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Revisiting Language Policy for Language Revitalisation

Introduction

Language revitalisation always requires a language policy or several language policies. The decision to revive an endangered language is itself, part of a policy, or can constitute a full language policy. From that starting point or decision will come many further agreed decisions as to how to revive the language, where to start, who should be involved and how long it might take. Language policies like all policies are complex and the fact that a policy exists, of course, does not guarantee the successful revitalisation or regeneration of the language. Even where no policy exists, this too is a type of implicit policy (Spolsky, 2004). Language demise may well continue even when and where a language policy exits. Conventions, treaties and agreements that are formulated with a view to extend the use of the language in different domains, in education, for example, may lack the power or popular support to enforce them. Policies too may have negligible impact on the language used in the home which is critical for natural intergenerational transmission. The relationship between language policy and language planning is also complex. A similar type language policy might bear quite different results in different polities. So language policy remains under constant scrutiny and our understanding of its inherent complexities is constantly being modified.

Much has been written about language policy in the past decade. This paper examines the evolution of language policy, reviews recent literature on policy and argues for the need to reconceptualise language policy in language

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endangerment and language revitalisation[1] contexts in the 21st century. Firstly I will trace the origins of language policy showing its "imperial" foundations as a nascent discipline. Using critical theory to scrutiny the thinking and theories inherent in the roots of discipline, the second part of this paper illustrates the need to divert from central agency and all-governing precept and to localise our thinking on policy. Thus policy, rather than being the yardstick against which we are measured, should become the iterative and reiterative dynamic ensuring that power is negotiated and renegotiated in crucial sites of language revitalisation. Rather than situating language policy solely in its academic conceptualisation and its implementation in macrocontexts, we will try to resituate and reconceptualise it at the local, at the edge, on the periphery. Thus we will move from a descriptive or prescriptive approach to an evaluative one; viewing language as an economic, cultural, social and human response to the ongoing external forces of demand and change.

The origins of language policy as a discipline

The work of Ricento (2000; 2006)[1], Schiffmann (1996)[2] Corson (2008)[3] and Tollefson (2002)[4], for example, enables us to conduct an excavation of the language policy archaeology since its emergence as an academic discipline in the 1950s and 1960s using the tools of critical theory.

Although language policy is interdisciplinary, it came into its own as a branch of sociolinguistics during the 1970s. In the earlier decades, western trained linguists were involved in fieldwork developing grammars writing systems and orthography and dictionaries for indigenous languages in Africa, Asia and South America. Much of this work had a language planning, particularly a corpus planning focus. Ricento (2006: 13)[5] states that "…the activities of many sociolinguists were understood (by them) as beneficial to nation building and national unification-the discussion of which language (i.e. colonial or indigenous) would best serve these interests was often based on which language would

[1] The author does not discuss language revitalisation in any detail in this paper. This has been done elsewhere in this journal. See Ó Laoire (2008): http://tekaharoa.com/index.php/tekaharoa/article/view/59/31

provide access to advanced, that is Western (sic) technological and economic assistance."

A corollary of this ongoing work was the development of a stable diglossia with a major European language used for formal and specialised domains and with local languages used to serve less formal functions. The end result was, of course, the elevation of the former colonial language as the language of power, status and prestige in national, political and elite educational sectors.

So language policy despise its liberal leanings in the earlier decades has been perhaps unwittingly associated with bolstering the powerful and dominant at the expense of local indigenous languages.

Critical sociolinguistic perspectives on language policy

In the 1980s and 1990s language planning and policy was beginning to be criticised from critical sociolinguistic perspectives. Having developed its original thinking and methodologies in postcolonial contexts, language policy was accused of serving the interests and agendas of the dominant elites, of perpetuating the interests and agendas and discourse of the powerful. The role that language policy played in the reproduction of social and economic inequality was being questioned and this imbalance of power relations that it effected were being elucidated by critical and post-modern theories. Even terms like mother tongue, standardisation, and linguistic competence, the hallmarks of the typical language policy document were now all being questioned. There was a broad calling into question of received ideas about language, language learning, language and local economic interests-with a move from positivistic to a more critical epistemological orientation.

