



Power

Inequality

Hegemony





Language Planning To Construct Power, Inequality, and Hegemony

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Spring 2002



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An Introduction To Language Policy Issues

All human beings are born with the capability to learn the language of which they are exposed to. Learning language is inevitable. However, most teacher-preparation programs in language education focus on second language acquisition and linguistics without putting them in their social, economic and political context. So, though learning language may be inevitable, the *role* of language and the impact it has on one's life is arbitrary. In other words, through the process of language education, it is not taught clearly how language contributes to one's social, economic, and political life, yet it is extremely vital and influential. Indeed, language is so deeply rooted into society that its significance is seen as natural, and its policies are issued according to "natural, common-sense assumptions" (*Planning language, planning inequality*, Tollefson 2). In response, applied linguistics currently has begun to research the impact of social, economic, and political forces upon the ideology and practice of language teaching and language learning. A central feature to their research, and now mine, is to examine the role of language policy in language education and how it is related to issues of power, inequality and hegemony.

Because of the historical and current state and national language situation, or 'dilemma' as some would have it, California has issued several language policies, such as the English Language Development (ELD) Standards and official U.S. English. The primary purpose of language policy/planning is to make "explicit the mechanisms by which planning processes interact with other historical-structural forces that form language communities and determine patterns of language structure and use" (*Planning language, planning inequality* Tollefson 36). Still, language policies and ideologies are



“articles of faith” subject to empirical verification, where there are profound related effects to the object of their inquiry (*Planning language, planning inequality* Tollefson 28). In general, language policy makers and planners see themselves as simply observers in a process they do not interfere with, and therefore place full responsibility in the hands of public schools on whether or not the goals articulated are achieved. Although language problems do incorporate public schools, on a much more covert and controversial level, they incorporate language planning/policy and its principles/ideology. What language is being planned, who is doing the planning and for whom, and for what local, state, or national purposes and with what anticipated effects, are some of the questions that must be answered in order to first understand the language planning approach to language problems, then with more adequacy and competency, address what I believe to be a more critical issue, literacy.

Language Planning Approach: Predominant Theory and Practice

The first step in understanding language policy—the language planning approach in order to regulate language situations—is to analyze historical as well as current theory and practice regarding language development and assessment.

Historically, for the first half of the twentieth century language development theory was dominated by a belief that the cognitive process “consisted of patterned connections that needed to be separately triggered and trained” (Moore and Readence 7). In other words, cognitive processes such as reading and writing could be reduced to predictable components, patterns, and functions. This ideological variety remains predominant in the current era: people often view the brain as a computer where



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information is encoded, stored, retrieved, and produced. Or they might see the teacher-student relationship the same way as a doctor-patient one, with the doctor diagnosing conditions and prescribing treatments (Moore and Readence 6). What ends up happening here though is that when people reduce the cognitive process to predictable components, patterns, and functions, they aim to produce generalizations and ‘universal’ applications.

The most widely accepted approach in assessing the achievement of students is the conception of survey instruments. Since Edward L. Thorndike (1917) and William S. Gray (1948) various tests, scales, and formulas to verify the highest achievement as a result of instructional practices have been produced (Moore and Readence 7). Into the current era, the means of assessing student achievement in a subject, such as language acquisition, by test, scales and formulas, persists. For example, California’s public schools participate in the Exit Examination (CAHSEE), SAT 9, and Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR), in addition to each district’s own standardized tests.

In 1999, as a response to the current state language situation, the Standards and Assessment Division of California’s State Board of Education adopted the English Language Development (ELD) Standards. The Standards were created by a committee of fifteen members, comprised of practitioners and scholars in English language development and assessment. The standards were designed for the purpose of moving limited-English proficient students to fluency in English. Assuming that all students will attain proficiency on the ELD standards, the committee maintains that it takes into consideration the various degrees/rates at which language acquisition occurs—keeping in mind California’s 1.4 million English-language learners (those acquiring English as a second language). California’s public school system is unique wherein over 40% of its



student population has a primary language other than English and a 25% student population of not-yet-fluent English learners. As compared to monolingual English students, these students generally enter school with a smaller vocabulary and less knowledge of sentence structure. In short, according to the designers of these standards, English language learners are in a state of “catch up” (Standards and Assessments Division 1).

