Exploring neoliberal language, discourses and identities

Christian W. Chun

Introduction

The term ‘neoliberalism’ has been described as ‘a dismal epithet … imprecise and over-used’ (Watkins 2010: 7), which has led to some confusion among the general public as well as contestations among scholars regarding its meaning. Neoliberalism will be used in this chapter as a shorthand indicator to name the complex and dynamic changes that have occurred in many countries since the 1970s that have led to political and economic rearrangements and redistributions of power in favour of capital and governance over labour. These changes include the ever-increasing ‘extension of market-based competition and commodification processes into previously insulated realms of political-economic life’ (Brenner et al. 2010: 329) along with systematic attempts by democratically elected governments acting on behalf of corporate governance to deregulate and privatise state-owned and run institutions and defund social services, such as education and health care. Efforts towards neoliberalism in the past 35 years have resulted in the massive accumulation of private capital through the concerted dispossession of public wealth (Harvey 2005). A fuller discussion of the various aspects and understandings of neoliberalism will be featured in the section ‘Current issues’.

Why is neoliberalism relevant to applied linguists?

Why is neoliberalism relevant to the applied linguistics field and why should we care about it as researchers, teachers and students? Neoliberal policies and practices have attempted to remake our everyday lives so that every aspect is minutely measured, assessed and evaluated as ‘outputs’, in accordance with manufacturing-based standards of production, and defined as ‘best practices’, which is another term adopted from corporate culture now widely used in education. Those of us who work or study in applied linguistics, including TESOL and English language teaching, and/or as language teachers at primary, secondary or tertiary levels, are all affected and adversely impacted in varying ways. For example, in the case of public school K-12 teachers working in the United States, their students have been forced to take a battery of standardised tests, the
results of which lead to performance-based reviews of school districts, determining who receives more or less federal funding. Teachers themselves have also been subjected to increased assessment based on their students’ test scores.

In addition to these neoliberal keywords – the aforementioned ‘best practices’ and ‘outputs’, and others, such as ‘flexibility’ – that are shaping the way we narrate and enact our work lives, the material practices of neoliberalism in reshaping universities should also give researchers pause. In the neoliberalisation of universities, humanities courses such as Renaissance literature, Shakespeare and the nineteenth-century novel are increasingly coming under attack as insufficiently linked to the world of work and graduate employment. This can be seen in the proverbial admonition that ‘studying Chaucer or Milton won’t get students a job’. In this manner, academic fields and courses of particular study ‘can be considered economically akin to a consumer durable which has the peculiarity of being inseparable from its owner’ (Gordon 1991: 44). With many universities following government emphasis on STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths), maintaining courses in the arts, social sciences and humanities has become ever more difficult even when there are healthy enrolments. With respect to our own field of applied linguistics, and in particular English language teaching, we are still struggling at many tertiary institutions to have our discipline gain recognition as a legitimate field of scholarly inquiry and practice. Another neoliberal practice has been the increasing ‘adjunctification’ of university faculty in many countries, which has resulted in 75 per cent of all academic tutors in the United States working as non-tenured adjunct instructors on low-paying short-term contracts (Kezar and Maxey 2013). The casualisation of the academic workforce in universities can be attributed in part to the permeation of neoliberal discourses and practices that have reconfigured the university as a site of cheap labour producing surplus value. This in part has led to the people therein to remake themselves in the true neoliberal fashion as entrepreneurs of the self as they are obliged to compete with colleagues for scarce resources.

This chapter addresses the ways in which our co-constructed identities and performed identifications (Hall 1996) have been dialogically articulated and enacted within neoliberal discursive formations that have coevolved with neoliberal policies and practices. In discussing these neoliberal identity and discursive multimodal enactments, be they through verbal and/or visual performativities, I aim not to merely describe these now not-so-new phenomena, but rather, in drawing attention to them, to also explore how we can contribute to the counter-hegemonic process of resituating and realigning our identities with community-based notions of social justice and freedom. The chapter begins with a fuller account of how neoliberalism has been understood. It then turns to the ways in which neoliberal discourses have been mediated through identity formations and agencies. I next suggest several avenues of research to explore these discursive identities, before concluding with the argument for the need to create alternatives to neoliberal discourses and identities.

Current issues

What is this thing called ‘neoliberalism’?

