Neoliberal ideology, discursive paradox and communicative language teaching

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Abstract
This paper deals with the relationship between neoliberalism and communicative language teaching in language-in-education policy. Neoliberalism, or the deregulation of state based on meritocracy, or equal competition, gives rise to paradoxical discourses. On the one hand, sociolinguistic superdiversity shows us the unprecedented mixing and switching of languages by transnational migrants. On the other, language commodification requires us to use standard or monolingual language forms to access high-paying jobs in the global market. Parallel discourses in communicative language teaching pedagogy that distinguish between weak and strong forms also give rise to monolingual and multilingual language practices, respectively. This paper examines how language commodification and sociolinguistic superdiversity relate to the method-related problem of identity, a tension in the literature between the monolingual language practices of weak communicative language teaching, and post-structuralist language learner identities that are delineated by language. By drawing discursive and epistemic links between language commodification and sociolinguistic superdiversity and weak and strong communicative language teaching, I argue that language commodification emerges as a hegemonic discourse in weak communicative language teaching policy precepts, responsible for the method-related problem of identity. I attribute the discursive hegemony to a positivist epistemic framework that imposes preconceived language structures and identities on post-structuralist language learners in second and foreign language learning through monolingualism. This paper discusses important implications of sociolinguistic superdiversity as a counter-hegemonic discourse in superdiverse communicative language teaching contexts, as well as directions for future research.

Keywords
Neoliberalism, communicative language teaching, meritocracy, language commodification, multilingual turn, epistemic assumptions

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Introduction

Neoliberalism, or the deregulation of state based on meritocracy, or equal competition, has given rise to paradoxical discourses. On the one hand, language commodification (LC), or standardization, instrumentalizes language for economic capital (Block, 2017, 2018; Cameron, 2012). High-paying jobs in transnational corporations (Google, Airbus, Citigroup) require monolingual language fluency in languages like English and French, on which the exchange of global capital (stock, trades, investments) is based. On the other hand, the discourse of sociolinguistic superdiversity (SSD) (Blommaert, 2010, 2016) marks the mixed and hybrid language practices of transnational workers and their families we hear in malls, busses and marketplaces in globalized cities. These competing discourses can be observed in two ways in critical discussions in applied linguistics. The first highlights tensions between ‘imperialist’ or nationalist policy prescriptions and language learning and use (Phillipson, 2008). The second highlights a ‘multilingual turn’ away from nationalist ideologies that reflect the pluri-, trans-, metro- and multi-lingualism of actual language use in SSD (Blommaert and Rampton, 2011; Canagarajah, 2013; Canagarajah, 2017; Flores, 2013; Kubota, 2016a, 2016b; May, 2014; Ortega, 2014; Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015). 1

Despite a multilingual turn in language teaching and learning that mimics the anti-nationalist linguistic shift, how the competing discourses of LC and SSD manifest in language-in-education (LIE) policy is seldom made explicit. Moreover, the lacunae in current research becomes more pressing as communicative language teaching (CLT), prescribed by the Council of Europe (2001), continues to be institutionalized at the global level across both kindergarten to grade 12 (K to 12) and adult second/foreign LIE policy contexts (Block, 2008; Council of Europe, 2001; Kachru, 2006).

Specifically, CLT distinguishes between weak and strong forms of its pedagogy (Howatt, 1984; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Littlewood, 2013) marked by monolingual and multilingual grammar instruction, respectively. This means that in line with neoliberal aims, language learning requires a weak CLT pedagogy that promises to develop native-speaker (NS) or monolingual proficiency for those who wish to access ‘boundaryless careers’ in the age of globalization (Brown et al., 2011). This leaves a long-standing criticism of CLT, charging its weak form with limiting the linguistic resources of post-structuralist (PS) language learners (Lin, 2012; Norton, 2000; Norton and Toohey, 2011; Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004), relatively unresolved. I call this criticism the method-related problem of identity (MRPI), a tension between monolingual or standard language practices of a weak CLT, and PS language learner identities, which are produced within and inseparable from language.

