Jinhyun Cho*

Sleepless in Seoul: Neoliberalism, English fever, and linguistic insecurity among Korean interpreters

Abstract: This article examines the socially constructed nature of significant linguistic insecurity with regard to the English language in Korean society as informed by neoliberalism. It specifically explores how linguistic insecurity leads to the pursuit of linguistic perfectionism under the popular discourse of neoliberal personhood. Participants are English-Korean translators and interpreters who spent extended periods of their youth abroad in English immersion contexts. Informants’ narratives trace their linguistic journeys from linguistic adjustment overseas to readjustment and career decisions back home. This study examines their experiences at school and work, with a particular focus on their relationships with non-returnees. The findings reveal that in contrast to the commonly-held beliefs that returnees are competent and confident speakers of English, they suffer from anxieties related to unrealistically high “native-like” expectations of their English back home. Their career choice can be traced to a strong belief in the ideals of neoliberal personhood, through which they hope to transform themselves for social recognition. This, however, remains elusive due to heightened competition over English against an ever-rising bar. The article concludes that the current state represents a “no-win” situation, in which linguistic insecurity and perfectionism continue to be reinforced in neoliberal discourses of individual accountability.

Keywords: English as a global language, neoliberalism, South Korea, interpreters, returnees, linguistic insecurity, linguistic perfectionism, domestic English learners, overseas English learners

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1 Introduction: Neoliberal Korea in pursuit of “good” English

A language is a commodity that is convertible to forms of capital under the new economy characterized by neoliberalism (Heller 2010). A neoliberal turn, in which language and communication can be seen as commodities, has been extensively discussed in the field of sociolinguistics, and English has attracted particular attention for its increasing marketability in recent years. While the impact of English in a neoliberal context has been closely observed at global as well as country-specific levels, South Korea (henceforth Korea) represents a dynamic sociolinguistic site that lends itself to a multifaceted analysis of the implications of English as a valued commodity, given the intensity with which Korean society has pursued this form of language capital over the past two decades.

Since the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997–1998 and subsequent IMF intervention, neoliberalism disguised as globalization has played a critical role in shaping social orders that have been restructuring Korean society (Song 2006). Defined as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes human well-being which can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2005: 2), neoliberalism encourages social actors to commit themselves to endless self-development in order to enhance individual entrepreneurship. In the tumultuous period of the Asian Financial Crisis and the subsequent neoliberal reform of many aspects of Korean society, job security was greatly threatened and unemployment skyrocketed. This provided an imperative to increase individual competitiveness and English became one of the key terrains on which to compete (Piller and Cho 2013). Throughout this period, English came to be seen as one of the most significant “soft skills” that measure one’s alignment with the neoliberal job market, where individual commitment to self-development is celebrated as an important virtue for maximizing the value of human capital (Park 2011). Since then, Koreans’ obsession with English education, often called “English fever” or yeongeo yeolpung, has reached an alarming level. It is estimated that Koreans spend about 15 trillion won ($15.8 billion) a year on English-related activities such as standardized tests of English and study abroad programs (Chun and Choi 2006). The extent of English fever in the job market is well evidenced in the fact that among the four million people taking TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) worldwide every year, those sitting for the test in Korea represent more than 1.68 million (Hwang 2005).
As striking as these figures are, it is worth noting that such a phenomenal investment in linguistic education seldom translates into levels of English proficiency that satisfy the gatekeepers in Korean society. It appears that the harder people work to achieve English skills, the higher the bar is raised. One study that documents such a case in detail is that of Park (2011), which examines popular modes of English language testing that have emerged since the late 1990s as verifiable means for evaluating job applicants for Korean corporations. Park discusses the introduction of TOEIC in 1995 as a means to evaluate candidates’ English communicative competence for large Korean companies known as jaebeols under the government’s globalization (segyehwa) drive. As a TOEIC score became an essential criterion for most white collar positions and university graduates invested time and money in preparing for TOEIC, achievement gradually rose over time to the extent that the standardized test came to lose its discriminatory power. After ten years of stressing the importance of TOEIC, in 2005 corporations began to decrease the weighting given to TOEIC scores. They claimed that applicants’ communicative competence in English remained unsatisfactory, and that increased scores on TOEIC (a written test) were not generally accompanied by greater spoken English competence. In 2007, many corporations began to use a computer-based oral proficiency test known as OPIc (Oral Proficiency Interview by Computer), claiming that OPIc was a truly verifiable means for evaluating individuals’ English skills. Park argues that by reinforcing a perception that Koreans are poor speakers of English and capitalizing on much-touted neoliberal subjecthood, corporations are at liberty to constantly raise the bar to measure “good” English, leading job seekers to invest relentlessly in the achievement of that goal. In short, a recurrent recalibration of the linguistic market in Korea justified in terms of neoliberal ideologies drives people to ever greater insecurity, further fuelling the appetite for intensive language learning. Given that what counts as sufficient competence is dependent on the social context and evaluated within the context of power relationships (Park 2010), anything short of “perfect” English – however indefinable this might be – tends to be seen as inadequate in Korean society.

