

Language education policy in late modernity: (socio) linguistic ethnographies in the European Union

Miguel Pérez-Milans

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Abstract Focusing on developments in research on language education policy, this introduction to the thematic special issue begins with a sketch of the new problem space emerging at the intersection of intensified transnational mobility, expanding economic neo-liberalisation and institutionalised multilingualism. It then identifies situated practice, commodification and declining state authority as key perspectives and themes in the study of language policy, and outlines the methods required to address these. After that, it provides an overview of the articles in which these issues are addressed.

Keywords Language education policy · Late modernity · European Union · Multilingualism · Sociolinguistic ethnography

Developments in research on language education policy

This thematic issue dwells upon language education policy in relation to contemporary processes of change. Based on ethnographic and socio-linguistic approaches, the articles in this issue of *Language Policy* focus on the ways in which communicative practices, institutional policies and wider socio-economic transformations are interwoven in the production of daily life, in different educational communities. In so doing, the special issue is underpinned by the social and linguistic/discursive turns adopted in social sciences since the mid-twentieth century, which have resulted in social reality being understood as discursively constructed, reproduced, naturalized and sometimes revised in social interaction, in the course of large-scale historical, political and socio-economic configurations (Cicourel 1964, Giddens 1984).

M. Pérez-Milans (✉)
The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong, SAR
e-mail: mpmilans@hku.hk

In particular, we draw on a range of interdisciplinary sources from North American linguistic anthropology (Hymes 1968, 1974; Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Gumperz 1982; Irvine and Gal 2000; Agha 2007), UK-based linguistic ethnography (Creese 2008; Rampton et al. 2014), and European/Canadian socio-linguistics (Blommaert 1999; Pujolar 2001; Heller 2002; Duchêne 2009; Martín-Rojo 2010). In the area of language education, social and cultural perspectives provided by researchers in these fields have challenged well-established traditions. Moving away from cognitive theories which emphasise individual minds and prescriptive pedagogical models, these perspectives call for a focus on situated descriptions of language education practices wherein decisions about what languages to teach, to whom, when, why and how are not detached from the local, institutional and wider social conditions.

As a consequence of this change of focus, language education policy has seen growing interest during the last two decades in the study of ideologies enacted and negotiated in situated contexts where specific policies are locally implemented. Among such policies, those receiving major attention include the provision of emancipatory language education programmes teaching the language(s) of the host society to newcomers (Heller and Martin-Jones 2001; Moyer and Martín Rojo 2007; Martín-Rojo 2010; Codó and Patino-Santos 2014), the teaching of English as a necessary skill (i.e. commodity) for participation in the internationalized economy (Heller and Martin-Jones 2001; Block and Cameron 2002; Kubota and Lin 2009; Lo Bianco et al. 2009; Park and Wee 2012; Pérez-Milans 2013), and policies implemented by ethno-linguistic minorities in the context of wider nation-states (see, for instance, Heller 1999; Jaffe 1999).

This line of research has contributed to our understanding of the impact of mobility and economic globalization on language education policy. It has also shed light on the underlying mechanisms of “social structuration” (Giddens 1984) upon which modern nationalism is based. Nevertheless, there is still a need for in-depth exploration of the new local and institutional transformations emerging hand-in-hand with the dilemmas and contradictions that the so-called conditions of “late modernity” (Appadurai 1990; Bauman 1998) have posed to the prevailing notions of language, identity, culture and nation. These conditions, which involve widespread socio-economic, institutional, cultural and linguistic changes, include processes such as the intensification of transnational mobility, the expansion of economic neo-liberalisation and the institutionalisation of multilingualism (Codó and Pérez-Milans 2014; Tollefson and Pérez-Milans, forthcoming).

