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ENTERPRISING AND IMAGINING MULTILINGUAL SUBJECTS: BEYOND COMMODITY-CENTERED DISCOURSES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE U.S.

Abstract:
The foundation of this study is a contrastive analysis of mainstream discourses of the learning of languages other than English (LOTEs) in the U.S. and some of the alternative ways in which individuals enrolled in university language programs imagine the multilingual futures that might be afforded to them through the study of a new language. The data for the first part includes public-facing documents from three discourse planes: popular news media, public documents from governmental agencies and NGOs, and public-facing advocacy from language educators themselves. For the latter part, the article relies upon data from case studies of four students at U.S. institutions of higher learning: two learners of Italian and two of Mandarin, all in some sense embodying underrepresented identities in university education and second language research. These analyses reveal that in contrast to the prevalent commodifying discourses, the student participants experience language learning not as first and formemost the acquition of a disembodied skill, but as deeply ensconced in their social, affective, and moral lives in ways that extend beyond economic interests. Through the exploration of the contrast between these two data sets, it is argued that the treatment of multilingualism as a commodifiable skill perpetuates the ideological double standard (Pavlenko, 2002) that foreign language learning is the privilege of certain individuals, and consequently, leads to the misrecognition of language learners' actual intentions and desires. The article concludes with a discussion of possible implications for the ways in which educators and language advocates might frame the learning of languages other than English.

Keywords: Multilingualism ◆ language learning ◆ subjectivity ◆ discourse analysis ◆ commodification of language

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Introduction

U.S.-based learners of languages other than English (LOTEs) are often positioned as enterprising multilingual subjects, whose ability to adapt to different linguistic and cultural contexts will enable them to live and work across the globalized markets of late capitalism (Flores, 2013; Heller & McElhinny, 2017). Within this view, languages are valued first and foremost as commodities that secure economic, diplomatic, and self-fulfillment benefits for the individuals who speak them and for the nation states they serve (Heller, 2010). At the same time, recent data suggests that this commodity-centered framing is at odds with how many English speakers in the U.S. select a particular foreign language (see Anya, 2020; Looney & Lusin, 2019). This disconnect between how language learning is advocated and marketed, on the one hand, and learners' experiences with new languages, on the other hand, opens up a space for questioning the assumptions inherent in skill-centered discourses of language learning and the effects thereof for learners whose experiences and desires are marginalized within these discussions.

In this article, we examine prevalent variations of the language-as-commodity discourse in mainstream conversations and depict some of the alternative ways in which individuals imagine the multilingual futures that might be afforded to them through the study of a new language. For the former, we rely on a critical analysis of documents from three discourse planes that impact language programs and language teaching practices: popular news media, public documents from governmental agencies and NGOs, and public-facing advocacy from language educators themselves. We then put these into dialogue with learner voices, drawing upon data from studies of four students at U.S. institutions of higher learning: two learners of Italian and two of Mandarin, two languages that are often positioned in contrasting ways within conversations about the value of language learning. Each of these four focal participants represents identities that have been marginalized within the field of language teaching and learning, as well as a set of unique histories and experiences. Thus, together they provide a glimpse at the diversity of language learners. By exploring this contrast between how language learning is promoted and how these learners imagine the role of multilingualism in their lives, we argue that commodity-centered discourses perpetuate ideological double standards (Pavlenko, 2002) that position languages other than English as a form of symbolic capital for upwardly mobile (presumably white, middle class, enabled) elites in ways that misrecognize the desires that may actually drive learners' (re-)commitment to language learning. We then conclude with implications for how educators and language advocates might frame the learning of languages other than English in the US, in ways that allow themselves and their potential students to imagine subjectivities for themselves outside of these commodifying discourses.

Commodity-Centered Discourses of Language Learning and the Centering of Enterprising Subjects

Certain discourses are incredibly pernicious within language teaching and learning (see Dupuy & Michelson, 2019; Diao & Trentman, 2016; Trentman & Diao, 2017); among them, the notion of languages as commodifiable skills ranks highly. At the foundation of commodity-centered discourses of language teaching and learning is a notion of linguistic instrumentalism, in which language is viewed as a means to utilitarian ends (e.g., Bernstein et al, 2015; Kubota, 2011). As scholars such as Anya (2020), Flores (2013), and Kubota (2016) have compellingly argued, the neoliberal discourses within which this model of language partakes have contributed significantly to the maintenance and intensification of inequities related to race and class.

One of the most tangible effects of commodifying discourses is the distribution of forces and resources, which as Flores writes, tend to coalesce in "support of the free flow of capitalism in ways that benefit transnational corporations and economic elites" (Flores, 2013, p. 503). This relates to questions of funding, as languages are evaluated in terms of which are most valuable. It also relates to less immediately quantifiable effects, such as the ways in which languages act as forms of symbolic capital that can be mobilized in markets as a marker of class or elitism (De Costa, 2019; Heller, 2010, p. 102). Flores (2013) has argued that neoliberalism furthermore manifests itself in individual subjectivities, by positing the ideal of an enterprising-self—"an autonomous, flexible, and innovative subject" who is able to rapidly adapt (p. 503). Thus, even celebratory takes on pluri- and multilingualism are often complicit in discourses that reduce multilingual subjectivities to consumers and entrepreneurs (see Kubota, 2016).