In this article, I aim to examine the state of affairs in which Korean people are made to feel constantly insecure about English skills, leading to the pursuit of linguistic perfectionism as informed by neoliberal ideologies. Specifically, I intend to explore the way in which linguistic insecurity and linguistic perfectionism build upon each other. To do this, I focus on professional English-Korean translators and interpreters who, as individuals and as members of a profession, clearly embody the pursuit of linguistic perfectionism. Linguistic perfectionism in this particular context does not simply refer to an orientation to an idealized standard upheld in a particular social context.
Rather, it refers to the other side of linguistic insecurity, in which even proficient speakers of English feel anxious due to ever-rising local standards for English skills and the value accorded to neoliberal personhood. In turn, they are led to believe that the only solution to constant linguistic recalibration is to become “perfect” speakers of English through strenuous investment in language learning. This makes it possible to trace where their collective and competitive pursuit of “perfect” English leads. In order to examine these issues, I follow the linguistic journeys of individuals who are inarguably the products of ongoing English fever gripping the nation: those who studied English abroad during childhood, a phenomenon known as jogi yuhak. The participants are returnees who spent extended periods of their youth abroad in English immersion contexts and were either professional or trainee translators/interpreters at the time of the research.

The article is structured as follows: First, I discuss the history and images of returnees in Korean society to contextualize them in relation to the concurrent phenomena of English fever and neoliberalism. This is followed by an account of the methodology and the profile of the participants. In the remainder of the article, I discuss the stories of the participants chronologically in order to trace the way in which linguistic insecurity has given rise to linguistic perfectionism. Participants recount their early language learning experiences abroad, their readjustment back home, the motivations behind career decisions, and their experiences in translation/interpreting classrooms and in the job market. A particular focus of the analysis is their relationship with non-returnee peers at each of these stages.

2 Returnees: from fool to cool

Koreans’ relationship with English has never been smooth, as Koreans often see themselves as linguistic incompetents, whose inability to speak English is both hilarious and a cause for national shame (Lo and Kim 2012: 271). Defined elsewhere as the ideology of self-deprecation (Park 2009), such a negative self-perception among Korean people has been further reinforced by market discourses informed by neoliberal ideologies, which idealize individual efforts to succeed, and regard success as part of the natural order. Early English study abroad (jogi yuhak) is a response to the collective problematization of Koreans’ English proficiency and ever more demanding linguistic yardsticks. Koreans have come to believe that English, particularly coveted native accents, is unattainable within the geographical boundaries of the nation and is achievable only
through overseas exposure during childhood (Park and Bae 2009). The typical arrangement is that mothers accompany children abroad as guardians, while fathers remain in Korea to earn money in order to support them financially. In some cases, children are sent abroad entirely on their own. The Korean government’s move to lift the ban on early study abroad in 2000 saw ambitious parents rush to send their children overseas in order to acquire the language capital to succeed in the intense, all-or-nothing competition that has become so prevalent since the neoliberal turn of Korean society (Vitello 2006).

According to data released by the Korean Education Development Institute (KEDI) in 2011, the number of students with education visas for early study abroad peaked at 29,511 in 2006, falling to 27,349 in 2008 and dropping further to 18,118 in 2009, a situation ascribable to the global financial crisis (Oh 2010). The year 2009 saw more students returning to Korea than leaving the country for the first time since the lifting of the government ban on early study abroad in 2000.

Another group of returnees in Korea comprises those who sojourned overseas as children and adolescents accompanying parents on overseas work postings. This group represents the more traditional cohort of returnees. Back in the 1980s (before the advent of early study abroad options), such individuals were regarded as products of elitism, due in part to the provision of a special university quota for returnee children. In the eyes of the public, these returnees received preferential treatment that enabled them to enter prestigious universities with little individual effort (Goodman 1986). As Sungnam Lee noted in a Sisa Press article on August 29, 1991, readjustment issues found among adolescent returnees were seen by the general public as mere “whining” from the elite class rather than a social issue that deserved attention from the government. The public perceived them as immature products of upper class families living mostly in the wealthy districts of Seoul. Lee (1991) also pointed out that their good command of English, which was often envied by ordinary Koreans, was another source of tension between returnees and non-returnees.

Twenty years on since Lee’s article, heightened public interest in the English language competence of returnees has endowed them with a new title: haewaepa (overseas English learners). The original meaning of haewaepa is “the international faction”, referring to those who studied and received a higher degree overseas, while those with a degree from Korean universities were called kuknaepa (“the domestic faction”) (Goodman 1986: 52). However, as proficiency in the English language has become a crucial necessity for securing good opportunities in education and employment in Korea (Park and Bae 2009), these terms are increasingly used to refer respectively to people who have learned English overseas at an early age, and to those who have learned English only in Korea.
Table 1: Numbers of Korean students emigrating for early study abroad during 2004–2010 (data from the Korea Education Development Institute in 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Primary school</th>
<th></th>
<th>Middle school</th>
<th></th>
<th>High school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>Return</td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>Return</td>
<td>Departure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Numbers</td>
<td>Percentages</td>
<td>Student no.</td>
<td>Percentages</td>
<td>Numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>6,276</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>9,676</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>5,568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>8,148</td>
<td>▲29.8</td>
<td>7,309</td>
<td>▲24.5</td>
<td>6,670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>13,814</td>
<td>▲69.5</td>
<td>10,536</td>
<td>▲44.2</td>
<td>9,246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>12,341</td>
<td>▼10.7</td>
<td>12,789</td>
<td>▼21.4</td>
<td>9,201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>12,531</td>
<td>▲1.5</td>
<td>13,845</td>
<td>▲8.3</td>
<td>8,888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>8,369</td>
<td>▼33.2</td>
<td>13,901</td>
<td>▼0.4</td>
<td>5,723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>8,794</td>
<td>▲5.1</td>
<td>12,412</td>
<td>▲10.7</td>
<td>5,870</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At the same time, the image of returnees has substantially improved in accordance with the valorization of English in neoliberal discourses. Once viewed as immature and privileged, returnees are now presented in the local media as cool, intelligent, and elite multilinguals with access to membership in the global community (Lo and Kim 2012). Such a shift in the public perceptions of returnees was facilitated by changes in the prevailing discourses about jogi yuhak following the neoliberal turn of Korea at the time of the 1997–1998 Asian Economic Crisis, in which English emerged as a key terrain on which to compete in Korean society (Piller and Cho 2013). Sojourning abroad was embraced as a necessity in preparing children to function more effectively in a globalizing and ever more competitive world. Those who successfully managed jogi yuhak by overcoming circumstantial and linguistic challenges – supposedly through sheer individual hard work and resourcefulness – have often been held up in the media as worthy individuals of proper discipline celebrated in neoliberal discourses (Kang and Abelmann 2011). The transformed representation of returnees, however, erases the possibility of failure, as success is seen as achievable by any individual who is capable of hard work and dedication. At the same time, returnees are seen to have a duty to manage carefully their overseas experience to ensure that they attain a complete mastery of the language, in line with neoliberal ideologies. The imagined image of returnees speaking “perfect” English can thus cause anxiety for returnees, as failure to personify this ideal subjecthood can condemn them for lacking the important virtue of an independent enterprising spirit.

