The construct of investment, developed by Norton in the mid-1990s, represents the historically and socially constructed commitment of learners to language learning. Now considered a significant explanatory construct in language education research (Cummins 2006; Kramsch 2013), this construct serves as a sociological complement to the psychological construct of motivation and is an index of identity and power. Of central interest is the question, “What is the learner’s investment in the language and literacy practices of classrooms and communities?” Because identities are multiple and sites of struggle, the investment of learners is always a dynamic negotiation of learning in specific contexts. This chapter traces how investment has been taken up in language education research.
Internationally, including journal special issues in Asia and Europe. The chapter addresses both the origins of the construct as well as the recent development of a comprehensive model that locates investment at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology (Darvin and Norton 2015). Responding to the changing social and digital landscape, the model recognizes the capacity of both learners and teachers to move fluidly across both time and space in an increasingly digital world. The chapter concludes with a discussion of investment research directions for the future, given evolving conceptions of identity, capital, and ideology, and how such research can impact language education policy.

**Keywords**

Identity • Investment • Ideology • Capital • Digital • Language learning

**Introduction**

Recognizing that learners are social beings with complex identities, the construct of investment, introduced by Norton in 1995, highlights the socially and historically constructed relationship between learners and the target language (Norton 2013; Norton Peirce 1995). This construct demonstrates that commitment is not just a product of motivation, but that learners invest in a language because they recognize how it will help them acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power. At the same time, how learners are able to invest in a target language is contingent on the dynamic negotiation of power in different fields and how learners are granted or refused the right to speak (Norton 2013; Norton Peirce 1995). A learner may be highly motivated, for example, but may resist opportunities to speak if a given classroom is racist, sexist, or homophobic. Over the past two decades, Norton has advanced these ideas, and identity and investment are now considered foundational in language education (Cummins 2006; Kramsch 2013; Miller and Kubota 2013; Ortega 2009). This chapter illustrates how both emerging and established scholars in the international community have taken this work in new directions and in diverse scholarly and linguistic communities, with important implications for language policy.

**Early Developments**

In her classic study of immigrant women in Canada, Norton (2013; Norton Peirce 1995) observed that existing theories of motivation in the field of language learning often conceptualized the learner as having a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical “personality.” She argued that this conception was inconsistent with the findings from her research and did not do justice to the identities and experiences of language learners in immigrant contexts. Inspired by the work of Bourdieu (1990, 1991) and Weedon
investment recognizes the language learner as having complex, multiple
identities, changing across time and space, and reproduced in social interaction. If
learners “invest” in the target language, they do so with the understanding that they
will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will increase
the value of their cultural capital and social power. By collapsing the dichotomies
associated with traditional conceptions of the learner (good/bad, motivated/
unmotivated, anxious/confident, introvert/extrovert), investment recognizes that
the conditions of power in different learning contexts can position the learner in
multiple and often unequal ways, leading to varying learning outcomes.

Norton also made the case that an investment in the target language is an
investment in the learner’s own identity. In addition to asking “Are students moti-
vated to learn a language?” researchers pose the question “To what extent are students
and teachers invested in the language and literacy practices of a given classroom and
community?” A learner may be highly motivated, for example, but not necessarily
invested in the language practices of a given classroom, if the classroom exhibits
racist, sexist, or homophobic tendencies. In the same way that identity is a site of
struggle, how learners are able to invest in a target language is contingent on the
dynamic negotiation of power in different fields, and thus investment is complex,

By demonstrating the socially and historically constructed relationship between
language learner identity and learning commitment, investment soon secured a
significant place in language learning theory. As Kramsch (2013) notes:

Norton’s notion of investment, a strong dynamic term with economic connotations …
accentuates the role of human agency and identity in engaging with the task at hand, in
accumulating economic and symbolic capital, in having stakes in the endeavor and in
persevering in that endeavor. In the North American context, investment in SLA has become
synonymous with ‘language learning commitment’ and is based on a learner’s intentional
choice and desire. (p. 195)

Since its inception, the construct of investment has been used analytically in
diverse research studies. For example, McKay and Wong (1996) examined how four
Mandarin-speaking secondary students from a California school were invested in
learning English, while Skilton-Sylvester (2002) drew on investment to analyze the
participation of four Cambodian women in adult ESL classes in the USA. While
Haneda (2005) focused on the engagement of two university students in an advanced
Japanese literacy course, Potowski (2004) and Bearse and de Jong (2008) analyzed
how learners invest in the context of two-way Spanish-English immersion programs.
In a “meta study” of two nonnative English-speaking (NNES) international students
in an English-speaking graduate school in the USA, Chang (2011) examined how the
students were able to exert their own agency “to fight their academic battle” (p. 228)
and selectively invest in areas that would increase their market value in their current
and imagined communities. In a study of low-level adult ESL classrooms in
Australia, Ollerhead (2012) drew on the constructs of investment and imagined
communities to understand teacher responses to learner identity and to demonstrate
how the aspirations of learners are integral to this identity. A comprehensive literature review on investment by Pittaway (2004) underscored the growing significance of the construct, and in 2006 Cummins asserted that investment had emerged as a “significant explanatory construct” (p. 59) in second language learning research.

