The Unexamined Relationship Between Neoliberalism and Plurilingualism: A Cautionary Tale

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In recent years, TESOL scholars have offered both explicit and implicit critiques of language ideologies developed within nationalist frameworks that positioned monolingualism in a standardized national language as the desired outcome for all citizens. These scholars have used insights from both the social and the natural sciences to call into question static conceptualizations of language and have reconceptualized language pedagogy in ways that place the fluid and dynamic language practices of bilingual students at the center of instruction. This dynamic turn in TESOL has informed the emergence of plurilingualism as a policy ideal among language education scholars in the European Union. This article argues that this shift in the field of TESOL parallels the characteristics of the ideal neoliberal subject that fits the political and economic context of the current sociohistorical period—in particular, the desire for flexible workers and lifelong learners to perform service-oriented and technological jobs as part of a post-Fordist political economy. These parallels indicate a need for a more critical treatment of the concept of plurilingualism to avoid complicity with the promotion of a covert neoliberal agenda. The article ends with a framework for TESOL that works against the grain of neoliberal governance.

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Recent years have witnessed an epistemological shift in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). This shift has been characterized as a move both explicitly and implicitly away from the nationalist language ideologies that informed approaches to TESOL throughout the 20th century (Cook, 2010). Observers of this shift have called it by several terms, including multilingual TESOL (Taylor, 2009), bilingual instructional strategies (Cummins, 2007), dynamic bilingualism (García, 2009), and the bilingualization of TESOL (Widdowson, 2003). Although coming from diverse perspectives ranging from the sociology of language (García, 2009) to
psycholinguistics (Herdina & Jessner, 2002) and emerging from different social contexts, including environments of relative linguistic homogeneity (Cummins, 2007) and environments with a great deal of linguistic heterogeneity (Mohanty, 2006; Taylor, 2012, in press), the common theme underlying this shift is a rejection of monolingual pedagogical approaches and authoritarian teaching methods. The major argument is that these monolingual language ideologies should be replaced by bilingual and multilingual pedagogical approaches that engage students in authentic learning tasks and encourage them to use their entire linguistic repertoires to make meaning and develop their language skills (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). This development in the academic literature has emerged in conjunction with the policy ideal of plurilingualism, which attempts to reconceptualize language policy in ways that are aligned with this shift in thinking (DoCoyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010).

In this article, I offer a critical reading of this recent shift away from nationalist language ideologies in the TESOL literature. My basic argument is that the shift occurring in the field of TESOL that has produced plurilingualism as a policy ideal parallels the production of a neoliberal subject that fits the political and economic context of our current sociohistorical period—in particular, the desire for flexible workers and lifelong learners to perform service-oriented and technological jobs as part of a post-Fordist political economy. The purpose of pointing out these parallels is to offer caution in relation to the uncritical acceptance of plurilingualism in TESOL and to advocate a more nuanced conceptualization that explores unexamined power relations in current theories of plurilingualism.

In order to prove its claims, this article first offers an overview of the theoretical and methodological approach that informs the analysis that follows. It then offers a definition of neoliberalism through an examination of both the institutional and individual impact of neoliberalism on society. The article then offers an analysis of a key text of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that illustrates the characteristics of the ideal neoliberal subject. This description of the ideal neoliberal subject is then used as a point of reference for a similar analysis of the recent shifts in TESOL, with a specific focus on plurilingualism. The article examines several parallels that exist between the ideal subject of neoliberalism and the ideal subject of plurilingualism, and raises questions regarding the complicity of plurilingualism as currently theorized in promoting the neoliberal agenda. The article ends with a theorization of plurilingualism in ways that resist rather than promote neoliberalism.
A GENEALOGICALLY INFORMED APPROACH

The textual analysis that follows takes a genealogically informed approach. As opposed to issues related to policy implementation, for Allan (2009) such an analysis is interested in the ideal subject that a specific text produces. In line with this approach, the textual analysis that follows focuses specifically on the particular subject positions that are presented as most desired. I then place these texts, and the ideal subject that they are producing, in conversation with larger discursive shifts occurring as part of changes in the current sociohistorical context.

In order to develop a coherent picture of the ideal subject, I first identified key texts that are representative of three separate but overlapping discursive regimes: (1) neoliberalism, (2) the dynamic turn in TESOL, and (3) plurilingualism. I then highlighted sections of these key texts where an ideal subject position was being described. Once I completed reading the texts, I placed all of the highlighted sections together to develop a coherent picture of the ideal subject being produced by a particular discursive regime. I then made connections across the three discursive regimes in an attempt to explicitly understand how the regimes overlap.

