

## RUNNING HEAD: English Fever and Coffee: Transient Cosmopolitanism and the Rising Cost of Distinction

### Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of English and coffee in Seoul, South Korea in order to document how distinction (ala Bourdieu, 1984/2008) functions under the prevailing conditions of neoliberalism. A mere two decades after Starbucks first opened in Korea, high-end specialty coffee shops proliferate. Drawing on photographs of the exteriors, interiors, and menus from 89 coffee shops in the trendy Seongsu-dong neighborhood in Seoul, we examine how coffee shops deploy English (in addition to, or instead of Korean) in their signage, and how this deployment differs by type of coffee shop. We argue that English and coffee interact in a complex process of dual-distinction. The coffee shops brand themselves as cosmopolitan and simultaneously offer the customers the distinction of demonstrating themselves knowledgeable about/proficient in both coffee and English. We explain this dual-distinction in terms of the extreme competitiveness occasioned by neoliberalism in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. We conclude by suggesting the notion of “transient cosmopolitanism” as a way to understand specialty coffee shops, which we argue are crucial sites for understanding the contemporary subjectivities occasioned by the dominance of neoliberalism.

Keywords: Language, Class, Cultural Capital, Bourdieu, Neoliberalism

### **English Fever and Coffee: Transient Cosmopolitanism and the Rising Cost of Distinction**

*“I was not oppressed by the university, but the teashop, acting as it if were one of the older and more respectable departments, was a different matter. Here was culture, not in any sense I knew, but in a special sense: the outward and emphatically visible sign of a special kind of people, cultivated people. They were not, the great majority of them, particularly learned; they practiced few arts; but they had it, and they showed you they had it” –Raymond Williams (1958)*

The quote above, from Raymond William's (1958/2011) seminal essay "Culture is Ordinary," highlights the degree to which sites centered around mundane daily activities (e.g., drinking tea) can function to police cultural capital, and distinguish those "with" culture from those without. This article examines how cultural capital is similarly symbolically deployed by and through the coffee shop. We focus in particular on the site of the English language coffee shop in South Korea (hereinafter Korea) and examine how this particular site of distinction (ala Bourdieu, 1984/2008) came to be as a result of the rise of neoliberalism in Korea following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Finally, we suggest the notion of "transient cosmopolitanism" as a way of making sense of the subjectivities occasioned by neoliberalism and pursued through coffee shops and other similar sites.

We examine the interplay between English and coffee during a period of time in which both are becoming increasingly "ordinary" and thus disassociated from high culture (Bourdieu, 1984/2008). Starting from Park and Abelmann's (2004: 640) observation that "English is a saturated sign: never simply one thing or another," we suggest that because English functions differently in different linguistic markets (Park & Wee, 2013), English plays a different role in the coffee shop space than it does in other domains (e.g., the college entrance exam) or even other linguistic landscapes (e.g., public infrastructure like subway stations). Although previous research has examined how coffee (Shaker Ardekani & Rath, 2017) and English (J.S.Y. Park, 2011) function as markers of distinction, little research considers: 1) how these two markers might work together and why; and 2) the causal mechanism behind their emergence and deployment together. Examining the interplay between these two saturated signs—coffee and English—offers important insights into how Bourdieuan processes of distinction function under prevailing conditions of neoliberalism.

### The Coffee Shop

The coffee shop has an illustrious history in the West, and many scholars venerate the coffee shop as fundamental to the emergence of contemporary democracy. Gaudio (2003: 670) summarizes:

[coffee shops] were characterized as places where commoners and aristocrats alike could meet and socialize without regard to rank...This idealized image of harmonious social interaction has led a number of commentators, including Habermas (1989[1962]), to characterize the original English coffeehouses as a veritable birthplace of modern European democracy.

The coffee shop is still often treated as an idyllic space, though one that is recognized as functioning in a variety of ways in various contexts. For example, Jeffrey et al. (2018) examine how NGOs in both South Africa and Bosnia and Herzegovina use coffee shops as a means to cultivate youth citizenship amid very different histories. Song (2014: 430) also maps out the importance of Starbucks in Korea as a physical space and in particular a gendered physical space of the Korean middle class, drawing on Ray Oldenburg's notion of the "third place" vis-a-vis Starbucks' founder Howard Schultz's interpretation of the idea.<sup>1</sup>

While we are wary of ascribing to the contemporary coffee shop democratic qualities that it may not embody, it is nonetheless important to consider the importance of the *space* of coffee shops within contemporary Korea, and within Seoul in particular, and how these configurations might affect the instrumental and affective value of the coffee shop to its customers. For example, Seoul has one of the most expensive real-estate markets in the world, and one obvious

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<sup>1</sup> Waxman (2006) also draws on Oldenburg's notion of the third place to examine the growth of coffee shops in the U.S. context.

reason that cafes are so popular is because they provide a physical space more comfortable than the small apartments in which many Seoul-ites reside.