In the past 25 years or so, the seemingly disparate academic disciplines of economics, urban geography, cultural studies, anthropology and sociology have extensively examined policies, implementations and material manifestations characterised as neoliberal in a variety of globalised and localised settings and spaces. In addition to the vast scholarly literature on neoliberalism
stemming from these disciplines, there also have been an increasing number of mainstream publications addressing neoliberal practices – and naming them as such – that are aimed at a wider public audience. For example, David Harvey, in his *A brief history of neoliberalism* (2005) and *Spaces of global capitalism* (2006), has analysed how urban spaces have been reconfigured around a neoliberal strategic aim of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2005: 178). In these works, Harvey illustrates how various elite formations, comprising corporate and government interests, have undertaken and benefited from carefully planned privatisation schemes of public goods and services, such as health care, schools and transportation, as well as benefiting from the systemic economic crises revolving around consumer debt tied to housing mortgages and loans. Similarly, Naomi Klein, in her *The shock doctrine: the rise of disaster capitalism* (2007), documented how natural catastrophes, financial crises, environmental disasters and violent conflicts have served in the past 35 years or so as pretexts for the politically engineered dismantlement of social safety nets for the general public in the pursuit of privatised corporate profits. These texts have attempted to explain the ways in which neoliberal policies and practices in the past four decades have negatively impacted on the majority of the people who are subject to various forms of neoliberal governance. Countries where neoliberalism is rife include, but are not limited to, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Chile, Argentina, Spain, Greece, China, South Korea and Brazil. The negative impacts of neoliberal policies and practices can be measured in concrete ways, such as the rising rates of economic inequality, falling or stagnant wages, increasing levels of poverty, and the loss of well-paid manufacturing jobs in industrialised countries.

The aims of neoliberal principles and material practices involve and utilise a range of domains, including politics and the economy, society and cultures more generally, that ‘are directed toward extending and deepening capitalist market relations in most spheres of our social lives’ (Colás 2005: 70). However, it can be argued that it is not ‘most spheres’ that neoliberal policies and practices are targeting, but instead every sphere of our lives, so that nothing will remain untouched by the drive to monetise every imaginable and imagined private and public domain constituting and constitutive of our everyday lives. Indeed, Henri Lefebvre had already observed this in the 1960s with his *Everyday life in the modern world* (Lefebvre 1984), in which he argued that our everyday lives are now largely shaped and organised by powerful institutional decisions in which we do not participate.

Despite the prevalence and dominance of neoliberal language and discourses in our everyday lifeworlds, neoliberal ideologies, practices and identities have only recently begun to be addressed and explored in the field of applied linguistics (see e.g. Holborow 2006, 2007; Chun 2009, 2013, 2015; Gray 2010; Block et al. 2012). For example, in examining how students have become semantically reframed as ‘customers’, an important keyword in the neoliberal lexicon (Chun 2015), Holborow (2007: 61) noted that the notion and naming of customer has become ‘endowed with a semi-reverential status, whose supposed needs and endless desires become the guiding light of progress and efficiency’. However, as Holborow astutely noted, students cannot be customers ‘because degrees are not quite, in fact, bought and sold, and the student does not always have the last word – not because universities are authoritarian (which they may well be), but because education is not that sort of transaction’ (ibid.). In another example, Gray (2010) analysed how English language teaching materials offer particular representations of English as a branded global commodity that were part of a larger constellation of commodities. These included the remaking and branding of the individual, which is a marker of neoliberal discourses. In *Neoliberalism in applied linguistics*, Block et al. (2012) give a critical account of how neoliberal ideologies and accompanying language have impacted on language teaching,
language teacher education and language in general. They urge researchers in applied linguistics to engage more directly with issues of political economy.

My own work has focused on neoliberal discourses and the identities that neoliberal discourses afford and constrain in English language teaching (see Chun 2009, 2012, 2013, 2015). In a 2009 article addressing neoliberal discourses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), I discussed how English language learners have been referred to as customers or clients in many intensive English language programmes in the United States. In addition, I examined how the construct of ‘emotional intelligence’, which was featured in an EAP textbook chapter, was framed within a neoliberal discursive formation that explicitly named a self-management technique that was claimed to provide emotional and psychological benefits for the individual worker (Foucault’s (2008) notion of ‘the conduct of conduct’ and ‘auto-correcting selves’). However, this self-management technique was in fact serving the interests of the company first and foremost, by increasing the workload, efficiency and production output of the workforce in order to bolster profits. In other publications (Chun 2012, 2013, 2015), I examined how an EAP instructor and her students in a Canadian university mediated neoliberal globalisation discourses featured in their curriculum materials, together with the subject positions that they took up and co-constructed in adopting, reproducing and/or contesting these discourses. For example, after the EAP class watched a video in which a business entrepreneur discussed worldwide trends in paper product consumption, the instructor offered her students the subject position of the global investor by asking them how they ‘would profit from this information’ (Chun 2015: 89). This led to an extended silence among all the students apart from one, possibly indicating a resistance on their part to inhabiting the identity of a capitalist entrepreneur in the global free market.

