International Journal of Research (IJR)

p-ISSN: 2348-6848
e-ISSN: 2348-795X
Vol. 8 Issue 10
October 2021

LANGUAGE POLICY AND ELT

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Abstract:

This paper examines the role of language planning and policy in the career of English language teaching across the latter half of the twentieth century. It looks at scholarship that has connected shifts in policy on language and education to the socio-political and disciplinary contexts in which it was made. The paper draws on research on language planning in plurilingual contexts to see how this has been capitalized from the peripheries.

Keywords: *language planning, policy, linguistics, ideology, agency*

1.0 Introduction

Educational policies are generally planned and structured with particular aims and objectives that are upheld at different levels. Different bodies or committees that prepare educational policies implemented nationally or regionally do so in a consultative manner, based on the inputs and requirements of various stakeholders such as institutions, experts, teachers, students, local communities, etc. In addition, the making of educational policies may also take into account international discussions, demands, standards and regulations. These policies and their underlying principles govern how educational transactions are to take place, and the functioning of educational institutions and personnel at different levels. They deal mainly with curricula, teaching methods, materials, classroom factors, learners, teachers, etc. In short, the educational policy of a country determines how the goals of education are met across schools and universities in a country. Thus, research into language policy and the teaching of English requires some attention to the rationale behind the framing of such policies, its historical and socio-political contexts.

1.1 Rationale of language policies

In his introduction to *Ideology, Politics and Language Policies* (2000), Thomas Ricento identifies several central axes or premises as partial explanations to understand how language policies were developed and continue to function. These premises would help identify the complex roles that language policies have played in promoting and preserving 'particular political and cultural interests and agendas' (3). A particular language policy may impact different communities or groups within a nation-state differently.

The first theme, he explains, has to do with how language policies that appear different may yet have in common a set of assumptions and language policies that appear similar may arise from antagonistic orientations. For example, in the south African context, an emphasis on

English and on African languages can simultaneously be both racist as well as liberatory. The former was the language of the segregationist era and yet became the language of liberation. The resistance to it arose from Afrikaans, which was at the same time a dominating language in the apartheid era in terms of other languages of South Africa.

A second theme Ricento presents is that of ideologies of language that are connected to other ideologies which in turn can 'influence and constrain the development of language policies' (4). He cites the work of Canagarajah in the Sri Lankan context to note how the use of English in the socio-political discourse prevailing in Sri Lanka becomes both allied to an 'internationalism and cultural pluralism' (4). Concurrently, it works in opposition to conservative interests that wish to advocate a policy of 'pure' Tamil in favour of a nationalist move towards a Tamil state in Sri Lanka. The third theme that Ricento outlines has to with ideologies in colonial and postcolonial contexts, where he identifies a two-way traffic between the centre and the periphery propelled by competing demands (6). The fourth theme that Ricento discusses has to with how ideological interests do not always explain the struggles of dominant social group to validate their power (6).

Ricento uses these themes to suggest that policies about language are more often than not 'forged with compromise', serving several interest groups simultaneously and may not always achieve their stated objectives (7). Thus, Ricento argues, any way of looking at language policy must understand it as a 'socially situated practice' that both informs and institutes it (8).

1.2 Language planning and policy

Research into language planning and policy has undergone several shifts. Around the middle of the twentieth century, it was viewed from the perspective of a structural linguistics that worked alongside larger socio-political processes of nation-building. This perspective was questioned later, with a recognition of the importance of bi/multilingualism. Work in language ecology, human rights and identity towards the end of the twentieth century brought into focus the roles of individuals and communities in language use and policies. The following sections lay this out in some more detail.

1.2.1 Structuralism, decolonization and pragmatics

The field of language planning and policy, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, took shape in part due to the need to develop grammars, dictionaries, writing systems and corpus planning across various languages. The structuralist turn in linguistics and social sciences thus impacted these demands, particularly in newly emergent postcolonial states which held out potential for typologists and sociolinguists. In the words of Fishman (1968a), these nations provided an 'indispensable and truly intriguing array of field-work locations for a new breed of genuine sociolinguists' (11). Thus, the focus was on selecting a national language for the purpose of nation-building and nationalization.

An implicit consensus here was that English or French (in the case of some erstwhile colonies of France) could be established as languages for use in formal domains while local vernaculars could be used in other domains. Linguistic diversity, it was implied, could be a hindrance for a national development and a linguistic homogeneity, following a European model, would facilitate 'development' and 'modernization'. This approach was also regarded

p-ISSN: 2348-6848
e-ISSN: 2348-795X
Vol. 8 Issue 10
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as non-political as it was oriented towards the goal of nation-building. In the case of developed nations, the issue in language planning was more about coping with technological issues. In the case of countries such as India that did not seem to fall under either category, the challenge was greater as there was no single indigenous language that could be considered as a national language.