### **Coffee in Korea**

Coffee and English share many parallels, including global presence and complex (post)colonial histories. In Korea, coffee and English share further similarities. Both coffee and English are commonly treated as foreign, despite Koreans being avid and creative consumers/practitioners of both. That is, in the Korean popular imaginary coffee/English is viewed as something non-Korean, that is from abroad, and which derives much of its value from its presumed difference and or association with an affluent/cosmopolitan West (on English, see J.S.Y. Park, 2009; on coffee, see Bak, 2005: 39). At the same time that English and coffee are acknowledged as non-Korean, they are increasingly common in Korea. For example, Korea's coffee market, which has tripled over the past decade, is now worth approximately \$10 billion USD, and the average Korean consumes more than 500 cups of coffee per year (Korea Herald, 2018; Y. Park, 2018).

Korea is home to a rising number of high-end coffee shops, the increasing ubiquity of which signals the popularity of third wave coffee culture in Korea. Third wave coffee can be distinguished from first wave (homemade instant coffee) and second wave (large chain stores) by high quality—and carefully sourced—beans, professional roasting, and meticulous preparation (see Schneider, 2020). As a result of third wave coffee's rising popularity, otherwise unassuming neighborhoods, such as Seungsu, where this study took place, have acquired a reputation for their specialty coffee shops (Tanaka, 2017). Third wave coffee is particularly popular with the younger generation, many of whom have either lived abroad or would like to live abroad (see Yoon, 2014).

Both English and coffee in Korea can be dated back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and Emperor Gojong, who not only enjoyed the beverage, but also helped open Korea's first coffee shop (on English see Choi, 2006: 6; on coffee see Bak, 2005: p. 41, and Song, 2014: 446). Like English, coffee in Korea began to take on a far more prominent role in Korean society due to its links with the occupying U.S. military post WWII. Bak (2005: 40) writes "it was only with the availability of powdered instant coffee as part of American military ration food during and after the Korean War (1950-1953) that a significant number of Koreans started to enjoy coffee." Despite the early popularity of coffee, coffee shop culture in Korea, like English education, took off only after Korea achieved relative affluence. By the middle of the 1990s, coffee shops were replacing the more traditional *tabang* (teahouse) (Song, 2014: 232-233).

Coffee drinking in Korea is important due not only to its instrumental value—a productivity-boosting vessel of caffeine—but also because of its affective associations with high-culture and the West. Song (2014) has written extensively on Korean coffee shop culture in relation to the opening of Korea's first Starbucks, in 1999. She argues that "consumption of coffee in South Korea carries a symbolic association with bourgeoisie Western culture" (432). Explicating the crucial role that coffee shops play in processes of cosmopolitan striving, Song writes, "women's material and symbolic relationship to Starbucks and their use of the cafe space is often ultimately a desire to participate in the effortless attainment of middle-class modernity" (435).

In summary, despite being viewed as inherently foreign, the burgeoning demand for coffee (and English) have resulted in both becoming increasingly common in Korea, in terms of their daily appearance and consumption. For example, the market for coffee has significantly expanded downward, such that a variety of low-price coffee chains have appeared, and even

convenience stores have begun selling fresh, high quality espresso-based coffee drinks (D. Kim, 2018; Kim and Lee, 2016). Likewise, people are increasingly assumed to have studied English, and failure to have done so dooms job-applicants (Curran, 2018b).

### **The Functions of Language**

English is a compulsory subject from elementary school in Korea, and Koreans spend hundreds-of-millions of US-dollars per-year on English proficiency tests alone (Song, 2011: 38). In 2018, the average family was spending more than 1 million Korean won—approximately \$850—per year on their child’s private English education (Statistics Korea, 2019). Such expenditures are understandable; English plays a major role on the highly-competitive college entrance exam and is used to differentiate between qualified candidates for a dwindling number of stable, well-paid jobs (Curran, 2018b; J.S.Y. Park, 2011). The result is that English is viewed by many Koreans as a necessary “base” on which to build their career aspirations (Abelmann, Park & Kim, 2009: 230).

However, like coffee, English in Korea (as elsewhere) is tied up in complex affective commitments. Park and Abelmann (2004: 666) note, “English satisfies cosmopolitan strivings quite independent of its functional or instrumental character.” That is, Koreans engage with English not only for the promise it holds for their careers, but also for the global, cosmopolitan lifestyles that English is seen to index (see J.S. Lee, 2006, J.S.Y. Park, 2010). In this vein, Abelmann et al. (2009: 230) observe: “the present college generation is deeply committed to a cosmopolitan ideal in which people are able to circulate in a wide and increasingly global arena. At the heart of this personal development project is English mastery.”

Here it is important to note that Korea has not uncritically accepted English. Koreans take great pride in their own language. In fact, *hangul* day, which celebrates the invention of the

Korean alphabet in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, is a national holiday in Korea (Choe, 2009), In addition, many segments of the Korean population came out as vigorously opposed to plans in the early-2000s to make English an official language (J.S.Y. Park, 2009). Therefore, it is important to approach the issue of English in Korean coffee shops critically, and to avoid construing use of English as sycophantic celebration of either America or the “West.” Instead, attitudes toward English must be understood in terms of ambivalence, articulated vis-a-vis multiple, sometimes contradictory discourses such that individuals’ personal relationship with English can be complex and contradictory (Curran, 2018a).