It is important to emphasize that the objective of this genealogically informed approach is to better understand the similarities between the ideals articulated by proponents of neoliberalism, the dynamic turn in TESOL, and plurilingualism. That is, what follows is an attempt to understand how the ultimate goals of the dynamic turn in TESOL and plurilingualism intersect with the ultimate goals of neoliberalism. The issue of how successfully these goals have already been realized in actual TESOL classrooms is an important follow-up question that is outside of the scope of this article.

DEFINING NEOLIBERALISM

Neoliberalism can be understood at both an institutional level and an individual level. At an institutional level, neoliberalism entails the merging of the state and the market in a new form of corporate governance (Klein, 2007). Phillipson (2009b) extends this traditional definition of neoliberalism with a specific focus on the role of language and linguistic imperialism in perpetuating the neoliberal agenda. Phillipson argues that neoliberalism is a combination of a top-down process of what a state, or combination of states, or an institution such as a corporation or a university, does to achieve its goals,
which include the way it manages linguistic capital [and] the way economic power flows across and through continuous space, toward or away from territorial entities (such as states or regional power blocs) through the daily practices of production, trade, commerce, capital flows, money transfers, labour migration, technology transfer, current speculation, flows of information, cultural impulses, and the like. (p. 132)

Therefore, on an institutional level neoliberalism can be understood as the coalescing of institutional forces in support of the free flow of capitalism in ways that benefit transnational corporations and economic elites. TESOL scholars examining neoliberalism from an institutional level have focused on how Anglo-American organizations perpetuate cultural and linguistic imperialism through the worldwide marketing of TESOL (Phillipson, 1992, 2009b). In addition, these scholars have focused on the role of transnational corporations in regard to the development of TESOL curricula (Block, Gray, & Holbornow, 2012). The major argument made by these scholars is that TESOL in a neoliberal context has produced a new global market for English language teaching that has increased the profits of transnational corporations while reinforcing existing hierarchies between Anglo-American nations and the rest of the world’s population.

Although this macro-level analysis is certainly important, an overlooked aspect of neoliberalism has been its impact on the conceptualization of the ideal subject (i.e., what it means to be an ideal human being from a neoliberal perspective). That is, in addition to the corporatization of the state, neoliberalism also entails the corporatization of the individual subject. Foucault (2008) refers to this corporatized subject as the enterprising-self, and explains:

The idea of a privatization of insurance mechanisms, and the idea at any rate that it is up to the individual [to protect himself against risk] through all the reserves he has at his disposal, either simply as an individual, or through mutual benefit organizations and suchlike, is the objective you can see at work in the neo-liberal policies. (p. 145)

In other words, the enterprising-self is an autonomous, flexible, and innovative subject who is able to adapt to the rapidly changing contexts of our sociohistorical period (Besley & Peters, 2007). This enterprising-self is in stark contrast to the docile workers desired on an assembly line (Anyon, 1980).

Education is a key site for the production of this enterprising-self. For example, despite there being no explicit connection between cognitive science and neoliberalism, Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996) see ties between them. Specifically, they connect shifts in cognitive science that favor a more collaborative model of learning to shifts in the needs
of the post-Fordist workplace, as the corporate culture of neoliberalism has begun to demand flexible workers who are able to work autonomously and make informed decisions that are in the best interests of corporate profits. They conclude that the parallels between the ideal subject of cognitive science and the ideal subject of neoliberalism indicate a possible complicity of cognitive science in supporting the neoliberal agenda.

Neoliberalism, then, is the merging of macro-level policy shifts and the individual-level production of subjects to fit these political and economic changes. Neoliberalism is not simply about the corporatization of society but also the corporatization of the individual subject. This corporatization of the subject does not necessarily have to be produced through an explicitly pro-corporate stance. On the contrary, the case of cognitive science indicates that it is also possible for a neoliberal subject to be produced without an explicit acceptance of neoliberalism. In the next section, I argue that the same process may be occurring in TESOL—namely, more dynamic language ideologies are being produced that parallel the dynamic subject of neoliberalism without an explicit embrace of the corporatist agenda of neoliberalism.

Before exploring this argument in more detail, a few disclaimers should be stated. First of all, connecting neoliberalism with the dynamic turn in TESOL and with plurilingualism should not be misconstrued as arguing that English linguistic imperialism is no longer relevant to the neoliberal project. Certainly, one project of neoliberalism is “the normative goal of English becoming the default language of international communication and the dominant language of intranational communication in an increasing number of countries” (Phillipson, 2009b, p. 106). This article argues that another project of neoliberalism is to produce dynamic subjects who engage in fluid language practices that fit the needs of global capitalism. In other words, neoliberalism consists of both a desire to reinforce English hegemony and to mold multilingualism into a commodity that serves the interests of transnational corporations. The major question this article seeks to address is in regard to the role that plurilingualism as currently conceptualized may have in supporting this underexamined aspect of the neoliberal agenda.

