

# Ideology of English in Neoliberal Globalization

— From a Scope of Applied Linguistics —

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## Abstract

This paper summarizes the recent trend of positioning language as a commodity within neoliberalization in Applied Linguistics. The term “Neoliberalization” in Applied Linguistics has been disseminated without defining its meaning; the term is sometimes overused to explain the complex situations around English Language Teaching in the world. This paper is not a discussion on the term “neoliberalization” from the perspective of the economics of languages, but rather the one from the field of social sciences. In addition, this paper seeks the possibility of investigating how language-as-a-commodity discourse in neoliberalism can be “applied” to research on language learning. This paper will also help to deepen the understanding of the ideology/discourse of neoliberalization in language teaching today.

*Keywords: Neoliberalism, Ideology, Language as commodity, Discourse*

## Introduction

Currently, the Japanese government plans to revise the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Law in order to compensate for the

shortage of working forces in Japan. The new working visa will be issued to around 345,000 foreign people who will engage in 14 selected industries. The new visa has two sub categories, labelled No.1 and No.2. People who have the No.1 can work for five years, and the workers with No.2 – who possess advanced skills in specific fields – can stay for longer periods. Since 1993, the Japanese government has nurtured foreign workers from developing countries in order to hand over “Japanese skills” in specific industries through the “Technical Intern Training Program.” Also, in 2017, a trainee program in nursing care was launched in order to compensate for the shortage of workers in the industry due to the graying of Japanese society. The new policy functions basically to loosen the requirements on current policies and to invite in a much higher number of working forces from other countries.

However, there are many critiques of the new policy. The government wants to push the new policy forward during the 2019 fiscal year, although it has not discussed how to manage that much higher number of foreign migrant workers and how to improve conditions for foreign workers who work overtime and earn a low salary. One reason that the number of the participants has been limited in current programs is due to the difficulty of the required Japanese proficiency test. The workers under the current scheme of the Technical Intern Training Program and the trainee program for nursing industry are basically required to have an N-3 level<sup>1</sup>. The new policy for No.1 does not require N-3 level proficiency depending on the industry. However, if workers would like to acquire the No.2 visa in order to stay longer with their family, they need to have advanced skills with a high proficiency in Japanese. As seen in the new policy, attracting mobile human resources becomes common practice even in Japan, where there is a feeling against “immigrants”. As part of this, language proficiency

becomes a “commodity” for the foreign workers who work in the country.

The term “neoliberalism” has been used in free market economic theory which is itself shaped by ideologies of freedom of choice, and is engaged in human-capital development. “Human capital” was originally used in economics and gradually expanded its meaning to the study of social fields. This term is a metaphor for selling the knowledge and labor forces that people obtain through their lives. In the era of neoliberal globalization, marketing oneself as human capital with language proficiency skills has become a prominent way for people to participate in the global economy, with this proficiency being treated as a resource or a commodity that can gain higher wages. The ideological view of language as a commodity gives rise to a new ideology of stratification and exclusion built into language policy (Jeon, 2012). However, the term is sometimes overused in various research without defining its meaning in order to explain the complexities of current situations around the globe (Holborow, 2015; Ricento, 2012). Therefore, this paper summarizes how the terms neoliberalization and human capital—relying on discourses of language as a commodity— have been discussed in the field of Applied Linguistics. This paper also delineates potential research on English Language Teaching in Japan where English is viewed as linguistic capital for socio-economic mobility and for global career opportunities in neoliberal globalization (Kubota, 2016).

### **The Definitions of Neoliberalization**

The term “neoliberalization” has been used to explain not only economic situations, such as self-regulating markets, privatization, and financial deregulation, but also a political mindset, social representation, and social reality. Holborow (2015) delineates that these social realities in neoliberal

globalization viewed as an ideology. Some research try to underpin the neoliberal ideology embedded in society (Block, 2013; Holborow, 2015; Flubacher & Del Percio, 2017). This section reviews the term “Neoliberalization” through two lenses: 1) Economics and capitalism and 2) As a discursive and ideological term.

### **Neoliberalization in Economics theory**

This paper does not delve deeply into the economic theory of neoliberalism but does give an overview of what economic policies have been pursued under the name of neoliberalism because the term is primarily used as reference to economic theory. In the late 1970s, in the contexts of market principles, many countries tried to reduce labor costs, sought the expansion of capital, and opened markets freely with less government intervention (Holborow, 2015). These “free” markets in the new structures are called “neoliberalism.” Furthermore, under neoliberalization, the number of contract-based part time workers have increased due to the demand for more flexible employment conditions separate from lifetime employment and seniority wage systems. Under working conditions framed through “personal responsibility,” workers are required to obtain the “capital” of abilities, skills, and knowledges. This is called “human capital,” and people try to increase their capital to survive in the competitive markets.