### **Symbolic Use of English**

The past two decades have seen increased interest in what is commonly referred to as the “linguistic landscape,” or what Landry and Bourhis (1997) refer to as “the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs” (as cited in Gorter, 2013: 191). Previous research on linguistic landscapes has highlighted that English is deployed in non-native contexts in multiple ways. For example, it can be used both to convey information and to entice customers through the associations they make with English. In their work on English advertising, Tan and Tan (2015: 75-76) suggest that English functions as a status marker, and view the use of English as “symbolic rather than information-giving in nature” (as cited in Lee, 2019: 501).

Previously, Lee (2006) observed that Korean TV ads about coffee and coffee flavored drinks tend to use English (as cited in Lee, 2019: 509). However, Lawrence (2012) found that in many neighborhoods in Seoul, the percentage of English in Korean signage dropped significantly when one transitioned from “outside” (i.e., the street) to “inside” (i.e., enclosed spaces). This is unsurprising, because despite the regular appearance of English in Korea’s linguistic landscape, as well as the significant time and money that Koreans invest in English education, Korea is a

primarily monolingual country in terms of which language is actually spoken (J.S.Y. Park, 2009: 30).

Vandenbrouke (2016) provides a simple and straightforward way to theorize the function of English in non-native contexts, drawing on the work of semiotician Roland Barthes. Vandenbrouke argues that “the function and value of English and its commercialization in non-native spaces is commonly construed in [linguistic landscape] studies as twofold: namely either referential or emblematic” (96). Vandenbrouke describes the referential as semiotically denotational in that its visible presence “preambles interactions with English-proficient clientele in which English is a viable means of communication during service encounters” (pp. 96-97). On the other hand, emblematic English “fulfills an alternative goal in commercial advertising: that of enticing and attracting potential customers by projecting a particular image” (p. 97). However, Vandenbrouke (2016: 98) goes on to point out that “qualitatively distinguishing between referential and emblematic functions of English on signage is not an unproblematic zero sum outcome per se, as this can be highly perception-dependent.”

As we demonstrate in the next section, within the context of Korean coffee shops, English is simultaneously performing both referential and emblematic functions. It simultaneously conveys information (what’s available), and also indexes cosmopolitanism. Importantly, in its emblematic function, coffee shop English signals not only the cosmopolitanism of the café, but also that of the customer as well. The very fact that an English menu “preambles interactions with English-proficient clientele” means that many customers are likely to be attracted to the café in part out of an aspirational desire to embody the image of an English speaking customer. That is, to be able to select one’s coffee from an English menu, a certain degree of cosmopolitanism is being displayed by the customer. These customers are thus



able to distinguish themselves, ala Bourdieu (1984/2008) from those who are unable to navigate the menu (i.e., those who visit coffee shops with Korean menus).

Here, it is pertinent to note that Italian is emblematically employed somewhat similarly in the U.S. context. For example, Klein (2001: 22) notes Starbucks' use of "Euro-latte lingo" (as cited in Piller, 2003: 176) and Gaudio (2003: 679) highlights how "pseudo-Italian" is used to market coffee. However, in the Korean context, it is English that this role. There are many reasons for this. First, in Korea, coffee is associated more closely with Starbucks than with Italy (see Song, 2014). In addition, English' success in marketing coffee in Korea is aided by its association with cosmopolitanism and globalization (Piller, 2003; Park & Abelmann, 2004). As Hornikx and van Meurs (2020, p. 98) point out, rather than being linked to a particular product, English generally "evokes associations that can be classified under the heading of globalness."

### **Distinction**

In interpreting the emblematic functions of English in Korea, Pierre Bourdieu's notion of distinction is useful. Bourdieu (1984/2008) suggested that taste (preference), rather than being innate, is a byproduct of social environment and conditioning. In essence, taste is learned. Allen and Anderson (1994: n.p.) summarize: "For Bourdieu, taste becomes a 'social weapon' that defines and marks off the high from the low, the sacred from the profane, and the 'legitimate' from the 'illegitimate' in matters ranging from food and drink, cosmetics, and newspapers...." The "legitimate" (aesthetic) is marked by its opposition to the "illegitimate" (ordinary) and is distinguished by both its rarity and difficulty of attainment. Therefore, a coffee that is able to be drunk and appreciated by everyone does not function well as a mark of distinction. However, an expensive coffee that requires a high amount of cultural capital to enjoy does work as a marker of distinction. Distinguishing the aesthetic from the ordinary calls for privileging "the mode of

representation over the object represented” (Bourdieu, 1984/2008: 504), i.e. coffee as *art* over coffee as *beverage*.

In their study of middle-class consumers of specialty coffee in different cities around the world, Shaker Ardekani and Rath (2017: 5) write:

Coffee people seek to practice their sense of class and to differentiate themselves from the dullness of mass culture by consuming quality products. In other words, sipping coffee is not only about drinking coffee but also about navigating through countless tastes, flavours and smells of coffee, selecting a specific coffee bean coming from a specific country and farm, derived from a distinct process, brewed and cupped by a skilled, professional barista...Simply put, where to go and what to drink have become key avenues for class distinction and practice.

In other words, the discerning—i.e. distinguished—customer considers a whole range of secondary meanings that are thought to elude the average consumer of (lower-quality) coffee, for whom the functionality of the coffee—caffeine and sugary taste —ncapsulate the totality of its meaning.