Intensified transnational mobility, expanding economic neo-liberalisation and the institutionalisation of multilingualism

Transnational mobility refers to increasing cultural interconnectedness, population mixing and political dynamism emanating from contemporary “superdiversity”, leading to growing complexity and unpredictability of the way social life is arranged through daily practices (Vertovec 2007). In terms of linguistic and cultural practices, the intensification of transnational mobility has led to a gradual

destabilization of abstract notions of standard languages, uniform views of speakers and stable group identities. Indeed, this process of destabilization resonates well among many researchers who have begun to investigate such practices with reference to fragmented repertoires. Rather than bounded abstract systems, the study of contemporary communication requires a different approach whereby repertoires traditionally associated with different and separate national ‘languages’ are used and negotiated in more hybrid and dynamic ways (Blommaert and Rampton 2011; Pennycook 2012; Canagarajah 2013; Rymes 2014).

Economic neo-liberalisation, on the other hand, involves selective deregulation, internationalization and privatization of national economies (Harvey 2005) through “a series of reforms, both at the level of institutions and in the management of firms, aimed at four main goals: deepening the capitalist logic of profit-seeking in capital-labor relationships; enhancing the productivity of labor and capital; globalizing production, circulation and markets, seizing the opportunity of the most advantageous conditions for profit-making everywhere; and marshalling the state’s support for productivity gains and competitiveness of national economies, often to the detriment of social protection and public interest regulations” (Castells 2010: 19). These reforms encourage states or larger supra-national political entities like the European Union to regulate the language and cultural skills of their populations in order to achieve or maintain competitiveness in international markets (Duchêne et al. 2013).

Under these neo-liberal conditions, educational institutions are required to adapt their curricula and organization to conform to centralized policies, since the state retains control over the distribution and allocation of symbolic resources through monitoring, evaluation, measurement and standardization (Del Percio and Flubacher, forthcoming). As Del Percio and Flubacher state, this is reinforced through ideas of free competition and efficiency, and through a political discourse of autonomy upon which schools become accountable for providing work forces with specific sets of (linguistic and non-linguistic) skills (see also Urciuoli 2008; Heller 2010). Thus, these institutions have to adjust centralized policies creatively (read: “unpredictably” or with insufficient support from the state) to specific contexts where new transnational institutions and corporations operate too.

As to the institutionalisation of multilingualism, nation-states are compelled to reposition themselves and abandon the uniform ‘one state/one culture/one language’ discourses that underpinned the ideological framework of modern nationalism (Anderson 1983; Billig 1995; Bauman and Briggs 2003). This is leading to an ideological transition, from defining languages as tied to ethno-national membership to conceptualising them as commodities in the globalised post-industrial/services-based market (Blommaert 2010; Heller 2011). However, the new emphasis on multilingualism and cultural diversity in contemporary societies co-exists with earlier linguistic ideologies, giving rise to the circulation of heterogeneous official discourses whereby languages are represented either as technical skills or as bounded/separate entities tied to supposed ethno-national communities (Gal 1995; Kroskrity 2000; Schieffelin et al. 1998).

Altogether, these processes of change demand new sensitivities in the study of language (education) policy, language ideology, bi-/multilingualism and/or identity.

These new sensitivities are well illustrated in three major shifts that have particularly transformed the field during the last decade.

Situated practice, commodification, and the decline of state authority

First, the increasing destabilization of bounded, stable and consensual communities and identities makes it necessary to have situated approaches to language, in contrast to critical research carried out in a “top-down” fashion. These approaches no longer rely on analytical methods that privilege the propositional content of (verbal and written) texts as empirical foci and conceptualize context as a set of “backgrounding facts” imposed too rapidly by the researchers onto people’s meaning making practices (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000). Rather, such situated approaches understand language in relation to social practice and they therefore take meaning-making practices as a set of empirically trackable actions, experiences, stances and expectations that are always enacted and negotiated in situated encounters across space and time.