The committee also maintains that the developmental process English-language learners undergo differ from the experiences of monolingual English learners. It is their assumption that “grammatical structures that monolingual English speakers learn early in their language development may be learned much later by students learning English as a second language”; and therefore suggest that the “progress to full competency for English-language learners depend on the age at which a child begins learning English and the richness of the child’s English environment” (Standards and Assessments Division 1).

The ELD document uses words like “common,” “logical,” “appropriate,” and “standard” quite frequently with explicit and implicit definitions and applications for the English Language Development Standards (Standards and Assessments Division 1-89). The following are some examples of the ELD standards for grades 9-12 that I found most interesting and controversial¹:

Listening and Speaking

- ◆ Recognize appropriate ways of speaking that vary based on purpose, audience, and subject (25).

¹ The following ELD Standards are to be further discussed under Constructions of Language Planning



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- ◆ Speak clearly and comprehensibly using standard English grammatical forms, sounds, intonation, pitch and modulation (28).

Reading

- ◆ Demonstrate sufficient knowledge of English syntax to interpret the meaning of idioms, analogies, and metaphors (46).

Writing

- ◆ Clarify and defend positions with relevant evidence, including facts, expert opinions, quotations and/or expressions of commonly accepted beliefs and logical reasoning (73).

Constructions of Language Planning

The second step in understanding language policy is to examine the space(s) in which its theory and practice exist. The primary target space where language policy is explicitly and implicitly exercised is in public schools. Within this space there are two major competing forces—the school itself and the State Board of Education—which I discuss here as subcultures.

Schools are subcultures within broader communities “that have their own bodies of cultural knowledge and ways of communicating and legitimizing that knowledge” (David G. O’Brien, Elizabeth B. Moje and Roger A. Stewart, 31). They are a structural and social representation of how individuals “construct their teaching and learning lives within a system based on partially shared beliefs, practices, symbols, and knowledge”



(David G. O'Brien, Elizabeth B. Moje and Roger A. Stewart, 31). Observing schools from this perspective comes from the understanding that all schools share some organizational, political, and ideological foundations even though each school has a distinct "cultural stamp" due to its unique social organization, expectations, administrative structure, community members, and values of the community in which the school is situated (David G. O'Brien, Elizabeth B. Moje and Roger A. Stewart, 31).

As I mention above, the State Board of Education is also a subculture with "their own bodies of cultural knowledge and ways of communicating and legitimizing that knowledge." Planning and advising committees, governing and enforcing agencies, and producing and distributing branches are all correlating bodies that make up a subculture. Ways of communicating a subculture's knowledge can be observed through the process of adopting the ELD Standards: From California's Department of Education the Standards and Assessment Division submits to the Board of Education the ELD Standards, which it adopts then passes down to the English Language Proficiency Assessment Project, an advisory committee, where the Standards are to be further developed and overseen as they are implemented in public schools. Simply through the process of adopting these Standards, legitimacy of this subculture's knowledge has been established.

Once ELD Standards and other language policies enter the public school space, schools immediately become sites of struggle. It is a struggle about whose knowledge, experiences, and ways of using language are legitimate. And, as I will discuss further, students are in an unfair position, in terms of power; nonetheless, Giroux in Elsa Auerbach's essay "The politics of the ESL classroom", argues that whenever the



dominant forces/subcultures (a.k.a. State Board of Education) shape the educational agenda and the goal is to construct and reconstruct existing inequalities and hegemony, there is resistance to this agenda (12). This resistance may take the form of overt rejection of teacher authority, refusal to learn in prescribed ways, or dropping out (McDermott 1977; Ogbu 1991).

Power and Inequality

Learning the purpose of language policy to determine patterns of language structure and use, appeals to the issues of power and inequality. Whose language experience is legitimate, what counts as legitimate knowledge, and how is this knowledge expressed are essential questions in the analysis of power and inequality.