Although the metaphor of the market is integral to neoliberal ideological discourse, inasmuch as it is claimed to be fundamental to liberty and freedom of choice (Couldry 2010), the discourse masks the issue of what choices are offered, the limits of those choices and, importantly, who makes the decisions on which choices are available. The original proponent of neoliberalism was Friedrich A. Hayek, whose book *The road to serfdom* claimed that the most dangerous threat to individual freedom was government interference through economic and social planning. In advocating the ‘free’ market as the only viable and efficient instrument for social management, Hayek argued against devising ‘further machinery for “guiding” and “directing”’ individuals, and called for the creation of ‘conditions favorable to progress rather than to “plan progress”’ (1944: 240). Hayek’s proposal that ‘a policy of freedom for the individual is the only truly progressive policy’ (ibid.: 241) is a prominent feature of the neoliberal claim that the free market is the only social mechanism capable of providing freedom and ‘choice’ to people. By appealing to the desire for freedom and the emotions that this evokes, neoliberal discourses propagate the idea that a hyper, ultra-competitive market can offer the best option for freedom. The fact that no market has ever been historically isolated from systemic and power-invested interests and constraints is very rarely, if ever, mentioned in neoliberal discourses.

Behind the ideological guise of declaring that individual freedom and choice is made possible only by the workings of the free market, Harvey (2005) and others have argued that neoliberal policies and practices have in fact worked to bolster the immense power of the ruling elite, coined by the Occupy Movement in the United States as the ‘1 per cent’. The 1 per cent have consolidated their power by re-establishing the material, political and social conditions to accumulate financial capital, through the dispossession and appropriation of public wealth via privatisation and the imposition of austerity measures that have involved actions such as destroying the social safety net and cutting budgets to public institutions, and via tax cuts to
the wealthy. Not surprisingly, these policy enactments have led to a rapid increase of economic inequalities in the countries in which neoliberal policies have been enacted. They have also played a large role in the ensuing miseries stemming from chronic unemployment, underemployment and the increasing dearth of formerly well-paying jobs in the manufacturing sector in developed countries.

**Different understandings of neoliberalism**

While some have now observed that the term ‘neoliberal’ has itself become widely overused (Watkins 2010), others go even further in maintaining that it is ‘an incoherent concept with no objective referent’ (Barnett 2010 in Gilbert 2013: 7). However, it is still theoretically and politically useful to employ this term ‘to describe the macro-economic paradigm that has predominated from the end of the 1970s’ (Watkins 2010: 7). Yet, although neoliberalism may be a complex ‘reorganization of capitalism’ (Campbell 2005: 187), and therefore just the most recent phase in the ongoing political arrangement and management of an economic system still characterised as capitalist, what are the affordances of portraying these reorganising measures as neoliberalism, rather than using the term ‘capitalism’ or ‘globalisation’ (Chun 2015)?