### **Method**

This study took place as part of a large, interdisciplinary research project on cosmopolitanism and foreign languages in Korea. The study is based on data collected from 89 coffeeshops in the Seongsu neighborhood of Seoul. We counted as coffee shops those establishments that sold primarily coffee. Therefore, we excluded bakeries (e.g., Korea’s immensely popular chain, Paris Baguette). On the other hand, we included businesses that offered baked goods and coffee, so long as coffee seemed to be the primary product. We also

included businesses that sold milk tea (a recent trend) alongside coffee, as similar processes of distinction mark its consumption.

Seongsu is a hip and upcoming neighborhood popular with young Koreans. One online guide to Seoul describes the neighborhood thusly:

While not very well known by tourists, [seongsu-dong] has become popular among young Koreans. The streets in this area were once lined with shoes factories and other small factories, but in recent years artists and designers have transformed many of the old buildings into cafes and restaurants (Tanaka, 2017: n.p.).

Seongsu's relative dearth of tourists (in comparison to Myeongdong, for example, where Lee [2019] conducted her study), indicates that the linguistic choices made by cafes are likely not the result of trying to appeal to potential foreigner customers. That is, the use of English is intended primarily for the domestic audience rather than being directed at a non-Korean audience.

We attempted to sample exhaustively. One of the authors visited every coffee shop in an approximate 200-meter radius from Seongsu subway station. In order to better understand how these coffee shops were embedded in the local neighborhood, the coffee shops were visited on foot. This "walking tour" of the coffee shops in Seongsu necessitated walking more than 50km and took place over the course of several weeks. The procedure for data collection included taking photographs of: 1) the menus; 2) the interior of the coffee shops, with special attention paid to signage and decoration; 3) the signage outside the coffee shop; and 4) the coffee shop as it appeared from across the street (situating it within the milieu of the surrounding buildings and shops).

The same author who took the photographs also took detailed notes about the coffee shops, and spoke to several of the baristas and owners. Based on the photographs, pertinent

information was recorded about a variety of variables, including the price of various beverages, the discount offered to take-out customers, the capacity (seats) of the coffee shop, and the languages used in various types of signage, including the menu. Next, both authors separately examined the corpus of photos, and then met together to discuss our observations and reach collective agreement about our findings.

In assessing the languages used in the coffee shops, we counted all signage written in the roman alphabet as English, and all signage written in the Korean alphabet (*hangul*) as Korean. Thus, our corpus of English language data includes many non-English-origin words, such as “macchiato,” “espresso,” and “cappuccino.” We count these as English for a number of reasons. First, the high degree of visible difference between the Korean and roman alphabet renders specific differences between roman-alphabet-based words less apparent than they would be in many other (i.e., American or Western European) contexts. Second, our broader argument is related to how cosmopolitanism signaled through the use of word that appear “in English” script, which is largely unrelated to whether the words are actually of English origin or not. In addition, because English and Italian are both foreign languages in Korea, and both use the roman alphabet (as opposed to the Korean alphabet), there is likely significant overlap in their reception. Indeed, we found that individuals we spoke with tended to refer to all words displayed in the roman-alphabet as English (*yeong-eo*).

All the Korean-language coffee shops we examined transliterated the names of their coffee drinks into *hangul* from English/Italian. Thus, “iced café Latte” was written in the Korean alphabet as “아이스 카페라떼” (*aisŭ k'ap'e rattae*).

### **Analysis**

First, we confirmed that the majority of the coffee shops in Seongsu were independent coffee shops. Although large chains stores (e.g., Starbucks and Ediya) did appear ( $n = 14$ ), they were far outnumbered by specialty coffee shops. Second, we confirmed that a large majority of the coffee shops in Seongsu include English on their menus. In fact, of the 89 coffee shops examined, less than one-third ( $n = 26$ ) did not include English names for all the drinks on their menu (see Table 1). A small but significant proportion contained no Korean at all ( $n = 7$ ). The majority of coffee shops ( $n = 56$ ) included both Korean and English for all their drinks.

In order to theorize the functions English plays in the coffee shop, we first compared the prices across the three different types of coffee shops. To calculate price, we recorded the price of two staple drinks—Americanos and Lattes—at all of the cafes<sup>2</sup>. Table 1 displays the results of this analysis.

Table 1  
Language and price at coffee shops in Seungsu ( $N = 89$ )

Menu language	$N$	%	Average Americano price	Average Latte price
English-only	7	8%	4,200	4,700
Korean-and-English	56	63%	3,600	4,250
Korean-only	26	29%	2,700	3,400

*All prices are in Korean won, with 1,000 Korean won equal to approximately 0.84 USD as of February 2020.*

As illustrated in Table 1, English-only cafes are significantly more expensive, on average, than Korean-only cafes and bilingual cafes. In particular, coffee shops with Korean-only menus are significantly cheaper than coffee shops whose menus include English (see Authors, forthcoming). However, simply comparing the prices does not necessarily inform us about the role English is playing in the coffee shop space, or whether there are other important factors that

<sup>2</sup> At the few (all upscale) cafes where Americanos and Lattes were not offered, we replaced their prices with the comparable drink, such as “Brewed Coffee.”

appear in conjunction with English, and which might also affect price. For the purposes of explicating the trends we identified in the data as a whole, we focused our analysis on a few coffee shops in particular. Although we highlight just a few examples, we find these examples largely representative of the differences between English-dominant and Korean-dominant coffee shops in general.