Tollefson (2002) [6]states that during the 1980s and 1990s there was new departure in the discipline; a branching occurred between mainstream sociolinguistic research that dealt with language shift in language-contact situations (using data interviews and ethnographic analysis) and critical approaches on the other hand where language shift is understood not as an incidental and natural outcome of language contact but rather an illustration of asymmetrical power relations based on social situations that position groups. Rather than concerns with language per se, data, surveys, the emphasis has shifted to discourse and discourse

analysis, which views language as social interaction, and is concerned with the social contexts in which discourse is embedded.

This shift of emphasis from positivistic enquiry to analysis of discourse occurred also at a time when language policy was coming under stronger focus, as it tried to respond more fully to and engage with contingent contemporary socio-political realities. Within language education, for example, one of the key agencies in language revitalisation, new issues and questions were being raised in the 1990s that re-echoed the criticisms being levelled at language policy. Phillipson (1992)[7] and Pennycook (1994)[8] have argued cogently that English language education for example can be interpreted as a neo-colonialist enterprise serving the needs of capitalism and dominant world powers. Other critical scholars like Shohamy (2000)[9] and McNamara (2001)[10] were also beginning to question the way that language testing was serving the function of gate-keeping in many contexts as a tool to enforce or maintain the influence of the elite and ruling classes.

More critical approaches to language policy

Even in the field of politics of language, more self-critical approaches were beginning to emerge at the beginning of the new century. Alderson (2009)[11] was beginning to speak about a language politics with a small p including not only institutional politics but *personal* politics, the motivations of actors themselves and their agendas, showing how personal politics at the micro-level can influence day to day politics for innovation and change. Against this background of the discipline becoming more self-critical, major geopolitical developments have set new challenges for language policy. The focus has shifted from the typically postcolonial to new contexts marked by political and economic change. Language policy is back on the agenda but bringing a new and different perspective on power relations and methodology.

As a result, we can now see the dangers inherent in our positioning on policy. We need to be alert to potential problem in language revitalisation contexts. Language policy could be the means or the instrument of repression, particularly if it is framed in a discourse of dominant power. These dominant discourses of power are passed on and tend eventually to have a force of history. This creates situations of lost opportunities for meaningful growth and *personal response to policy*. The

domains targeted by language revivalists (home, school, neighbourhood, church, workplace etc.) may operate out of a centralist paradigm and become sites of what Heidegger might have referred to "they-self" where there is an irresponsible averaging off of understanding, where language behaviours and attitudes are not so much conceived in terms of their meaning for our own human, unique existence, but are seen solely in the light of the business of immediate practical concern and instrumental conceptions of life and work.

Critical theory applied to language policy helps us to see the gaps, urges us to change the way see look to the centre for answers and encourages us to authenticate the local and periphery.

Discourse analysis and language policy

If we were to conduct a discourse analysis on the documents, conversations, interventions that are meant to lead to the formulation of a language policy and to its implementation, the following understanding might well emerge that is critical to achieving progress in language revitalisation. According to Habermas (1971),[12] there is no one discourse that can be applied to differing and different situations. Even though written in the particular historical context in which the Frankfurt school evolved, his work, nonetheless suggests a different agenda for many researchers, educationalists and activists in language revitalisation. Each site or setting requires a contextually appropriate conception of what is right and just for it. The commitment to consider all individuals as potential participants in discourse presupposes a universalistic commitment to the potential equality, autonomy and rationality of individuals.