In following Ward and England’s (2007) framework, Springer (2012: 136) details four different understandings of the ongoing neoliberal phase of capitalism. The first is to view neoliberalism as an ‘ideological hegemonic project’ in which ‘elite actors and dominant groups organized around transnational class-based alliances have the capacity to project and circulate a coherent program of interpretations and images of the world onto others’. Springer is careful to point out that these interpretations and representations are not merely forcefully imposed against people’s wills but do involve some levels and measures of both participatory active and passive consent, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The second understanding of neoliberalism is that it constitutes a formation of specific policies and programmes that have actively concentrated on the ‘transfer of ownership from the state or public holdings to the private sector or corporate interests, which necessarily involves a conceptual reworking of the meaning these categories hold’ (ibid.). This involves ideological work in framing and presenting the idea that public resources, such as schools, hospitals, transportation, parks and public spaces, are ineffective as constituted and thus should be reconfigured in accordance with market-based principles in the name of ‘dynamic’ efficiency and freedom of choice that will supposedly benefit the public. The ideological keywords of these policies and actions, ostensibly in the public interest, are the now familiar words of ‘privatization, deregulation, liberalization, depoliticization, and monetarism’ (ibid.). The third understanding of neoliberalism is to see it as the active transformative management of the state in its relation to a globally linked economy in which other states are similarly vying. This involves a ‘quantitative axis of destruction and discreditation whereby state capacities and potentialities are “rolled back”’ (ibid.: 137), as well as a ‘qualitative axis of construction and consolidation, wherein reconfigured institutional mediations, economic management systems, and invasive social agendas centered on urban order, surveillance, immigration issues, and policing are “rolled out”’ (ibid.). Finally, the fourth understanding of neoliberalism draws upon Foucault’s (1991) notion of governmentality, in which people as neoliberal subjects can be viewed as in an endless process of ‘unfolding failures and successes in the relations between peoples and their socially constructed realities as they are (re)imagined, (re)interpreted, and (re)assembled to influence forms of knowledge through “the conduct of conduct”’ (Springer 2012: 137). In reducing, or in some cases abandoning, state responsibility for public well-being and welfare, neoliberal governance enmeshes individuals in the subject position of being solely responsible
for their well-being and development. In other words, the onus is on the individual to find the means and resources to improve and adapt on their own and with little, if any, government-funded support. Self-improvement and learning to be ‘flexible’ and ‘adaptable’ comes about by individuals being required to invest in themselves via privatised and monetised commodities such as the for-profit charter and online schools that are now replacing many public institutions. The displacement of government in our everyday lives involves an ‘ensemble of rationalities, strategies, technologies, and techniques concerning the mentality of rule that allow for the de-centering of government through the active role of auto-regulated or auto-correcting selves’ (ibid.). This results in increasing self-governance that necessitates increased personal expenditure by individuals on education, health care and so on for corporate profit.

**Neoliberal language, discourses and the discursive figure**

Despite these four different but interconnected understandings, Gilbert (2013: 8) is still compelled to ask, ‘What kind of a thing is “neoliberalism”?’ Is it simply ‘an aggregation of ideas, a discursive formation, an over-arching ideology, a governmental programme, the manifestation of a set of interests, a hegemonic project, [or] an assemblage of techniques and technologies’? In considering how all these comprise the unifying theoretical and practical stance advocating a systematic and ‘deliberate intervention by government in order to encourage particular types of entrepreneurial, competitive and commercial behaviour in its citizens, ultimately arguing for the management of populations with the aim of cultivating the type of individualistic, competitive, acquisitive and entrepreneurial behaviour’ (ibid.: 9), it is important to delineate how each contributes to this project of attempted cultivation and management of people in remaking themselves as neoliberal subjects. In contrast to notions of democratic and communal collectivities in shaping people’s identities, the neoliberal discursive formation persistently promotes ‘an individualistic conception of human selfhood and of the idea of the individual both as the ideal locus of sovereignty and the site of government intervention’ (ibid.: 11).

The individualistic conception of human selfhood is what Gilbert thinks has enabled neoliberalism to endure and succeed to date. Neoliberalism is in part achieved by discourses that blame state interventions, such as unemployment benefits and welfare support for the poor and disenfranchised, for restricting the free market and, hence, freedom of choice, while omitting to mention, or obscuring, other market or state interventions that benefit private corporations. However, the complementary dimension is perhaps even more important: that of the ‘management of individuals qua individuals’ (ibid.). In what has been characterised as an increasingly fragmented, postmodern and post-ideological world of discontinuities, dislocations and hybridities, which has resulted in identities in constant flux and questioning, it is possibly the recognition of individuals and their naming as such that has social, psychological and material appeal in terms of being able to act as ‘individualised selves’ in an increasingly chaotic and alienating world. This narrow definition of the individualised self offered by neoliberal discourses continues to have a central and significant appeal despite the material manifestations of the narrowing of avenues available to people’s agentive options that forecloses any notion of interdependent and collective agencies. The onus is on us to remake ourselves in whatever fashion in the pursuit of rewards and recognition in a highly competitive environment. This act is portrayed as allowing us to achieve an integral holistic and individualised sense of self that is independent and set apart from the rest of society. This ideological stance that ‘acquisitive individualism is both an inherent feature of the human personality and the only logical basis for human civilisation’ (Gilbert 2013: 14) has been made
Christian W. Chun

into a prevailing common-sense belief (Gramsci 1971) through repeated and sophisticated discourses in various sites, such as school, the university, the media and social media. As Hall et al. (2013: 13) observe, in order to legitimate itself, the neoliberal settlement, like every social settlement before it, ‘is crucially founded on embedding as common sense a whole bundle of beliefs – ideas beyond question, assumptions so deep that the very fact that they are assumptions is only rarely brought to light’. Indeed, the successful discursive strategies that gain and win consent are ‘those which root themselves in the contradictory elements of common-sense, popular life and consciousness’ (Hall 2011: 713).