Power can be analyzed from several perspectives. In his book *Planning Language, Planning Inequality* James W. Tollefson describes three types of power: discourse, state, and ideological power. “Discourse power” refers to events of interaction between unequal individuals (Tollefson 9-10). Within the classroom, it is the unequal interaction between student and teacher where ‘discourse power’ thrives. By definition, ‘discourse’ is language in its fullest sense, including syntax, semantics, and other linguistic features like sounds and context. Sometimes it even goes as far as including the set of utterances a speaker produces (Thomas and Tchudi 345). And the teacher is generally seen as the norm setter and regulator of discourse. But it is outside of the classroom where ‘discourse power’ really begins. It begins with language policy. One of the ELD Standards cited demonstrates this ‘discourse power’: “Speak clearly and comprehensibly using standard English grammatical forms, sounds, intonation, pitch and



modulation” (Standards and Assessment Division 28). The power to determine who speaks ‘clearly and comprehensibly’ and dictates the linguistic manner in which they are to speak is exclusionary and unfair. According to this Standard, because a native-speaker of an Asian language, for example, does not have the initial enabling experience of pronouncing certain English letters such as [r] and [l] ‘clearly’ and/or ‘comprehensibly,’ they are automatically ‘fail’; then, most likely be given limited-English proficiency status even though they might speak with standard-grammatical English. The experience one has in learning a language is different and unique from another’s experience. After all, its from these experiences one learns what grammar is fundamentally: “what it is one knows when one knows a language” (Thomas and Tchudi 60).

“State power” refers to control of governmental agencies (Tollefson 10). The state is the basis where bodies of power (i.e. State Board of Education) preserve and expand its dominance. Language policy is one of the many mechanisms available to the state to exercise its power and control. So, in terms of language policy, it is the authoritative office that summons and sends out the ‘experts’ to set the norms of language structure and use. Demonstrating ‘state power’, California’s State Board of Education empowers one of these ‘experts’ to create and implement the following cited Listening and Speaking Standard: “Recognize appropriate ways of speaking that vary based on purpose, audience, and subject” (Standards and Assessment 25). This standard is unjust and unfair, because whose to say what is ‘appropriate’ or what is a legitimate way to express one’s knowledge.

“Ideological power” refers to the ability to project one’s own theories and practices as commonsense and universally applicable (Tollefson 10). In the event of



teacher-student interaction, this type of power is illustrated with the popular conception that teaching is a neutral transfer of skills, knowledge, and competencies. In fact, knowledge itself is often seen as neutral and objective. Paulo Freire, in a critical analogy, coins this neutral transfer as the *Banking Model*, where students are “empty vessels who passively receive deposits of knowledge in an uncritical one-way transfer” (Auerbach 11). In other words, ideology is something done to them, and students are positioned as subordinates. This type of power in the hands of language policy-makers is exercised by coercion (forcing others to go along with them) or consent (convincing them that it is in their best interest to do so—however, consent is not necessarily the result of conscious choice, but rather an unconscious acceptance of institutional practices). Language policy-makers are often seen as the experts and professionals, the people who ‘know’ what is best; thus, ‘ideological power’ is the naturalization and legitimization of control by consent (Auerbach 10). But too often, these experts’ ‘ideological power’ goes unchallenged. In the cited Reading Standard, English syntax is described as a means to interpreting a sentence’s meanings, idioms, analogies, and metaphors (Standards and Assessment 46). Unchallenged, this standard implies that syntax is all a language learner needs to know when understanding content. This is misleading, however. Syntax is only the set of rules that govern how a sentence is constructed (Thomas and Tchudi 350). This alone cannot inform a reader of meanings, idioms, analogies, and metaphors. Missing in this particular standard are concepts such as *deep structure* and *semantics* that are vital in literary interpretation.

Together, these types of power refer to the capacity of controlling resources, both tangible economic resources and intangible resources such as language and discourse.



Perhaps the most important determinate of access into education and of varying degrees of academic achievement is language. Consequently, language also becomes a determinate of access into the job-world and of economic 'success'. Therefore, language is a factor in the construction and reconstruction of social and economic divisions.