Moreover, while recent debates in CLT have been concerned with the implications of political ideology on language teaching ‘methods’ (Block, 2017; Holborow, 2012; Pennycook, 1989; Ricento, 2012;), none, to my knowledge, have been successful in directly linking the discursive and epistemic assumptions of meritocracy as a neoliberal political ideal, to the methods and tenets of a CLT pedagogy. This paper thus examines an old problem in a new light by bringing together the neoliberal discourses of LC and SSD, weak and strong CLT, and MRPI. My aims here are two. First, I wish to draw explicit links between the discursive and epistemic assumptions LC and SSD and weak and strong CLT – in order to assess whether and to what extent neoliberal ideology manifests in LIE policy. Secondly and in extension, I wish to examine whether and to what extent the multilingual discourse of SSD can serve as a counter-solution (cf. Flores 2013; Kubota 2016a) to the monolingualism of a weak CLT responsible for MRPI.
What I will try to argue is that weak and strong CLT constitute pedagogic manifestations of the competing neoliberal discourses of LC and SSD. My main claim is that the discourse of LC emerges as a hegemonic discourse in the form of weak CLT policy precepts, while the discourse of SSD can serve as a counter-hegemony in these contexts. This is because the language standardization of both LC and weak CLT is grounded in monolingual orientations to language learning. Monolingualism, however, I argue is meritocratic, in neoliberal terms, in that it legitimates a nativist epistemology that separates the learner from his/her socio-cultural context. Like other positivist epistemologies that aim to explain social phenomena in scientific terms, meritocracy universalizes meaning in language, by universalizing ‘equal competition’ in terms of NS/non-native speaker (NNS) identity categories. This threatens PS language learner identities by delineating the bounds of discourse in preconceived language terms. Finally, I argue that the use of hybrid and mixed language forms of transnational workers and their families can serve as a counter-hegemony by destabilizing existing knowledge frameworks to re-draw the bounds of discourse. When used in weak CLT, and hence MRPI language learning contexts, SSD can disrupt the discursive hegemony of LC by allowing other social realities to emerge.

This paper will proceed as follows. I begin by establishing that though LC and SSD constitute neoliberal discourses, LC emerges as a more direct result of neoliberalism’s meritocratic ideal. Next, I establish a discursive parallel in LIE policy between LC and SSD, and weak and strong CLT. I problematize weak CLT in relation to its discursive and epistemic commitments. I argue that the monolingual discursive assumptions of weak CLT, which give rise to MRPI, are grounded in a positivist epistemic framework that understands the language learner as distinct from his/her socio-cultural context. I then problematize hegemonies as epistemic problems that delineate the bounds of discourse for language learners in globalized contexts. This allows me to lodge the claim that monolingualism is meritocratic, in that it assumes everyone can reach the NS standard, irrespective of socio-cultural background. Finally, I consider the possibility of SSD as a counter-hegemonic discourse in MRPI/weak CLT language learning contexts. I argue that in the global CLT context, a strong CLT pedagogy can accommodate the discourse of SSD in pedagogic terms by accommodating its discursive and epistemic assumptions. This paper ends by addressing a criticism of SSD that questions its effectiveness as a counter-hegemony, prior to ending with a discussion on directions for future research. The arguments made in this paper will be relevant for policy producers, theoreticians and language teaching practitioners concerned with language acquisition in the age of globalization.

The context I: the neoliberal discourse of SSD

According to Saad-Filho and Johnston (2005: 1), we are living in a neoliberal era. Neoliberalism constitutes an ideology of the post-capitalist replacement of capital with a knowledge-based economy. In this economy, ‘outsmarting economic competitors’ (Brown and Lauder, 2006: 26) places individuals and corporations in a global ‘war for talent’ (Brown and Lauder, 2006; Brown and Tannock, 2009; Brown et al., 2011), where top-notch companies hire the ‘best’ and ‘brightest’ irrespective of ethnicity, social background and nationality (Brown and Tannock, 2009: 377).

Termed ‘magnet economies’, the UK, France and the US have become leading suppliers of high-paying jobs for transnational, high-skilled workers (Brown and Lauder, 2006: 28). Because magnet economies assume a linear relationship between learning and earning
(Brown and Lauder, 2006), neoliberalism values a wide array of ‘skills, knowledge and enterprise’ (Becker, 2000 cited in Brown and Lauder, 2006: 25) that include, for the purposes of this discussion, linguistic competence deemed necessary to compete in an unregulated market (Keeley, 2007 cited in Kubota, 2016b: 469 - See also Grin, 2001 cited in Cameron, 2012: 354). In this context, transnational labour flows now require the use and appropriation of multiple, mixed and hybrid language forms for economic gain. This constitutes the code-meshing, code-switching and translation we hear in cafés, malls and marketplaces in globalized cities (Block, 2005; Makoni and Pennycook, 2006; Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015). In this article, I refer to this discourse, following Blommaert (2010, 2016), as SSD.