We do not need just the one concept of justice, one discourse of policy making or policy engineering- an "all-for-one" and "one-for-all" scenario. It is *not just one preference therefore that should be formulated into policy but collective and aggregate preferences*. Habernas asked for a new form of institutionalised discourse that would recapture the legitimacy of voice for participants in social organisations and institutions to give them a sense of purpose and recapture their motivation. He asked for decision-making in a setting where there were no constraints and where each participant had equal and open chances of entering the discourse/discussion; thus restoring the cultural capital. This

suggests that those who want to reform language policy need to set new paradigms for its articulation need to devolve decision making on *all* members of the speech community.

In arguing the need to shift the emphasis and paradigm from the macro to the micro, Corson (2008) cleverly integrates the work of Habermas with that of Bhaskar to reinforce his arguments. Roy Bhaskar's *Scientific realism and human emancipation*[13] deeply questions positivistic approaches to science enquiry, referring to the divisions and dualisms besetting normative theory: between society and the individual, structure and agency, meaning and behaviour, mind and body, reason and cause, fact and value, and theory and practice. Thus the main actors in language policy formulation and implementation must address these dualisms by being critically real. They must not go on making policy in a structured way when they know, for example that structure may conflict with agency- i.e. the chasm between the individual and institution. *What the institution wants is not what the individual may want.* Similarly, what might appear to look valid in theory may be invalidated in practice and what may be meaningful at the level of reasoned abstract articulation may not be meaningful in the least when it comes to human behaviours and interactions.

Consulting the main actors in language revitalisation

Only by consulting the ontologically real accounts of the main actors in language revitalisation (community members, leaders, families, teachers, administrators, students etc.) can policy makers learn about the values, beliefs and interactions and come to understand what these actors value. This would suggest that social policy makers of any kind need to devolve decision making to the people whose interests are crucially and critically at stake as well as being in touch with the opposing interests and factors that might constrain or oppress them

It is human behaviours and interactions that are at the very heart of language revitalisation. Beginning with Spolsky's (2004)[14] model of language policy as ideological, behavioural (language practices) and management, there is a growing awareness of policy being located in human choice and voice. This emerging perspective is dealt with in the remainder of this paper where agency is discussed.

Agency in language revitalisation

Critical theory also provides new perspectives on the importance of agency in understanding the need to shift the paradigms in language policy in education research and practice. Baldauf (2008) reminds us that the issues of agency has traditionally not been investigated or regarded as important in language policy. The reason for this quite simply is that it was assumed that language policy was always carried out by central agents who made decisions that were in the best interests of the state. Who they were was of little interest, provided they had the required expertise.

In fact this tendency to overlook the crucial issue of agency appears to have been endemic in all areas of social policy until recently. Policy analysis has been dominated by a rational planning model of decision-making that assumes a linear sequence of stages from problem identification, formulate goals, compare costs and benefits of alternative solutions, select optimal solution, implement. Such a technocratic approach has inevitably led to much disappointment, many have argued, because implementation is perceived as an administrative process, devoid of values, Hajer and Wagenaar (2003)[15], interests or emotion, Wagenaar and Cook (2003)[16]. The blame for implementation failure has frequently been placed on a perceived policy-practice gap, Ball (1997)[17]. Typically, policy studies have considered people only as either those who have policy done to them or as shadowy resistors who contribute to this gap (Ball, 1997). This has been the orientation of policy studies across the board, from education, to environment, to poverty and development, and including language policy (Shohamy, 2006)[18].

A key recent shift in policy studies internationally has been to understand the policy process itself as peopled. Ball, (1997), for example, draws attention to the importance of both human agency and context. He suggests that policies are 'awkward, incomplete, incoherent and unstable', that 'local conditions, resources, histories and commitments will differ and that policy realisation will differ accordingly' (Ball, 1997:265)[19]. He draws attention to how people at different levels of policy formation and implementation are active, indeed are compelled to be creative in interpreting how to implement policy, not least because operationalisation in each specific context must respond to local circumstances, with everyday problems that require localised decisions regarding how people implement policy must 'consider the other things

they are expected or required to take seriously and which compete for attention, effort and resources in the complexities of practice' (Ball, 1997:265) changes and balances with other expectations.

