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Making Language Education Policies: A Needed Response to Globalization

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As usual, Elana Shohamy provides an outstanding stimulus for discussion of language education policy (LEP). The imposed brevity of response format provides a luxurious opportunity to indulge in unqualified generalization. This response is organized under four headings: (a) inevitability and contractions of pluralism, (b) global English and world Englishes, (c) state-centered LEP, and (d) role of language professionals.

Inevitability and Contractions of Pluralism

Globalization combines the integration of national economies and technology with vast population mobility. Vast population transfers (the poor and displaced alongside elites and the wealthy curious) are making virtually all states ethnically and linguistically diverse. Service-based commerce, not least tourism and commodified higher education, intensify this engagement with cultural and linguistic difference. Claims for indigenous rights also place languages on national policy agendas. Globalization is multidirectional and even contradictory. Economic globalization animates resistance from resurgent local identities. This resistance occurs alongside the emergence of supranational polities (e.g., the European Union) that impose a decline in national sovereignty. Linguistic hybridity and multimodal literacy confront standard languages asserted by testing-driven, centrally imposed curricula. Population movements also bring to the surface conflicts between assertions of national sovereignty and human rights claims to refuge and citizenship. Alongside the acceleration in pluralism, there is the obliteration of entire kinds of languages. The transportation to all corners of the globe of consumerist social formations, mediated by industrial and postindustrial literacy-saturated languages attached to states espousing inclusive notions of modernity, has produced a spectacular threat to the world's indigenous and tribal language forms. Of these languages, 90% are threatened with extinction. As the world aggregates towards supranational economic structures and produces multiculturalism everywhere, there is also erosion of space for languages expressing radically divergent forms of society and life.

Global English and World Englishes

The succession of English-centered global technocapital with English-based empire has converted English into the common, convenient, instrumentally demanded global language. English is immersed in a three-part cultural dynamism: the struggle of forms and norms appropriate to its global status and claimed transethnicity, the struggle for forms and norms for its new local statuses and identities, and the persistence of its identity-representing forms and norms for original native speakers. LEP debates everywhere almost always invoke English, even in its old homelands. Where it is not the main social language, English becomes the preferred second language. Where it is the dominant social language (the most effective means of citizenship) and where economy-based socialization is via literate, academic English, there arises a discourse of tension between minority language activists and the state. Connoting opportunity, supranational communication, and econo-technical modernity, English's characterizations marginalize popular representations of indigenous and immigrant minority languages. These languages struggle against associations with atavism, localism, and parochialism imposed by the limiting discourses of state, which in turn provoke rejection from minorities seeking to forestall dislocation, reject anomie, and disrupt assimilative surrender. Even within countries with secure national languages - even when these have international presence - Global English denies states some part of their past autonomous LEP because policies will always devote prominence to the acquisition of English. Not surprisingly, the distribution of bilingualism in Europe reflects the local status of English. Sociologically, bilingualism is both low and scattered in Britain - it is a phenomenon of minorities (among whom it is intergenerationally transitional) and language professionals (among whom it is intergenerationally irrelevant); it is high in non-English parts of Europe (predominantly English-knowing, except in very small nations proximal to large neighbor states, and among language

professionals and minorities, where it again appears intergenerationally transitional). LEP must take such factors into account, because these are policy in action, the effect of attitudes and ideologies of language that either sustain or subvert the declared goals of formal LEP.

Likelihood of State-Centred LEP

The massive expansion of globalization-induced pluralism makes state-centered explicit processes of LEP inevitable as states manage multicultural demographics. Two goals struggle for prominence: equality (economic- or citizenship-oriented national language instruction) versus identity (culture-oriented first language development). Although they are intimately linked, state discourses rarely acknowledge this fact. These goals take LEP form in public policy as either assimilative, monoliterate socialization, or integrative, transitional (partially biliterate) bilingualism, all the way to intergenerational, biliterate maintenance bilingualism. Most states undertake the first, some the second, few the third. Universal second or foreign language education is a practice deriving from a different constellation of factors, but it, too, is impacted by LEP for pluralist populations in new relations between heritage bilinguals and target language norms, identities, and pedagogies.

The integrating globe extends instrumental rationality to languages with relative power, not only in economic markets, but also with other kinds of capital: cultural prestige for national elites, geopolitical strategic and security calculations for states, and intergenerational connections and authenticity for minorities resisting assimilative pressures. During the 1980s and 1990s, these kinds of capital came together, in both harmony and conflict, in Australian LEP. Top-down discourses of Asian economic regionalism and national strategic interests encountered bottom-up claims to transform national identity and retain minority languages. LEP struggled to combine pluralism and identity-based participation claims, with elite interest demands. Some 15 years of intensive LEP resulted from the elevation of LEP to a national problem. An outcome has been the vast expansion of languages at elementary and secondary schools, counter-discourses of priority for English literacy, tensions between these, but also productive compromise about directions and priorities. More deeply, perhaps, the result has been the conversion of LEP into a site of cultural struggle and representation.

Role of Language Professionals

Language professionals can play a critical role in LEP. LEP is essentially a governmental process of resource allocation. States engage in LEP as low-ideology political activity. In globalized contexts, with divergent interests and increased stakes, LEP is more ideologized and conflicted. Language professionals are an interest group with ideological predilections and specific stocks of knowledge and information. Effective kinds of participation in policy processes involve engagement with arguments about effectiveness, evaluations of practice, participation in policy discussions in ways that are distinctive to the professional field, but interactive with bottom-up claims, top-down directions.

Elana Shohamy's article stimulates a consideration of the oscillation and tensions between these dimensions: pluralizing and homogenizing policy options; interest in how states seek to either co-opt, distance, or embrace pluralism; citizen collaboration and resistance to state actions; and the role of professional language personnel in the resultant agitation and momentum. LEP is not just the formal realizations of government action, but also its public discourses. Social and economic forces and prevailing language attitudes and ideologies constitute a kind of language planning that accompanies, and impedes or sustains its more formalized alternative. It is not surprising that language planning and policy are fields of growing interest in applied linguistics and relevant too for modern foreign language teaching.



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