Second, the expansion of the global neo-liberalised, post-industrial and services-based market requires contemporary social sciences to move away from the celebration of bi-/multilingualism towards a closer look at its commodification. In fact, recent studies have shown that bi-lingualism and multilingualism are still institutionally constructed as parallel/separate monolingualisms (Heller 2007; Blackledge and Creese 2010) in which the languages involved are attributed distinct values according to historically constructed linguistic hierarchies derived in many cases from former European colonial discourses (Fabian 1986; Errington 2001). In this way, ideas and practices of multilingualism intersect with issues of socio-economic inequality and social class. That is to say, far from people across the globe becoming mobile and multilingual citizens who enjoy a higher degree of autonomy or freedom than ever, this new (super)diversified scenario gets articulated under conditions of late capitalism where socio-economic inequality is reinforced by the fact that different social groups have different degrees of control over the production, distribution and valuation of linguistic and cultural resources (Duchêne and Heller 2012; Block 2014).

In the space of second language education, the commodification of multilingualism is deemed to be leading to a preliminary transition, away from English being treated as the main prestigious language, towards a new panorama in which English shares an institutionalized space with other languages from the wider world (Fenoulhet and Rosi Solé 2010). Indeed, widespread earlier disregard for languages from the wider world, which had resulted from the traditional Eurocentric/Western-based international order, is now evolving via a new policy framework that places more emphasis on dissemination of non-European languages even within Europe (Commission of the European Communities COM [2008]566). That said, this transition towards other languages from the wider world overlaps with the continuing prestige of English, as well as with commodification of European languages other than English in nationally regimented labour markets in Europe (May 2012).

Third, the state's loss of its monopoly over the regulation of institutions' social/discursive organization invites more nuanced accounts where modern arrangements and institutional identities are no longer taken for granted. In education, this loss of state monopoly drives schools to accommodate consumerism and to conform to the functioning of a client-relationship management in which teachers do not necessarily embody the state's authority. As a result, it is harder to describe schools as discursive spaces where teachers are representatives of the institution/state and where students are social actors who can only resist or comply with the teachers' authority. Indeed, both teachers and students find themselves experiencing high degrees of uncertainty and anxiety, which may lead to the emergence of alternative social relationships and forms of cooperation, beyond simplified accounts reporting domination on the part of either the teachers or students (Rampton 2006; Harris et al. 2011; Pérez-Milans 2013).

Research methodology

Under these conditions and related shifts, the study of social life and institutional policies needs to be fine-tuned so that situated meaning-making practices and instability are placed emphatically at the centre of the analysis. (Socio)linguistic ethnography constitutes a suitable theoretical and methodological approach to this, because it avoids bounded representations of stable communities/identities and carries a strong orientation to the discovery of the local, uncertain, unpredictable and changeable positioning of the participants in interaction. Indeed, researchers in this tradition work with transcriptions of audio-recorded interactions and look closely at how participants build common frameworks of action/interpretation.

However, unlike some other traditions (Sacks et al. 1974), this type of enquiry is not carried out by permanently putting aside any connection between local interactions and other activities/texts observed in remote spaces and times. Instead, each recorded and transcribed interaction is taken as part of a web of social activities that participants develop in the course of their trajectories throughout the organizational logic of the institution in which such activities take place, in intersection with the trajectories of other material artifacts and discourses that are produced and circulate in the research site (see Pérez-Milans forthcoming, for further discussion on this). So this type of enquiry allows us to account for links between the situated practices analysed in fieldwork and the larger historical, political and socio-economic configurations that shape (and get shaped by) such practices.

The papers in this collection

The contributions in this volume follow this approach by empirically documenting the processes described above, in the context of the European Union. They discuss how different language education policies are taken up, negotiated and made sense of by social actors in diverse educational spaces affected by distinct socio-linguistic

and institutional regimes, and they focus on their socio-economic implications. Although based on different sets of data across different contexts, the contributions all address: (1) the impact that the current political economic transformations have on educational organizations and policies, with attention to some of the institutional and inter-personal consequences; (2) the specific logic by which language practices get regimented and evaluated in educational spaces; and (3) changes over time in ideological configurations and language valuation dynamics.