### **Onion and Joe**

Two coffee shops selected for further analysis are located on the very same block: Café Onion and Café Joe. By comparing coffee shops located close together, we minimize chances that the differences we observe between the coffee shops are related to location-dependent criteria, such as the cost of renting on a more expensive block. Café Joe (see Appendix, photo 1) is a small, unassuming café with an artful menu hand-drawn on a chalkboard (a common writing-surface for both expensive and cheap coffee shops in the neighborhood). Café Joe's simple menu is adorned by a drawing of Snoopy, the popular character from America's popular syndicated newspaper cartoon, *Peanuts*. Considering *Peanuts*' popularity in Korea, Snoopy's appearance is not surprising. Joe's overall atmosphere (*bunwigi*) is quite homey and it does not distinguish itself as a particularly upscale or fancy café. This is in keeping with its relatively low-priced menu; Café Joe's Americano price is 2,900won. In contrast, Café Onion's Americano is 4,500won, i.e., more than 150% the price of Joe's Americano. Further contrasting Café Joe's menu, Café Onion's menu (see Appendix, photo 2) is entirely in English.

Located in an old converted factory, Onion is one of the trendiest cafes in the neighborhood and is commonly featured on Korean blogs. Despite its English-only menu, the café's clientele is also overwhelmingly Korean (as is Café Joe's). The complete excision from Korean on the menu distinguishes the café as a distinctly cosmopolitan place, and implies that

customers who visit Onion are able to read the menu, and by extension, speak English. Of course, customers order their coffee in Korean, preventing any possible embarrassment to the customer, who would likely feel embarrassed to speak in English (see J.S.Y. Park, 2009).

Importantly, a small paper menu is available at the counter at Onion, and on this menu, Korean appears alongside English, though it is written in a much smaller and lighter font.

### **Coffee and/as Art**

Many of the fancier (i.e. English-only) coffee shops prominently advertise the origins of their coffee beans, and/or the fact that they sell or roast their own beans. That is, these coffee shops market themselves not only through English, but also through high quality coffee. For example, one English-only café, Brewing Company, features printed-out descriptions of its coffees (see Appendix, photo 3). Each sheet provides information about the country the beans are from (e.g. Ethiopia), the region/farm from which they are sourced (e.g., Mormora), as well as their size/grade (e.g. Natural/Grade 1). In addition, the sheets also provided a few keywords describing the “flavor profile” (e.g., Orange, Caramel, Hazelnuts, Full Body, etc.). Each of the Brewing Company’s coffees received its own printed placard. Directly below the “flavor profile” on each sheet is an image of an art-piece, such that each coffee is paired with an image. For example, one coffee from Ethiopia (“Sweet Creamy, Banana, Vanilla, Strawberry, Long Clean Finish”) is accompanied by painter Marc Chagall's 1887 work, *The Birthday*.

Brewing Company also differentiated from less fancy coffee shops in other ways. For example, it is one of the only coffee shops that offered neither an Americano or Latte. Instead, it offered a brewed coffee and an espresso-based “White,” each available for 5,000 *won* (approximately \$4.30). The appearance of non-espresso drinks is somewhat surprising because drip/brewed coffee is less common in Korea, and the overwhelming majority of cafes in our

sample served the espresso-based Americano. In addition, Brewing Company was the only coffee shop we examined where Korean seemed to have been totally excised from the space. For example, in other English-dominant coffee shops we examined, bakery items and their descriptions were in Korean. In contrast Brewing Company used only English, including for the labeling of its small selection of elegant baked goods.

The trends that we observe at Brewing Company are not unusual, though they are taken to somewhat of an extreme (i.e., the art pairings). Another expensive English-only coffee shop, Layer 57 Studio, also provides placards offering information about their coffee. The printed placards feature virtually the same information as provided by Brewing Company, including the name of the blend, the roaster, and the beans' origin. However, Layer 57 Studio makes a concession regarding the "flavor profiles," which are written accessibly in Korean. In understanding the choice to write the flavor profiles in Korean, we suggest that the referential function of the "flavor profile" may have been judged to be more important than the emblematic/symbolic importance associated with English. In other words, Layer 57 Studio may have been forced to decide which is more important: providing easily comprehensible information about the distinct and special characteristics of its high-grade coffee or the prestige of a menu entirely in English. Both are important sites of distinction.

### **The English Coffee Shop as a Site of Dual-Distinction**

Noting that expectations about English are constantly rising in Korea, J.S.Y. Park (2011: 453) notes that "distinction must go on." This is true also of coffee in Korea, especially because the last 20 years have seen an explosion of new coffee chains in Korea that have made high quality, espresso-based coffee available to an increasingly large subsection of the population (see D. Kim, 2018). More than a dozen years ago, Bak (2005: 54) presaged the escalating forms of



distinction tied up with coffee-drinking, observing: “in the early period of coffee drinking in Korea, just the fact that someone drank coffee might have been sufficient grounds for ‘distinction’ [but] ... in today’s Korea, there are more elaborate kinds of ‘distinction’ involved in coffee drinking.”