One of the most famous economists who strongly pursued neoliberal theory is Milton Friedman. He and his team tried to reconstruct the Chilean economy in the 1970s due to economic corruptions by Allende Administration. They had three main objectives: economic liberalization, privatization of state-owned companies, and stabilization of inflation. Based on the appearance of achievement in Chile and without analyzing

closely<sup>ii</sup>, the Reagan administration in the United States aimed to revitalize the market by reducing Social Security costs and adopting supply-side economics<sup>iii</sup> for fiscal rebuilding. The Reagan regime increased military spending to “Make America Great,” and as a result, the cumulative debt increased from \$909 billion at the time of his inauguration in 1981 to \$2,601 billion at the time of his retirement. Politically, neoconservatism took power away from the Democrats’ liberal wing. This neoconservatism, while holding neoliberal views on state non-intervention, used state enforcement in order to pursue “American’s national interests.” Similarly, the Thatcher restructuring in the UK aimed at changing serious problems in the British economic structure. Reduction of social spending, labor union restrictions, and the privatization of public enterprises was promoted. However, because of these neoliberal policies, the unemployment rate was significantly high. As a result, these policies exacerbated economic disparity in the country in both U.K. and U.S.A.

In Japan in the 1980s, the Nakasone government was classified as a neoliberal regime influenced by the Reagan administration and Thatcher regime. Indeed, the privatization of three public corporations and five government enterprises during the 1980s was in line with ideologies about opening up markets, market mitigation, and small government. The privatized corporations were Japan National Railways, Japan Monopoly Corporation, and Nippon Telegraph and Telephone. The five privatized government enterprises were the postal services, mintage, printing, management of state-owned forests/fields, and monopolization of alcohols.

In Japan, these economic policies have been carried on through latter administrations in the 2000s. The Koizumi administration (2001-2006) tried to enact structural reforms, such as privatizing Japan Postal Service and other government-oriented services. Also, the current administration led

by Abe (2012-), has been recognized for reconstructing its economy under the name of “Abenomics.” (The Japan Times, 2016).

### **Neoliberalization as an ideology and discursive discourse**

The economic theory of neoliberalism has been widely used in other fields to explain the complex condition of social sciences. The concept of neoliberalism is interpreted as an ideology and discourse which values market exchange, and as a result, that informs the choices and actions of individual, state and corporate actors (Ganti, 2014). Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) in the field of Applied Linguistics tries to uncover such embedded discourses by focusing on the relations among texts, discursive practices, and social practices. The CDS approach views the contexts of language use as sites where discourses—both spoken and written—are created. Discourses are formed and being formed by situations, knowledge, identity of people and community and other various social activities (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Therefore, language use is a discourse practice with ideological effects. It may seem that language use representing social practices and ideology carry the same meaning; however, Holborow (2015) insists that “Language and ideology overlap but this does not mean that the two things are the same” (p. 23).

Van Dijk (2006) argued that ideologies are foundational beliefs that regulate shared social representations and in turn the basis of discourse and other social practices. Fairclough (2003) explained further the term and the importance of revealing ideologies by analyzing texts.

“They (ideologies) may be enacted in ways of interacting (and therefore in genres) and inculcated in ways of being or identities (and therefore in styles). Analysis of texts (including perhaps especially assumptions in texts) is an important aspect of ideological analysis and critique, provided

it is framed within a broader social analysis of events and social practices” (p.218).

Ideology establishes identity, actions, aims, norms and values, and resources as a result of social practices, and discourse is a medium of such ideologies. In order to investigate the structures and functions of “underlying” ideologies, systematic discourse analysis is a strong method (Van Dijk, 2006). Thus, analyzing discourse uncovers embedded ideologies in society. Following the understanding of discourse and ideology, the recent movement of neoliberalism can be analyzed based on the notion of critical discourse studies.

The creation of neoliberalism as an ideology is a dynamic process of interacting global languages and discourse activity. The term often denotes an ideological rationalization which is itself shaped by ideologies of freedom of choice, and is engaged in human-capital development. English proficiency has become a prominent way for people to participate in the global economy, with this proficiency being treated as a resource or a commodity. This ideological view of language as commodity gives rise to a new ideology of stratification and exclusion built into language policy (Jeon, 2012). The next section will delineate the relationship between neoliberalism and English in the world.

### **Neoliberalism and English Language Teaching**

It is undeniable that English is the most commonly used global communication tool in the world. In globalization, English is viewed as a commodity and English use sometimes embodies the neoliberal ideology. For example, China has tried to downsize public education from the central government since 1990s. The centralization of English education creates a situation where English language skills are unequal depending on students’

economic status. Therefore, English language competence denotes holding a good educational background with a high social status. (Gao, 2017). People in China view English as an important commodity to spend “better” life. This notion has been fostered after the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and other economic competitive events in globalization. People in China go to private English language training centers for self-development under such a neoliberal economy, and their business has been expanded. This one situation shows that neoliberal ideology around English Language Teaching in China is not coming from top-down policy but bottom-up. i.e., Chinese citizens “help to foster the commodification of English and the industrialization of the English language learning industry” (Gao, 2017, p. 27).