This article seeks to problematize the way in which the pursuit of linguistic perfection has been uncontested, reinforced, and naturalized through neoliberal ideologies in Korean society and how it feeds into linguistic insecurity by exploring lived experiences of Korean returnees. It specifically examines how neoliberal personhood has been naturalized in the mediatized images of the profession that the participants have chosen: translators and interpreters are often portrayed as glamorous cosmopolitans yet with superior self-discipline and dedication to self-development. Examining the motivations behind their career decisions in relation to the popularized images of the profession sheds new light on how dominant ideologies operate in the day-to-day lives of individual actors living in a society obsessed with the pursuit of English as a valued commodity.

3 Methodology

This study explores the personal and professional journeys of English-Korean trainee and professional translators and interpreters with sojourning experiences during childhood or adolescence in English-speaking countries. The recruitment
of returnees from this professional group was determined by the fact that as the most intensely engaged and professional language learners and users, this group of former sojourners and now professional language mediators is likely to have unique stories to tell about their linguistic journeys. Participants were recruited from among graduates from the Graduate School of Interpretation and Translation (GSIT) at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Korea and among current and past students from the Korean-English cohort of the Translation and Interpreting Program at Macquarie University in Australia.

The data was collected in June-July 2011 through one-on-one interviews conducted by the author face-to-face in Australia and Korea, or through video calls (e.g. Skype). Miles and Huberman (1994: 17) and Rubin and Rubin (2005) state that responsive interviewers begin a project with a topic in mind but recognize that they will modify their questions to match the knowledge and interests of the interviewees. Following this axiom, I used the prepared research questions as guides only in an effort to keep the interview focused, while trying to converse or “wander together” with them, to use Kvale’s metaphor (2009: 5). Each interview lasted for one to two hours and was electronically recorded. Participants were given the option to choose between English and Korean as their preferred language for interviews; all of them elected to use Korean with a few switching back and forth between English and Korean. The interview data conducted in Korean were directly translated into English by the author later and the English transcripts were used for data analysis.1 In the end, the data consisted of narrative responses to semi-structured informal interviews about the language backgrounds of participants and factors that led to their interest in the field of interpreting and translation. As soon as possible after each interview, I wrote field notes to log factual interview details as well as any personal reflections and feelings about the interview. In some cases, I emailed participants to clarify information or fill gaps that emerged later.

For data analysis, I adopted an interpretive approach (Spradley 1979) and followed a recurrent thematic analysis as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to identify concepts and themes that were related to the trajectories and experiences of returnees.

### 4 The participants

Table 2 provides an overview of the participants, all of whom are female. All participants were former sojourners and were (at the time of the interviews)
either studying translation and interpreting or working as translators or interpreters in Korea.

At the time of the interview, Arim was 30-years old and had 5 years of experience working as a corporate translator and interpreter. Though she was too young to remember much about Kuwait, her first country of sojourn due to her father’s job transfer, she does have vivid memories of learning English at an international school in Malaysia which she called a “linguistic struggle for survival”. Since then, her English competence has been a perennial aspect of her life and was a factor that motivated her to study translation and interpreting.

Minah was 27-years old and a trilingual speaker of English, French, and Korean. She had lived in the United States at the age of 6 due to her father’s job transfer. When she was 15, her family moved again to France but her father was

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**Table 2: Overview of participants.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Year of birth</th>
<th>Reasons for sojourn</th>
<th>Country and length of residence</th>
<th>Age at departure and return</th>
<th>Profession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arim</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Father’s job transfer</td>
<td>2 years in Kuwait, 3 years in Malaysia</td>
<td>4–6, 15–18</td>
<td>Corporate interpreter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minah</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Father’s job transfer and Early study abroad</td>
<td>1 year in the United States, 3 years in France</td>
<td>6–7, 15–18</td>
<td>Interpreter for supranational organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soomi</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Father’s sabbatical</td>
<td>1 year in the United States</td>
<td>16–17</td>
<td>English language teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sora</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Father’s sabbatical</td>
<td>1 year in Australia</td>
<td>12–13</td>
<td>Job-seeking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yumi</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Early study abroad</td>
<td>3 years in Australia</td>
<td>15–18</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junghee</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Family migration</td>
<td>3 years in Australia</td>
<td>10–13</td>
<td>Corporate interpreter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soyoung</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Father’s job transfer</td>
<td>Born in Latin America, 9 years in Latin America, 2 years in the United States</td>
<td>0–9, 14–16</td>
<td>English news writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dahye</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Father’s study abroad and Early study abroad</td>
<td>2 years in Australia, 1 year in the United States, 7 years in Australia</td>
<td>7–9, 13–14, 15–22</td>
<td>Job-seeking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
recalled to Korea a year later because of the Asian Economic Crisis in 1997. Fearing the prospect of having to face the notorious “exam hell” in Korea, Minah decided to stay in France on her own in order to attend a university there. However, exhausted from struggling with language learning and loneliness on a daily basis, she decided to come back to Korea a year later and faced a tough readjustment period in education-obsessed Korea. Similar to Arim, she experienced anxiety with regard to English and saw interpreting and translation as a good opportunity to improve her English. Since graduating in 2010, she had been working for an international organization in Paris.