Subjectivity in Language Learning: Investment and Desire

Along with related concepts, such as identity and agency, subjectivity has been a key topic of interest in applied linguistics and second language studies for the past couple of decades, and scholarship in this area helps to explain why the kinds of subject positions afforded to learners by particular discourses around language learning matter. In this section we focus on a few of the key theories and concepts from within this vast set of discussions, in order to create a working vocabulary around multilingual subjectivities that will guide our analysis in the subsequent excerpts. Our focus will be on poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity, which have been associated with engagement "in a sustained critique of current social, political, and cultural forms and an ethical pre-occupation with questions of justice" (McNamara, 2012, p. 477).

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding subjectivity in language education has been Norton's work on identity and investment (Norton 1997, 2000, 2001). Norton treats

identity as relational, subjective, non-static, and particular to geographical and temporal contexts. As an alternative to psychologically oriented discussions of motivation, the socially-centered notion of investment describes how learners relate to their context and to others as they negotiate power and social positions through discourses as they invest (or not) in learning a new language. Drawing on Bourdieu's sociological concept of symbolic capital (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977), Norton argues that when learners invest in a language they do so with the belief that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources (see Norton, 2013; Norton & Darvin, 2015). A learner can be highly motivated, and yet disinvest in a particular classroom community or set of teaching practices because they are incompatible with the identities they imagine for themselves.

Kramsch (2009) shares Norton's interest in how multilingual subjects are shaped by and reproduce social structures. She likewise draws on Bourdieu among others, to make sense of how human subjects are shaped; however, Kramsch's interest in the "lived experiences of multiple language users" (p. 2) in and outside of the classroom leads her to put a different emphasis on the role of desire in subjectivity. To theorize desire, Kramsch draws heavily from Kristeva's (1980) theory of humans as subjects-in-process who are continually being (re)made on the cusp of two realms: the semiotic, which for Kristeva is a pre-verbal, ahistorical, psychosomatic realm of emotions and feelings (see Kramsch, 2009, p. 97) and the symbolic, which is mediated by linguistic and stylistic choices and meaning designs. By bringing in Kristeva, Kramsch is able to highlight the aesthetic, affective dimensions of language learning that are not wholly outside of but are also in excess of rational assessments of material and symbolic capital. Whereas for Norton desire as it relates to investment means "the desire to...", for Kramsch desire is often less directional. She cites, for example, the many language memoirs in which language learning is associated with the desire for escape or for simply being *other* (pp. 14-15, 82-85).

Norton's notion of investment is helpful for conceptualizing how language learners orient themselves towards idealized subject positions in imagined communities and how this relates to what Pennycook (2016) has described as "economies of desire," that is the ways in which these personal investments are embedded in socioculturally shaped values, wants, and needs. While Kramsch's discussion of subjectivity and desire reminds us that language learning is not only shaped by actuarial decisions related to losses and gains, but also by often more affective and less oriented towards pre-defined goals. It is noteworthy that while Norton and Pennycook based their theoretical positions on English as a second language learners for whom the market value of the new language is a given, Kramsch focuses primarily on languages other than English (LOTE) learners studying in English medium contexts. For these individuals, the choice

to learn a second language is likely shaped by different economies of desire, and especially those who do not fit the usual profile of "foreign language learner" may find the assumptions made about their motivations and investments heteronormative and exclusive (e.g., Anya, 2020). In the next two sections, we turn first to the broader contemporary discourses around LOTE learning in the U.S. and then to learner discourses. Drawing from both Norton and Kramsch and the theories of poststructuralist discourse analysis, we show how these discourses position the subjectivities of the learners, before concluding with a discussion of the implications for research and practice.

Contemporary Public Discourses of LOTE Learning in the U.S.

In this section, we critically examine discourses of LOTE learning as these manifest in three different planes in publications over the past decade. This time span stretches from the years immediately following the Great Recession in 2008 to the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Media discourses

For this first discourse plane, our primary sources are online news articles and op-eds. These were found by conducting a search with Google's news filter, using the term "language learning", and then manually removing any results that focused on English language learning. The nature of news media means that a topic is only thematized when prompted by current events. In the publications from the past decade, this has meant that coverage of LOTE learning has clustered around two topics: post-recession debates about language requirements in higher education and the rise of casual language learning apps. In the former, the learning subject is often almost absent, because the focus is on programs and institutions. A notable exception is a *New York Times* feature from 2016, published in response to the decision by Princeton University to implement a requirement that all students study a language other than English. Around the question "Should Foreign Language Classes Be Mandatory in College?,"[1] the *Times* published three short op-eds written by highschool students. While the three pieces represent a range of opinions, the respondent who makes the most unequivocal case for a language requirement bases her argument securely in the idea of students as enterprising subjects: "We must be able to communicate effectively with foreign partners. So, what gives a person the edge needed to compete with others in this job market? Proficiency in another language." A strikingly similar reasoning is used to argue against language requirements in a 2014 episode of the popular economic podcast, *Freakonomics*, responding to a listener query, "Is Learning a

[1] "Should Foreign Languages Classes be Mandatory in College?," Room for Debate, *New York Times* (Online), Dec. 28, 2016.

Foreign Language Really Worth It?" The conversation largely focuses on the financial return on investment, based on the amount of time and money it costs to teach languages versus the amount of money the average students is expected to increase their earnings. At the end of the episode, Bryan Caplan—an economist, who has argued through the podcast that only English promises this kind of real-world incentive—reveals that he speaks German, citing his love of the philosophy of Nietzsche and compositions of Wagner. The concluding message is that only this kind of personal enrichment can justify the pursuit of a new language for an English speaker.