**SSD in (critical) applied linguistics**

In current (critical) applied linguistics, SSD has taken the form of a ‘multilingual turn’, which challenges the notion of language as distinct code and rule-bound (May, 2014; Otsuji and Pennycook, 2010; Kubota, 2016a; Flores, 2013). In the multilingual turn, terms such as ‘native-speaker’ and ‘non-native speaker’ ‘prefigure as monolithic elements in SLA [second language acquisition] . . . leading among other things, to an analytic mindset that elevates an “idealized” native speaker above a stereotypical “nonnative” . . . defective communicator’ (Firth and Wagner, 1997: 285). Instead, the multilingual turn conceives of multilinguals as part and parcel of their communicative contexts. In this view, grammar and pre-set target language standards are resisted, in favour of discursive resources (linguistic and semiotic modalities) that can satisfy social and situational communicative needs (Kramsch, 2002 cited in Canagarajah and Wurr, 2011: 5). Thus, multilingualism embraces a shift toward language users’ complete language repertoires (Cenoz and Gorter, 2011: 341), rather ‘than an aggregate use of languages that are separated along structural boundaries’ (Kubota, 2016b: 476).

The multilingual turn, in this context, is importantly defined by a political shift in critical applied linguistics that connects the local and peripheral context of language learning and use with the wider social and political order (Pennycook, 2010: 169). In fact, the ‘critical’ aspect directly derives from what has partly been dubbed a neo-Marxist tradition that challenges the compatibility of individual freedoms with a capitalist/post-capitalist political economy faced with the fundamental question: in a capitalist/post-capitalist economy where everything and everyone is reducible to a physical, saleable commodity, how can social investment and individual difference be accounted for? (See Marx 1867 cited in O’Regan, 2014: 537–538). I address this question below as it pertains to L2 learning, by examining the epistemic commitments of MRPI as they relate to neoliberalism.

**Language commodification: a paradoxical neoliberal discourse**

SSD, therefore, is juxtaposed to a paradoxical discourse that emerges from a neoliberal ideology that instrumentalizes language for economic gain. We call this language commodification (Block, 2017; Cameron, 2012), which emerges as a more direct result of neoliberalism’s meritorocratic ideal. This is because equal opportunity is materialized through ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ criteria in an education system where knowledge and skills determine future employment. Equal opportunity, in this sense, requires ‘marketizing’, or standardizing language to satisfy a double promise – that no matter your geographical locale (i.e. whether you are in London or in Toronto) – you will always get the same product, and
it will therefore be accessible to you (Duchêne and Heller, 2012: 12). The global spread of English (See Phillipson, 1992, 2008) and the commodification of French (Heller, 2003, 2010) have been paradigmatic in the legitimation of universal and hence instrumental language standards (i.e. what it is that language can get you in a magnet economy). Because English, for instance, is a ‘key medium’ by which commercial products of all kinds (i.e. film, television, advertising, the stationing of workers abroad, the export of books, education) are communicated (Phillipson, 1992: 58 cited in Grimshaw, 2015: 220), standardization occurs through monolingualism that requires close adherence to native-speakerism. In this sense, LC, it is said, hegemonizes discourse (say English) to non-English speakers, who readily subordinate their own language – or mother-tongue – in favour of an LC (See Phillipson et al., 1995). Power is legitimated, affirmed as true, directly through meritocracy – that is, in globalization’s promise of boundaryless careers. This means that ‘regimentation and control of dominant national languages co-exist with a valuing of multilingualism to serve economic interests’ (Duchêne et al., 2013: 8-9). Hence, we have a neoliberal discursive paradox between the monolingual or standard language practices of LC, and the hybrid or mixed language forms of SSD, with the former emerging as a more direct result of monolingualism’s meritocratic ideal.

The context II: discursive parallel in CLT and MRPI

A discursive parallel exists, I would argue, in LIE policy, between the neoliberal discourses of LC and SSD and weak and strong CLT. Firstly, I understand CLT as a spectrum of teaching practices that depend on the extent to which language form subserves socio-cultural context (function) (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Larsen-Freeman, 2011; Littlewood, 2013; Thornbury, 2011; Zhiming and Wee, 1998). On one end of the spectrum, weak or standard CLT advocates the teaching of language structures prior to social interaction (Prabhu, 1987: 1). On the other end, a strong CLT allows language to emerge as a product of communicative exchanges (Howatt, 1984: 279; Kumaravadivelu, 2006: 271). While in a strong CLT, therefore, communication is fluid and unpredictable, in the weak form, presentation, practice, production (PPP) lesson plans and task-based learning (TBL) enforce the correct appropriation of linguistic structures (i.e. grammar, vocabulary) in simulated social contexts (Ellis, 2003: 29). This also means that in weak CLT, hybrid or alternative forms of language (such as code-switching and/or using multiple languages in one sentence) are prohibited, whereas in the strong form they are the norm.