Major Contributions

While earlier research on identity and investment was mostly from North America, major contributions in recent years have been more international in orientation. In the African context, Norton and her colleagues (Andema 2014; Early and Norton 2014; Norton et al. 2011; Norton 2014; Norton and Williams 2012) have worked in different countries, particularly Uganda, to better understand the investment of learners and teachers in the English language, digital literacies, and language policy. The researchers observed that as learners and teachers developed valued digital skills, they gained greater cultural capital and social power. One teacher named Betty indicated that when she used a digital camera, she “felt like a man”:

I feel very powerful like a man because I had never held a camera in my life. I have always seen only men carrying cameras and taking photos in big public functions like may be independence celebration, political rallies and wedding ceremonies. But now as I move in the community taking pictures with my camera, I feel I am also very powerful, like a man. 

(Andema 2014, p. 91)

Norton and colleagues observed that both Ugandan students and their teachers are highly invested in new literacy practices because the use of digital technology extends the range of identities available to them and expands what is socially imaginable in the future. Advanced education, professional opportunities, study abroad, and other opportunities have become a component of their imagined futures and imagined identities. Recognizing that what is socially imaginable in the African context is not always available. Norton and Williams (2012) have looked to the work of Blommaert (2010) to theorize the investments of learners in language and literacy practices associated with digital resources. This conception sought to extend Blommaert’s notion of “uptake” with reference to the construct of investment. While Blommaert argues that discourses shift their value, meaning, and function as they travel across borders, Norton and Williams (2012) point out, similarly, that when digital tools travel, they are subject to different sociopolitical and economic conditions, which shape their social meaning. This in turn has a concomitant impact on the investments of learners and teachers, who navigate a range of identities in taking up and sometimes rejecting these new digital resources.

The construct of investment has also proven productive in the Asian context. To respond to the questions, “Who owns English?” and “What are learner and teacher investments in the English language?,” the Journal of Asian Pacific Communication published a special issue on investment (Arkoudis and Davison 2008) that focused on the social, cognitive, and linguistic investment of Chinese learners in English
medium interaction. The research in this issue included studies of an English Club that allowed mainland Chinese learners in Hong Kong to practice English (Gao et al. 2008), college students from nonurban areas in China (Gu 2008), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners in an English medium university in Hong Kong (Trent 2008). More recently, De Costa (2010) drew on the construct of investment to understand how and why a Chinese language learner in Singapore embraced standard English to inhabit an identity associated with being an academically able student. With reference to Chinese learners of English, Norton and Gao (2008) note:

As Chinese learners of English continue to take greater ownership of the English language, redefine the target language community, and develop unique forms of intercultural competence, scholars interested in English language learning and teaching need to reframe their research questions and reconsider their assumptions. (p. 119)

In the South American context, Carazzai (2013) and Sanches Silva (2013), like Reeves (2009), have focused on the investments of language teachers. Their doctoral theses examine the construction of teacher identity in the Brazilian states of Santa Catarina and Mato Grasso, where Portuguese is the dominant language. They concluded that the imagined identities of students and teachers were crucial in explaining investments in English language learning and teaching, together with the opportunities afforded to them for both face to face and virtual interaction with English speakers internationally. Mastrella-de-Andrade has also helped to extend theories of identity and investment to her Portuguese-speaking colleagues in Brazil (Mastrella-de-Andrade and Norton 2011). Although at the time a graduate student in the United States, Uju Anya (forthcoming) conducted data collection in the Afro-Brazilian city of Salvador, where she studied the investments of African-American language learners of Portuguese in a study abroad program. She demonstrated how the learners co-constructed and negotiated multiple racialized, gendered, and classed identities in the learning of Portuguese and how their investments influenced second language acquisition.