Soomi, who was 29-years old at the time of the interview, had lived in the United States at the age of 16 for one year, when her father, a university professor, spent a sabbatical year at a university there. Despite having learned English from native English speakers as a young girl due to her father’s keen interest in his daughter’s English education, she found language learning very tough during the initial stage of her stay. She chose to study translation and interpreting on the strong advice of her father, who believed that English competence alone could give her a strong advantage in her future career. She finished the course in translation and interpreting in 2009 and was working as an English teacher and education counselor at a franchised English language institute in Korea.

Like Soomi, Sora went abroad at the age of 12 for one year while her father was on sabbatical at a university in Australia. Living in a friendly neighborhood in a small town, she retains a happy memory about Australia and recalls no readjustment problems when she returned to Korea. Her overseas stay boosted her confidence initially, as her friends always came to her to ask questions regarding English and nicknamed her “Miss Australia.” However, her confidence dwindled after starting translation and interpreting studies due to the demands of the program. She was attracted to the field by its practical nature and by the prospect of a flexible work life. She completed her translation and interpreting degree in mid-2011 at the age of 23, and was seeking a job at the time of the interview.

Yumi, who was 29-years old when interviewed, had been sent to Australia alone at the age of 15 for early study abroad. While she had planned to complete her undergraduate studies in Australia, she faced unexpected visa issues and had to go back to Korea. Since returning to Korea was not her choice, she experienced readjustment issues, yet continued to learn English, which she described as a “medium to connect her to Australia”. She observed that Korean people have very high expectations regarding her English competence because of her overseas education, and reported feelings of stress as a result of such expectations. She had one more year to complete her translation and interpreting studies at the time of the interview.
Junghee was 26-years old when the interview was conducted and had moved to Australia at the age of 10 when her family migrated to the country. Her transition to life in Australia, in her words, was “traumatic”, mainly because of the need to learn a new language. After living in Australia for three years, her family decided to return permanently to Korea in accordance with her mother’s wish to go back home. When she entered an elite foreign language high school in Korea, she began to experience feelings of inferiority associated with English compared with her classmates who had much longer sojourning experiences. Since completing her translation and interpreting degree in 2010, she had been working as a freelance interpreter for large firms in Korea.

Soyoung was 34-years old when interviewed. She was born in Latin America and considered English to be her first language. As her father was a diplomat, she moved frequently back and forth between Korea and Latin America, returning permanently to Korea at the age of 16. From then on, she suffered from the language barrier due to her “inadequate” Korean language as well as unwanted attention prompted by her background. Once an outsider, at the time of the interview she was in the process of reconciling her English-speaking self with her Korean identity, and working as an English news writer at a major broadcasting company in Korea.

At the age of 22, Dahye was the youngest participant. Like Soyoung, she regards English as her first language, having begun to learn the language at an early age due to her mother’s desire to raise her as a “global person.” She acquired English in a naturalistic setting at the age of seven from her stay in Australia where her father was studying for a Master’s degree, and later on was sent to the United States as an exchange student for one year. Although the decision to come to Australia at the age of 15 for study abroad was mutually agreed between Dahye and her parents, she found adjustment very tough. She decided to study translation and interpreting to improve her Korean language ability, since she always identified herself as Korean. She completed her degree in July 2011, and was seeking a job when the interview was conducted.

Returnees who have spent extended periods of their youth in English-speaking countries are often regarded back in their home countries as highly proficient speakers of English. For example, Kanno (2003) in her longitudinal research on four Japanese returnees found that despite varying competence and confidence levels in English, all of the participants eventually reconciled with their bilinguality as their English proficiency was much stronger than that of their peers. Interestingly, one of Kanno’s participants decided to become a translator with her new-found linguistic confidence. By contrast, the majority of the participants in the current research reported varying degrees of negative association with English learning abroad and language anxiety at home over the
enormous public expectations regarding their linguistic skills. The following section uses the interview data to explore the factors that contributed to the development of linguistic insecurity among the informants, and the reasons behind their decisions to pursue a career in translation and interpreting despite a self-evaluated lack of linguistic proficiency.

5 Life abroad – language for survival

Contrary to the common belief that “earlier is better” for the mastery of foreign languages, the data reveals that six out of eight participants found it extremely stressful to cope with linguistic transitions as a child after being thrown into a new environment overnight. Except for Soyoung, who was born and spent most of her childhood overseas, and Sora, who was warmly welcomed by local residents in a small and friendly town in Australia, the other participants recalled struggling with English language learning particularly during the initial period of sojourning and claimed that they had no other choice but to learn the language for survival.