Closely related to the issue of power in language policy/planning is inequality. Because of this, constructed social and economic divisions easily become social and economic inequalities. As the English language is most commonly associated with the United States, where it is exclusively used in spheres of education, government, and major mass media, other languages become invisible and, therefore subordinate and unequal. When a language is subordinate and unequal, often times so is the individual or group it belongs to. Within the sphere of education, for example, a subordinate, unequal student would suffer disadvantage because they are required to attend classes in which they do not understand the language of instruction.

Hegemony

What I believe to be the most pervasive concept and tactic in language policy/planning is hegemony. Since language planning is particularly effective in constructing power and inequality, ideas about language itself are defined/re-defined. The exclusive use of the English language in spheres of education, government, and major mass media, for example, gives the impression that it is the preferred, logical, and natural language to acquire. That is why the common idea of everyone speaking one language variety seems so natural and logical. To the extent that these feelings of what is natural and logical about language become pervasive, hegemony has been established.



Demonstrating hegemony is one of the cited ELD's Writing Standards where students are to write in harmony with "commonly accepted beliefs and logical reasoning" (Standards and Assessment Division 73). 'Common' and 'logical' here are ideas about language, especially the English language, that language planners want one to believe in: When the ELD document states that they assume all students will attain proficiency on the ELD Standards, means that the Standards were constructed as universally applicable; so, when they say "commonly accepted beliefs and logical reasoning" they are trying to sale two ideas: 1) that common and logical reasoning is an absolute law/standard which governs language use and 2) that logic is a set of rules that govern language behavior. Indeed, it is common to have logically conflicting beliefs.

Hegemony can also be observed through a whole different vein of language policy projected beyond the sphere of public education and the state. It is actually a movement that influences language planning to shift English, the *de facto* language of the United States, to official status. This movement is known as U.S. English. On April 27, 1981, Senator S. I. Hayakawa (R, California) proposed as a constitutional amendment Senate Joint Resolution 72. Senator Hayakawa intended that English be declared the official language of the United States, and in addition that it be unlawful for the "federal government or any state [to make or enforce] 'any law which requires the use of any language other than English'" (Donahue 112). In its first version, this bill failed to reach congressional committee. However, it wasn't long before Senator Hayakawa found support and joined ranks with FAIR (Federation for American Immigration Reform) organizer, John Tanton. Together they rallied more support from interest groups with strong influence on language policy on both the state and federal levels. Between 1984



and 1990, they developed a successful campaign to mobilize the U.S. public and convince them that: 1) English should be the official language of the U.S. and that 2) bilingual education should be ousted. Since then fourteen states declared English as the official language—North Carolina, Georgia, Oklahoma, New Hampshire, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Illinois, Arkansas, North Dakota, South Dakota, Colorado, Arizona (a decision since suspended and now under litigation), and California (Donahue 112-114).

One of the ways they are successful in mobilizing the public and government is by mailing their rhetoric materials. Mailed in 1991 was a flyer entitled “A Common Language Benefits Our Nation and Its People” (Donahue 113). Cited within this flyer is “In our country this bond is more important than in most because Americans continue to be diverse in origin, ethnicity, religion and native culture.” The now-former U.S. Senator Hayakawa is quoted as saying “a common language unifies, multiple languages divide,” asserting that in the future “a division perhaps more ominous in the long run than the division between blacks and whites” is currently being threatened by “the ethnic chauvinism of the present Hispanic leadership” (Donahue 114). To him, Hispanics make a living by perpetuating the conditions they live in, “insisting on special programs, special treatment and special handouts” (Donahue 114). Currently, arguments put out by U.S. English regarding “Hispanic fecundity” include “speaking Spanish *causes* racial tensions and low economic achievement” (Donahue 115). Here, they are misleading the public into believe that Spanish (or any other non-English language) is the problem and not racism. Rhetoric like this that influence language policy are extremely dangerous because they not only work to construct hegemony, but power and inequality.