Research interest in identity and investment has also been gathering momentum in Europe. German-speaking European educators have found the relationship between literacy, identity, and investment productive for classroom-based research with youth (Bertschi-Kaufmann and Rosebrock 2013), and research on English as a Lingua Franca (Jenkins 2007) has drawn considerably on the construct of investment. A 2014 international symposium at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland organized by Bemporad and Jeanneret (2014) focused entirely on the construct of investment. The purpose was “to recontextualize the notion of investment in the field of the francophone didactique des langues and to consider its possible developments, articulating theoretical considerations and empirical analyses from various research contexts” (Symposium Program, para. 3). Opening with a paper by Norton and Darvin, the symposium addressed a wide range of issues, including the challenges of translating research on investment from English to French (Zeiter and Bemporad 2014); the relationship between materiality and investment (Dagenais and Toohey 2014); and the political economy of language investment (Duchêne 2014).
The rich discussions during the symposium are the subject of a special issue of the journal of *Langage et Société* (Bemporad *in press*).

Responding to how technology has radically changed lifestyles and modes of productivity (Darvin 2016), compressing time and space, while ushering people into more private, isolated spaces, Darvin and Norton (2015) have extended theories of identity and investment to address the realities of this new world order. For these two scholars, the individualization of labor and the virtualization of social processes have made the mechanisms of power more difficult to detect. As people occupy more fragmented spaces, it also becomes challenging to determine how specific communicative events are indexical of the macrostructures of power. Hence, there needs to be a critical framework of language learning that attempts to lay bare the invisible and reexamine the situated against the backdrop of institutional processes and systemic practices. Responding to this need, they have proposed an expanded model of investment (Darvin and Norton 2015) that challenges educational agents to examine how discrete events are indexical of communicative practices and how learners both position themselves and are positioned not only within the contexts of a classroom or workplace but within community, national, and global networks. To achieve this, the model is built on the constructs of identity, capital, and ideology (see Fig. 1).

Recognizing a more polylithic and porous conception of ideology, Darvin and Norton refer to *ideologies* as “dominant ways of thinking that organize and stabilize societies while simultaneously determining modes of inclusion and exclusion” (p. 72). It is a pluralized formulation because ideologies are constructed by different structures of power and reproduced by both institutional conditions and recursive hegemonic practices. In an age of mobility, learners are able to move fluidly across spaces where ideologies collude and compete, shaping their identities and positioning them in different ways. Such a conception complements the view of identity as multiple and fluid, and in the same way this model recognizes that the value of one’s economic, cultural, or social capital shifts across time and space – subject to but not completely constrained by the ideologies of different groups or fields. It is when
capital is “perceived and recognized as legitimate” (Bourdieu 1987, p. 4) that it becomes symbolic capital. Hence, the extent to which teachers are able to recognize the value of the linguistic or cultural capital learners bring to the classroom – their prior knowledge, home literacies, mother tongues – will impact the extent to which learners will invest in the language and literacy practices of their classrooms.

The conception of identity in this model aligns well with the theoretical underpinnings of Norton’s 1995 definition, which describes identity as multiple, a site of struggle, and continually changing over time and space. What Darvin and Norton do in this later work is to elucidate further the struggle as one that wrestles with the conflict of habitus and desire, of competing ideologies and imagined identities. Ideologies shape a learner’s habitus, an internalized system “of durable, transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53) that allow him or her to make sense of the world. While one’s social location shapes habitus, which in turn structures the way one thinks and behaves, there is also desire that may align with or contradict this predisposition. Learners exercise agency by choosing what they perceive as beneficial to their existing or imagined identities, by consenting to or resisting hegemonic practices and by investing or divesting from the language and literacy practices of particular classrooms and communities.

Work in Progress

Since the expanded model of investment has only recently been made available in the literature, research which draws on the model is in its early stages. In a 2015 TESOL Quarterly article on language learner strategy research (Cohen and Griffiths 2015), Darvin and Norton explore strategies associated with what Bourdieu calls sens pratique or practical sense, which is an important component of the model. This “feel for the game” comes with knowing the various rules, genres, and discourses that inform learners’ practices and help them make strategic decisions across diverse spaces. Learners need to be able to read multimodal cues and communicate with not just the visual but also the gestural and other embodied signs; they need to know how to gain access to spaces where communication is taking place; and they need to manage communication gatekeepers, in order to claim the right to speak.