1.2.2 Sociolinguistics and modernization

Research in sociolinguistics, such as work by Dell Hymes and others, raised questions about the linguistic paradigm of language acquisition and notions such 'native speaker', 'mother tongue', 'linguistic competence' and so on came to be called into question. The model of discrete languages with standard grammars also received close scrutiny. So 1970s and 1980s witnessed an awareness of the limits of the earlier model of language planning and policy as well as of the complexity of bi/multilingualism. It was recognized that the selection of 'neutral' languages of the first world were anything but, and had over time come to favour the dominant political, socio-economic and cultural interest groups. This also meant that the capabilities of various vernacular languages lost ground even as indigenous language communities were further marginalized in the nation-building process of such policies and planning. The concerns about the social, economic and political effects on languages and speech communities brought to the fore how language use was a social behaviour.

1.2.3 Linguistic human rights

A third phase of research into language policy is regarded to be post-1980s, when political events such as the formation of the European Union, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the repatriation of Hong Kong, and so on led to different formations wherein local and regional languages came into competition with 'global' languages such as English and French. Moreover, the neoliberal changes linked with globalization contributed to a paradigmatic shift in terms of control by a relatively smaller number of multinational corporations and media organizations. Edward Said, citing Adam Smith, framed it thus:

> The threat to independence in the late twentieth century from the new electronics could be greater than was colonialism itself. We are beginning to learn that decolonization and the growth of supra-nationalism were not the termination of imperial relationships but merely the extending of a geo-political web which has been spinning since the Renaissance. The new media have the power to penetrate more deeply into a 'receiving' culture than any previous manifestation of Western technology. The results could be immense havoc, an intensification of the social contradictions within developing societies today (Smith 1980: 176, cited inSaid 1993: 291–292)

One of the consequences of these conflicts for language policy was the loss of 'small' or indigenous languages. Robert Phillipson (1997), for instance, uses the term 'linguistic imperialism' to signal a 'a multitude of activities, ideologies and structural relationships … within an overarching structure of asymmetrical North/South relations, where language interlocks with other dimensions, cultural … economic and political' (239). Alistair Pennycook (1994) on the other hand distinguishes between a 'structural power' attributed to English as against its 'discursive effects' or the manner in which English may be received, impost or appropriated by language users around the world.

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e-ISSN: 2348-795X
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The work of scholars such as Pennycook offers a nuanced and contextualized description of events and language practices to posit the relations between language policies and formations of power in complex ways. Such a perspective, drawing on the work of Habermas and Foucault, also begins with an emphasis on the agency of communities from the periphery. It also takes issue with the planning aspect of language policy being regarded as a 'neutral' or a benevolent activity. While there is some criticism of political theory and its concepts (imperialism, economic power, ideology, etc.) being deployed in linguistics, some others have noted that changes or shifts in existing frames of thought are inevitably motivated by either to change an existing paradigm or maintain the status quo.

1.3 Policies, power and performativity

Distinguishing between ideology as power and ideology as that which affects the ways in which its users think and behave, Alastair Pennycook (2010) suggests that the global spread of English cannot be addressed without recourse to 'a variety of political lenses' (118). Pennycook draws on Michel Foucault's notion of power as that which operates on and through various points or nodes in a society, as well as Judith Butler's concept of gender as something that is iterated and reiterated through a performance, rather than being a pregiven. He uses these frameworks to locate the global dominance of English not as 'an apriori imperialism' but instead as 'a product of the local hegemonies of English' (117).

Pennycook is wary of the notion of universal linguistic rights as being 'too much of a dream' in a world interconnected in complex ways and in danger of denying, if not ignoring, any sense of agency, resistance or appropriation (116).

Suresh Canagarajah (2010) draws on a colonial anecdote of one Thiru from Jaffna who accidentally slips into his native Tamil while being baptized and on the verge of an English job in the colonial bureaucratic apparatus. Canagarajah reads Thiru's quick recovery into English to build an argument about a 'strategic' and 'creative' recourse to 'resources of language and discourse' that prove 'the marginalized are by no means under the total control of ideologies' (123). Canagarajah assembles thinking, communicating and behaving in a language—its discourse—as a way of 'representing and interpreting' an ideology or a reality that can set free or confine. All these concepts—language, discourse, ideology—operate in a tension that he contends is 'not only between them but within' as well. Their relative autonomy, according to Canagarajah, explains how language and ideology are negotiated by individuals on the periphery (123).