The fundamental problem with a weaker-oriented CLT is found in recent criticisms from critical applied linguists, who argue that language learners, in a globalized world, bring with them a wide array of language repertoires and socio-cultural contexts that go beyond the rules and bounds of language (Bax, 2003; Canagarajah, 1999 ; Holliday, 1994; Kuchah and Smith, 2011; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Phillipson, 1992). While a range of pedagogies have been proposed, aimed at integrating both aspects of the pedagogy, that include context-appropriate (Bax, 2003; Holliday, 1994; Kuchah and Smith, 2011; Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996), critical (Canagarajah, 1999; Lin, 2008; Norton and Toohey, 2011) and post-method pedagogies (Kumaravadivelu, 2006),³ none of these alternate approaches have managed to explain how the meritocratic discourses of LC and SSD manifest in LIE policies that prescribe CLT. Therefore, my focus remains on the former criticism as it pertains to the discursive parallel between LC and SSD and weak and strong CLT. I am interested in how meritocracy is legitimated through discourse to delineate the bounds of CLT in LIE policy.
This requires drawing discursive and epistemic links between the parallel discourses of LC and SSD and weak and strong CLT.

The discursive and epistemic assumptions of weak CLT

Specifically, it has been argued that weak CLT threatens PS identities in the language learning context (Norton, 2000, 2013a; Norton and Toohey, 2011). This is because weak CLT is grounded in monolingualism that distinguishes between NS and NNS standards. Here, the L1 (or mother-tongue) is construed as a standard point of reference against which subsequent language acquisition is measured and assessed (Kramsch, 2012; Leather, 2002). This implies the deficiency of NNS variations (Pennycook, 2014: 181) which, according to Norton (2000), limit PS identities in L2 learning, by restraining language, wherein identities are produced and confirmed.

This occurs in the teaching and learning of L2s in line with what Creese and Blackledge (2010: 104) call ‘separate bilingualism’, or the view that languages ought to be kept separate in language teaching and learning. K to 12 French immersion programmes in Canada, and dual Spanish/English language programmes in the US are paradigmatic examples of L2 contexts where learners learn specialty subjects in both languages (e.g. maths, history, art), but the L1 and L2 (i.e. English + French or Spanish + English) co-exist as separate entities (See Cummins, 2005; Garcia and Woodley, 2014). By extension, any possibility for multi-modal language practices that include code-switching, translation and trans-, multi- and pluri-languaging are excluded, thereby reducing languages and the people who speak them to ‘the postulation of rules, objects and systems’ (Harris, 2013: 91 cited in Pennycook, 2010: 133)

Epistemically, monolingual orientations to language learning, which include bi- and multi-lingual education, mark a cognitivist tradition in applied linguistics, aimed at modeling its theory and method after the tenets and methods of the lower-level sciences (see Davies, 1999 cited in Pennycook, 2008: 170). These preferred ways of knowing have privileged and subordinated, included and excluded subjects, social and political relations, and cultural conditions in their divisions between subjective/objective, theory/method and scientific/ideological (Pascale, 2010: 163). Construed as an ‘a priori’, ‘static entity’ (Larsen-Freeman, 2007: 782–783) that mimics objects of the natural world, language through the cognitivist lens becomes ‘naturalized’, unquestioned and taken as ‘given’ (see Dean, 1994 cited in Pennycook, 2001: 7). It is what Widdowson (2001) calls ‘object language’, that in categorizing language competence in terms of NS/NNS standards reduces the lived experiences and social contexts of language users to universalized linguistic applications. In this sense, monolingualism importantly assumes a positivist epistemic framework that proliferates the primacy of ideal language structures and the Cartesian dyad between mind and social context (Firth and Wagner, 1998; Lantolf, 2000; Larsen-Freeman, 2007; Swain and Deters, 2007; Zuengler and Miller, 2006).