Our findings reflect how English and coffee come together to function as a unique site of dual-distinction in Korea today. We suggest that the “mode of coffee’s representation” (ala Bourdieu, 1984/2008) involves not only the origin-story of the beans and method of roasting, but also the linguistic cues and signs found in the coffee shop. While drinking coffee at a café is itself a way to distinguish oneself from those who consume instant coffee, we suggest that drinking coffee at a café whose menu is in English is a way to further signal one’s distinction, as it indexes the ability to both navigate the English menu and discern between low quality (cheap) coffee and high quality (expensive) coffee. The combination of these modes of distinction come together in Brewing Company, where coffee is literally paired together with art, and both the art and coffee are presented in English.

We further conjecture that excising Korean from the menu allows the café to brand itself as a distinctly non-Korean space and thus allow it to charge more money than customers might otherwise be willing to pay for a commodity that is becoming increasingly “Koreanized,” and thus a part of daily life. This branding strategy also helps explain the rapidly expanding types of foreign-themed coffee drinks available (e.g. Spanish Lattes, Appendix, photo 4) and the increased attention coffee shops pay towards advertising the beans themselves (e.g., their origins, taste profiles, and roasting techniques). It also helps explain not only why English coffee shops are more expensive, but also why a higher percentage of Korean-only coffee shops offered substantial discounts for takeout customers and/or during particular hours of the day; these

Korean coffee shops tend not to rely on marketing themselves as sites of distinction and aesthetic enjoyment. Instead, they bill themselves as purveyors of cheap, caffeine-based productivity-boosts. This instrumental view of coffee is reminiscent of Bourdieu's (1984/2008: 501) point that unlike elite culture, which is based on the distance between the two, the popular is based upon an "affirmation of the continuity between art and life." For the non-elite consumer of coffee, coffee is merely a tasty beverage and/or tool of productivity in daily life. On the other hand, the coffee connoisseur enjoys coffee outside/beyond the realm of daily life, appreciating it as something akin to an art form, as illustrated figuratively by the extreme attention to the entire coffee "process" and more literally by the pairing of different types of coffee with specific works of art, as in the case of Brewing Company.

### **Neoliberalism and the Striving/Shrinking Middle Class**

We have discussed how both coffee and English have long been markers of cultural capital and distinction in Korea. However, although we drew on J.S.Y Park's (2011) observation that "distinction must go on," we left unmentioned the possible causal mechanism whereby a site of dual-distinction (e.g., the English-only coffee shop) would emerge, a mere twenty-years after the introduction of Starbucks. What has caused distinction to "go on" so very quickly? In offering an answer to this question, we wish to highlight the neoliberal restructuring that followed the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Piller and Cho (2013) give a summary of the crisis' effects. Citing Klein (2007: 272) they describe how, for many Koreans, the IMF-mandated economic restructuring was an "unequivocal disaster," noting that "the unemployment rate tripled and the number of those who self-identified as middle class fell by more than a third from 63.7% in 1996 to 38.4% in 1999" (27). In describing the crisis, they also highlight the "English frenzy" that it engendered (25).

Both coffee and English took on renewed importance in the aftermath of the crisis. Song (2014: 430) argues that for many Koreans recovering from the income-decimating effects of the crisis, “designer coffee provided a new and less expensive occasion to mark class status at a fraction of the cost of brand-name clothing.” Parallely, Park and Abelmann (2004: 650) suggest that “English took on particular value at this historical juncture.” In many ways, Korea has never fully recovered from the crisis; the heady economic growth that Korea experienced prior to the crisis has never returned and income inequality has skyrocketed (Piller & Cho, 2013). In the wake of the crisis, both English and coffee emerged as aspirational goods and they continue to function as such. The English coffee shop is thus a site not only for cosmopolitan striving, but also for economic and social striving more generally.

In addition to being a top-down process of state governance, neoliberalism is also a bottom-up process of personal governance (Foucault, 2008; Lemke, 2002). Both J.S.Y. Park (2010) and Abelmann et al. (2009) highlight how Korea’s 1997 crisis resulted in renewed investments in human capital and self-development. This focus on self-investment also carried with it moralistic undertones. Discussing the ways in which neoliberal ascriptions of morality are tied up with popular press stories about English success stories, J.S.Y. Park (2010: 26) presciently concludes that under neoliberal logic, “the ultimate virtue of the worker became continuous entrepreneurial engagement in the project of one's own human capital development.” Viewed in this light, visits to the English coffee shop can be understood not only as signifying cosmopolitan striving, but also as an important way to signal one’s investment in one’s human capital, and thus one’s moral rectitude. To visit the English language coffee shop is to claim the morality associated with having properly invested in both the English education and the cultural

capital necessary to successfully navigate such a space. Visits to the coffee shop can thus be understood as representing the assertion of an appropriate neoliberal personhood.