The issue of agency has become a very important one particularly in micro-contexts as Baldauf aptly points out (2008:25-26)[20]: "…The fundamental planning is conceptualised and carried out at the macrolevel with the local taking an implementation role. This is the traditional top-down approach where language policy decisions are implemented via good professional development models. By contrast microplanning refers to cases where businesses, institutions, groups or individuals hold agency and create what be recognised as a language policy and plan to utilise and develop their language resources; one that is not directly the result of some larger macro policy, but is a response to their own needs, their own "language problems", their own requirement for language management"

Reappraising the local

Ramanathan (2005)[21] taking stock of language education policies for English and vernacular-medium education in Gujarat, India for example, provides evidence from teacher practice that language policies are embedded in *local* rather than central political power structures and behaviours. He sees language policy as a grounded situated reality rather than an abstract text formulated "behind closed doors and formalized in a document without paying much heed to local realities" (Ramanathan 2005:98)[22]. Thus language policies are hybrid entities that draw their force and movement from the lives of real people. Thus, the ethnography of the local community in language revitalisation contexts becomes a valuable starting point to illuminate local and often subaltern interpretations and can be used in simultaneously formulating and implementing language policy.

Canagararajah (2005: xiv)[23] states that the notion of the local is often shortchanged in the discourses on globalization, and reminds us that: "The local shouldn't be of secondary relation or subsidiary status to the dominant discourses and institutions from powerful communities whereby the gobal is simply applied, translated or contextualized to the local. Making a space for the local doesn't mean "adding" another component or subfield to the

paradigms that already dominate many fields. It means radically reexamining our disciplines to orientate to language identity, knowledge and social relations from a totally different perspective." He (2005:155) suggests that ethnography of local communities can be used to build language policy models and inform policy-making. "Developing policies informed by ethnography can counteract the unilateral hold of dominant paradigms and ideologies in language policy". Similarly Hornberger and Johnson (2007:509)[24] illustrate how local ethnographies in two different contexts in the US and in Bolivia including interpretations, negotiations and resistances can reveal spaces where local actors implement in varying and unique ways. Heller (2006:221)[25] argues equally for an approach in research where the trajectories of the social actors who participate in a school's discursive spaces be fleshed out in order to allow us to understand the scope of action available to individuals and the structural constraints that shape their experience.

Concluding remarks

When a language policy is formulated at the central/macro or mega level, the implementation stage as a component of policy process at the micro level can be quite complex (Georgiou, Ó Laoire and Rigg 2010)[26]. Implementation cannot be assumed to follow automatically and successfully from the stages of formulation and authorisation stages that precede it. This is why language policies have often been ineffective and have had negligible impact in reversing language shift in language revitalisation contexts. This paper emphasises language policy being more than the mere interpretation of official government texts in the context of regulation and implementation of the language curriculum. As shown here, recent critical approaches to language policy emphasise it a complexity of human interactions, negotiations and production mediated by interrelationship in contested sites of competing ideologies, discourses and powers. These new frameworks enable us to examine language policy as covert and overt, bottom-up and top-down as *de facto* and *de jure*. These elucidate themes of agency ecology and negotiation. They are being used more and more to scrutinise the policies that nation states apply to their ethnic and linguistic minorities. Studies and research into micro language planning in language revitalisation context need to take stock always of language policy and more

importantly to conceptualise it as being the empowering site of agency. In other words, families, individuals, institutions, groups hold agency and can create what be recognised as a language policy in a language revitalisation situation and plan to utilise and develop their language resources; one that is not directly the result of some larger macro policy, but is a response to their own needs, their own "language problems", their own requirement for language management". It is only from this perspective that we may see more successful narratives beginning to emerge in language revitalisation research.

Notes

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