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## Buying into English: Language and Investment in the New Capitalist World

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Welch uses this anecdote about class discussions to launch an inquiry into rhetorical ethos. She argues that in our privatized, neoliberal society, public debate is increasingly restricted to the “experts,” leaving ordinary citizens without a voice in the issues that affect them. She cites literacy theorists (such as Shirley Brice Heath), media critics (Robert McChesney), journalists (Helen Thomas), and historians (Howard Zinn) to help her unpack what it means to own and wield ethos in a constricted public sphere. This chapter ends with a call for collective concern about “the disturbing gap between actual demonstrations of mass public argumentation and what many of our students, in their classrooms and in the wider culture, learn about leaving arguments to the experts or until the next election” (144). In the book’s epilogue, “Education Goes Public,” Welch includes a case study of collective action among students and faculty at the University of Vermont to urge the Board of Trustees to divest from companies who did business with South Africa in the era of Apartheid. She chronicles their efforts to find and create forums for voicing dissent against university policy as well as solidarity with South African activists.

This book raises as many questions as it answers, but in provoking thought and debate about the shrinking public sphere and in giving educators a set of tools to help students engage in public writing, Welch’s text serves a vital purpose. Nancy Welch has seized the kairos of our historical moment to make a call for us to encourage and facilitate community literacy. I hope we will heed her call.

## *Buying into English: Language and Investment in the New Capitalist World*

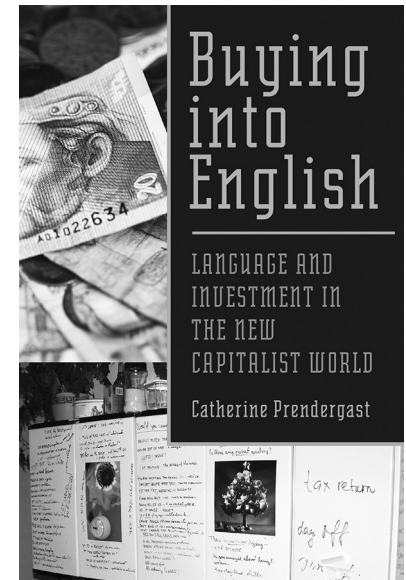
Catherine Prendergast

Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2008. ix + 180 pp. \$22.95.

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Prendergast’s *Buying into English* exposes readers to some of the material realities of the English language’s role in relation to globalizing capitalist market structures. Using Slovakia as her case study, Prendergast demonstrates through critical ethnography the state’s efforts to learn or “buy into” English and how the promises of such efforts often remain unfulfilled. After the Velvet Revolution of 1989 that saw the overthrow of communism in Czechoslovakia, English was taught widely in Slovakia (still a part of the Czechoslovakian state until 1993), becoming “predominantly associated with money and influence” (5). Prendergast complicates previous efforts of Robert Phillipson (author of *Linguistic Imperialism*) and David Crystal (author of *English as a Global Language*) to equate English with economic access, arguing that the globalization of English needs to be understood also as an exercise in information asymmetry (6-10).

Chapter One discusses how English was a “lingua non grata” during communist rule in Czechoslovakia, censored or limited by Soviet doctrine: “The central control of information, the demand for loyalty, the empty rituals, and the danger of punishment all left their imprint on people’s encounters with English” (26). The English language, because of its associations with capitalism, was vilified, although Prendergast provides instances in which it was in fact necessary nonetheless. But one of the main



points Prendergast appears to be making here is that even though Soviet authorities denied English's "fast-approaching status as the global lingua franca," this denial ensured that English would remain "inextricably linked to an imaginary of capitalism that would in time prove to be a bit different from the real thing" (48).

Chapter Two, "Other Worlds in Other Words," mainly follows the efforts of two disillusioned Slovak interviewees, Fero and Maria, in their efforts to learn two discrete dialects of English: Received Pronunciation and American vernacular respectively. Although Fero chose Received Pronunciation as a way of distinguishing himself from other Slovaks, he felt that his efforts to master this dialect were wasted as various nontraditional dialects of English, world Englishes, were gaining legitimacy on the global scene (67). This experience, along with Maria's difficulties actualizing her dreams of becoming an artist in New York make up, as Prendergast argues, "the ruthless truths about locality that make a lie of the neoliberal rhetoric of the free movement of people, goods, and services" (73).

Prendergast begins Chapter Three discussing how English textbooks in postcommunist Slovakia taught more than the language of capitalism but the logic of it as well, "convey[ing] the logic of commodification inherent to capitalism" (76). But understood within the context of English language acquisition, it is a logic that is inherently paradoxical: "learn me, it beckons, and you will know things that the others don't. Don't learn me, and you will be the one not to know" (78). The interrogation of capitalist logic continues into Chapter Four, which discusses issues of assessment in the English language portion of the "maturita," the national high school graduation exam. The task of reforming the maturita were limited by the British Council's involvement in English language education policy in Slovakia, as the team in charge of the reform "wanted an exam that would be recognized by the international community, but not at the expense of losing the sense of what English would mean to Slovaks entering the global economy (113-14).

Continuing with the theme of information asymmetry, the final chapter "The Golden Cage" begins with an explanation of English as the language of "discommunication," using Alastair Pennycook's term, because "[c]apitalism has made a game of English with few—if any—unbreakable rules governing how information can be withheld, distorted, or extracted" (128). The imaginary of capitalism, as portrayed by communist ideology in any case, offers the promise of social and economic opportunity, and Prendergast chronicles the disillusionment of those who sought social and economic advancement by buying into English.

The book on the whole is intelligent and accessible, and my only concern is minor. A brief explanation of the Velvet Revolution (1989) and the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia are mentioned early in the book, but it is not clarified until Chapter Two that Czechoslovakia split

into the Czech Republic and Slovakia until 1993. In other words, by the time Slovakia became an independent state, the communist government in Czechoslovakia had already been overthrown. As such, there are some references to a "postcommunist Slovakia" throughout the Introduction and Chapter One that may leave some readers with the history of the region with questions. This, however, does not denigrate or compromise the overall argument that is being made in the book. I believe that *Buying into English* will serve as a good introductory work on the geopolitics of the diaspora of English for readers of *CLJ* who are interested in the interplay of literacy and access (economic and/or social, local and/or global).