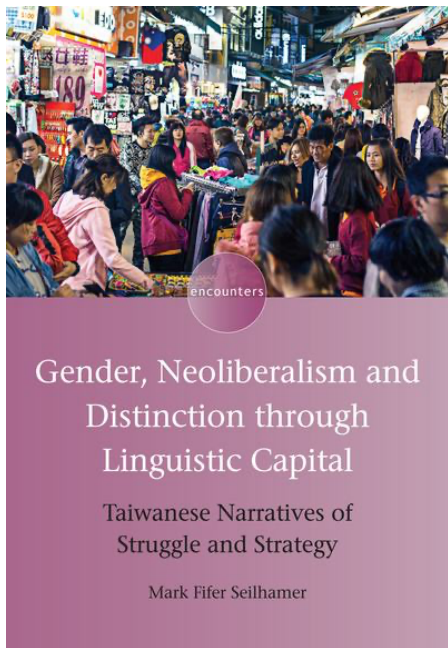


## Book Review



**Gender, Neoliberalism, and Distinction through Linguistic Capital: Taiwanese Narratives of Struggle and Strategy**  
Mark Fifer Seilhamer. Multilingual Matters.  
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In *Gender, Neoliberalism, and Distinction through Linguistic Capital: Taiwanese Narratives of Struggle and Strategy*, Mark Fifer Seilhamer provides a compelling account of the journeys of four Taiwanese women who leverage their language skills to grow their social and economic standing in a hyper-competitive world, detailing the specific challenges each confronted and their methods of perseverance. Through the use of narrative inquiry, Seilhamer offers novel insights into the obstacles faced by these L2 learners in the Taiwanese education system and in their subsequent professional lives. In particular, the book shows how the struggle often extends beyond the classroom and into the extracurricular domains of life.

Seilhamer begins by introducing *distinction*, one of two central concepts of his study, which involves converting one's capital – in this case, linguistic or “cultural” capital – into other forms of capital as a way of producing “differentiating power” (Chapter 1). Seilhamer also provides a useful and succinct background, touching on Taiwan's history, politics, and culture as they pertain to the book's main focus, notably the history of non-

native languages being thrust onto the Taiwanese populace. He explores distinction and its underlying mechanisms in Chapter 2, and also comments on the interaction between distinction and gender, particularly the role it plays in women's socioeconomic advancement. This leads to a discussion of *neoliberalism*, Seilhamer's second central concept (Chapter 3). Often associated in the public mind with the economic principles of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, neoliberalism has been gradually woven into the fabric of everyday life, sometimes unwittingly. Seilhamer considers the relationship between neoliberalism, the English language, and Taiwanese society, and the prominence of English as a means of connecting the increasingly isolated state with the global community, especially (but not only) for economic incentives. In Chapter 4, Seilhamer outlines his methods, his data and his own background.

After laying the groundwork in these initial chapters, the book transitions into the narrative analysis. Chapters 5-8 each deal with a single interviewee, all of whom are former students of a Taiwanese junior college known for its foreign language programmes. The first interviewee (Chapter 5) is described as an intellectual whose identity features English learning, neoliberal tenets such as self-reliance, and constant personal development. She attempts to distinguish herself as a cosmopolitan individual, well-acquainted with the world outside of Taiwan. Chapter 6 introduces us to another participant, sharing some similar characteristics but facing struggles in her personal and professional life after graduation. Chapter 7 (titled: *The Ideal Neoliberal Subject – Rachel's Story*), is perhaps the strongest chapter of this book. It provides the most detailed evidence of the connection between neoliberalism and individual distinction. Seilhamer depicts a participant who is acutely focused on maximizing her output and fully embracing an identity based on personal responsibility, risk-taking, and determination. Rachel differs from the other interviewees in that she eagerly claims English as part of her identity. Chapter 8 focuses on an individual who embodies the archetypical competitor spirit that is closely associated with neoliberalism; Chapter 9 presents an overarching analysis of the intersectional facets of gender and ethnicity in the study, touches on relevant sociopolitical factors, and offers conclusions. The book's postscript reveals the participants' lives and reflections some years after the study (Chapter 10).

The narratives of the interviewees in Chapters 5-8 are sound examples of how neoliberal policies crystallize at the individual level, with the discussions showing how attempts at distinction often become intertwined in such policies. A secondary and possibly unintentional theme in *Gender, Neoliberalism, and Distinction through Linguistic Capital* is the soft power of Western languages, particularly but not limited to English. Readers see that while each of the four women has explored another language to some degree (e.g. French, Italian and Mandarin), each of them uses English as at least one of their primary means of distinction, corresponding with Taiwan's emphasis on English. Though each had varying reasons for doing so, their stories, along with Taiwanese society's push toward developing English as a second language, demonstrate the persistent influence of the anglophone world on Taiwan, despite the closer proximity of the People's Republic of China and its desire to take on a greater role in Taiwanese affairs.

This book will be of interest to researchers in sociolinguistics and to those concerned with education and language policy, due to its detailed illustration of the effects of top-down policies and neoliberal norms on citizens. Because it is written in accessible language it is also likely to be of interest to a general audience. The elements present in the individual accounts, especially the pursuits of distinction and the personal and professional challenges encountered by the participants, will be relatable to readers both

in Taiwan and abroad. Seilhamer does a superb job of presenting a rich, thorough analysis in a clear, approachable manner.

**About the reviewer**

Michael Lane Tessmer is a communication advisor at the Centre for Applied English Studies, University of Hong Kong, where he works in the Writing Centre. His research interests include political discourse, social movements, and transnational migration.