The hegemony of English is not merely tolerated by the United States; it is considered a legitimate construct of society. But the legitimacy of U.S. English is based on an old myth, a sociolinguistic myth that English-only implies economic success. In fact, it is this myth that the founders of this country tried to avoid: The beliefs that the U.S. had the resources to “structurally incorporate its citizenry and that economic success would be linked to a natural shift to English led the founding fathers to reject the imposition of English as the official language” (García 146). Still, that did not stop the myth from becoming reality for many white immigrants during Manifest Destiny. But it has remained a myth for Native-Americans, African-Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos/Hispanics (i.e. Mexican-American, Cuban-American, Puerto Rican-American etc.). Even though these groups have achieved high rates of English acquisition, most of them have little economic success. That is why it is not ironic that despite the low rates of English acquisition achieved by Cuban-Americans, they have enjoyed the greatest economic success (García 146). There is further evidence that English acquisition does not result in economic nor social success for racial and linguistic minorities. African-Americans, for example, remain largely excluded from the socioeconomic mainstream even though they have completely shifted to English. Though less successful than the shift to English among African-Americans, Spanish among Latinos has declined tremendously, yet they still do not partake of many economic benefits: In the 1975 Current Population Survey, eleven percent identified as Spanish-monolingual of eleven million Spanish-origin respondents. Yet, based on 1988 income, “24 percent of Latino families fell below the poverty level, compared with 9 percent of non-Latino families (US Bureau of the Census 1990)” (García 146-147).



A critical response to the U.S. English movement is the “core-periphery” analysis, also commonly known as the process of marginalization. This analysis states that “any attempt to divide subject populations along lines of...language...is in fact an attempt to create a cultural division of labor in which a [peripheral] minority is held subservient to the economic and political interests of a core majority” (Donahue 115). Applying this analysis to the U.S. English language policy, it seems as though the purpose of this vein of policy is to restrict the political, social, and economic power of minority-language-speaking groups and force them to the periphery of society in order to preserve and increase the dominate-language group’s own core wealth and power.

Basically, what U.S. English does is exploit the fears of the majority population who are terrified of change, because to them change is threatening. And when they feel threatened they are driven to protectionist behavior. The U.S. English movement is a manifestation of linguistic protectionism. They influence language policy with hegemonic implications as a means of producing inequalities and excluding certain racial and linguistic groups from participating fully as citizens or residents of this country. So, just what kind of change does the majority population fear? They fear that one language, English, will no longer unify the U.S. Well, this appeals to another sociolinguistic myth: that this country once experienced a “Golden Age” in which we all spoke English (Madrid 63). But the reality is that we never had such an experience. For example, at the time of the Declaration of Independence there was a significant number of German speakers; therefore, the founders wisely chose not to single out English as the national or official language, because they did not want to “propose that English officially displace



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other languages...far more important as forces to unify the nation were individual rights, freedoms, and protections” (Madrid 63).

So, why does the government and public adopt language policies that construct hegemony? One reason, among others, is that people who are required by such policies to acquire a new language in order to gain access to education or work are usually excluded from the policy-making process (*Planning language, planning inequality* Tollefson 209).

Literacy: A Critical Issue

Language policies like ELD Standards and U.S. English are false policy issues that only serve to construct power, inequality, and hegemony. What the real policy issue facing California and the U.S. is literacy. The ELD document ignores that when it diverts attention towards California’s 1.4 million English-language learners. And U.S. English movement ignores that when they mislead the government and public into believing that English unifies the nation politically, promotes social equality, and guarantees economic success. But what the state of California and the U.S. lack and therefore need is a higher literacy rate. Currently, there are over 25 million illiterates nation-wide, and the overwhelming majority of whom are English monolingual speakers (Madrid 63). The fact is a literate person in one language is better equipped and more likely to become literate in English than illiterates (Madrid 63).

Interestingly, literacy works in a similar way as language policy does; in that they work as constructs. However, the difference is that language policy works from a controlling, authoritative, and privileging standpoint (i.e., discourse, state, and ideological



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power), whereas literacy works from the people's perspective. Literacy enables people to construct their own worlds and act accordingly. In the classroom then, literate students can participate in structuring literate actions and dynamics. From this perspective, literacy constructs power too. But unlike language policy, literacy constructs power for the purpose of examining power relations and encourages reform. It incites learners to bring to the events of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, their experiences in relation to their subordinate or privileged position in the world.



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