I wasn’t aware of anything. I started my primary education in the States, and remember that people all looked different from me and I couldn’t understand their language. Anyways, my parents forced me to go to school and I remember going to school crying every morning. Because I couldn’t communicate with them, kids argue a lot you know, and sometimes I got, how should I say, wrongly accused because I couldn’t defend myself, nor could I explain what happened – Minah

I had never been exposed to English like all day. During the first couple of months, I couldn’t understand anything so I developed an ability to guess. I made a guess based on a few words that I grasped and memorized English words all the time. It was literally a struggle – Arim

Feelings of anxiety associated with English language learning deepened as they became increasingly aware of their status as temporary residents and members of a linguistic minority group in the host country. They began to see the linguistic aspect of their lives in the frame of power relations with local residents whom they considered to be superior users of the language. Some even chose to exclusively associate with those equally on the periphery, as it preempted fears of being judged by those whom they perceived to be linguistic authorities.

When I got to year 5, I think my condition bordered on depression. In Korea, I was a happy and active child playing with my friends all the time. And suddenly, I couldn’t communicate, didn’t have any friends, and it really hurt my ego so I kept my mouth shut. When I
got transferred to another school in year 6, I found some kids in similar situations in the ESL classes. Those from Hong Kong and Spain, for instance. I think it gave me more opportunities to learn and practice English because we were all poor speakers of English – Junghee

Bourdieu argues that one’s initial relation to the language market and the discovery of the value accorded to one’s linguistic productions are crucial for shaping the practical representation of the way one conducts oneself (Bourdieu 1977: 660). As detailed above, the linguistic beliefs of the participants were often shaped by negative associations with English: day-to-day struggles, an inferiority complex, and fear of being judged. By following how the participants fared upon returning to Korea, the next section illustrates that English is one key terrain on which to compete as informed by neoliberal ideologies.

6 Life back home

In this section, I trace how heightened competition over English in Korean society feeds into the existence of prior linguistic anxiety held by the participants, whose return to Korea between 1992 and 2004 coincided with the rise of English fever. I begin with Soyoung, who is the only participant who lived through the early 1990s in Korea. When asked about how she was treated at school upon returning in 1992, she recalled:

*I was like an alien*. I am not a boastful character, as you know, and *want to keep a low profile no matter what*. But I received so much attention and I guess that girls in my year all knew that I had lived abroad. Back then, there were few such students with foreign exposure. My Korean sounded funny and my English was awesome in their eyes and I was just an interesting subject. My English teacher always asked me to read English textbooks because he was ashamed of his pronunciation and the kids really liked me reading! It was *live English* for them, because *English zeal* hadn’t started in Korea yet. It was just fun for them and they liked it, because they could get a taste of real English² – Soyoung

One might speculate that the curious reaction from Soyoung’s classmates was due to the fact that returnees were rare in the early 1990s. As most students at the time had never been abroad, let alone lived and studied in English-speaking countries, Soyoung’s international background and fluent English appeared to be the subject of benign curiosity and even fascination. In addition, English fever had yet to take hold in Korea, as Soyoung commented during the

² Although all of the participants chose to conduct interviews in Korean, some switched between English and Korean at times. Interview transcripts in bold represent the parts spoken in English originally.
interview. It is therefore interesting to trace the ways in which the other younger participants readjusted – a decade later – to life in a country gripped with English fever following the neoliberal restructuring of Korean society. Five out of the eight participants – Arim, Yumi, Junghee, Minah, and Soomi – returned to Korea in the 2000s and reported feelings of stress due to the enormity of external expectations about their English skills as illustrated below.

I had to come back to Korea (in 2003) while struggling to adjust to Korea, I lost English so quickly because I didn’t make a conscious effort to maintain it. However, I couldn’t explain this to people and my friends believed that I must be very good at English because I had lived abroad at an early age. I found it very stressful [... ] At school, I could take time to explain to my friends what I went through in Australia in detail, but at work, it was a matter of time until people found that I graduated from a high school overseas. And then they started giving me small translation jobs. They had such high expectations, and I got really stressed because I couldn’t meet their expectations – Yumi

As such, the popularly-held image of returnees as impeccable speakers of English strengthened pre-existing anxieties held by the participants, who were fearful of being discounted or even delegitimized as English speakers in the face of ever-rising local bars to measure “good” English and the frequent expectation of native-like levels of competence. Regardless of growing inner conflicts, however, their overseas backgrounds were increasingly envied by non-returnees, who attributed their own self-perceived lack of English skills to an absence of overseas experiences and interpreted their linguistic backgrounds as less desirable amidst the growing significance of English in society.

We freely talk about our overseas experiences. For example, “When I was in Italy, when I was in Australia” like that. It is part of who we are. I’ve lived in this country, you’ve lived in that country, and you’ve been there, like that. So we casually ask things like “What was it like living in Pakistan?” There was one person in our group, who was not an immigrant kid, and she sometimes said that “You speak good English because you lived overseas. I could’ve become better than you if I had been given such a chance.” I think it’s, in a way, opportunity or chance? She wasn’t given opportunities and felt deprived and some friends have an inferiority complex about not having lived overseas – Junghee

Junghee’s friend was particularly conscious of her own background because she saw many of her “possible selves” (Markus and Nurius 1986) in her returnee friends: she could have joined conversations without feeling excluded had she lived overseas; she could have learned to speak fluent English had she been afforded an opportunity. This indicates how rising expectations with respect to English skills led to a belief that mastery of English was unachievable within the confines of Korea. Under such popularly-held beliefs, English became deeply implicated in the construction of an idealized personhood, with its acquisition
serving as an undeniable index of the transnational experiences through which one’s neoliberal spirit is forged (Park and Lo 2012). Such a link between English and a desirable personhood served to aggravate linguistic inferiority on the part of returnees, who increasingly felt that their individual values were determined almost exclusively by their English proficiency, which was often assessed on the basis of native-likeness. By way of example, returnees can experience reverse discrimination for not being as perfect as native speakers of English in oral tests for job interviews, with such external censorship of their linguistic production serving as a cause of stress for them (Yeom 2009). Burdened by their own backgrounds, a sense of linguistic insecurity held by the participants only deepened over time in terms of their inability to be as competent as they wished with their “limited” resources. With this aspect of their linguistic struggles in mind, I now turn to the question of why they decided to pursue the profession of translation and interpreting.