In a teaching issues article for the TESOL Quarterly, Darvin (2015) uses the model of investment to chart how teachers can reflect critically on a short play, written by Darvin, about a migrant caregiver mother in Canada and her teenage son in the Philippines. A dramatization of the issues of long-term family separation instigated by temporary migrant worker arrangements, the play was written primarily for an audience of teachers and school administrators to understand how this predicament impinges on migrant learners’ imagined identities and investments and has been performed in a range of schools and teacher education institutions in Vancouver. In the article, Darvin draws on the model of investment to pose questions to teachers for critical reflection: (1) To what extent do I as a teacher respond to the material, unequal lived realities of learners, and their transnational identities? (2) What dominant ideologies circumscribe these realities, and how does my own
worldview position these learners? and (3) In what ways do I recognize and value the linguistic and cultural capital that these learners are equipped with? By challenging educators to examine specific classroom events and their own recurring classroom practices, the model of investment serves as a critical framework for both language teaching and language policy. It compels teachers and policymakers to recognize that the classroom itself is a microcosm of political economic forces that inscribe an increasingly globalized world. A greater awareness of how these macro forces shape the investment of learners can help teachers and policymakers develop more equitable teaching strategies and educational policies.

In other recent work, Mendoza (2015) examines data from interviews with eight international graduate students in Canada, analyzing how cultural and social capital shaped student investments in their imagined identities. Students from China, Singapore, and different parts of Europe, who had prior knowledge about Western popular culture and academic socialization and developed a local social network, were able navigate the personal and professional demands of studying in a foreign country. By using the model of investment as a way to frame her argument, Mendoza examined how the positioning of these students and their capacity to negotiate their own capital shaped their investment in higher education.

At an April 2015 “think tank” in Calgary that discussed how literacy needs are evolving in the new world order, Darvin and Norton (forthcoming) explored how the model can be used to theorize pedagogy in transcultural, cosmopolitan times. By framing the imperatives of this critical pedagogy through the constructs of identity, capital, and ideology, they asserted the need to equip learners with the capacity to: (i) negotiate individual aspirations with a sense of global citizenship; (ii) recognize the value of different knowledges and the material inequalities that circumscribe them; and (iii) examine differences in worldviews and discern how these enable or constrain a cosmopolitan imagination. They argue that by developing these skills, learners can be fully invested not just in the identity of a global citizen but the imagination of an equitable future.

**Problems and Difficulties**

Perhaps the fundamental challenge in identifying ideology as a means to examine learner investment is that ideologies often operate invisibly and that people subscribe to ideologies both consciously and unconsciously. By structuring habitus, ideology makes particular relations and ideas normative and common sense. To dissect ideology thus requires a “stepping back” that allows one to critically examine the constructed nature of one’s own dispositions and convictions. Achieving this reflexivity is difficult, especially as ideological mechanisms become increasingly invisible in the twenty-first century. The paradox of the discourses of globalization and neoliberalism is that while they highlight “mobility,” “flows,” “flexibility,” and “de-regulation,” ideological sites continue to exercise greater control and regimentation (Duchêne et al. 2013). The logic of capitalism and the supremacy of market forces and profit become deeply entrenched into systems of governance. The rhetoric
of the self as entrepreneur (Foucault 2008) aggrandizes the pursuit of individual
gain, naturalizing it in a way that over looks or neglects more collective aspirations.
This has great implications for the way investment is interpreted and how learning is
understood as a means to achieve both personal and societal benefits.

In the digital age, the control of the flow of information and ideas on the
Internet also contributes to the preservation of ideologies. Technology can filter
the data made available to users through algorithms in search engines like Google
and social media platforms like Facebook. The value of a piece of data is determined
by its popularity among users or by one’s own search history and location. Facebook
newsfeeds push status updates and posts of friends with whom a user interacts the
most. As users are socialized into the practices technologized around specific tools,
not only do these media shape the way people behave and communicate with one
another, they can also promote particular versions of reality and make possible some
kinds of relationships more than others (Jones and Hafner 2012).

When teachers and researchers analyze the investment of learners through the
lens of ideology, they need to exercise greater reflexivity by examining how their
own worldviews and conceptions of such categories as race, gender, and class shape
their interpretation of what learners are capable of and can invest in. This critical
reflection allows teachers to understand how their own assumptions position learners
and value or devalue the capital they possess. Norton (2017), for example, describes
how Keeley Ryan (2012), a teacher working in an adult English language learner
classroom in Vancouver, found that reflection on issues of investment led to a much
higher retention rate in her classes. Prior to drawing on investment, Ryan found that
9 out of 25 students remained in her adult class; after drawing on investment, 25 of
29 students remained till the end. As Ryan notes, “I began by imagining what a good
English teacher would look like for my students ...I altered my practice to reflect
what I imagined their idea of a good school would look like.” De Costa and Norton
(2017) assert that globalization is impacting language teacher identity in diverse
ways. The expanded model of investment may help researchers investigate the
degree to which teachers consent to or dissent from the pressures of a neoliberal
ideology and how this will shape curricula, classroom materials, and practices. The
call to decenter and decolonize teaching becomes increasingly relevant in a social
order that emphasizes accountability and adherence to common standards.