The neoliberal common-sense discourse has redefined the notion of individual freedom in the highly restrictive and narrow agentive options to act only in the ‘capacity for self-realization and freedom from bureaucracy rather than freedom from want, with human behavior reconceptualized along economic lines’ (Leitner et al. 2007: 4). The ideological discursive formation that has helped to relocate our sense of agency to the private domain of the self has resulted in what Brown (2005: 43) termed ‘the neoliberal citizen’. In attempts to eliminate any sociopolitical concerns that seemingly have no relevance to the ‘free market’, neoliberal discourses work to reduce any notions and practices of an active ‘political citizenship to an unprecedented degree of passivity and political complacency’ (ibid.). Indeed, it is this ‘insistent belief that it is our private, personal beliefs and behaviours which define our “true” selves, whereas our public behaviour can be tolerated precisely to the extent that it is not invested with any emotional significance’ (Gilbert 2013: 13). As such, neoliberal discursive formations as they are disseminated and propagated in various mainstream media have prominently featured two popular discursive figures – the “taxpayer” and the “customer”’ (Hall 2011: 715). As Hall describes it, the taxpayer is the ‘hard-working’ person, who is continually ‘over-taxed to fund the welfare “scrounger” and the “shifters” who lived on benefits as a “lifestyle” choice’ (ibid.). Not coincidentally, at least in the United States, this discourse of the beleaguered taxpayer also draws upon classed and racialised discourses in that the taxpayer indexes a White middle-class person living in the suburbs and the heartland of the country. In contrast, the welfare scroungers and shifters are understood to be living in the urban areas and are members of various minority groups including recent immigrants. These narratives have been part of the dominant discourse in both the United States and the United Kingdom – as the rise of the Tea Party and UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) can attest. These political movements draw on neoliberal racialised discourses aimed at White working and middle classes fearful of job loss and the growing economic inequalities engineered by neoliberal policies and practices in favour of powerful and wealthy corporations.

The customer is another significant representational figure in neoliberal discourse. This discursive subject is intertwined with the taxpayer and can be seen as two sides of the same coin. As corporate enterprises in the industrialised economies in the major developed countries experienced falling rates of profit, partially due to the relatively well-paid and unionised jobs in sectors such as the car industry, they began to look elsewhere for new sources of profit, with many reconfiguring their organisations by shifting many of their manufacturing jobs to China, Brazil, Indonesia and India. One such enterprise is the service-based retail economy whose megastores have driven out smaller businesses from many areas. The neoliberal subject position of the customer, made to look attractive through a supposed increase in freedom of choice, has now permeated from the corporate business world into the higher education sector, with universities in countries such as the United States and the UK referring to international students as customers or clients (see Holborow 2007; Chun 2009).

In fact, this discursive identity construction of English language students as customers is an apt one in light of the global marketing and selling of the English language (specifically in its
Exploring neoliberal language

British, American, Canadian and Australian varieties) as an essential component and marker of the entrepreneur of oneself endlessly competing with others on an international scale. This commodification of the English language and the accompanying promotion of English as an integral ingredient to an identity invested in global success have important implications for English language teaching and learning (Chun 2015). For example, what might be some of the ways in which both teachers and students take up various subject positions and/or enact particular performative identities in the classroom when engaged in interacting with multimodal texts featuring neoliberal discourses tying language study with modes of remaking oneself, consumerism and global competition? These need to be explored further for not only pedagogical and learning effects, but also for how we conceive of English language learner identities both inside and outside of the classroom.

Are neoliberal language and discourses shaping new identities, and if so, how?