Personal enrichment is also at the center of many of the articles on language learning apps. While some of these articles focus on the economics of this now multi-billion-dollar industry, many of the publications present readers with reviews of the best apps available. In particular the latter has seen a surge in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, as a number of pieces have appeared that promote the idea of language learning as a means of realizing one's travel fantasies while in lockdown or as a form of self-improvement akin to baking and fitness regimes.[2] In these articles, the reader is implicated and sometimes even directly addressed as a consuming subject, whose perseverance and savvy app selection will drive their personal enrichment.

Governmental and NGO discourses

The second discourse plane is represented by public documents from governmental and non-profit organizations that directly or indirectly support the learning of LOTEs in the U.S. This includes, for example, transcripts of congressional hearings and commissioned reports published on web sites of the Department of Education and Department of Defense web sites and widely distributed reports (see Appendix for a full list). Because our data set begins in 2010, the early publications from the federal government and from NGOs continue to echo the discourses of an American "language crisis" that took hold following the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001 (e.g., Klein & Rice, 2012; U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012). Through the 2000s, a series of statements from governmental organizations, their representatives, and non-governmental organizations commissioned by the government have issued statements and reports that advocate for increased federal support for languages. Across these publications, the most salient discursive frames are that of "language-as-a-resource," of which the nation-state can have as deficit, and "language-as-a-barrier," which can impede the

[2] See Stephanie Rosenbloom, "Want to Learn French? Italian? Russian? There's No Time Like the Present," *New York Times* (Online), Apr. 28, 2020; Bianca Ferrari, "How to Learn a Foreign Language at Home, and Stick to It," *VICE* (Online), May 13, 2020; Lane Greene, "How to learn a language in the lockdown," Johnson Column, *Economist* (Online), Apr. 18, 2020.

success of an institutional entity (such as a corporation or nation state). In both cases, a frequent characteristic is the use of agentless constructions, like the following from the testimony of Tracy North, a deputy assistant director of intelligence operations in the FBI:

> The FBI relies on foreign-language capabilities to quickly and accurately inform operations and enhance analysis. The success of the FBI's mission is clearly dependent upon high quality language services and the ability to translate and analyze information in a timely manner. (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012, p. 8)

Language capabilities here are presented as if they act independently of human subjects. Social actors are only mentioned in passing and are often treated as possessions of the federal government, as they are in another part of North's testimony where linguists exist in a "linguist resource base" (p. 8) or in the more recent report from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2017) where language speakers (including heritage speakers) are "local and regional resources" (p. 12) that can be "deployed" or "tapped" (p. 17) for national interests. In the documents from this discourse plane, the rhetorical conflation of individuals with the nation forms as a justification for federal and institutional investments in language education; where the motivations and desires of learners are mentioned, it is incidental and related to the careers they might hold, in which they might serve these national interests.

Advocacy discourses from language educators

For this third section, we draw from two sets of examples of public advocacy from those working in modern languages and cultures. We focused on two sites for this—op-eds by scholars working in LOTEs from the online publication *Inside Higher Education*, which has a general academic audience, and materials from the *Lead with Languages* advocacy project, sponsored by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL).

In the language advocacy op-eds in *Inside Higher Education*, authors often promote arguments that learning a language can support generally accepted academic learning objectives including "critical thinking skills" and "intercultural competence."[3] A striking example is an op-ed from 2010 by Russell Berman (then Vice President of the Modern Language Association), written as a response to a keynote address at ACTFL's annual convention by Richard Haass (then president of the Council on Foreign Relations).[4] While both are ostensibly advocating for

[3] See Deb S. Reisinger, "Claiming Our Space," *Inside Higher Ed* (Online), May 18, 2017; Megan M. Ferry, "Foreign Language Learning," *Academic Minute Podcast, Inside Higher Ed* (Online), October 22, 2014.
[4] Russell A. Berman, "Foreign Language for Foreign Policy?," *Inside Higher Ed* (Online), November 23, 2010.

languages, Berman takes issue with the governmental discourses that inform Haass' argument, which lead him to emphasize language study in the service of national security and the global economy. He cites Haass' quip that the choice is between "Fallujah or Firenze," that is to say, strategic languages like Arabic (and Mandarin, which he mentions elsewhere) or *luxury* languages like Italian. Berman's overarching argument is that such utilitarian rationales for language learning foreground national interests, rather than the intellectual needs of students, which can be fostered through the critical and intercultural perspectives afforded by any language and culture.

Lead with Languages is an advocacy initiative for and by language education professionals with the stated aim of "making language proficiency a national priority."[5] The landing page of the site adopts a discourse that in some ways resembles what can be found in many of the governmental publications, but instead of institutions, it is people who are positioned as the acting subjects, who are motivated "to take action around the rapidly rising importance of language skills to a wide array of careers—and to our nation's economy, national security and international standing." *Lead with Languages* also features a series of "Why Learn [X]" pages devoted to specific languages. The pages for Mandarin and Italian both feature the career benefits of each language and aspects of the cultures prominently; however, Italian is dominantly positioned as a language of personal enrichment and Mandarin as a resource for national security and economic interests. This manifests in the images selected for each page: the Italian page shows a picture of a "Ristorante" and the Trevi Fountain in Rome, while the Mandarin page includes an image of a crowded commerce area and a "Help Wanted" ad; but it is even more salient in the final sections on each page. The Italian page ends with a note under the header "Beauty" that Italian is arguably one of the most beautiful languages in the world, whereas the Mandarin page addresses the reader with "Uncle Sam Wants You" and a list of the governmental organizations that support the learning of Chinese as a critical language.

