



Book Review

Beatriz, P. Lorente. *Scripts of servitude: language, labor, migration, and transnational domestic work.* Bristol: Multilingual Matters. 2018. Pp. xvii + 176, GBP 99.95 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-78309-899-6, GBP 29.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-78309-898-9.

Reviewed by **Irene Theodoropoulou**, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar,
E-mail: irene.theodoropoulou@qu.edu.qa

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2019-2073>

Beatriz Lorente's book is an ethnographic study focusing on the relationship between language and the construction of transnational domestic worker identity with a special emphasis on Filipina domestic workers. It deals primarily with the ways in which language is embedded in the labor migration infrastructure that produces transnational Filipina domestic workers and the conditions that regulate their mobility. It is argued and illustrated through numerous examples that the transnational mobility of these domestic workers is dependent on the selection, assembly and efficient performance of particular bricolages of linguistic resources that construct migrants as labor and not as people. The various institutions and social actors that are involved in the migration infrastructure include the Philippine State, transnational maid agencies, Singapore and the domestic workers themselves. The book is split into seven chapters that deconstruct the aforementioned relationship at multiple analytical and methodological levels.

Chapter 1, "Language and transnational domestic workers", provides the background of the study by presenting the core concepts used throughout the analysis, including those of *scripts* and *transnational workers*. The key components of *migration process* are also explained here. As templates that index domestic workers, scripts are embedded in large-scale and everyday processes that produce these workers as laboring personalities awaiting their selection and purchase by potential employers. In this sense, domestic work, which is inscribed in scripts, is highly ideological and it includes material processes of distinction, stratification and commodification. The author prefers to talk about *scripts of servitude* instead of *scripts of domestic work* to emphasize the dependency and submission present in paid domestic work. Another important category that informs her analysis is that of *scripts of linguistic taylorism*, which include concrete linguistic resources that connect language to profit. Against this backdrop, scripts are enacted and are subsequently converted into various forms of capital (e. g. economic, symbolic, social and cultural) by the actors involved in the migration infrastructure. The author presents their sociodemographic profiles along with her methodology that consists of ethnographic interviews and participant observation of training maids, whom the author herself has taught voluntarily. Her

methodology also draws from a wide collection of official migration-related documents from institutions and maid agencies in Singapore and the Philippines in addition to media texts about the linguistic situation in the Philippines and foreign workers in Singapore.

Chapter 2, “The making of ‘workers of the world’: language and the labor brokerage state”, provides essential information about the history and current linguistic dynamics of the Philippines as well as historical patterns of labor migration from the country. More specifically, it locates the emergence of the Philippines as a labor brokerage state in colonialism. In order to overcome global competition in labor-sending, the state has invested in language and communication skills training for its citizens. This instrumentalization of language on behalf of the Philippine state serves as the latter’s intervention in the global labor market. It is through this investment that the Philippines constructs particular representations of Filipino labor and, at the same time, legitimizes the export of migrants for profit. However, it is argued that this state of affairs results in inequalities within the state and, eventually, compromises the latter’s power to provide readily deployable workers worldwide.

Chapter 3, “Assembling the ‘supermaid’: language and communication skills for vulnerable occupations”, discusses the main discourses that emerge around the concept of the *supermaid* with particular emphasis on workplace communication skills and the peculiarities of cultural linguistic training. The primary discussion in this chapter is the Philippine state’s control and protection of domestic workers through their enregisterment in a script of servitude. The state’s cultural linguistic training program guides workers to use scripts that position themselves as efficient workers who are passive and docile. The state legitimizes Filipina maids through a national discourse that focuses on the Philippines’ protection of its vulnerable citizens despite its delegation of the responsibility for such protection onto the workers themselves.

Chapter 4, “Marketing domestic workers: maid agencies in Singapore” zooms in on the role of transnational maid agencies as mediators between domestic workers and the clients who wish to hire them. Migrant domestic workers are re-embedded in local labor markets through stylization of their English language skills and verbal behavior that constructs them as the “right” workers. This “rightness” entails specific sought-after personal qualities, including an efficient and nurturing style to house cleaning as well as baby, children, and elderly care. At the same time, these agencies train workers in scripts that perform subordination and deference, a fact that leads them to reproduce and, subsequently, reinforce national and racial stereotypes about Filipinas as polite, subservient performers of labor who employ a “de-sexualized” approach (i. e. as workers and servants rather than women). While Filipinas are branded as proficient in English, migrant domestic workers from other

countries, including Indonesia, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, are stereotyped by the agencies as lacking – either in part or in full – English language competence, a fact that places Filipinas in an advantageous position.