The problem: MRPI

PS identities, however, are not independent of the ‘everyday social encounters between people with different access to symbolic and material resources . . . that are inevitably produced within language’ (Norton, 2000: 7 cited in Ricento, 2005: 899). Rather, they are contingent and, fundamentally, socially and historically constrained. PS identities are an
ongoing depiction of the individual as ‘subject’, who is subjected to subordinate or powerful positions, in relation to possibilities afforded by language (Weedon, 1997: 21 cited in Norton, 2013b: 2). Akin to Bourdieu’s ‘cultural capital’, investment indexes knowledge frameworks associated with different social groups and classes (Norton, 2000: 10–11). When someone invests in learning an L2, they do so with the understanding that they will increase their cultural capital that extends beyond materials, to include symbolic goods and imagined futures, which – and this is important – are dependent upon their shifting identities and complex and unique histories. Accordingly, in language learning, language learners can be positioned to participate in social life (through reading, writing, listening, speaking), or excluded and constrained, based on ‘target language’ (NS) standards (Norton and Toohey, 2011: 414).

In this way, in weak CLT language learning contexts, teachers can marginalize students by not valuing the symbolic and cultural capital they bring with them to the language learning context. Norton’s (2000) documentation of adult English language learners in Canada, for instance, illustrates examples where learners sought ‘access to the social networks of educated Canadians’ and were denied (Norton, 2000: 91). In multiple cases, when the teacher deemed a learner’s linguistic competence to be sub-par, this forced the student to drop the course as they were denied the right to speak in any NNS form. This imposes, as Pavlenko (2002: 279) reminds us, a view of the world that is made up of ‘homogeneous and monolingual cultures’ by propagating a strict divide between a language learner’s mothertongue (and culture) and the L2 language (and culture). It is in this sense that MRPI is a tension between monolingual language standards and PS language-learner identities.

The multilingual turn in this context can be understood as a rejection of positivist epistemes and monolingual discourses in L2 learning that has, though turned cognitivism on its head – by epistemically prioritizing the social world over the cognitive (See Block, 2003; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006)– has neglected to uncover how political ideology (meritocracy) manifests in weak CLT policy precepts that give rise to MRPI. Below, therefore, I draw epistemic links between meritocracy, the discourse of LC and weak CLT, by examining the role of positivism in hegemonizing discourses. This requires problematizing hegemonies as epistemic problems that delineate the bounds of discourse in a given knowledge community (k-community) to legitimate, and render common-sense, power. In this way, dominant social structure reproduces itself through monolingual discourses by ascribing unitary, a priori meaning to language and to identity categories that include NS/NNS. This is how the discourse of LC emerges as a hegemonic discourse in weak CLT policy precepts to legitimate meritocracy.

**Hegemonies and counter-hegemonies as epistemic problems and epistemic struggles in LIE policy**

Accepting that LC emerges as a hegemonic discourse in LIE policy requires accepting that hegemonies are epistemic problems and counter-hegemonies are epistemic struggles, or competitions between competing knowledge frameworks that delineate the bounds of discourse in a given k-community. For instance, as in all ideology, neoliberalism is disseminated through discourse (text, talk, email, policy) where dominant groups ‘select, organize and redistribute knowledge’ (Pitsoe and Letseka, 2013: 24) to produce ‘meaning in the service of power’ (Thompson, 1990: 7 cited in Holborow, 2007: 52). This constitutes ideology. Ideologies,
however, become hegemonies through universal representations of meaning that, in their claim to legitimate knowledge, transform the collective will and legitimate power.

Hegemonic discourses, specifically, are informed by particular knowledge frameworks that inform various groups’ beliefs (Tatman, 2001; Haugaard, 2006). In these k-communities, individuals are epistemically dependent on a ‘shared, communal or public language... used by two or more people to express, apply and debate the application of these concepts’ (Potter, 1993 cited in Tatman, 2001: 133). K-frameworks, thus, create semantic parameters from within which truth claims can be asserted and rendered true (Tatman, 2001: 134). In this sense, the maintenance and legitimization of ideological discourses emerge from what Haugaard (2006: 59) calls a need to ‘deny the arbitrariness of the sign’, which can achieve the desired universalizing effect of ideology on a social group. Historically, this has most effectively been achieved by appeal to the natural sciences or positivist epistemologies.4