How multilingual subjects are imagined across the three public discourse planes

Across these three discourse planes examined here, the rationales for learning LOTEs within the U.S. tend to frame languages in three ways: 1) languages as personal enrichment and luxury; 2) languages as national resources; 3) languages as market goods/financial investments. All three discourse frames create hierarchies between languages, i.e., Chinese is most often treated as a resource or asset, whereas Italian is construed as a language of personal enrichment. Learners are consistently positioned as the kinds of enterprising subjects described by Flores

[5] Lead with Languages can be found at https://www.leadwithlanguages.org/

(2013), whether they be enterprising *professional* subjects, invested in career futures that serve national economic and security interests, or enterprising *cultural* subjects, invested in accruing the forms of symbolic capital garnered through the foreign language as an aesthetic good (see Bourdieu, 1984).

Learner Discourses around Language and Multilingual Subjectivity: Case Studies from Mandarin and Italian

The three ways of framing learning languages other than English discussed in the previous section are all anchored in a neoliberal discourse regime, which treats languages as commodities to be acquired. These discourses potentially influence the choices students make about whether and which languages to study. At the same time, as this next section demonstrates, their individual ways of speaking about their language learning contest commodifying discourses in important ways. In this next section, we present vignettes of four students—two learners of Mandarin Chinese and two of Italian. The examples are all taken from larger, longitudinal studies conducted by Diao and Gaspar with participants, who were undergraduates enrolled in language programs or study abroad programs associated with U.S. institutions of higher education (Diao, 2017; Gaspar, 2020). Data included semi-structured interviews in both studies, as well as recorded conversations with peers in the case of the Mandarin learners and reflection journals in the case of the Italian learners. As part of the larger studies, thematic and discourse analysis methods were used to illuminate different aspects of the learner's experiences. The current study borrows from those analyses focusing on moments where the participants discuss their relationship to the new languages and how they imagine themselves as multilingual subjects.

Bobby: "America was never great"

Bobby was an Afro-Latino student born and raised in South Carolina, where he was enrolled in a private liberal arts college at the time of Diao's research. He was studying abroad in Beijing during fall and winter of 2016, immediately after completing a previous study abroad trip in the Dominican Republic. He funded these trips and his education by participating in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), a college-based training program for commissioned officers in the US Armed Forces.

Bobby's maternal grandmother was a Spanish speaker from Panama, but out of fear of racism in the U.S., she never taught his mother Spanish. His mother also chose to not be a Spanish-speaking Black person and at the time of the interview did not even talk to her mother anymore according to Bobby. While Bobby's maternal side of the family felt pressured to be

monolingual English speakers in order to assimilate, Bobby took a different path and studied several other languages, including Spanish—the language that had skipped a generation with his mother—, French, German, Latin, Spanish, and eventually Mandarin. In college he double majored in both Chinese and Spanish. According to Bobby, this interest in languages was confusing to his parents. They wondered what he planned to do with his degree and assumed that he might become a teacher. Although Bobby did briefly mention an interest in becoming a consultant for the U.S. government during an interview, he also made clear through other statements in the interview that he did not have a well-defined career plan. Rather, Bobby often emphasized that his desire to learn other languages and to live abroad was driven in large part by his experience as a Black person in the southern U.S. and the ways in which living elsewhere offered him alternative ways of being outside of American systemic racism (see Diao, 2020).

Bobby's experiences in China were closely intertwined with socio-political events at home, in particular the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign and ensuing election of Donald Trump. The election was a prominent theme in almost all of the participating students' data (Wang & Diao, forthcoming). While U.S. presidential elections always draw international attention, this was heightened in this context because of the frequent statements against China made by both candidates (but especially Trump) during the campaign (Miura & Weiss, 2016). The strained relations between China and the U.S. led to speculations among the students as to whether economic links the two countries might be in peril. For example, in a recorded conversation with his Chinese roommate, Bing, Bobby described his Mandarin teacher's concerns about how geopolitical relations might impact her job.

> Bobby: She's particularly worried that she would not have a job in the future. It's because learning Chinese- she thinks that students who learn Chinese will be fewer and fewer.
>
> Bing: Em.
>
> Bobby: Because, Hilary and Trump both don't like China.
>
> Bing: I think eh=
>
> Bobby: =right.
>
> Bing: Maybe not that serious.
>
> Bobby: Yes! I told her you don't worry.
>
> Bing: em
>
> Bobby: It's because I think students who learn Chinese will continue to learn.

(Originally in Mandarin)

By revoicing his Chinese teacher's concerns, Bobby here acknowledges the tensions between China and the U.S., but rejects the assumption that Chinese language learners are motivated only by national economic interests.

During the program, Bobby made friends outside of the program with other international students, with whom he spoke Mandarin as a lingua franca, and according to him, many of the international students were drawn to him because of their curiosity about the US election. When asked how he found opportunities to speak Mandarin outside of class, Bobby said,

> Actually when someone asks me like where I am from, and I tell them America, and they're like, oh *meiguo* (Mandarin word for America). And I'm like, yes. and then like I immediately say like you know, I'm a little sad because of Trump. [...] So, (Laughing) It's kind of funny. I'm like, yup I'm from America. Oh yeah I'm so sad about Trump winning. Nooo! We just talk from there. And we just go, you know, the Chinese government, the American government. So yeah. Trump sparks every conversation of mine. (Interview)

As a signifier of American politics, Trump frequently came to organize Bobby's interactions with others. By responding to the seemingly simple question of where he was from, Bobby engaged in the identity work of expressing himself as an American who did not celebrate the Trump presidency. This response then created space for further discussion of politics in the U.S. and China. *Where one is from* is a question frequently taught at the beginning level in communicative language teaching. Bobby's response here shows that language learners' actual response to that question can be complicated, especially for learners who struggle to align with a national identity. The frequent expressions of affect here (e.g., "funny," "I'm so sad," and "Nooo!") highlight his emotions while studying overseas as an American during an election year.