Future Directions

As teachers, researchers, and policymakers confront issues of reflexivity and power
to examine learner investment, the constructs of identity, capital, and ideology,
which are key to investment, need to be continually researched and developed for
such constructs to prove useful in the new social order.
Identity

Recognizing the shifting social landscape, De Costa and Norton (2016) and Norton and De Costa (2018, forthcoming) consider future directions in identity research and propose a number of research tasks on identity and investment. They highlight, for example, the importance of intersectionality (Block and Corona 2014) in understanding identities as always a convergence of different social categories. Research needs to examine how racial, ethnic, gender, and class identities are often inextricably linked as learners navigate the spaces of home, school, and community. They point out how other categories like sexual orientation and religion are under-researched and that new insights can still be drawn from a diverse range of research populations that include lingua franca speakers, heritage language learners, and study abroad learners. In a study of how transnational Mexicans construct their identity in offline and online contexts, Christiansen (2015) identified four emic criteria: language, color, transnationality, and display of culture. She looks at how the perceived level of Mexicanness negotiated through Facebook establishes a place of influence that disrupts a hierarchy traditionally built on age and gender. By examining how online interactions influence those offline, this study presents new ways of understanding how authenticity or adequacy of one’s ethnic identity is negotiated through social media. These gradations of identity across different social categories, performed in digital media, provide new opportunities for research.

Capital

As learners move fluidly across boundaries and oscillate between online and offline spaces, they enter these spaces equipped with their own material resources, linguistic skills, and social networks. For learners, occupying new spaces involves not only acquiring new material and symbolic resources but also using the capital they already possess as affordances and transforming it into symbolic capital. What is valued in one place however may be greatly devalued in another, and thus the process of transformation is always a site of struggle. Within the digital landscape, what is perceived as valuable is also shifting. The simultaneity of communicative events and tasks made possible through digital tools creates a distinct need to structure attention. People have begun to live in a state of “continuous partial attention” where they feel they always need to attend to information from their communication devices. In the knowledge economy that runs on the exchange of information, the most valuable commodity becomes attention, and this shift has shaped digital literacy practices of representing the self and of sharing and creating information (Jones and Hafner 2012). It has also promoted the use of an affective discourse style that employs a high degree of intensification. This includes frequent use of boosters like “very” or “really,” exclamation marks, capitalization, and exaggerated quantifiers like “all” and “everyone” (Page 2012). Recognizing that value is created from the exchange of attention has important implications for how linguistic, economic, and cultural capital is transformed into the symbolic.
learners produce and consume digital texts and how they use language in social media to obtain attention promises to be an exciting area of research. The choices they make to participate in this attention economy and how these in turn shape their identity have important links to investment.

**Ideology**

To understand ideology as a complex, layered space of sometimes contradictory ideational, behavioral, and institutional meanings, one needs to recognize dominance and hegemony as processes rather than facts. Ideology is not a static, monolithic worldview that rests on either acceptance or resistance. At the same time, while language can be ideological, “this does not mean all language is ideological or that discourse doubles up as ideology” (Holborow 2012, p. 31). For Holborow (2012), when discourse is conflated with ideology, dynamic social processes are isolated from analysis. Real world events like the economic crisis of 2008, the rise and fall of economies, and the implementation of policies in trade, labor, and migration make and unmake ideologies. Research on how material and historical conditions and events shape educational policies, language ideologies, and other patterns of control becomes increasingly significant (Kramsch 2013; Block et al. 2012; Duchêne and Heller 2012).

An examination of learner and teacher investment and its relationship to identity, capital, and ideology can help shape language education policy by demonstrating how classroom practices are indexical of larger relations of power. As learners today participate in multilingual online and offline spaces, how multilingualism is recognized as cultural capital is key to policymaking. At the same time, the research discussed in this chapter demonstrates that the valuing of different languages is often unequal and associated with language ideologies and other political/economic forces. Our hope is that our model of investment, which represents an organic integration of identity, capital, and ideology, will serve as a resource for scholars in the future, as they examine the intriguing relationship between classroom practice and language policy in the twenty-first century.

**Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education**

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Monica Heller: *Language Choice and Symbolic Domination*. In Volume: Discourse and Education
Cross-References

- Language, Class and Education
- Teaching Language and Power

References


Index Terms:

Capital 10
Digital age 9
Digital landscape 10
Digital literacies 4
English language learner 9
Identity 5–7, 10
Ideology 6, 9, 11
Investment 3
  and identity 2, 5
  issues 9
  language teachers 5
  Norton’s notion 3
Language learning 3, 5–6
Model of investment 6
Nonnative English-speaking (NNES) 3
Transnationality 10
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