7 Career choices

Giddens (1991) argues that in all cultures, human beings preserve a division between their self-identities and the “performances” they put on in specific social contexts. This statement is particularly relevant here since the division that the participants experienced in the context of a Korea consumed by English was caused in large part by the performances that they had to put on in order to maintain or meet the socially constructed images of returnees’ linguistic competence. On one hand, English was a source of insecurity even for those who self-assessed English as their first language due to the socially-held idealized native norms. On the other hand, English was a socially-recognized asset that should be constantly managed and improved in line with the idealized neoliberal subjecthood in which success is solely attributable to individual effort. It can be argued that the translation and interpreting profession was seen as an opportunity to bridge the gap between participants’ current and ideal selves, given its reputation as a profession for “master English speakers” (Choi and Lim 2002: 635), as reinforced through glamorous mediatized images of simultaneous interpreters.

They [Interpreters] looked very professional and like perfectionists. I thought that they are masters of English and that that’s something only bilinguals can manage – Sora

I happened to watch Professor Junghwa Choi from GSIT on TV and I was so impressed by her story. I sent a letter to her and she replied. I read lots of books (about interpreting). I think it kind of planted a seed in my mind – Junghee
The glamorous image of simultaneous interpreters working with high-ranking figures at international conferences as apparently “perfect” English speakers has been constantly highlighted in the local media against the backdrop of English fever in Korean society. A recently produced television drama series featured a conference interpreter as the main protagonist. Entitled “Ajikdo kyolhonhago shipeun yeoja (A woman who still wants to marry)” and produced in 2011, this drama series featured an English-Korean simultaneous interpreter who was depicted as highly professional, intelligent, and beautiful. While such glamorous and cosmopolitan images constitute the biggest attraction of the profession among young and ambitious people (Kwak 2012), it is important to note that glamour is not the only element that contributes to the positive image of interpreting professionals. Simultaneous interpreters are also portrayed as the embodiment of endless individual commitment to self-development. Such a desirable interpreter personhood has been highlighted through mediatized figures of celebrity interpreters who are revered by the public for achieving perfect English skills through extraordinary hard work. A prime example is Professor Choi Jung-hwa, who is undoubtedly the most well-known successful interpreter in Korea. Choi became the first professionally accredited simultaneous interpreter not only in Korea but in Asia after completing an English-French-Korean program at ESIT (École Supérieur d’Interprètes et de Traducteurs) in Paris in 1981. Her career journey is strongly tied to the ideology of neoliberalism, in which she weathered insurmountable linguistic challenges with an indomitable spirit. This is evident from the following extract from a radio interview, in which Choi recalls her time in Paris:

“It was so tough. I was a go-getter and had excelled at school before. In France, I thought that I was good, but I was at the very bottom in the first test. But I really wanted to do this. I was very healthy and never skipped class until university. But I worked so hard there and passed out. When I woke up, I found myself lying in bed at the hospital. As soon as I regained consciousness, the first question I asked was “What is this thing stuck in my vein in French?” “What is pulse, what is blood pressure in French?” While the French nurse was answering my questions, I was simultaneously interpreting them into English. I think I was crazy back then. I think because I was crazy about languages, I was able to accomplish my dreams even though I had never studied abroad before.” - Excerpts from a radio interview (Park 2008)

This story has been widely circulated among English learners, particularly after Choi appeared on a documentary program entitled Sungkokg Sidae (Success Stories) broadcast in 2000 by Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). The image of the independent, enterprising neoliberal self is also well-embodied in the accounts of English learning experiences of other star interpreters such as Lee Bo-young, who conquered daunting challenges with her super-human
commitment to English and strong moral character (Lee 1999). In typical “rags-to-riches” fashion, these stories help people embrace the neoliberal logic of endless self-development, making them believe that “perfect” English is attainable through superior moral calibre and unswerving dedication to the pursuit of the goal regardless of one’s linguistic gifts or language learning background. It can be conjectured that the participants who were feeling anxious about their English skills were led to internalize such beliefs, in which becoming a perfect English language professional was presented as an achievable goal.

After graduating from university, one day, I happened to watch a morning talk show and they had a veteran interpreter as a guest. She advised that mastering English takes a long time and one should be persistent, and I found her advice very encouraging – Yumi

Masked by the celebratory neoliberal discourses of the profession, however, is the fact that most translators and interpreters in Korea work on a freelance basis without any organizational affiliation or stable source of income. While the compensation can be relatively high at the top level of simultaneous interpreting (Bahk-Halberg 2007: 255), the reality for non-simultaneous interpreters whose career trajectory is often fragmented is hardly discussed in the media. For the participants suffering from a sense of linguistic deficiency, however, the valorized image of the profession promised a “glamorous means of reinventing and empowering” (Piller and Takahashi 2006: 64) themselves through the acquisition of language capital. The “dreams” held by the participants about the profession are well illustrated by the pre-conceived images that they reported about the profession when they made the decision to pursue this career path. Six out of the eight participants described the profession with labels such as “glamorous”, “competent bilinguals”, “most professional people”, “smart and confident people”, or “perfectionists.” Such a high evaluation of the profession is a powerful example of the “dreams” held by the participants who were suffering as a result of day-to-day linguistic struggles. The dreams appeared attainable due to the mediatized images discussed above that held out the tantalizing possibility of achieving, through sheer hard work, endorsement as a perfect language professional.