OECD AS A NEOLIBERAL INSTITUTION

What follows is an analysis of a text disseminated by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an international organization with 34 nations as members. The OECD’s (n.d.)
stated mission is “to promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.” According to Mahon and McBride (2009), the OECD serves an important but underexamined role in the worldwide dissemination of neoliberalism. The document chosen for analysis, titled *Human Capital: How What You Know Shapes Your Life* (Keeley, 2007), was selected because the entire text explicitly discusses the economic theory underlying the work of the OECD. This text therefore provides an excellent introduction to the ideal neoliberal subject.

Keeley (2007) situates his advocacy for the ideal subject of the current sociohistorical context within the changing nature of an increasingly globalized society. Specifically, he argues that the economy has shifted toward a knowledge economy in which information has become central to economic transactions:

> These days, a major source of growth comes not from physical objects, but from something quite intangible: information. And the form of that information—whether it’s on a computer hard disk, an iPod or flying through the air in a satellite transmission—hardly matters. It’s all just ones and zeros. (p. 23)

Keeley connects these changes in the economy with the emergence of the idea of human capital:

> Since the early 1960s, there’s been increasing agreement on one key part of the growth puzzle, namely, the importance of people—their abilities, their knowledge, and their competences—to economic growth. Or in other words, human capital. (p. 29)

In his view, all human knowledge is potentially profitable and, therefore, all human knowledge can be commodified and made into human capital. The objective of the ideal subject in this new knowledge economy is to accumulate as much human capital as possible.

Keeley (2007) situates this shift toward a knowledge economy within larger changes in the global political economy. In particular, he focuses on the breaking down of national and economic borders:

> Globalisation is a complex and controversial phenomenon that takes in a wide range of social, political, cultural, and economic trends, but at its heart is a simple reality: national borders no longer matter as much as they used to.... Economically, globalisation means that national economies are increasingly plugged into each other and into the world economy. (p. 13)

He argues that the breaking down of these borders in conjunction with the emergence of a knowledge economy requires the ability to interact with people of different cultures:
Think about the world they’re heading out into: it’s one in which more of us are earning a living in the knowledge economy. It’s also one in which globalisation means greater interaction between people from different cultures and backgrounds. And it’s one in which individuals and communities are facing major social and economic challenges—from funding retirement to tackling global climate change. (p. 61)

That is, the ideal subject for our current sociohistorical context is one that has cultural competence. Yet the reason for this favoring of cultural competence is purely economic; that is, awareness of diversity is treated as a commodity that can increase economic productivity.

Another key characteristic of the ideal subject of Keeley’s (2007) neoliberal discourse is that this dynamic subject is a lifelong learner who is continuously accumulating more human capital. As he argues:

To go on working, we’ll need to continue updating our skills throughout our working lives. Why? Because the skills we need in the workplace are evolving, and the pace of that evolution is speeding up. Behind those developments are two major factors: the march of globalization and the rise of the knowledge economy. (p. 13)

Therefore, as opposed to a factory job where education was complete once the skill required to do that job was mastered, the ideal subject of neoliberalism is one that is constantly working to acquire new skills and accumulate more human capital that will be used to maximize profits.

Keeley (2007) then goes on to examine how the K–12 system should be structured to facilitate the accumulation of human capital. He argues for the replacement of the traditional authoritarian classroom that focuses on unreflectively following directions with a more collaborative and reflective pedagogical approach in school:

Schools have generally not kept up with the development of “knowledge management.” That’s business jargon for the process—often informal—of sharing knowledge, insights and experiences within organisations. The aim is to encourage individuals and groups to reflect on what works and what doesn’t…. In the corporate world, many companies believe it’s vital to become—more jargon—“learning organisations.” These are places that put a high value on this process of exchanging information and insights, and use those exchanges as the basis for action. (p. 70)

In contrast to a Fordist economy, in which the goal was to produce docile workers who could follow instructions (Anyon, 1980), the neoliberal discourse produced by Keeley advocates the creation of autonomous learners who are able to collaborate with people of varying backgrounds and make independent decisions. This neoliberal
discourse constructs an ideal subject that is also favored by recent developments in cognitive science and, as is examined below, favored by advocates of the dynamic turn in TESOL and plurilingualism.