In further explicating the popularity of high-end English coffee shops, and many young Koreans' apparent "overinvestment" in high-end coffee, we also find it useful to draw upon the notion of *sibal biyong*. Translated as "fuck-it expenses," the term *sibal biyong* has recently become popular in Korea to refer to unnecessary purchases one makes to get through a bad day (J. Kim, 2019). First appearing in 2016, the popular neologism has been linked to the bleak economic prospects many young Koreans face and the seemingly unnecessary luxuries to which they counterintuitively treat themselves as a result. In a *Foreign Policy* article discussing the term, J. Kim writes, "the term implies that you might as well make yourself happy right now because your prospects in the long term seem bleak" (n.p.). Similarly, we suggest that the high level of discretionary spending at specialty coffee shops is related to a desire for a middle-class, consumption-based, cosmopolitan lifestyle that lies out of reach for the majority of Koreans. Viewed in this light, frequent trips to the coffee shop can be understood as momentary distractions from the harsh realities of Korea's neoliberalized job market. Further, *sibal biyong* can also be understood as asserting one's (aspirational) right to belonging in a neoliberal society in which market success and morality are conflated through the object of English (J.S.Y. Park, 2010) and expressed through conspicuous consumption of specialty coffee (Kim & Jang, 2017).

**"Distinction must go on"**

Korea has often been noted for having undergone a process of "compressed modernity" (see Chang, 2010: 27). Likewise, we argue that the process of distinction has been compressed in the Korean case, and in particular over the past twenty years. This has been a result of the neoliberal restructuring that has vastly changed both the economy and Koreans' understandings

of their place within Korean society (i.e., the precipitous decline in the percentage of people who self-identified as middle-class). Amidst the decimation of the middle class, middle-class aspiration and cosmopolitan striving remained strong (see Park & Abelmann, 2004). The results of the rising bar for distinction can be particularly identified in two trends that emerged in the aftermath of Korea's post-1997 neoliberalization: 1) the escalating English-credentialism in Korean society, such that English test-proficiency test-scores increasingly functions as prerequisites rather than a meaningful form of distinction (J.S.Y. Park, 2011; Curran, 2018b); and 2) the increased amount of coffee connoisseurship regarding one must display in order to signal a high level of cultural capital relative to others, which is a direct result of the "democratization" of espresso-based drinks via their increasing ubiquity (see D. Kim, 2017). At the higher end of the market, the increasing ubiquity of specialty coffee shops is undoubtedly also a manifestation of the *sibal biyong* phenomenon.

We suggest that the dominance of neoliberalism is the causal mechanism which has resulted in the rapid "inflation" of distinction in Korea, and by extension, the rapid emergence of Korea's enormous coffee industry. By referring to neoliberalism, we include not only the economic restructuring that followed the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, but also the changes to people's perceptions of their identity and place in society (i.e., subjectivity). Both factors helped spur competitiveness and an extreme focus on self-development, which has in turn been expressed in both English learning (see Abelmann et al., 2009; J.S.Y. Park, 2011) and the consumption of specialty coffee.

Yoon (2014) also draws on notions of neoliberal subjectivity and self-development in his study of 30 young Koreans who postpone their graduation from university in order to spend time working abroad in Toronto, Canada. Yoon highlights that these youths' decision to sojourn

abroad is in part the result of their internalizing of a neoliberal subjectivity that privileges mobility, freedom, and self-development. Presaging our own conclusions, Yoon note: “Starbucks was a commonly preferred workplace for literally all Korean working holidaymakers interviewed for the current study” (1022). In other words, the perceived relationship between cosmopolitanism and coffee persists even among Korean youth already living abroad in a cosmopolitan city like Toronto.

Neoliberalism’s dominance is well recognized in other countries (Harvey, 2005) and we suspect that similar “inflationary” trends can be observed in other places. However, in Korea, unique attributes have helped contribute to the extreme forms of “cosmopolitan striving” we identify in the form of the English coffee shop. These unique attributes including a singular focus on English language learning (J.K. Park, 2009) as well as the extreme competitiveness that resulted from the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and its aftermath (Park & Abelman, 2004).

### **Transient Cosmopolitanism**

We have discussed how the use of foreign imagery and non-Korean languages (especially English) allow many coffee shops to brand themselves as sites of cosmopolitan consumption. However, situated as they are within Korea, using both a language and a drink that are increasingly common in Korea, there is an obvious limit to their cosmopolitan potential. We suggest that these coffee shops thus foster a “transient cosmopolitanism.” The cosmopolitanism they offer is transient in a number of ways. First, it is centered around the physical location of the coffee shop. Leaving the coffee shop returns the customer to Seoul, a place in which the Korean language dominates and the customer cannot signal distinction through their coffee consumption. The cosmopolitanism offered by the café is accessible only within the café, and must be

surrendered upon exit (though it can perhaps be partially maintained through the object of the take-away cup).

The cosmopolitanism offered by these coffee shops is also transient in it is based upon consumption of two goods—English and coffee—that are increasingly “Korean” and must therefore constantly be reproduced and rebranded as foreign. Because the bar for distinction is being constantly raised, that which distinguishes one as cosmopolitanism today may not do so tomorrow. Finally, the cosmopolitanism on offer is transient because the bleak career prospects of most young Koreans mean that the *sibal biyong* of an expensive coffee represents a momentary sampling of a middle-class, cosmopolitan lifestyle rather than a concrete reality. That is, the cosmopolitanism represented by English coffee shops is transient in the sense that it represents an identity that is highly aspirational, and beyond the grasp of most young people in Korea today.