8 Dreams versus reality

8.1 In the classroom

This section examines how the dreams of the participants play out in the university classroom and in professional contexts, particularly in their
relationships with non-returnees. I shall explore the reality of the translation and interpreting classroom, in which students are engaged in fierce competition to become “perfect” bilingual speakers.

To become a professional translator or interpreter in Korea, one has to gain admission to a graduate school that offers translation/interpreting programs and pass a qualifying examination at the end of the period of studies. The GSIT at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies is the most popular institute and every November, several hundred (and sometimes in excess of one thousand) applicants try for one of 40 or 50 places in the English-Korean department (Bahk-Halberg 2007: 19). In a highly competitive environment in which everyone aims to be perfect, students naturally envy the language opportunities that others have had, and tensions arise between returnee and non-returnee students, as competition is structured on the basis of their language backgrounds.

I had never studied interpreting before and everything was so new and hard. But people viewed me as a local Australian, and I was afraid that they might expect me to be very good. During interpreting class, my classmates always asked me “Don’t you use such an expression in Australia?” when I too was struggling to find the right expressions! I was afraid that they might say “You’ve lived in Australia, and you don’t know this?” I was always so anxious – Yumi

As the competition intensified, some returnees even reported a tendency to discount or even deny entirely, their linguistic assets out of a heightened sense of inferiority. This is illustrated by Minah’s case below.

Most people at school did something related to English before coming to the school. Teaching English or majoring in English literature, you know. However, I didn’t have any English background and it was really stressful. It was like while other people got ingredients ready to cook, I didn’t have any ingredients to cook with. I got stressed a lot and felt inferior – Minah

When I reminded her of her overseas experience in the United States, she was still reluctant to see this as a “legitimate” ingredient, saying that her English grammar is much weaker compared with that of kuknaepa, who, in her view, had learned it properly through the building of sound grammatical foundations. Two other participants were of the same opinion that their grammatical foundations are much weaker than those of kuknaepa, because they learned English in a naturalistic setting without having structured opportunities to strengthen their grammatical knowledge base. Such a high evaluation of kuknaepa’s linguistic competence by the haewaepa participants illustrates that it is not kuknaepa’s explicit grammatical knowledge of English itself, but a particular image of an elite, “standard” speaker that is valued by society. Data analysis reveals that
such an image of a perfect speaker was often embodied in the figure of native
English speakers among the participants. They attributed the pain of their own
perceived deficiency to being non-native speakers of English, and had come to
believe that becoming as competent as a native speaker of that language was the
best way to be recognized as an absolute language authority.

I don’t want to look like a non-native English speaker, and want to use natural
expressions when I talk to native speakers. I want to use verbal expressions well.
Something that sounds like a native speaker and natural so that I can communicate
well with them. I think I am obsessed with the worry that when I talk to foreigners or
good English speakers, they might evaluate my English. They can tell if I can speak
natural English or if I am just trying to compose awkward sentences and expressions as
a non-native speaker – Sora

During their translation and interpreting studies, the classroom experiences
recalled by the participants highlight a vicious cycle, in which competition is
structured around English acquisition, linguistic insecurity is reinforced, and
linguistic perfectionism is relentlessly pursued. The way in which linguistic
perfectionism is pursued through hard training is described as “killing” (Baek
2008), for students study for over twelve hours every single day for the length
of the program in order to be “perfect” bilinguals. Retaking a unit is not
allowed: if a student receives a fail grade, he or she must leave the school.
After completing a two-year program, less than half of the students at the
GSIT manage to pass a qualifying examination on their first attempt (Baek
2008). Those who fail to pass the exam are given seven additional chances
within three years of the completion of the program. If they use up their
chances, they will forever remain “incomplete” on their academic transcripts.
For some, perhaps most, this was the most competitive linguistic arena, in
which the Spartan-like training did not tolerate anything less than perfection,
leaving the notion of nativeness, however vague it might be, as the one and
only standard to follow in their efforts to achieve linguistic perfectionism. As
stressful as the reality was, dreams of becoming a perfect language master
were sustained by neoliberal ideologies that stress the human spirit as the key
to success.

I sometimes regret my decision to come here [Australia] and don’t really know what to do
in the future. I think that I could’ve built my career better if I had stayed with the previous
company, but I don’t regret it. But I think it (translation and interpreting studies) offers me
an opportunity, since I came here when I was getting too relaxed about English and it’s
good that I get stimulated by my studies and my classmates to improve my English. I came
to the realization that if I want to keep English for the rest of my life, I shouldn’t be so slack
like I was before. I should push myself more – Yumi
8.2 In the personal and professional sphere

Analysis of the data reveals that the linguistic struggles which the returnees are destined to endure do not end even after realizing their dreams of becoming professional interpreters, as the level of societal competition over English continues to rise. In a sense, the newly-acquired “master English speakers” (Choi and Lim 2002: 635) label served to add more stress in a broader social context, in which their personal and professional backgrounds are viewed as a threat by the kuknaepa with whom they are engaged in a job-seeking war (kujik jeonjaeng) in a tight local job market. Since English proficiency is regarded as the most important element in securing a decent white-collar job in the local market, anyone with sound linguistic credentials is likely to meet with jealousy, with some even being excluded due to what is perceived as a privileged background.