A characteristic of this ideal neoliberal subject is the universalizing discourse surrounding it. There is an assumption that all people are moving in the direction of becoming ideal neoliberal subjects. Any possible resistance to neoliberalism is silenced through an imposition of a neoliberal ideology on all human action. For example, Keeley (2007) highlights the experiences of Bhutan, a nation that he describes as “one of the world’s least developed countries” (p. 118). He describes how the government of Bhutan is in the process of developing a concept of “Gross National Happiness” which could be seen as a response to the privileging under neoliberalism of Gross National Product and Gross Domestic Product. However, Keeley interprets this Bhutanese initiative through a neoliberal lens:

This might all sound like just another example of Bhutanese eccentricity, but in fact the kingdom is not alone. Other countries too, are working on sets of alternative indicators that could include measures of their levels of human capital, among other forms of capital. In part, these indicators are aimed at providing a broad picture of national well-being. But, crucially, they’re also designed to indicate whether nations possess sufficient capital—in all its forms—to ensure sustainable economic development. (p. 118)

Therefore, rather than seeing the actions of the Bhutanese as being in opposition to neoliberalism’s focus on economic development and materiality, Keeley makes the case that the Gross National Happiness initiative is, in fact, very much in line with economic development. The actions of all people and all nations are interpreted through the very narrow lens of economic development and the maximization of corporate profits. Therefore, there is a colonizing aspect to neoliberal discourse that silences subaltern voices. Similar universalizing tendencies of the dynamic turn in TESOL and of plurilingualism that will be examined next raise questions as to the complicity of these discursive regimes in perpetuating a similar silencing of subaltern voices.

**NEOLIBERALISM AND THE DYNAMIC TURN IN TESOL**

The rise of plurilingualism is connected to broader changes regarding the goals of language education in TESOL that I refer to as the dynamic turn. In what follows, I give a brief overview of the dynamic turn in TESOL and examine the underlying ideal subject produced in
this discursive regime. By necessity, such a brief overview involves broad claims that gloss over differences between authors that are positioned within this epistemological shift. It is beyond the scope of this article to address the merits of the various positions within the dynamic turn or to examine the nuances that distinguish each of the positions. Instead, the purpose here is to illustrate the common underlying epistemological orientation to language and the commonality of the ideal subject that are embedded in all of the different positions.

The dynamic turn as a discursive regime is emerging simultaneously from various disciplinary perspectives. Scholars who favor the social turn in applied linguistics (Block, 2003) tend to explicitly position their conceptualization of language within changes associated with globalization. Blommaert (2010) provides an illustration of this approach. In his view, increased mobility made possible by our current era of globalization has produced language practices that cannot be properly analyzed using language ideologies based on a nation-state paradigm. His work can be seen as the culmination of a critique that has sought to challenge nationalist framings of language that privilege monolingualism in terms of a standardized variety of a national language.

The aspect of this critique most relevant to TESOL has focused on the spread of English worldwide. This critique has come from different political traditions and goes by various names, including global English (Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 2006), world Englishes (Canagarajah, 2006; Kachru, 1990), English as a lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2005), and English as an international language (McKay, 2003). Although there are specific differences between each of these positions, the basic underlying argument is the same: New varieties of English are emerging as more and more users learn English as an additional language. Rather than lament this phenomenon, these scholars have critiqued constructs such as the native speaker and have argued for embracing new varieties of English in the TESOL classroom that support the development of fluid ethnolinguistic identities (Jenkins, 2006).

In addition to scholars who favor the social turn in applied linguistics, other scholars who are also part of the dynamic turn have been inspired by insights from the natural sciences. For example, Herdina and Jessner (2002) use dynamic systems theory to develop a model of second language acquisition that they term a dynamic model of multilingualism (DMM). DMM adds a new perspective to the idea that multilingual people are not two monolinguals, but their language systems interact in dynamic and complex ways. Thus Herdina and Jessner argue that “DMM works on the assumption that human beings are complex biological systems and therefore are best studied and explained on the basis of systems theory, complexity theory, and chaos
theory rather than fundamentally mentalist and methodological models” (p. 154). This aspect of DMM has been echoed by other scholars (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Van Lier, 2004). The consensus among these scholars has been that bilinguals are not the equivalent of two monolinguals and that approaches to TESOL must connect new language practices to students’ prior linguistic experiences.

Therefore, whereas some of the scholars leading the dynamic turn are attempting to describe language practices associated with an increasingly globalized world and others are applying insights from the natural sciences, the underlying ideal subject is the same. Regardless of the disciplinary perspective, the dynamic turn means abandoning static language constructs—which are seen as either connected to outdated nationalist ideologies or out of sync with the latest developments in the natural sciences—in favor of more fluid linguistic constructs thought to be more appropriately matched to the needs of our global society or to recent insights from the natural sciences. Within this framework, the ideal subject position shifts from a monolingual user of a standardized national language to a dynamic user of fluid language practices. In short, the linguistic fluidity that was once positioned as inferior and undesirable (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007; Mühlhäuser, 1996) is now being positioned as ideal. The question remains of what has led to this epistemological shift and what relationship this shift has to the demands of a neoliberal political economy. To answer this question, I analyze one proposal that has been influenced by this shift: plurilingualism.