### Conclusion

Some might dismiss the English language coffee shop in Korea as merely the reflection of broader trends of globalization; a sort of McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1993) through which a globally dispersed commodity—coffee—is rendered predictable and standardized by its description in today’s *lingua franca*, English. However, we believe such a conclusion to be mistaken. As we noted earlier, the majority of coffee shops in Seung-su feature *both* Korean and English. The appearance of English is unsurprising, either in Seoul or in any other global city. What distinguishes shops like Brewing Company is the fact that *only* English appears; Korean has been excised from the menu completely, and replaced with a language that has special affective value within Korea (Park & Abelmann, 2004). While cosmopolitan identity itself may be becoming increasingly standardized among specialty coffee drinkers worldwide (see Shaker

Ardekani & Rath, 2017), within Korea the English-only coffee shop represents coffee shops' efforts to distance themselves from globally ubiquitous chains like Starbucks (whose menus are uniformly bilingual) and lay claim to an "authentic" cosmopolitan identity at the intersection of English and coffee. The pairing of art with coffee in the English-only coffee shop (as in Brewing Company) can similarly be understood as representing the rejection of a standardized, universally-accessible coffee experience in favor of a sophisticated and distinguished experience.

In making our argument, we have drawn upon empirical evidence gathered from the expanding high-end coffee shop market in Korea and theorized that neoliberalism helps to explain the incredibly rapid rise of specialty coffee shops. In Korea, both English and coffee have traditionally played a role in distinguishing those with culture from those without—not dissimilar to the teashop that Raymond Williams (1958/2011) mentions at the opening of this article. Because both English and coffee have become increasingly commonplace in contemporary neoliberal Korea, new possibilities for distinction arise through their combination at the site of the specialty coffee shop. The combination of foreign language and coffee likely function similarly in other national contexts, though this is bound to vary according to multiple factors, including the status of both the foreign language and culture. This supported by Bookman's (2013) examination of coffee shops in Canada. However, we also urge caution in drawing overly broad conclusions about why individuals visit coffeeshops, especially since individual patrons of the same coffee shop may consume space differently (Waxman, 2006).

More research is thus needed to understand how individuals themselves view the coffee shop, and explicate the specific ways through how language and coffee interact to aid in the creation of (transient) cosmopolitan identities. Viewed in terms of transient cosmopolitanism and the *sibal biyong*, visits to the coffee shop can be interpreted in different ways; young Koreans'



visits to high-end coffee shops can be interpreted as an effort to momentarily escape the pressures of neoliberal South Korea or alternately as signaling an internalization and embrace of neoliberal culture and the subjectivities it inculcates (Abelmann et al., 2009; Yoon, 2014).

Our study highlights how quotidian forms of consumption are indicative of important social and ideological changes. The evolving landscape of coffee shops in Korea offers insights into broader trends of neoliberalism. In making sense of the incredible changes that have shaped Korean society over the past several decades, we highlighted the social and ideological work carried out through everyday forms of consumption.<sup>3</sup> However, our findings speak to a global phenomenon, in which seemingly innocuous differences in patterns of daily consumption mask the every-changing terrain through which social class is negotiated and signaled. Analyzing how different configurations of everyday goods are marketed and consumed reveals how new forms of distinction—and new subjectivities—emerge. Thus, the English language coffee shop in Korea represents merely one snapshot of the evolving and dynamic process of distinction.

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<sup>3</sup> We thank Reviewer #2 for their help in helping us formulate this idea.

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Photo 1: Café Joe’s Korean-only menu



Photo 2: Café Onion’s English-only menu



Photo 3: Brewing Company

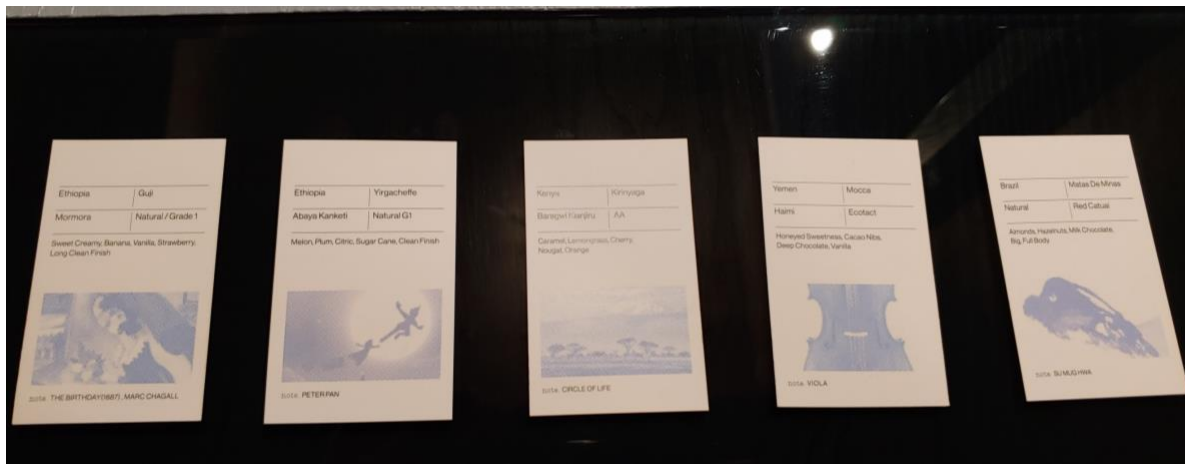


Photo 4: Spanish Latte