Neoliberal identities stem from the ideological construct that people are and can be viewed as solely comprising an ‘entirety of skills that have been acquired as the result of “investments” in the corresponding stimuli’ (Lemke 2001: 199), be it of schooling, job training or so-called self-improvement courses. Thus, ‘the individual producer-consumer is in a novel sense not just an enterprise, but the entrepreneur of himself or herself’ (Gordon 1991: 44). In the face of an increasing societal pressure to actively pursue a specific set of skills (while disregarding others that are seen as being ‘impractical’ or ‘useless’ such as studying Renaissance literature), some people now see themselves as remaking, or rather rebranding, themselves as a more marketable and, hence, more sellable and attractive commodity on the global exchange market. Indeed, as Ong (2007: 5) argued, ‘neoliberalism as a technique is fundamentally about the re-management of populations’ in which ‘the common goal is to induce an enterprising subjectivity in elite subjects, to increase their capacity to make calculative choices’.

A central issue that has been discussed at length in various disciplines, including applied linguistics, is the tension between structure and agency. While an in-depth discussion of this complex subject is beyond the scope of this chapter, suffice to say that in addressing and articulating neoliberalism as an overarching structuring mechanism that has spread globally, there might be the risk, as Springer (2012: 135) cautions, of ‘[neglecting] internal constitution, local variability, and the role that “the social” and individual agency play in (re)producing, facilitating, and circulating neoliberalism’. Thus one challenge for applied linguists is to capture the dimensions and domains in which individuals reproduce, facilitate and circulate neoliberal discourses, practices and behaviours at the micro, interpersonal and interactional level through agentive acts and performances. As Gershon (2011: 539) argues, in neoliberalism’s universalising aim to convince people to adopt and perform agencies that are restricted and limited to corporate-like identities, other agencies are not only ‘getting pushed aside’, but also there is ‘a move from the liberal vision of people owning themselves as though they were property to a neoliberal vision of people owning themselves as though they were a business’ (ibid.). As a result, the becoming of a ‘neoliberal self’ is ‘produced through an engagement with a market, that is, neoliberal markets require participants to be reflexive managers of their abilities and alliances’. However, more than just their abilities and alliances are in play; other performative behaviours are expected ‘through tourist performances, media forms, food, clothes, art, and so on’ (ibid.: 541).
Future directions

Exploring neoliberal discursive identities

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, there is an increasing body of work in applied linguistics on neoliberalism. Aside from my own work (Chun 2012, 2013, 2015) that has examined how an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructor and her students positioned themselves in various ways while engaging with, and in, neoliberal globalisation discourses, there have been others in the field of applied linguistics and TESOL who have researched how people take on, negotiate, reproduce and/or reject neoliberal discursive identities (see e.g. Mautner 2010; Clarke and Morgan 2011; Holborow 2013; Block et al. 2013). One possible line of inquiry of applied linguists doing language and identity projects would be ‘an interest in how material conditions shape ideologies and uses of language, including political economic approaches to language that understood it as a material form of social practice’ (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012: 356). This might involve ethnographic research into local sites in which neoliberal practices have taken hold to see how people are employing language use shaped by company policies, for example.

However, possibly more fruitful lines of research inquiries may be in the direction of how specific identities emerge through various performative acts framed within neoliberal discourse formations. If we see identity as performative sociocultural practices, and if identity ‘refers to sameness’ (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 370), then what does it mean for the notion and practices of class-based politics that articulate and stress class-based identity sameness in terms of common interests and alliances across power-motivated and socially constructed differences of race, gender, sexualities, nationhood and so on? Have these dimensions of identity been co-opted by the discursive formation of a neoliberal consumer cultural and identity politics that attempts to invent sameness through an overarching consumer identity that downplays socially constructed differences of race, gender and sexualities? In other words, if in the case of a class-based political identity that identifies sameness as the common interest of an allied and broad-based labour movement, or, as the Occupy Movement so aptly termed it, the ‘99 per cent’, and the necessary accompanying Other is the Capitalist, or the ‘1 per cent’, then in the case of a neoliberal consumer identity, who is the Other? Those who do not, or cannot, consume to the same extent?