PLURILINGUALISM AND THE NEOLIBERAL SUBJECT

One of the biggest advocates for plurilingualism has been the Council of Europe. I therefore examine two key documents that describe the Council’s vision of plurilingualism: From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education (Beacco, 2007) and Plurilingualism, Democratic Citizenship in Europe and the Role of English (Breidbach, 2003). It is important to emphasize that the following analysis is not intended as a dismissal of the important work of the Council of Europe, which has been a pioneer in advocating for improved education for marginalized populations throughout Europe and the world (Little, 2010). Instead, the purpose of the following is to demonstrate possible unexamined power relations in plurilingualism as currently theorized in order to develop a more nuanced conceptualization that engages with the realities of the neoliberal context. This analysis is meant as a cautionary tale of how plurilingualism may unwittingly be used as a tool of neoliberal governance that reinforces rather than challenges current relations of power.
In line with both neoliberalism and the dynamic turn in TESOL, the Council of Europe frames plurilingualism as a response to the need for a new language ideology for the changing sociopolitical context. In particular, Beacco (2007) offers an explicit critique of nation-state language ideologies:

This legal definition of citizenship strongly bound up with that of the national language(s) tends to make monolingualism the official (national or regional) norm and introduces antagonistic relationships between languages, in that it leads to some languages receiving preferential treatment and a radical distinction being made between the national/official language(s) and all the others. (p. 12)

He argues for reconceptualizing language in ways that break free from the monolingual ideal and embrace the communicative aspect of language. As he defines the term,

Plurilingual and pluricultural competence is the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural action, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures. It is not seen as a juxtaposition of distinct competences, but as a single competence, even though it is complex. (p. 10)

Therefore, in opposition to nation-state language ideologies that treat bilingualism as double monolingualisms, plurilingualism parallels the dynamic turn in TESOL by conceptualizing bilingualism as a single complex competence.

In line with this reconceptualization of bilingualism, Beacco (2007) defines being plurilingual as not entailing equal competency in different languages but rather the ability to expand one’s linguistic repertoire in any given language when the need arises:

Being plurilingual does not mean mastering a large number of languages to a high level, but acquiring the ability to use more than one linguistic variety to degrees (which are not necessarily identical) for different purposes (conversation, reading or writing, etc.). The degree of proficiency is not necessarily the same for all the varieties used and will also be different according to communicative context (a person can read a language without being able to speak it or speak it without being able to write it well).... The degree of proficiency in the varieties in the repertoire may change over time, as may its composition. (p. 38)

In other words, the concept of plurilingualism produces the same type of lifelong learning and flexible use of language that is described as crucial for economic development under neoliberalism.

The interrelationship between neoliberalism and plurilingualism becomes more pronounced with the call by advocates of plurilingualism
for a common communicative sphere. Beacco (2007) argues that a common communicative sphere is inherently democratic because, in contrast with nation-state language ideologies, it can be used to develop a sense of belonging through appreciation of linguistic diversity:

The development of plurilingualism is not simply a functional necessity; it is also an essential component of democratic behaviour. Recognition of the diversity of speakers’ plurilingual repertoires should lead to acceptance of linguistic differences: respect for the linguistic rights of individuals and groups in their relations with the state and linguistic majorities, respect for freedom of expression, respect for linguistic minorities, respect for the least commonly spoken and taught national languages, respect for language diversity in inter-regional and international communication. (p. 36)

The argument is that through engaging in fluid language practices, people will learn to appreciate linguistic and cultural diversity and be able to effectively participate in a common communicative sphere.

Proponents of plurilingualism make two arguments about its role in creating this common communicative sphere. The first argument relates to cultural competence. At the core of plurilingualism is the idea that by developing competence in different language varieties, plurilingual subjects will be better positioned to interact with one another despite cultural differences:

The aim of plurilingualism and plurilingual education is not simultaneously teaching a range of languages, teaching through comparing different languages or teaching as many languages as possible. Rather, the goal is to develop plurilingual competence and intercultural education, as a way of living together. (Beacco, 2007, p. 18)

Therefore, in line with the neoliberal discourse examined above, plurilingualism makes cultural competence a central characteristic of the ideal subject. The difference is that with neoliberalism, cultural competence takes place within the economic sphere while with plurilingualism, cultural competence takes place within the political realm.

