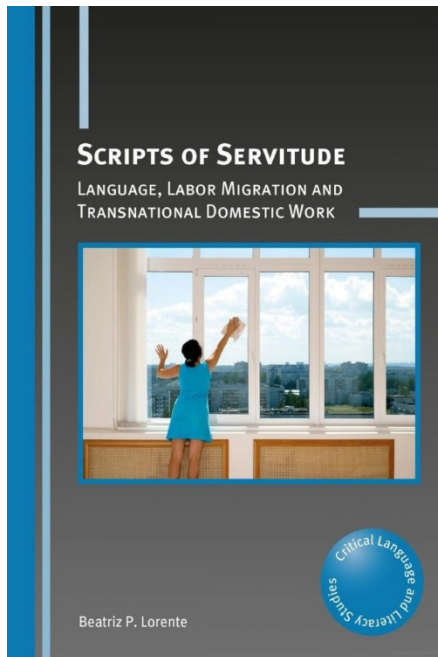


Book Review



Scripts of Servitude: Language, Labor Migration and Transnational Domestic Work

Beatriz P. Lorente. Multilingual Matters.
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Few countries match the Philippines in the number and scale of workers it sends overseas. Filipino Domestic Workers (FDWs) have been arriving in Singapore since 1978 with one in five Singaporean households now employing a FDW. It is now no longer enough to hire someone to handle household chores – indeed the candidate needs to meet a longer list of personal qualities and requirements among which proficiency in English language is essential. Beatriz Lorente's *Scripts of Servitude* looks at how FDWs use language resources to negotiate their role as well as navigate their way through a cross cultural employer-employee relationship. The book goes beyond a simple discourse analysis of FDW utterances during job interviews, and reveals a depressing transnational system built on inequalities of class, gender, and race.

The book is divided into two parts with Chapters 2 to 4 looking at institutional forces that interact to create this mass labour migration which has proved to be an effective way to tackle unemployment and underemployment in the Philippines. Education does not appear to alleviate the problem as 43% of the unemployed population are high school graduates, and too numerous to be absorbed by the labour market. Perhaps the education system's only saving grace is the use of English as a medium of instruction, a policy implemented during the American colonial period

which facilitates Filipino migration to countries where English is a second language or widely used lingua franca.

Chapter 4 is arguably the most fascinating part of the book for its analysis of how FDWs are commodified and crafted from three important elements: language, appearance, and stereotyping. Although Filipinas have an advantage thanks to their higher levels of English, they must also look the part and behave a certain way – presumably quiet, obedient, and not likely to answer back. This reveals much about employers' insecurities and ignorance, and yet maid agencies and FDWs themselves are in a position to exploit this and secure a job. The chapter also notes that despite FDWs' linguistic capital, when pitched against European accents in the Canadian market (often the target destination for Filipinas), they are not viewed as favourably and are unable to command high salaries. Nonetheless, this does not deter Lorente's interviewees from wanting to move there in the coming years.

The second part (Chapters 5 and 6) looks at FDW's perceptions of Singaporean English and the relationship with their employers. Despite English being one of the city-state's official languages, the local variety is considered undesirable, incomprehensible, and is frequently ridiculed by FDWs. In contrast, Filipinas rate their own accent as being almost as prestigious as American and British English, and thus provides one area where FDWs feel they have a degree of superiority over Singaporeans. This is one of the few instances where FDWs are empowered, and at times their commentary borders on the comical. In an international context however, FDWs are aware that Philippines English is not perfect either, with many of Lorente's participants expressing anxiety at the thought of being interviewed in "standard" English for admission to the Canadian Live-in Caregiver Programme which would later make them eligible for permanent residency there.

The book deserves praise for the insight it gives into a powerless but lively community that caters to the needs of the middle classes in industrialised nations. We learn that FDWs need to juggle three varieties of English (their own, Singaporean, and standard) in an occupation that is often looked down upon by the local population as well as their own countrymen and women back home. On top of the hardships of being an FDW in a foreign country, Lorente captures a frustration from her interviewees that their proficiency in English is being wasted due to the lack of more meaningful interactions than simply acknowledging their employer's requests and instructions. As such, it is also the reader who hopes that domestic work is no more than a stepping stone towards a better future.

Although this book primarily deals with issues of language and identity, it is in fact more valuable for its portrayal of FDWs, their interpersonal relationships, and their long-term goals. It will be of interest to students of sociolinguistics, gender studies, and international labour and migration, but especially those in places with large numbers of FDWs such as Hong Kong and the Arabian Gulf. If there is ever to be a second instalment, it would be useful to read a more longitudinal study of how FDWs have progressed to a professional caregiver's role in the West. This would give hope and motivation to the thousands of other young Filipinas that the potential rewards for their hard work can be for themselves as well as for their families.

About the reviewer

Simon Cheung Scanlon is an Assistant Lecturer in the Centre for Applied English Studies at the University of Hong Kong where he teaches academic literacy courses.