Similarly, in Korea, many Korean companies have had candidates take a TOEIC test for selection by notable companies since 1995; however, many companies have switched to assessing their English communication skills, such as interviews and group discussions in English. People in Korea had to shift focus on the English learning from test-based study to more communicative skills. There are no guarantees for the future with English because it is constantly deferred depending on context (Park, 2011). Still, English is viewed as a highly commodified skill for those with a good command of English to carry out their business globally in neoliberalization (Park, 2011).

In Japan, as the words *kachigumi* & *makegumi* (winner and loser) and *kakusa shakai* (disparity society) were nominated as annual trend phrases in 2006, economic disparity has become prominent in globalization. Similar to the position of English language in other countries, English in Japan is also viewed as commodified language, paired with the neoliberal ideology of human capital that justifies the promise of English (Kubota, 2016). The



Japanese government published an action plan for globalization: 1) enhancing English teaching, 2) promoting studying abroad to high school students, and 3) developing entrance examination systems and reformatting job recruiting systems for college students (MEXT, 2012, p. 28). Especially, the Japanese government is trying to shift entrance examinations from two-skill tests (Reading and Listening) to four-skill tests, Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing in 2020, to measure English competency. This is an echo from the citizen, bottom-up view of English as commodification of English, the language of, people who have a human-capital-level English competency.

However, Terasawa (2017) criticizes the recent trend of the ideology of English as a commodity. He states that there are three categories of Language commodity in neoliberalism: 1) Language service; 2) Language Education; and 3) Language competency. 1) Language service is like English editing and translation, which can be seen as a product of human capital; 2) English education is material like an English textbook and English language teaching programs. Those two commodities can be measured. However, Language competency—whether someone can speak English in the labor market—cannot be measurable. Thus, there is the reliance on neoliberal ideology to promote in people an inflammatory feeling that improving English as a commodity will “sell” better in labor markets (Terasawa, 2017). Mirroring this ideology, many private companies try to sell four-skill competency tests in order to visualize the commodity.

In reality, however, the choice of the languages in a particular community varies depending on context. For example, Japanese workers in China consider the proficiency of Mandarin as a primary language for communication with local employees. For the Japanese workers in China, English proficiency is a “useful” tool for communication but cultural

understanding and communication competence is far more important in order to construct a good relationship. Thus, Kubota (2017) concludes that English is not the static ideology of commodity in globalization, but rather, needs to be critically analyzed in recent position of English in neoliberal globalization. In the recent educational policy of introducing four-skill competency tests does not meet the demand of the company, which focus more on “interacting” with others not “speaking” in English.

### **Conclusions and Future Research**

This paper summarizes the current research on the ideology and discourse of neoliberalism. The terms are very fuzzy and many researchers overuse the “magical” terminology to explain the current trend of the world in Applied Linguistics. This paper delineates the concept of the ideology of neoliberalism in both economic and socio-political term in globalization. Due to the limitation of the space, this paper could not been discussed the concept of ideology and discourse in more theoretical levels (e.g., the Foucauldian aspect of discourse and ideology). Also, there are still limited number of research on ideology of neoliberalism in social sciences and still it is hard to draw a whole picture of neoliberalism—or may be impossible because the ideology of neoliberalism is socially constructed.

As the examples of micro-level use of English as a commodity—human capital of English— in various countries, the ideology of neoliberalism can be observed not just top-down policy which we can see in economic theories. Rather, the ideology is discursively contracted through social practices and discourses. Sano (2017) mentions this dynamic process of creating an ideology English as commodity in neoliberalism is the ideology itself changes the society not just the society creates such ideology.

For future study, as other scholars have tried to uncover, there should be more focus on how these discourses and ideology of neoliberalism affect social structures, individual actions, practices and behavior, and displays how they challenge/reproduce the dynamics of inequality and exclusion (Flubacher & Del Percio, 2017). Neoliberalism as ideology and discourse is a complex and more integral approach to social relations rather than simply speech performance alone (Springer, 2014). Therefore, for the future study, the researchers need to go in depth a certain circumstance with the comprehensive, logical, and constructive analysis. Especially, I am interested in observing how English as flows a commodity discourse from the top-down policy project into the bottom-up grassroots ideology of English in neoliberalism, as well as, how the ideology of English are reappropriated by the society and globalization.

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<sup>i</sup> The ability to understand Japanese used in everyday situations to a certain degree (The Japan Foundation, 2012).

<sup>ii</sup> Fridman mentioned this reconstitution of Chilean economy as the "Miracle of Chile," but some economists suggested that this period was a failure of economic liberalism by showing little economic growth in 1975-1982 (Drake & Frank, 2004)

<sup>iii</sup> Economic growth can be fostered by lowering taxes and decreasing regulation, and focus on supplier sides. It was started by economist Robert Mundell during the Regan administration.