Yet it is important not to overstate this difference, especially in light of the argument, which explicitly situates plurilingualism within the new global economy, about the role of plurilingualism in developing a common communicative space. Using the discourse of lifelong learning and the flexible worker that lies at the core of neoliberalism, Beacco (2007) argues for continued language learning throughout one’s life:

Awareness of the growing role of knowledge and intellectual skills in the definition of production, distribution and design tasks is displacing
the question of compulsory language teaching from compulsory schooling to subsequent training: the need for opportunities to learn or take up again a linguistic variety may be many, created by career changes, new tastes or interests, leisure activities and personal development. (p. 66)

Here the idea of cultural competence and the needs of the new global economy coalesce to produce the ideal plurilingual subject of the common communicative sphere. This plurilingual subject is a flexible and dynamic user of language who adapts across his or her lifespan to an increasingly diversifying workplace. Therefore, in a manner similar to neoliberalism, plurilingualism advocates lifelong training that is monitored by the students/workers themselves. Individuals are responsible for assessing a given situation and determining whether and when they require new skills. That is, neoliberalism and plurilingualism both operate “within an individualistic paradigm of choice in a supposedly free market, choice that is assumed to be rational, as in mainstream positivist science” (Phillipson, 2012, p. 410). In other words, both discursive regimes produce as an ideal subject the enterprising-self that lies at the core of neoliberal governance.

However, plurilingualism adds a new element to this enterprising-self that positions plurilingualism as part of the reconceptualization of citizenship within the new global world. That is, the shift from static monolingualism toward fluid language practices that change throughout one’s lifespan is connected to a new type of citizenship being advocated by supporters of plurilingualism. Beacco (2007) argues for replacing the nation-state citizenship that has marked the political landscape in Europe for the last several hundred years with a citizenship that allows different groups of people to form a “civic friendship”:

The most immediate experience of the diversity of Europe is the day-to-day experience of the languages used: plurilingualism could therefore be a basis for “civic friendship” between speakers, whatever linguistic varieties they use. Citizens would regard one another as plurilingual and could constitute a community based on a common linguistic ideal. The idea is to detach first or official language from national or European belonging by recognising that a shared culture of languages is an informal element that could be a component of democratic citizenship. (p. 71)

In other words, breaking out of language ideologies associated with nation-states is thought to produce a new citizenship and develops a new solidarity and a more democratic society. While this break with nation-state language ideologies may be perceived as a movement toward more collaborative power relations, a closer examination of the production of this new subject position
exposes the potential development of coercive power relations. According to Breidbach (2003), this new citizen takes on a more global perspective: “From the point of view of education for European citizenship, it would however be desirable for individuals to be able to transcend localisms and acknowledge global political, social, or cultural issues in their full dimension” (p. 20). In fact, Breidbach makes it clear that nobody is permitted to remain outside of this new framework: “European communicative integration, being founded on plurilingualism, is antonymous to linguistic seclusionism as it is to linguistic homogenisation” (p. 7). According to Breidbach, no linguistic group can exclude itself from plurilingualism or the formation of a European citizenship. Therefore, where once the national subject of European nation-states was depicted as the natural subject position that all must model themselves after (Mühlhäusler, 1996), the plurilingual subject of modern European society is understood to be the natural model that all must currently follow. As with neoliberalism, no alternative is possible.

This positioning of Europe as a model for a new type of citizenship in which numerous linguistic varieties are used and respected produces a historically inaccurate discourse of European exceptionalism. For instance, fluid linguistic practices are not unique to the current socio-historical context. On the contrary, these linguistic practices have existed in many societies and have come in varied forms (Phillipson, 2012). Second, the history of European colonization has been a history of eliminating linguistic fluidity (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007; Mühlhäusler, 1996). It is only recently that European scholars have begun discussing language in these terms. To position European society as the originator of these ideologies erases the history of European marginalization of the language practices of much of the world’s population. This historical erasure, in turn, risks positioning plurilingualism as a tool for the justification of a new form of linguistic imperialism—one that seeks to impose a European conceptualization of linguistic fluidity on the rest of the world. In short, whereas neoliberalism is the continuation of economic imperialism, plurilingualism as currently conceptualized could be part of the continuation of cultural and linguistic imperialism in the service of neoliberal economic interests.

In summary, there are several parallels between the ideal subject of neoliberalism and the ideal subject of plurilingualism. Both subjects are characterized as dynamic and ever changing, and able to adapt to the increasing diversity of society through a lifelong development of cultural competence and a lifelong expansion of their linguistic repertoire. In addition, both subjects are depicted as emerging naturally from the changing global political economy and as the inevitable and desired outcome for all of the world’s population. In the case of
neoliberalism, the emergence of dynamic subjects as flexible workers able to continuously accumulate human capital is argued to be necessary for economic development. In the case of plurilingualism, the emergence of dynamic subjects as fluid language users able to continuously accumulate new language competencies is argued to be necessary for the development of a new citizenship to fit a new common communicative sphere. The many parallels between the two ideal subjects, as well as the aura of inevitability of both discursive regimes, indicate a possibility of their convergence in ways that are molding fluid linguistic practices in the service of the neoliberal agenda.