I don’t see my friends on the pretext of preparing for job interviews. I have met some and realized that they think that they and I belong to fundamentally different worlds. Well, it’s a border and I would say invisible, but you can feel it. [...] When we meet, we just talk about superficial things such as boyfriends or schools. We don’t talk about our dreams for the future. My problem is I don’t know what I want to do, but their problem is how to build all the skills required for a job. They say “Look, if you say it’s hard for you, can you imagine how hard it must be for us?” Whenever they do that, I don’t know whether I should be apologetic or not so I just shut my mouth – Dahye

The situation facing participants who are already working as professional translators and interpreters also highlights the intensity of language competition in Korean society. As the number of haewaepa has increased rapidly in recent times, the participants already working in the field felt increasingly threatened and insecure about their linguistic expertise given the growing presence of returnees. In other words, it was no longer a kuknaepa versus haewaepa battle, but competition amongst haewaepa on the linguistic battlefield waged on Korean terrain.

I am doing my best at work, but these days there are so many people who can speak English, not to the level of being able to interpret maybe. My English should be much better than theirs and should sound fantastic when someone hears me speak even briefly, but in actuality, it is not and it’s hard to get there – Arim

While they continued to suffer from a persistent linguistic gap, they came to realize that the status of translators and interpreters was not as glamorous as it had appeared to be prior to their career decisions. Among their friends and family, opinions on the profession diverge, with some appreciating the freelancing lifestyle for the flexibility that it affords in balancing work and life, while
others discount the profession for its lack of job stability given the harsh local job market conditions. Under these circumstances, the participants are in a double bind: the dreams that they held about the profession did not deliver the promises expected and yet they are unable to expose the reality if they wish to maintain their professional identity. With the glamorous images of interpreters disseminated in the mass media still highly visible to Korean society at large, they choose to perform social selves that masquerade inner conflicts.

The apparent (linguistic) gap is so sad. I feel like a fraud because I know that I am not good enough and it makes me feel so guilty. I collapse when I get home. Because I work wearing a mask all day long, the real me has been suppressed. It shouldn’t be shown in public and I can let down my guard only at home – Arim

When you see Korean job ads, they always say “We are looking for people who have native-level English competence.” I cannot help but wonder “What’s native-level English?” “Where am I at?” “Can I really say that I am a native English speaker when I apply for this position?” – And your conclusion? (a question from the investigator)- I always say this, always, I feel like I am a liar! – Junghee

9 Conclusion

Detailed above are the complex ways in which English as valued capital operates in individual as well as societal beliefs as informed by neoliberal ideologies. The analysis reveals that contrary to the common idea that returnees are the possessors of the English language and are thus in a privileged position, in actual fact they suffer from linguistic insecurity due to the heated competition over English in Korean society and social evaluations of returnees’ language skills on the basis of nativeness. While their dreams about the profession of translation and interpreting as a transformative opportunity for language and recognition are left unfulfilled, they continue to embrace the neoliberal ideologies which underpin the construction and embodiment of core social identity.

The stories of these returnees illustrate the nature of and issues surrounding competition structured in neoliberal ideologies, in which insecurity and perfectionism build to ever greater heights. As described, ever-rising standards to define “good English” since the neoliberal restructuring of Korean society leave returnees feeling constantly insecure, particularly in their relationships with non-returnees, who are envious of what they regard as the linguistic advantages of their counterparts. While it is true that they are pitted against each other in some contexts of the linguistic market, it is not the competition per se that is the focus here but the fact that both sides are mired in the destructive cycle of competition fuelled by neoliberal ideologies. The harder they compete to
achieve linguistic hegemony, the further the standards of good English are elevated, thus raising the levels of linguistic insecurity among language learners. The more insecure people feel, the more extreme measures they resort to, as seen in the popularity of jogi yuhak in Korea. However, capital is only valuable by virtue of its rarity and the more people who sojourn overseas for English learning, the lesser the newly acquired bilingualism is valued in the market. It is ultimately the valorization of the unlimited neoliberal competition that makes neoliberal success unachievable, even for the relatively privileged middle class (Park and Lo 2012: 159). In this regard, the frenzied pursuit of English taking place on the terrain of Korea represents a no-win situation, in which whatever linguistic competence achieved is constantly discounted and devalued.

The stories also suggest that neoliberalism will continue to prevail under popular discourses of desired subjectionhood. This is evident in the fact that the participants exhibited mea culpa attitudes consistently throughout their linguistic journeys in relation to the established moral norms: from social valuation of their linguistic competence against the expected native standards back home; through classroom competition in relationship with non-returnees; to the reality marked by persistent linguistic insecurity and dubious perceptions about the profession. Blaming themselves for being inadequate and even incompetent speakers of English after so many years of investment stems from the naturalization of neoliberal subjectionhood. In other words, they believe that they have “failed” through a lack of individual spirit required for success, when in fact it is the very same neoliberal ideologies that have pushed them to ever greater levels of insecurity. As long as society operates in the ideology of nothing but individual accountability and responsibility, individuals are destined to suffer from cutthroat competition in which failures are not structural problems but individual faults resulting from a condemnable lack of strong will. In this sense, attention to the reinforcement of linguistic insecurity and perfectionism as reflected here throughout the linguistic journeys of Korean returnees may offer a powerful way to highlight the nexus between neoliberalism and English.

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