What on earth is language commodification?

Language commodification is among the many terms in applied linguistics research that have become increasingly sloganized with little, if any, consideration of what they mean. Monica Heller (e.g. 2010) may be considered the originator of the term, and she has written about it with some care and intellectual integrity. However, originators of terminology seldom have control over how their terminology is taken up and used by others, and so language commodification is now used in a rather loose manner by sociolinguistics interested in the interrelationship between economic issues and language practices, who integrate it into their discussions of skilling discourses in education and society in general (see Urciuoli & LaDousa, 2013, for a recent survey and Block, 2014 and McGill, 2013, for critiques). There is, therefore, a need to stop and take stock, and this means engaging in a critical process of first examining how the term is used and then moving to consider what it might mean to the different researchers using it. To this end, I will take an historical view of commodification, going back to the classical political economy of Adam Smith (1976 [1776]) and above all Karl Marx’s work (e.g. 1904 [1859]; 1976 [1867]) a century later on commodity as a product of human labour and his use value/exchange value distinction. But beyond this, I will question whether or not language (and I could add here, whatever this term might mean) can ever have value as a ‘real’ product in the way that Marx had in mind. The overall aim here is to develop a more rigorous working understanding of language commodification, if, indeed, such a thing can reasonably be said to exist.

Literature