Trump also emerged as a theme in his recorded conversations with Bing, as did Bobby's ambivalent relationship to the U.S. When describing Trump's supporters, Bobby portrayed them as predominantly White, male, and rich.

> Bing: But now Americans really want to make, what's it called? (Speaking English) "Make America great again". (Laughing)
>
> Bobby: America was never good.
>
> Bing: Ah (laughing)

Bobby: (Laughing) Really really. But- em, number most [sic: the majority of] Trump-supporters- are- white.

Bing: Right right right.

Bobby: Men.

Bing: Yes

Bobby: They all are- they all are- I uh- many are rich.

Bing: Hm hm.

Bobby: But some are poor.

Bing: Right.

Bobby: So I feel em- especially sad=

(Originally in Mandarin)

In this conversation, after his Chinese roommate quoted Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again," Bobby disassociated himself from the claim by stating in Mandarin that the U.S. was "never good." He then positioned himself as not only ideologically opposed to Trump, but as a racial other (Black vs. White) in the American idealized by Trump's supporters. The expression of sadness at the end of this exchange marks a shift, where Bobby struggles to also disassociate himself from poor Americans with whom he perhaps has more sympathy or an easier time identifying.

The last two excerpts illustrate how Bobby used Mandarin and the context of being a Black American in Beijing to cope with feelings related to the 2016 presidential election. The political discourses of Trump and his supporters rejected Bobby in two ways—one for being Black and for being an emerging speaker of Chinese. These intersected in his relationship to Mandarin, which provided him a way to emotionally connect with people emotionally outside of America around their shared sadness about the election. Learning Mandarin thus became a way of speaking against American racism (see Diao, 2020), through expressions of affect and disassociation.

Nneka: "I am very comfortable in China"

A first-generation African American immigrant with parents from Nigeria, Nneka was raised in a city of Virginia. Nneka was studying Mandarin in the summer of 2010 in an eight-week language intensive program in Shanghai organized by her home university in the U.S. During

the interview, she expressed that languages were her "favorite". Her childhood dream was to learn other languages and cultures so that she could make friends with people from different parts of the world. She had started with French when she was 11; then she studied Italian and Spanish before deciding to learn Mandarin. During the interview, she asked the interviewer about possible career opportunities as a professional translator, suggesting that she was just beginning to consider how the languages that she spoke could evolve into job skills.

Nneka was clear in her intention not to live in the U.S. forever and express that she felt limited expressing herself in English.

> I really don't like English. Other people don't believe me. I really don't like it. I think- I really don't like English! I think- it's a culture with no way, eh, a language with no way. This language, I think, has no rules. I think- I don't know. Also, when I speak French, I can express myself. (Interview. Originally in Mandarin)

Nneka's desire to learn other languages was partially her way of resisting English monolingualism and seeing otherness. She seemed to see English as a symbol of larger systems of cultural dominance (comp. Thompson, 2017). At one point in the interview, Nneka stated that her friends in the U.S. were mostly non-Americans because they were more "open-minded." Although she was born in the U.S. and had only visited her parents' birth country once, Nneka identified as Nigerian and she expressed a desire to work and live in China in the future, because she perceived China to be culturally similar to Nigeria and different from the U.S.

> I want to come to China to do work [...] Because I am very comfortable in China. I think China and Africa are very- have a lot of similarities. Just, similar. [...] I like it very much. Because I, in Nigeria, my home- just home, not home- family. Some are Nigerians. We are very relaxed. I have been to Nigeria once. But I was very comfortable. Just- very relaxed. Our life wasn't too busy. You know, in America our life is especially busy. I don't like it. I feel there's no time to just be able to enjoy today's things. Just being able to enjoy what [we] have today. Today is very good. Today I'm very- I'm very blessed. I- my life, weather is good. Americans are just very quick. Work work. Sleep. But here, weather, I love hot weather, so I like it. And your landscaping, very- very beautiful. I like it very much. So, I just like Shanghai. I just like it. (Interview. Originally in Mandarin)

Here, as Nneka described what she perceived to be similarities in lifestyle between the two countries, her projection of future prospects in China also becomes linked to her familial past in Nigeria. Although Nneka's desire to learn Mandarin is career-related ("come to China to do work"), it is not career-oriented; her investment in subtropical Shanghai is rationalized through

a sense of familiarity and comfort, which she associated with Nigeria and saw as a contrast with American life. She further elaborated on this later in the interview.

> I think American culture, American ethic, morals? They just aren't very good. I think African morals are relatively better. And I think China for example, China, be good to your parents, and many, only- no- respect [sic: not only respecting your parents.] I really like that. (Interview. Originally in Mandarin)

For Nneka, aspects of Chinese culture, such as respect for parents, were more similar to her perception of African values than those dominant in American culture. Her desire to live in China thus represented a potential future in which she could regain a way of living that she perceived to be lost to her when her family left Nigeria.