In the first article, Jürgen Jaspers examines data from a Brussels Dutch-medium school where a monolingual policy collides with the linguistic diversity of the pupils whose linguistic repertoires include resources associated with Dutch, French, Arabic and Turkish. Jaspers pays close attention to the discursive co-existence of the school's emphasis on Dutch on the one hand, and the creation of multilingual spaces on the other. Beyond dichotomized accounts constructing these two realms as contradictory, Jaspers' analysis shows a more complex and nuanced picture where institutional normativities and localised anxieties are reconciled from the perspective of the teachers and students as they go through different communicative events. However, this reconciliation is not without costs. Although opening-up multilingual spaces proves to be a productive inter-personal strategy where teachers and students negotiate legitimacy and localised abstract curricula, Jaspers' case study also captures the ways in which wider-scale linguistic and educational hierarchies are enacted and reproduced in this field, with consequences for the students.

The second article, by Ana María Relaño-Pastor, focuses on the Spanish context of Madrid where a new English-Spanish bilingual programme has been recently institutionalized, linked into wider European language education policies emphasizing the importance of English in the new globalized economy. Relaño-Pastor illustrates the ways in which the situated implementation of this policy contradicts official discourse in Madrid where English (and the English-Spanish bilingual programme) is represented as available for any Madrid student regardless of socio-economic background. Far from it, Relaño-Pastor's close description of interactions and participants' voices shows how the discursive construction of bilingualism is traversed by social and linguistic hierarchies which prevent certain students with migrant and working-class backgrounds from having access to the bilingual programme and to the linguistic and cultural capital with which it is associated.

Next, Miguel Pérez-Milans explores the institutionalization of a recent language education policy that has introduced Mandarin in the curriculum of public secondary schools in London, drawing on transnational collaboration between the British Council and the *Hanban* office in the People's Republic of China. Against the backdrop of this policy and collaboration, Pérez-Milans investigates the organizational logic of one of these schools by looking at the dilemmas emerging locally in daily discursive practices. These tensions concern the position of the Chinese division within the socio-linguistic hierarchy of the school's language sections, as well as the difficult balance between the standards required by the *Hanban* office to keep the external funding on the one hand, and the need of the Chinese division to attract students and fulfill the minimum intake on the other. In particular, the article offers a window on the ways in which school as an institution handles and makes sense of these tensions, and it pays specific attention to the

emergence of collusion in the classroom as an interactional strategy whereby teachers and students construct the fiction of smooth learning even though they all face significant difficulties fulfilling the standards set by the Chinese institution.

Finally, James W. Tollefson's commentary on this thematic issue frames the contributions within broader contemporary developments in the field of language policy research. He also draws in the US context as a point of comparison, inviting the identification and discussion of wider, cross-regional processes of change tied to conditions of late modernity.

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Miguel Pérez-Milans is Assistant Professor at the Division of English Language Education, The University of Hong Kong. He holds a PhD. in Linguistics from the Autonomous University of Madrid where he studied social mobility, ethnicity, multilingualism and language education in Madrid secondary schools, under the funding of the Spanish Ministry of Science and directed by Prof. Luisa Martín-Rojo. He has been a visiting research fellow at University of Toronto, University of Zhejiang and University of Lancaster, where he was supervised by Prof. Monica Heller, Prof. Shi-xu and Prof. David Barton, respectively. He has been postdoctoral fellow, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education, at King's College London and at The University of Hong Kong, under the supervision of Prof. Ben Rampton and Prof. Angel Lin, respectively. Pérez-Milans has published in international journals within the fields of linguistics and language education studies such as *Pragmatics* (2011), *Journal of Language, Identity and Education* (2011), *Linguistics and Education* (2012), *Spanish in Context* (2012), or *International Journal of Multilingualism* (2014). He has authored a book on English language education policies and practices in late modern China, in *Routledge Critical Series in Multilingualism* (2013), and is currently co-editing with James W. Tollefson the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Language Policy and Planning* (2017). He has also been Book Review Editor for *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, and is currently Research Associate at China Institute in King's College London.