In the aim to develop a unified science, in which the social sciences are modelled after the tenets and methods of the natural sciences (Code, 1991), the cognitive primacy of thought pre-constructs identity categories through unitary, unambiguous meaning in language, where members of a social group have to satisfy their own categorization into these extant categories. Defined within universal terms, such as man/woman, straight/gay, black/white, NS/NNS, the possibility of occupying multiple categories across multiple spaces, or even expanding and transforming pre-existing categories, is precluded, based on a priori identity concepts (Tatman, 2001: 140). This happens through political discourse that positions subjects by claiming true dominant social structure on the basis of science as opposed to mere convention (Haugaard: 69). Historically, for instance, slavery and the subjugation of women were paradigmatically defended on biological grounds (i.e. women are ‘weaker’; slaves are ‘naturally born’) (See Haugaard, 2006: 60). Here, the exclusion of members of non-dominant groups is categorical. Hegemony, and implicitly the legitimation of power and control, is achieved in the subsumption of diverse class relations into a universalized or positivist epistemetic framework, where particular identities and social realities are forfeited in the interest of universal discourse categories and shared social goals (Rucki, 2011: 348 cited in Taylor, 2017: 29).

Hegemonies, however, can be interrupted through the co-existence of diverse social forms and discursive practices able to ‘break down the hierarchies and exclusions related to dominant representations of the real’ (Icaza, 2012 cited in Icaza and Vázquez, 2013: 685). As Tatman (2001: 141–142) notes, while individual exceptions to a discursive construct or category can be absorbed under existing identity categories, discursive (and hence epistemic) hegemonies can be interrupted only when multiple members of non-dominant groups come together to change the existing power/dominant ideology. This occurs through ‘action’ or ‘microrevolutions’ that use counter-normative language forms to those that are prescribed (Code, 1991 cited in Tatman, 2001: 142). The use of subaltern discourses, in this way, can re-ambiguate meaning and destabilize fixity, allowing new social realities and identities to emerge, with the eventualty of social change (Fairclough, 1992, 2001) This is, in effect, to challenge the k-frameworks that inform hegemonic discourses (and inherent, particular ways of viewing the world).

The manifestation of LC in weak CLT policy precepts

Applied to the context of LC, producing an ‘unadulterated product’ that will yield consistent and universal efficiency as a tradable product occurs by appeal to monolingual
language standards. It is herein that LC emerges as a hegemonic discourse in LIE policies. This is because the hierarchization of languages in LIE policies is inseparable from policy prescriptions regarding the ways in which languages are learned. In the L2 classroom, LC is sustained and legitimates control of language learners through ‘stable grammars and lexicons’ (Kramsch, 2014: 298) able to ‘replicate’ or ‘mimic’ activities in the real world (Cameron, 2001 cited in Duchêne and Heller, 2012: 12). This proliferates outright the disambiguation of meaning by focusing on mastery of language forms ‘that can be objectively measured by language tests’ (Kubota, 2016b: 469).

**Monolingualism is meritocratic**

The legitimation of power in this way is exemplified in my main claim that monolingualism is meritocratic. For instance, while the promise of meritocracy yields equal opportunity for all, the problem is in its construal of the individual and his/her ‘ability’ to succeed that is distinct from socio-cultural context (Collinson, 1992; Moore, 2012). The learner is construed as ‘an island, an active, independent subject, uninfluenced by social forces’ (Collinson, 1992: 181). Establishing value-free education (and hence language learning contexts), in this view, is crucially understood from within a nativist epistemology that posits the (objective) capacity to succeed based on an innate predisposition (Burt, 1960 cited in Husen, 1974; Hauser, 2010; Littler, 2013). The culprit here is epistemic: the universal capacity to meet the NS standard is articulated in monolingualism’s cognitivist commitments. It is herein that the discourse of LC inevitably manifests in the form of weak CLT policy precepts, in virtue of its shared commitments to monolingualism and inherent cognitive theory of learning. Equal competition is possible under the meritocratic guise, in that which the commodification of knowledge and skills promises to get; that is, productive capacity in a boundaryless career – irrespective of race, class, background, ethnicity or geographical locale. Here, the sole determinant of success is ‘hard work’ (Castro, 2010; Littler, 2013) and ‘pulling up one’s bootstraps’ (Ahlquist, 2011: 13). The new social Darwinism, seen as the ‘ultimate arbiter of innate intelligence and ability’ (Leyva, 2009: 365), consequently creates a tension between the diverse learning styles and socio-cultural needs of students and the ‘politically-neutral forces’ of social control (Apple, 2004: 17). This has been at the crux of my concern with the examination of MRPI here.