Yet the relationship between neoliberalism and plurilingualism does not have to be a deterministic one. That is, although neoliberalism is an all-pervasive part of the current sociohistorical context, it is not inevitable that plurilingualism in TESOL will by definition support the neoliberal agenda. In the next section, I offer a conceptualization of plurilingualism against the grain that shows how plurilingualism might be used as a tool that resists neoliberal governance.

PLURILINGUALISM IN TESOL AGAINST THE GRAIN

I have argued that both the dynamic turn in TESOL and plurilingualism are tied to the emergence of a dynamic subject that aligns with the enterprising-self of neoliberalism. These ideal subjects are characterized as ever-changing, life-long learners with the ability to collaborate in culturally competent ways. By pointing out these parallels, I am not advocating a complete rejection of a role for plurilingualism in TESOL. What I am advocating is caution in the universalizing tendencies of plurilingualism as currently conceived and its uncritical framing as inherently aligned with a more democratic society. In what follows, I offer a reframing of plurilingualism that positions it within a larger project of TESOL that goes against the grain of neoliberalism at both the institutional and individual level.

An important first step in positioning plurilingualism in TESOL against the grain of neoliberalism is to acknowledge that the phenomenon that is currently being described as plurilingualism is neither a new phenomenon nor a European development. On the contrary, fluid language practices have existed historically in most of the world (Mühlhäusler, 1996; Phillipson, 2012) and continue to exist today (Makoni & Makoni, 2010). Positioning European society as a pioneer in developing language practices critical of the nation-state framework erases this history and places European society as a leader of a linguistic phenomenon that European nations have, in fact, worked to destroy for the past several hundred years, both internally and as part
of their colonial project. The current framing of plurilingualism positions European society as a leader when it is in actuality a follower. There is much that can be learned from subaltern societies that have utilized fluid linguistic practices for centuries. This knowledge is erased by plurilingualism as currently theorized.

Acknowledging this history allows for advocates of plurilingualism to begin to reflect on how and why it has institutionally emerged as a popular concept among certain segments of European society at this particular sociohistorical juncture. Specifically, the important question is: Whose interests are served by plurilingualism’s growing popularity? This question cannot be answered without reference to the current neoliberal context in which many European nations feel threatened by the influence of English while being attracted to opportunities opened by the commodification of diversity. That is, the increasing popularity of plurilingualism as a goal for European society cannot be divorced from English linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) or the commodification of multilingualism that positions knowledge of fluid language practices as desirable for the ideal neoliberal subject. Within this context, institutional support for plurilingualism could be seen as both reinforcing English linguistic imperialism (with the assumption being that a plurilingual subject should have English as part of their linguistic repertoire) while simultaneously limiting multilingual competences to those that benefit transnational corporations (through the commodification of language that ignores relations of power produced by neoliberalism). In the same way that critical scholars have challenged the role of TESOL in perpetuating English hegemony worldwide (Phillipson, 1992, 2009b), critical scholars advocating plurilingualism must also challenge the role of TESOL in perpetuating a commodification of language in service of transnational corporations.

As an example of the form that such a critique of plurilingualism might take, I refer to Cronin’s (2003) study of changing understandings of translation, in which he describes neo-Babelianism by design. In contrast to neo-Babelianism by default, which is aligned with English linguistic imperialism through its advocacy of the universal use of English, neo-Babelianism by design acknowledges a place for translation but conceptualizes translation as “a formal, uncreative process, which any unqualified person or even a computer or a machine can accomplish” and as a “minor hiccup in corporate planning” (pp. 61–62). In short, within this neoliberal framework translation becomes a simple process that requires knowledge of lexicon and grammar and does not require any meaningful cultural knowledge. This delegitimization of the complexities of translation and of the cultural knowledge required offers opportunities for more affluent populations who are able to participate in global travel and develop cosmopolitan identities.
to position themselves as having the plurilingual language skills desired by transnational corporations.