This is a point made by Jim McGuigan (2009) in his book Cool capitalism. He argues that prevailing neoliberal consumer identities are constructed in part from buying certain products that have cultural and symbolic purchase beyond the purchase exchange price. These products are deemed ‘cool’ by a combination of aggressive advertising, marketing, celebrity endorsement and audience uptake and thus acquire a cachet that bestows the veneer of ‘cool’ upon the buyers. But more than this, the particular angle these products take in their acquisition of being ‘cool’ is their seemingly oppositional stance to capitalism, the system itself. Thus, McGuigan argues that a neoliberal capitalist culture can have it both ways: producing, marketing and successfully selling significant quantities of commodity objects while making it seem to the consumer that these products are antithetical to the very system that has produced them. These material embodiments of benign disaffection or fatuous rebellion against neoliberal capitalism are on display in, for example, fashion and accessories and are visible through performative displays in public spaces. One example are T-shirts featuring either the well-known photo portrait of Che Guevara or those printed with provocative-sounding slogans such as ‘Fuck Capitalism’. Consumers wearing such T-shirts view themselves as setting themselves apart from the rest who ‘don’t get it’. Their rebellion or oppositional stance is displaced onto the Other who is seen as buying into the system. These multimodal performances of identity enacted through sartorial
performativities need to be explored further for how they construct a specific kind of neoliberal consumer identity that seemingly opposes, or at least disdains, the system, while literally embodying it.

Inasmuch as identities are constructed through the signified and articulated markings of difference and exclusion, then ‘it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the “positive” meaning of any term … can be constructed’ (Hall 1996: 4). This leads to several other questions. First, if identity can be seen as people’s feeling or sense of belonging to particular communities, then to what extent do people primarily identify as consumers? For those who do not partake in the ‘rebellious’ consumer identity, do they identify as willing participants in neoliberal capitalism and do they see themselves as belonging to the capitalist system? Why might there be a need to belong to an economic system that clearly does not benefit everyone? If one identifies as belonging to capitalism, or as a ‘capitalist’, not in the sense of owning the means of production but merely believing that this economic system works for the most part or, at the very least, there is no viable alternative, then what is the Other in this case? The historically significant traditional Other to capitalism was communism, which in its ideological role as the bogeyman has largely disappeared as a bygone relic since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. If communism is no longer the viable Other to capitalism, then what are people identifying against? So for those who may not be entirely content or satisfied with the economic system in which they are working, producing, purchasing, borrowing and spending most of their daily lives contributing to through the workplace, what are the possibilities of the Other? In this manner, the notion of identity as sameness in its oppositional construction to difference is problematic and worthy of further interrogation.

Another issue to explore is going beyond the linguistic constructions of neoliberal identities. While language is integral to the construction of identity, we also need to explore the social semiotic meaning-making material practices and instantiations of people engaged in acts of identity that can be characterised as part of the neoliberal remaking of oneself: branding through purchasing, performing and displaying, as in the aforementioned examples of the now ubiquitous Che Guevara T-shirts and accessories. As Hearn (2008: 195) pointed out, ‘the material brand is the ultimate image-commodity: a fetish object par excellence, pursued and paid for by consumers who wish to become a part of its fabricated world of purloined cultural meanings’. People drawing on the practices of buying specific well-known corporate products to brand themselves as part of this imagined world of selected membership is not a new phenomenon. Displaying certain tastes and having the wealth to consume these tastes was evident in the bourgeois shoppers and passers-by walking through nineteenth-century Paris arcades, as Walter Benjamin and others have documented. However, what is new is the increased reach of brands across the globe, in that shopping malls in many developed and developing countries all feature the same stores, or at least the same well-known brands that are instantly recognisable by their logos, as these have been advertised throughout all media platforms. In this, brands, ‘both as trademarked image-objects and as sets of relations and contexts for life, become the ground and comprise the tools for the creation of self and community’ (Hearn 2008: 196). The relationship between brands and identity is certainly another issue for applied linguists to investigate.

These newly branded selves stem in part from ‘the demise of the traditional occupations’ that ‘give the sense that people have choices about who and what they are; we can all, it seems, now fashion mobile reflexive identities through consumption and social mobility’ (Machin and Richardson 2008: 281). The agentive acts seen in their consumer choices and purchases perhaps reflect the sense that ‘we can (re)brand ourselves as successful and fashionable through what we
Christian W. Chun

wear and what we drink’ (ibid.). Therefore, in what ways are people, especially disempowered, disenfranchised and un(der)employed youth, ‘seduced by the identity markers of “affluent lifestyle”’ (ibid.) that are so characteristic of neoliberal culture and how does this manifest itself in the research sites of interest in applied linguistics?