Learning Chinese and studying in China also provided Nneka with opportunities to encounter new people and to shape the kinds of interpersonal relations she imagined as part of her future (Norton, 2013), namely a future role as wife and mother. China has become the second most popular destination for Anglophone international students from African countries (Dennis, 2019), and in Shanghai Nneka met other students coming from Africa. This included a young man from Cote d'Ivoire, whom she identified in her journal entry as potentially "a good boyfriend." In the interviews, Nneka expressed a hope that her future children be born in the U.S., to take advantage of the opportunities and access that U.S. citizenship can provide, but be raised in other cultures such as China. She returned to the earlier theme of what she perceived as America's monolingual and heteronormative culture, although this time it was not for herself but for her future children that she wished a chance to escape:

> I really feel I want my kids to speak French, English, and, and Mandarin... Maybe we just live in China. Maybe just five years. It depends on my job. But I want them to have a very, have a very rich life, know how different cultures are. All [of us] can be more open-minded. (Interview. Originally in Mandarin)

Nneka's investment in learning languages, including Mandarin, was thus closely related to her identity as a Nigerian woman raised in America. Learning Mandarin and studying abroad in China became intertwined with her rejection of what she perceived to be dominant American cultural values and her longing for a lost Nigerian life organized by relations with others and with the world—a daughter who respects her parents, a human with an appreciation for nature, a young woman looking for a romantic partner, and a future mother who can raise her children to be open-minded multilinguals. While each of these carries symbolic capital in certain social contexts, for Nneka they were also intimately connected to aesthetic intuitions of comfort and

joy that were less about what she could gain from learning Mandarin and more about how it made her feel.

Stif: "I could live as a human being"

As a child in Ethiopia, Stif experienced political violence firsthand. He then spent two years in a refugee camp in Kenya prior to arriving in the US at the age of 13. He later served in the US military and afterwards followed some of his close friends from the service to the city, where he would eventually attend university with GI funding. He decided to study philosophy. He enrolled in Italian in part to fulfill degree requirements but also, as he discussed in the interviews, because he wanted to be able to communicate in Italian with his father, from whom Stif inherited an identification with Italian history and culture. Both Stif's birth country Ethiopia and his father's birth country Eritrea were part of the Italian colonization of East Africa that occurred before the outbreak of the Second World War. Stif's grandfather was born in Eritrea from an Eritrean mother and an Italian father. Stif's father had shared his love of Italian culture and language with his children and had taught Stif some basic Italian words and expressions.

By his second year studying Italian at the university, Stif had abandoned his goal to learn the language in order to communicate with his father, because he felt he could not change their difficult relationship. However, Stif's sense of a heritage connection to Italian continued to drive his desire to learn. In a composition from the fourth semester course, Stif wrote:

> Italian was very important to me. Because it is in my blood and my culture. The language was a lot of fun, fundamental and a process. The process that I use every day. Because I am able to speak three different languages, I was able to catch the problems... In my opinion Italian will be in my life. By improving I can better help maybe myself. (Interview. Originally in Italian)

Stif aligned himself here somewhat with the notion of language as a skill, but he described his ability in Italian as also deeply entangled with his heritage identity. Although Italian takes practice, he described it as a part of him, running in his blood, fluidly taking part of his life experiences, even if it is not yet clear how.

Beyond his relationship through his father and grandfather, it also became clear in other moments in the interviews that Italian helped Stif reconstruct nostalgic memories. The linguistic landscape of his childhood in post-colonial Ethiopia included signs written in Italian on buildings, stores, and some schools. Being engaged with Italian helped him reconnect to positive emotions from his youth, such as eating gelato with his family and watching Italian soccer games.

In addition to helping him make sense of his relationship to Ethiopia, Italian also helped Stif re-imagine his position in the U.S. One of Stif's formative experiences before attending university was a trip with his military friends to Italy. Stif described how his Blackness always seemed to be his most salient feature in the U.S.; he was seen first and foremost as either a Black American or an African immigrant. In either case, he felt he was often perceived as a threat (comp. Muhammad, 2010).

> They're like, "Is he Black or is he African?" Because they always look at me. If they're able to understand there's a difference. Which there is. It's a big difference. This is a mentality where they know immediately I'm Black and I'm going to do something bad.

In Italy, by contrast, he stated that he felt "just ... American."

Furthermore, his sense of himself as a subject from a former colony of Italy and as a heritage learner offered him a way of legitimizing himself as an Italian speaker, which for him was a protection against the forms of systemic racism he experienced in the U.S. Stif shared in one of the interviews that he imagined his life experiences—in Eritrea during his childhood, in the U.S. army, in American society, at university—as a sort of war belt.

> It's a big war belt. It's nice and tight. It has gotten a lot of stuff in it. Some of it is hard to talk about, some of it is easier to integrate. And this is where experience and skills, I guess, are vital because I lack a lot of skills in certain areas. But the experience gives me a little bit of understanding of certain - I can look at things differently than the average bear, like they say here. The average bear.

Although he had suffered traumatic experiences in particular related to racialization and colonization, the war belt metaphor suggested that he saw all of these as forming a kind of protection and affording him a different way of viewing the world. Italian was an essential component in this war belt.

At one point in an interview, Stif described Italian as creating a space in which he could bring together many of the complex, even contradictory, aspects of his subjectivity.

> Stif: So that little variable is what I'm looking for. To put all of them together and to use them where I could get a little room — where it's just man and not identity, in a sense that-
>
> Author 2: That is why you love Italian?
>
> Stif: Well, it gives me the diagram — I mean, the environment, I can live as a human being.

Although his memories of being seen as as American while in Italy were part of what Italian meant for Stif, in many moments it also becomes clear that Stif's desire to learn the language is less shaped by future plans to participate in or communicate with a specific imagined community of native speakers of the language and more about the ways of being *other* that it afforded him.