A failure to examine these global inequalities poses the risk that plurilingualism will become a new, institutionalized form of colonization as mobile plurilingual elites take advantage of the commodification of language to position themselves as ideal neoliberal subjects. In so doing, these elites position their linguistic resources as superior to the linguistic resources of marginalized populations both inside and outside of Europe. In short, the current conceptualization of plurilingualism may become complicit in the production of a new elite class of English-speaking plurilingual subjects who have mastered multiple linguistic codes and participate in fluid linguistic practices solely at the service of neoliberal expansion. Their use of English would continue to marginalize the world’s non-English-speaking population in ways documented at length by work on English linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992, 2009b). At the same time, these elites’ plurilingual competence would be used to inject a neoliberal epistemology that molds the world’s languages into market niches for transnational corporations through the erasure of deep cultural specificity in favor of superficial cultural differences. Populations that resist such commodifications of their language practices would be rendered obsolete and positioned as out of step with the universalizing neoliberal path. A conception of plurilingualism that fails to explicitly challenge the global inequalities produced by neoliberalism will only serve to reinforce and exacerbate these inequalities. Therefore, advocates of plurilingualism who wish to challenge societal inequalities must also engage with an explicit and systematic critique of neoliberalism as an institutional force that produces such inequalities.

In addition to offering a more explicit critique of neoliberalism at an institutional level, the concept of plurilingualism must also incorporate a critique at the level of the individual subject. This does not necessarily entail a complete rejection of the characteristics of the ideal subject of plurilingualism. That is, it may not be possible to develop an ideal subject completely outside of neoliberal governance. Yet it is important to remember that nation-state language ideologies that were imposed on colonies were eventually reappropriated by colonized populations as part of struggles that contested Euro-American supremacy and allowed subaltern voices to emerge (Furedi, 1994). Similarly, the discourses that have coalesced to produce plurilingual language ideologies can also be used for multiple purposes. They can be used to reinforce neoliberalism through the development of a universalizing plurilingual subject which is produced as part of the erasure of global inequalities, or they can be used to resist the universalizing narrative of neoliberalism through the development of a
resistant plurilingual subject that engages with subaltern perspectives. In what follows, I offer a brief conceptualization of what this resistant plurilingual subject might look like in the broadest sense.

In the TESOL classroom, this resistant plurilingual subject would be able to experiment with *meta-ethnolinguistic subjectivities*. The foundation of meta-ethnolinguistic subjectivities is the acceptance of the idea that it is impossible to transcend societal norms and escape the governance structures of the current sociopolitical context. The purpose of critique, therefore, should be to expose the limits of these societal norms and consciously push these norms toward their limits, with the ultimate objective of making them include new subject positions (Butler, 2005). Though meta-ethnolinguistic subjectivities may sound similar to the enterprising-self of neoliberalism and the dynamic subject of plurilingualism, there are major differences. The dynamic subjects of neoliberalism and plurilingualism are part of a universalizing narrative that sees all of humanity inevitably moving toward a future of global capitalism. In contrast, meta-ethnolinguistic subjectivities reject universalizing narratives and are continuously engaged in a process of both exposing the power relations embedded within universalizing narratives and attempting to imagine new subject positions that resist these narratives. Therefore, meta-ethnolinguistic subjectivities are suspicious of any and all subject positions, including their own.

A TESOL classroom that supports students in producing meta-ethnolinguistic subjectivities must work to expose the constructed nature and ideological assumptions of all language practices and provide opportunities for students to reappropriate plurilingualism in ways that resist neoliberalism’s corporatist agenda. The goal of this classroom is for students to become aware of how language can be consciously used to experiment with new subjectivities and produce new subject positions. The principal understanding that students are expected to gain is that they are in charge of how they use language and can consciously deviate from standardized rules and experiment with new ways of being. The end result is for students to become conscious users of blended discourses that subvert both nationalist language ideologies and neoliberalism. The fluidity of language practices that this approach encourages is in line with the goals of the dynamic turn in TESOL and plurilingualism in education. Its conscious nature reappropriates the dynamic subject of neoliberalism in ways that empower students to resist the corporatization of their language practices.

I am not naïve enough to imagine that allowing students to experiment with language in the classroom will magically eliminate the corporatization of society under neoliberalism. This point was made...
well by Phillipson (2009a) in his critique of the dynamic turn in TESOL as it relates to the U.S. context:

TESOL’s expansionist ambitions dovetail with US corporate and government global aims. This trend leads me to conclude that even if US TESOL were to more actively embrace the other languages of its emerging bilinguals, the languages of a more multilingual TESOL would still be hierarchically ordered. (p. 336)

The neoliberal project is so entrenched that pedagogical changes alone will fail to challenge the linguistic hierarchies that developed as part of the nation-state project and continue with the neoliberal project. Yet by providing a space for students to experiment with language practices and identities that challenge the universalizing narrative of neoliberalism, this type of TESOL classroom can become part of a larger institutional critique of neoliberalism. These classrooms can plant seeds for imagining a different direction to grow. These spaces add an important dimension to plurilingualism, which up to this point has been growing in step with the neoliberal agenda.

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