In this context, not only does the neoliberal view of meritocracy defer to a biological and hence positivist grounding of universal standards, but meritocracy’s cognitivism importantly justifies and renders as common sense the subordination of PS identities that mix and switch languages to express different worldviews and ideas. The reaffirmation of a priori language structures simultaneously reaffirms dominant social structure that subordinates, in the view of LC, alternative non-monolingual forms of language and hence non-monolingual identities. Linguistic inequality, in this way, propels linguistic homogeneity, and by extension socio-cultural stringency, in the name of economic gain.

Learning, however, cannot be separated from the socio-cultural contexts within which it occurs (Duggan, 2003 cited in Leyva, 2009: 369). Thus, to falsely claim that learning spaces and education contexts are ‘culture-free’ (See Moore, 2012: 85) is to corroborate the ‘meritocratic myth’ (Barry, 2001 cited in Leyva, 2009: 377; Bowles and Gintis, 1976), and to proliferate social inequality – reifying class relations (Kincheloe, 2008; Kincheloe et al., 2008), on the basis of ‘linguicist’ discourses (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson, 1994).
The counter-hegemonic discourse of SSD as a strong CLT pedagogy

Finally, attributing the neoliberal discourse of LC to a weak CLT pedagogy in LIE policy leaves us with the paradoxical neoliberal discourse of SSD as it relates to a strong CLT and to its potential as a counter-hegemonic discourse. For instance, I have made the claim that a weak CLT pedagogy is the product of a hegemonizing neoliberal discourse that limits the discursive practices of language learners to monolingual language standards. I would argue here that the paradoxical discourse of SSD can serve as a counter-hegemonic discourse for PS language learners who are constrained by LC. This, however, requires qualification. Recall that counter-hegemonic discourses constitute the ‘calling into question’ of existing discourses, which are epistemically delineated for language learners. Here, the value of problematizing hegemony as an epistemic problem emerges in the ‘disinvention’ of language that can (re-)ambiguate meaning, to counter linguistic normativity (Makoni and Pennycook, 2006: 27). Such a non-conventional discourse necessarily values the epistemic primacy of the social world and the language needed to communicate in it, over cognitive preconceptions of language. This characterizes the neoliberal discourse of SSD, which recognizes at its core the messy and multiple modalities of code-switching, language mixing and translation, and which has, therefore, the capacity to ‘reinvent’ language in ‘integrationist’ terms (Harris, 1990: 45 cited in Pennycook, 2004: 6). Recent developments in socio-cultural theory (SCT) (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006) align with the epistemic commitments of a strong CLT pedagogy that allow language to emerge from the social interactions of language learners. This outlines the beginnings of the pedagogic manifestation of SSD through a strong CLT that takes the multilingual turn as its core pedagogical tenet, and the mixing of language in LIE policy as the core pedagogical tool for language learning. Further elaboration on this aspect of SSD as it relates to strong CLT and to the multilingual turn is beyond the scope of this article. Prior to concluding this paper, however, I address a core criticism of SSD that questions its potential as a counter-hegemonic discourse by questioning its complicity with a neoliberal agenda.

Implications for LIE policy and practice

I am not the first to suggest SSD as a counter-hegemonic discourse (cf. Maher, 2010 cited in Otsuji and Pennycook, 2010: 246). Accepting my argument, however, requires the consideration of recent criticisms charging SSD with complicity in new canons of knowledge that celebrate individuality for capitalist purposes instead of group solidarity (Kubota, 2016a: 475; see also Flores, 2013: 516). The crux of the argument, largely sourced in Kubota (2016a), states that because SSD is based on the principle of mobility for economic capital then it must also commit to equal opportunity that has historically legitimated (and continues to do so) social inequalities in discourse. However, once we ask ourselves ‘To what standards are we accountable, in fulfilling the promise of equal opportunity, within an SSD discourse?’ then we can see that to the extent that SSD denounces monolingual language practices as the universal standard, then it is not meritocratic. I have argued above that what makes the discourse of monolingualism/commodification meritocratic is the transposition of nativist universal standards of success that equate monetary value with the capacity to produce commodified language in L2 learning. Once, however, we remove the universal standard of success (monolingualism for my purposes here) and replace it with a variable SSD discourse (multi-, pluri- and trans-languaging), universal/nativist conceptions of
language acquisition become obsolete. This shifts the function of a communicative event from being subservient to grammar, to now grammar developing from the function of a socio-culturally situated, communicative event. Socio-cultural situatedness, in this sense, becomes at once the source and etiology of linguistic variability that varies from one speaker to another. Kubota, however, assumes a cognitivist/positivist position in her criticism of SSD, which forces me to submit, in line with Blommaert (2016), that such criticisms are ‘of no material importance’. Finally, because there is nothing universalizing about these subaltern language practices, this makes them ideal candidates for a counter-hegemonic discourse that shares the emergentist functional premise, herein described.