Stif eventually did begin to develop a career plan that included his use of Italian, his Ethiopian background, and his connections to the U.S.; he dreamed of someday owning an export business for Ethiopian coffee, which would allow him to travel the world, visit different countries. Of note, however, is that despite this more practical orientation that learning Italian took on, Stif started to not see much use for the language classes at the university.

> Stif: I think I am at that point I see school like not helping.
>
> Author 2: Yeah, but do you see maybe the value in it and how you could use that like, why would you need?
>
> Stif: Language is one thing I want to clear up. Like when I talk to you when I talk to you in Italian, if you happened to be in Ethiopia we could talk Amharic or Tigrinya but that's not gonna happen.
>
> Author 2: But you don't want to like brush up your language?
>
> Stif: So yeah, I do, I do you see but why brush up when I have somebody already talking it. (laughs) I look at it like I fortunately have someone with your* personality. Coffee is three times, four times a year that you, you can farm it, ship it. Four times in a year it's the only time you see me. When you get your* coffee.
>
> ** The second person pronouns here refer to Gaspar.*

For Stif, the more instrumental aspects of language use were exactly the ones for which he did not need the classroom, because he would be able to just talk to the people who speak it and learn from them. While the Italian language was a part of his career plans, for Stif Italian had less of an instrumental role than a relational one. Speaking Italian and being in Italian allowed him to resist certain identities and the labels that shaped them. Italian allowed Stif to hold onto multiple, somewhat incommensurable aspects of his life experiences without pinning them down to racial and national identities. Over time he then constructed a professional goal, which would allow him to maintain his connections to all three countries, but this was less a goal of language learning and more an imagined future he was constructing and shaping for himself around his desires, through the multilingual subjectivity Italian afforded.

Isabella: "I am in a unique position"

Isabella was a learner of Italian enrolled in classes in the same institution as Stif. As a deaf person, she engaged in multilingual practices routinely; she spoke English, read lips, and communicated fluently in American Sign Language (ASL). She first began learning Italian when she decided to transition from being a full-time stay-at-home mother to enrolling herself in the university. She believed that without a college degree, she would be unemployable. Despite these pragmatic underlying motivations, Isabella's decision to major in Italian was part of a longer process of imagining herself as a capable, multilingual subject.

Since her childhood, Isabella had internalized her deafness as a defect, and this shaped her beliefs about her own capabilities and imaginations for her future. As a child, she had received a cochlear implant to compensate for her hearing loss, in large part at the behest of her hearing parents. In an interview, she shared that she had had difficulty fitting in throughout her life as a result. She felt excluded both from hearing communities and from the Deaf community where she was perceived to be "too hearing."

Prior to enrolling in Italian classes at the university, she had travelled to Italy once on vacation. She visited an Italian Deaf friend that she met a long time ago in the U.S. through her church. From their conversations, Isabella discovered that there were more and more readily accessible opportunities for community connections and institutional support for Deaf people in the U.S. than in Italy. But at the same time, certain characteristics of Italian communication more generally evoked for her a sense of belonging.

> Homesick yeah. People popolo grande benissimo. Not just that they are like. (showing hug) gesture a lot, funny. Yeah I blend in. Mio marito when we first got together he was uncomfortable with that. I don't sign but I do this when I talk (gestures) and he was like (moves hands downward to express *stop*) and I am like come on this is part of my personality maybe I don't sign but I do show. I went to Italy for the first time and I was like guarda, vedi (look, do you see)? people were like me, they are like me and they are not Deaf. (Interview)

The stereotype that Italians frequently and extensively use gestures while speaking (Kendon 2004) was for Isabella both affirmed and affirming during her visit. She had a feeling at last that her tendency to complement her speech with gestures, even when not using sign language, did not stand out. This sense of fitting in among the "popolo grande benisssimo," as she described them, was a change for Isabella who always felt that she had to adjust herself to blend into both the Deaf and hearing communities she had grown up with in the U.S.

Isabella decided that she wanted to later return to Italy and work to build resources to support the Italian Deaf community. She worried that not knowing Italian would be a barrier in achieving this goal, but also believed that learning a new language was impossible for Deaf students. She later met two other Deaf students who were learning languages at her university. Based on the experiences they shared, she began to develop a plan for learning Italian, using resources available from the campus disability resource centers, including note-takers and a simultaneous interpreter.

Isabella's success in Italian afforded her new positionalities within her local context in the American Southwest. For example, she described in an interview an occasion, in a local market where she recognized an Italian poster and initiated a conversation with the merchant about the meaning.

> Isabella: it was at the market. She was selling a poster. I asked her to read it because she was selling the poster and I thought she knows what it means. People have Internet, they can look it up. She had it on her wall and she doesn't know what it's saying. I just asked her, can you read it to me? She just liked the poster because it looked pretty. So I told her and she was like... funny.
>
> Author 2: So how does this make you feel?
>
> Isabella: Everybody speaks Spanish there are not many people that speak different languages. I know a language people in Suncity[6] don't know.
>
> (Interview)

By showcasing her knowledge of Italian, she positioned herself as empowered instead of someone with a deficit.

Through learning Italian, Isabella was able to see herself as a capable language user and this also allowed her to reframe her ability to move between spoken English and ASL as a strength rather than a defect.

> I am in a unique position. I can speak I can read and write and sign and I am learning Italian sign language. I want to be a teacher in second language but the reason I picked Italian is that there are a lot of people like me. They [here: the Italian Deaf community] didn't have a choice, the government made them the way they are, the government put them in the oral schools to let them learn, so right now they are fighting to have a sign

[6] This is a pseuodonym for the actual city.