1.4 English, class, and caste

It is popularly believed in most south Asian contexts that education in English, a 'neutral' code or, following Braj Kachru (1986) an 'unmarked' one, would lead any person with competence towards social mobility. In an extremely interesting article, Satish Deshpande (2019) tracks this transformation of capital in the case of his family rooted in a feudal community with a caste-based hierarchy (his grandfather, the revenue collector or *deshpande*) into a market- and capital-oriented one (his father, the engineer in a public sector organization) with a class-based social stratification (himself as a professor at a public university). One may say that the scientific or intellectual discourse represented by this new (upper caste) elite enabled it to assume leadership and claim to lead the way towards modernization and progress. Such examples demonstrate, it may be argued, how the liberal

p-ISSN: 2348-6848
e-ISSN: 2348-795X
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discourses which represented progressive ideologies earlier gradually acquired conservative interests to prop up the power of the periphery bilinguals. Thus, there is a 'strategy of accommodation' to use Canagarajah's phrase, in which English and its discourses are invoked to make room for the vested interests of a caste community.

However, the analysis offered by a Satish Deshpande is also an articulation that travels to its readers through English. In other words, English becomes the vehicle for a critique of caste and class that is laid out in 'My story of English'. Therefore, it might be more productive to acknowledge that, for better or worse, English is now embedded in indigenous discourse traditions. On the one hand, a democratizing or pluralizing of English has become possible with the explosion in technology and the global reach of Web 2.0, mass media, pop culture and entertainment, music, etc. On the other hand, it communicates products of the market forces and cultural artefacts of the centre.

Thus, the competing and conflictual discourses of English mean that it can carry different resonances to different people at different times. In the context of our classrooms, it means that we must ensure learners are attentive to the requirement of negotiating the terms and contexts in which they will use English while at the same time they remain aware of the conflicting values it represents. They may learnt to use the language in creative communicative strategies with an awareness of the hegemonic nature of English.

1.5 English and language policies in India

In a rationale that is discussed in the sections above, a newly independent India saw education as an important tool for its economic development and the empowerment of its population. Thus, goal was to make education available and accessible with the logic of national integration and development. Indeed, almost all education Commissions after Independence have stressed 'nation-building' as one of the important goals of education. However, the absence of a national or 'link' language was a major challenge for the process of building a nation pluralistic in linguistic as well as in every other aspect (Panikkar 2011).

The three-language formula of a regional language, Hindi and English as recommended by the 1948-49 University Education Commission has continued to hold ground across the decades. The concept of primary education in the mother tongue has held sway, with the introduction of English at the tertiary level. These early education policies, noted Annamalai (2005), kept disadvantaged students away from the socio-economic benefits promised through education, since English as the medium of instruction at the tertiary level gave a clear edge to those who attended English medium schools. For the rest, he claimed,

> The English of students from socially disadvantaged castes has diverged from the Indian standard by the end of their schooling. This variety of English prevents them from acquiring the social status and economic benefits English offers to others, thereby leading to social and political tension. (34)

The presence or the absence of the linguistic and economic advantage of English language becomes in fact a deciding factor in higher education as well as in terms of career opportunities. To quote Nambissan and Lall (2011),

> One of the key cultural resources that give the Indian middle classes advantage in education and occupational opportunities is the knowledge of English language. This links back to the legacy of colonialism and has been critical in accessing of

> opportunities in post-independence decades and crucially so after the opening up of the economy. (19)

In fact, English was termed a 'gatekeeper' of economic and educational opportunities and thereby served to exclude as well as consolidate existing socio-economic inequalities. For example, Dalits and other disadvantaged communities realized the important role played by English language in a developmental process. Educationists and leaders such as Savitribai Phule and Dr B.R. Ambedkar advocated learning of English in the fight against social, religious and gender inequalities. In a newspaper article, Kancha Ilaiah Shephard (2013) discussed how India would change if just ten percent Dalit children got an education in English.

Annamalai (2013) identifies shifts in policy as emerging from state formulations as well as others. He argues

> …language policy is also made by other agents, especially the community and the individual. They too have goals to be realised through language and preferences for language(s) to be learned and used in educational institutions. Some of their goals may overlap with the language policy goals of the state, whereas others may be specific to them alone, including political and cultural identities of communities and individuals. (192).

It may be too early to comment on how the new National Education Policy 2020, offered a contentious reception, will unfold on the ground. On the one hand it gives emphasis to a multilingual approach to education and on the other, prescribes the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language as the medium of instruction until at least Class 5. However, to use a plurilingual argument, the dominance of English in the public and market sphere is where its emancipatory potential as an 'international' language lies.

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p-ISSN: 2348-6848
e-ISSN: 2348-795X
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