning English coupled with students' obviated need to study for the CSAT formed a crack to resist the neoliberal subjectivities of English (Park, 2022b). As a result, Minji also reports feeling less stressed about English and able to imagine and enact "real, embodied experiences through which the learner imagines, however briefly, different ways of being a language user in the world" (Park, 2022a, p. 351). She does this by recontextualizing her student's relationship to English from one of failure to one of capacity-building -- to "learn more about English after they graduate." She later speaks about accomplishing this by "trying to make [her students] interested by some edu-tech programs, such as Kahoot or Quizziz." Minji's account of feeling "less stressed" allowed her to move beyond mandated test preparation books lamented by other interviewees in favour of more student-centred methodologies. And according to Minji's reported speech later in the interview, her efforts succeeded.

And after- After one year, they said I- I could know that English is not a stressful subject in your class. That's what I heard. So yeah, I think just pushing them to learn every details of English or too sophisticated- like rules or memor- words like that- can be very stressful for Korean students.

Minji follows up the constructed dialogue of her students (indexed through the deictic "they") viewing English as "not a stressful subject" with a critical evaluative stance against the hypothetical practice of "pushing [students] to learn every details of English or too sophisticated of rules." This constructed foil to her more relaxed teaching approach is not arbitrary, but rather parallels her previous critical stance against the test-centric culture of Korean English education. She creates this contrast through a performance break of stancetaking (Baynham, 2011).

In fact, when questioned whether English should be a mandatory subject of study in Korean secondary-level education, Minji suggested that English should not be a mandatory subject on the CSAT, calling the language on the exam "too difficult and too sophisticated." Most reading passages come from professional "science journals or history journals." Paralleling her previous stances of resistance to English, she argues that not every student will need that ability in the future. Such a response also mirrors an emerging critical nickname of South Korea as "examination hell" (Ahn, 2013) and adds nuance to Jee and Li's (2023) argument that teachers in rural areas may take more test-oriented stances in their teaching.

Yet as a reprise of the focal excerpt will show, Minji's resistance to the exam-oriented neoliberal subjectivities of English can never be whole or complete.

“I had dual feelings”: Reprise.

By tracing the discourse pathways of deictics, evaluative indexicals, and reported speech above, this paper aims to elucidate the complex heteroglossia of ideologies that manifest in Minji's sense of “dual feelings” in the excerpt (re)produced below.

But I had dual feelings as an English teacher. I thought I had to be more responsible in students' English level. I- I liked that students enjoyed the class, but I- every time in the class, I felt a little bit burden that I have- do I have to teach more? Or do I have to stop here? Because they will lose interest like this. So so making certain pace in every time for- in every lesson was difficult for me.

While the discourse pathways traced above seem to explain why her students may have “enjoyed the class” and why she was concerned about how students may “lose interest like this,” Minji's own positionality as an English teacher within the intense Korean EFL climate counterbalance this sense of success.

While Minji did not endorse English as a mandatory subject on the CSAT, she did argue for English to be a mandatory subject in high school “because it's related to [her] job.” However, she also softens her previous stances against ideologies of necessitation by appealing to English and education as pure potential (Park, 2016) in a globalizing new economy (Shin & Lee, 2019). “[Students] need to learn English because the borders between the countries are more blurred nowadays,” said Minji. “I think it's getting more like globalized. So, schools should uh- teach English because it can be useful in their future- in the students' future.” Minji even self-corrects to supplant the deictic “their” with “the students” to reiterate her complicated investment in the value of English, both due to her positioning as an English educator herself and the deep English-mediated neoliberal subjectivities in Korean society (Park, 2021; 2022a, 2022b).

Such a shift in stancetaking toward the (non)necessity of English seems to parallel a shift in gaze. When Minji's gaze remained local, focusing on her school life, she seemed more confident to express the nonessentiality of English, promising that students will “still graduate and live [their] life” even if “they don't know a single English word.” However, this stancetaking softens and even reverses while adopting a global lens, showing a kind of layered simultaneity where multiple spatiotemporal frames can index different historicities of linguistic resources (Blommaert, 2014; Kell, 2017). In other words, the scale at which Minji discusses English seems to influence the value she ascribes to English and shows how inconsistent or contradictory heteroglossic ideologies of English (Jenks & Lee, 2016) can appear within the same conversation or even within the same utterance.

CONCLUSION

This paper sheds a heteroglossic light on an understudied part of Korea often typecast as homogenous (Han, 2007). Through an analysis of reported speech and discourse pathways, this analysis highlights a complex picture of rural Korean English teachers' mixed ideological positionings. A more detailed analysis beyond the scope of length requirements in this paper would undoubtedly help paint an even more complex picture of ideological heteroglossia in Jeollanam-do.

However, this study also has shortcomings worth highlighting. As a single case study, readers should not treat this article as generalizable to all Korean English teachers working in rural provinces. Moreover, interviews were conducted (mostly) in English, which may have limited the

depth of detail shared by Minji or other participants. However, it is also important to note the complex relationship between second language studies and narrative analysis. Some scholars argue that interviews conducted outside of participants L1 repertoire may be deemed less reliable (e.g., Pavlenko, 2007) while others argue for the affordances of second languages for participants to discuss taboo topics at greater psychological distance compared to first languages (e.g., Espín, 2013).

In addition, it is important to contextualize Minji's ideological resistance noted earlier with the material realities of students with lower socioeconomic status (Block, 2017). In other words, "saying enough" to English (Park, 2022b) does not necessarily alter the material conditions brought on by neoliberalism. Regardless, Park (2022a) also noted how every small moment counts in the ongoing struggle to demystify English language ideologies. This study therefore serves as one of many first steps to better articulate and untangle the complexity of language ideologies in regions often characterized as homogenous, as well as understudied rural regions on the periphery of globalization.

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