All these questions relate to how the branded neoliberal self has become its own commodity sign: ‘the self as a commodity for sale in the labour market which must generate its own rhetorically persuasive packaging, its own promotional message, within the confines of the dominant corporate imaginary’ (Hearn 2008: 197). Inasmuch as this branded self ‘sits at the nexus of discourses of neoliberalism, flexible accumulation, radical individualism, and spectacular promotionism’ (ibid.), there needs to be further methodologies developed to examine this complex and animating nexus of discourses. Researchers and students can begin by drawing upon and expanding the work of Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon, particularly their Discourses in place: language in the material world (2003) and Nexus analysis: discourse and the emerging Internet (2004), to explore the nexus of these discourses and how people take them up at various sites and ensuing recontextualisations. And because ‘identity is more a situational performance than a stable trait or a sense of subjective continuity’ (Grad and Rojo 2008: 6), methodologies are needed that can trace the interactional and mediated connections and linkages contributing to situational performances in their given contexts. But it is not only these situational performances that should be investigated because, as Hall (1996: 6) astutely noted, ‘the notion that an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires, not only that the subject is “hailed”, but that the subject invests in the position, means that the suturing has to be thought of as an articulation’. Thus, it is incumbent upon researchers to also explore the ways in which the neoliberal subject invests in their positioning, drawing upon multiple meaning-making resources for identity work, be they linguistic, visual or so on.

Summary

In naming the ways in which neoliberal discourse and its material manifestations have shaped our identities and practices in different contexts, this chapter has explored how the language and discourses of neoliberalism have come to prominence. I have attempted to illustrate the complex and contradictory dynamics involved in the ideologically loaded discursive constructions of the neoliberal subject. This was done with the larger aim of setting the agenda for future research directions into how we might help develop counter-hegemonic strategies of contesting neoliberal common-sense beliefs by articulating resistant identities that are aligned with notions of democratically based inclusive communities in which one’s own sense of self is intimately and integrally connected to the well-being of others.

Indeed, as Gal (1989: 361) observed, ‘what is called dominant discourse is itself rarely monolithic, but rather a field of competition for power among elites’. Thus, any dominant discourse has fissures. These can be made visible by identifying the practices by which dominant discourses attempt to create and impose common-sense beliefs in society and our everyday lives (Chun 2015). Neoliberal discourses and the language that helps to construct them are no exception. For applied linguistic researchers working in the critical tradition, it is imperative not only to document and challenge how these discourses work and are materially instantiated, but also to examine how particular groups of interest to applied linguists reproduce and resist these discourses in their everyday identities and lived experiences. This work is crucial for anyone interested in social justice, which has proven to be an enormous challenge inasmuch as the
‘generic disposition induced by neoliberalism is an organising principle of the self, of the self’s relation to the self, and of its relation to others, articulated towards the maximisation of the self in a world perceived in terms of competition’ (Hilgers 2013: 83). It is my contention that applied linguistics needs to be concerned with countering neoliberal discursive identity formations that promote and encourage ‘the individual to mobilise a specific reflexivity that fits into a world perceived as a competitive market where it is necessary to maximise oneself’ (ibid.).

If in fact we take capitalism to be ‘a massive process of ego formation, the creation of modern selves, the illusion of individual autonomy, the cultivation of distinction and preference, the idea that individuals had their own moral conscience, based on individual reason and virtue’ (Grandin 2014: no page), there remains a lot of work for those of us in applied linguistics who are committed to social justice and economic democracy to address how notions of democratic community-based identities that can work for change can be reborn and embraced as the new common sense in this age of neoliberalism.

Related topics
Critical discourse analysis and identity; Class in language and identity research; The politics of researcher identities: opportunities and challenges in identities research; An identity transformation? Social class, language prejudice and the erasure of multilingual capital in higher education; Language, gender and identities in political life: a case study from Malaysia; Language and identity research in online environments: a multimodal ethnographic perspective.

Further reading
Block, D., Gray, J. and Holborow, M. (2012). Neoliberalism and applied linguistics. London: Routledge. (One of the first volumes in the field of applied linguistics to call for applied linguists to engage with issues in political economy in any analysis of language and its social contexts.)
Chun, C.W. (2015). Power and meaning making in an EAP classroom: engaging with the everyday. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. (An ethnographic English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom case study that examines the various identity positions the participant teacher and her students took up in their engagements with neoliberal globalisation and consumerist discourses in their curriculum materials.)
Couldry, N. (2010). Why voice matters: culture and politics after neoliberalism. London: SAGE. (Insightful analysis of how neoliberal discourses frame and organise the prevailing narratives in the attempt to define and limit our everyday lives and possibilities.)
Harvey, D. (2005). A brief history of neoliberalism. New York: Oxford University Press. (An excellent historical introduction and overview of neoliberalism from one of the world’s leading political geographers and theorists.)

References
Christian W. Chun