Chapter 5, “The English-speaking Other looks back”, discusses language ideologies associated with English in addition to the hierarchies of employers and domestic workers in Singapore. As the first of two chapters that discuss the workers’ reflections and reactions to the institutional scripts described previously, it points out that they prefer to work for English-speaking expatriates instead of Singlish-speaking Chinese locals because the former are seen as more relaxed, egalitarian, generous and progressive than the latter. This hierarchy of desirable employers is not the outcome of English-language fluency even though English is one of the few sanctioned sites where domestic workers can demonstrate their feelings toward their employer and contest their subordinate role. In parallel, a hierarchy of domestic workers who work in Singapore also exists on the basis of their linguistic capital, namely their good English. By deploying it not only with their Singlish employers but also with their fellow Indonesian workers, who have limited or no exposure to the English language, they manage to carve out spaces where their identities are not dominated by servitude. Such observations highlight the constant negotiations and shifts of power among different social groups involved in the migration system.

Chapter 6, “Translating selves: the trajectories of transnational Filipino domestic workers”, focuses on the ways whereby actual domestic workers of Filipino origin reflect on their linguistic experience working in Singapore. With a focus on their spatial and temporal trajectories of linguistic capital, the main argument put forward in this chapter is that foreign workers translate their selves in varying (spatially) and changing (temporally) systems of signification. The findings suggest that English as a linguistic resource is of minimal relevance to the performance of everyday identity for most of the domestic workers while they were living in their home country. On the contrary, when they moved to Singapore for work, many workers found their good command of English and their stylistic flexibility to be an asset and a way to perform the Filipino trait of *pakikisama*, which refers to the ability to get along with everyone by obscuring negative opinions in an unsuspecting way. Upon their return to the Philippines, many workers closely monitored and censored their language practices by systematically avoiding the use of English and consciously using their mother tongue to demonstrate their solidarity with and respect for their communities. When talking about their future work in Canada, domestic workers underline their inadequate English-language competence.

Finally, Chapter 7, the conclusion of the book, contains an overview of the arguments put forward. The author points to scripts as templates of language

practices that index convertible forms of capital, which are a useful analytical tool for understanding the multidimensional nature of labor migration. As they produce, at particular moments, both the actors and recipients of domestic work and their associated identities, they help to disentangle the complexities associated with use of language and identity construction in the transnational context of labor migration. In this chapter, the author also reflects on her ethnographic experience while collecting and analyzing her data; she implicitly suggests that we need to help training people who are about to become foreign workers make efficient use of English as an instrument of mobility instead of considering English as just a medium of communication.

Beatriz Lorente's monograph is an important and welcome addition to the growing body of sociolinguistic research focusing on language and migration (cf. Canagarajah 2017) of female labor, which is a relatively under-researched social group compared to male labor. In addition, it is a timely contribution to the sociolinguistics of globalization, since it shows very robustly how global relations of inequality are normalized, embodied and contested across multiple sociolinguistic scales. It illustrates how domestic workers are *language*d by institutions and themselves even though domestic work is considered unskilled and devalued as a professional domain in which language plays an important role. This study shows that, indeed, language matters with regard to the deconstruction of these women's identities. It is a well written ethnographic study from the perspective of a native Filipina, who has been trained in the West, so this work frames her local sociocultural linguistic knowledge of Filipinas within a Western analytical apparatus (including the use of terms like "scripts", "style", "foreign workers", and "transnationalism") which, in this sense, is tested in the context of Asia. Having said that, given the close ties between globalization and (neo)liberalism, a deeper discussion of (neo)liberalism in the Philippines and Singapore would have improved the analysis. This discussion would address how the discourse of (neo)liberalism is inscribed in the institutional scripts and how it impacts the study's participants (e. g. Holborrow 2015) in terms of their language and life practices. Despite this short-coming, I recommend this book to students and scholars who have an interest in sociolinguistics, migration and Southeast Asian studies.

References

- Canagarajah, Suresh (ed.). 2017. *The Routledge handbook of migration and language*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Holborrow, Marnie. 2015. *Language and neoliberalism*. London: Routledge.