> language and the government does not want to recognize it, so they are going through this right now and I am a perfect fit. I can sign I can speak I have oral. (Interview)

This also allowed her to start to construct a translingual future for herself as a teacher of English as a second language in Italy. Isabella recognized that her ability to function in both the Deaf and hearing communities as a multilingual gave her a unique advantage for this work, in ways that contested discourses of her disability as a deficit that she had internalized as a child.

In 2017, she applied for a Fulbright scholarship and was selected to go and teach at the Deaf and blind school in Rome.

> What made me different is the deaf. I am not only. I can use English to write and read but I also can share the American deaf history, American deaf culture and can share history and can help them set. They can be anything and I think there is a reason why. ...No-one has received a Fulbright and I think because I am unique. (Interview)

Her engagement with Italian afforded Isabella an opportunity to redefine herself, which she might have missed if she had followed more traditional instrumental motivations.

Discussion and Implications

This article juxtaposes different discourses related to the learning of LOTEs and the multilingual subjectivities they encourage. The public discourses around language learning, as represented by the news media, governmental and NGO publications, and advocacy efforts by professionals in language education, tended to echo the idea of languages as commodities and position learners as enterprising subjects (Flores, 2013). This consisted of a spectrum of positionalities, including the learner as a future global professional or as a discerning consumer, but a shared commonality across these is that individual interests and desires are assumed to align fairly readily with those transnational corporations and nation states. In some instances, most saliently in the discourses from organizations within or related to the U.S. federal government, the corporatization of language learners even resulted in the linguistic erasure of human subjectivities behind social and corporate and national actors. Although an alternative could be found in some of the op-eds from language and culture professionals in higher education, where the learning subject and their capacity for critical thought and reflection was centered, advocacy for the learning of languages other than English was dominated by the same commodity-centered discourses. In the *Lead with Languages* site, as an example, languages themselves became the most prominent grammatical subjects represented in the discourse, because they are being marketed to potential learners as future capital with which they can better market themselves.

The discourses of the language learners were not wholly removed from these public conversations about language, and across the four vignettes there are clear moments when they position themselves as enterprising subjects who are striving for better futures and better selves. At the same time, each of the learners' stories revealed investments in their new languages and cultures that were less directed towards pre-determined goals and gains, and more associated with affective assemblages of attachment. These were often expressed in terms of emotions or feelings, such as "comfort" (Nneka and Isabella) or a sense of humanity (Stif). It is also important that each of these participants felt in some ways marked or othered in the U.S. by their bodies, which they all described as somehow occupying social spaces differently in the other language and culture. While words like "fit" (Isabella) or other expressions of belonging come up in almost all of the learner vignettes, each of them conveys affective attachments to the language/culture that are not quite commensurate with an imagined target language community. Bobby emphasized conversations more than communities. While Nneka and Stif each constructed a kind of displaced heritage relationship to Chinese and Italian respectively, it is intimately personal familial connections that drove this rather than potential interactions with *the Chinese* or *the Italians*. Isabella more than the others oriented herself towards a particular community, but even in this case she emphasized how the advocacy work on behalf of the Italian Deaf community would enable her to invest in her unique position as American Italian-speaker who is both Deaf and Hearing. This relates to another commonality element of the learner discourses; in each case, the multilingual subjectivities they are developing in and through new languages allow them to position aspects of their identities that are seemingly irreconcilable within typical U.S.-based frames of reference in new ways. While it is not our intention to imply that these learners are uniquely diverse, they each represent identities that are minoritized and marginalized in dominant discourses around the learning of LOTEs, and demonstrate the complex clusters of experiences and desires that can shape the lived realities of language learning.

These vignettes thus complicate discourses that position learners as primarily enterprising subjects. They also compel language programs, which are often themselves put in the position of enterprising subjects themselves who must fight for funding and enrollments in order to survive, to expand how they imagine their learners as multilingual subjects. Commodifying discourses of language risk reducing learners to roles as enterprising subjects, while overlooking the affective and relational aspects of language learning, which are highlighted in our vignettes. Meanwhile, the students' ways of imagining their futures are much more nuanced, dynamic and responsive, and are grounded in everyday experiences and values that are not captured at all by the typical marketization practices of language programs. It is not that commodification or cost/benefit analyses are bad in themselves and as Flores (2013) has argued

it may not be possible or even desirable for language learning to operate outside of neoliberal logics completely; however, language educators can and must reflect on the extent to which they are complicit in normative and neoliberal discourse regimes that erase other ways of being and desiring to be multilingual. When given space to reflect, critique, and interrogate, learners themselves give us opportunities to explore the limits of their linguistic and cultural repertoires for envisioning themselves, their relations to others, and their possible future lives. In other words, while "competition over who defines and what counts as legitimate commodifiable language" (Heller, 2010, p. 103) cannot be overcome or cast aside, it is incumbent on educators to recognize that students have desires that are in excess of these concerns and that simply reproducing these structures reduces the power and potential of who they might imagine themselves to be. While we may not be able to design a mission statement or a curriculum that anticipates the kinds of needs and desires expressed by the learners in this study let alone the vast number of other possibilities other individuals might bring, we can continue to articulate answers to the question "Why study language X?" that are as much about spaces of possibility as they are enterprising calculations. And we can ask ourselves whether and how we are making room for learners to play with and explore their sense of themselves as human beings with feelings, hopes, and drives too complex to not be experienced through multilingual lives.

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