Conclusion and recommendations for future research

In this paper, I have argued that the meritocratic discourse of LC emerges as a hegemonic discourse in weak CLT policy precepts, while SSD can serve as a counter-hegemony through a strong CLT pedagogy in MRPI-constrained language learning contexts. I am aware that the arguments made here have their limitations and are open to criticism. Of particular concern is the complexity of the discourse of SSD to which I have not done justice. Recent research reveals emancipatory and counter-hegemonic language practices deployed by both teachers and learners in online and offline contexts in L2 learning settings (Canagarajah, 2011; Creese and Blackledge, 2010; Lin, 2012). The recent examination of university students integrating the use of multiple languages (English, Arabic and French, for instance) and multi-modal ‘visual motifs, emoticons and other symbols’ to negotiate meaning (Canagarajah, 2013: 133–135) is only beginning to gauge SSD’s emancipatory reach. Moreover, researchers are beginning to track the heightening effects of translingual practices in dual K to 12 language schools in North America and in Europe on L2 acquisition (García and Kleyn, 2019; García and Lin, 2017; Vogel and García, 2017). These empirical studies go beyond linguistic purism to legitimate the practice of SSD by encouraging and accepting the various discursive practices of individuals in the L2 classroom. While these studies demonstrate how SSD enhances PS identities in L2 learning, it remains unclear just how multilingual practices can enhance learning in the L2 context (Piccardo, 2017).

The issues raised in this paper suggest two broad directions for future research. Combining both critical policy studies and ethnographic monitoring to assess CLT-oriented language learning contexts in relation to weak and strong CLT and the inherent neoliberal discourses discussed here is a necessary endeavour. Such policy analyses must begin by rejecting the ‘neutrality’ of policy, based on the competing interests of culture, economics and politics that favour one group’s preference over others (Apple, 1993: 222). Moreover, just as ‘the transformations of social life are ongoing’ (Holland and Lave, 2001 cited in Norton and Toohey, 2011: 417), such should be the ongoing ethnographic studies of learners in the language learning context that denounce ‘objective realities’ and embrace the ‘importance of context and subjective perception’ (Nunan, 1992: 54). Only in this way are we able to determine MRPI contexts in L2 learning and implement the herein proposed counter-solution.

Further research must strengthen the epistemic link between a strong CLT and SSD discourse. This gives us traction for the future development of pedagogies that integrate SSD with post-method, context-appropriate and critical pedagogies, within the CLT
framework. As a salient point remains that to the extent that the magnet economies of Europe (Council of Europe, 2001), Canada (Council of Ministries of Education Canada, 2010) and the US (United States Department of State, 2020) subscribe to a CLT pedagogy, then these alternative pedagogies and social epistemologies ought not to and cannot be separated from strong CLT contexts. Rather, isolating the epistemic culprit in neoliberal-ism’s meritocracy serves as a starting point from which to elaborate a strong CLT approach in these contexts, a feat in which I have again fallen short. What the threshold of a strong CLT pedagogy constitutes, nonetheless, I suspect would begin with the fundamental premise of discursive emergentism at the crux of a socioconstructivist, CLT-based SLA and the rejection of positivist epistemics as ‘inappropriate knowledge’ for classroom reality (Kincheloe, 2008; Pennycook, 1990). Thus, future research must centre on the explicit development of pedagogic paradigms that are premised on the dialectics between politics and language, and hence theory and practice.

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Notes
1. I do not distinguish in this paper between the discourses of trans-, multi-, metro- and pluri-lingualism and SSD.
2. I do not distinguish here between second and foreign language learning. I refer to both of these as L2.
3. I do not see the post-method era of language teaching as separate from CLT. Rather, the further away we move from ‘methods’ – that is, weak CLT and standard language practices that follow the rule-bound nature of language – the closer to the strong CLT end of the spectrum we get. I conceive of the furthest point of a strong CLT pedagogy as one that promotes the use of language to communicate meaning.
4. Though as Haugaard (2006: 59) notes, religion has been equally effective to this aim.
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