INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME 1: LANGUAGE POLICY AND POLITICAL ISSUES IN EDUCATION

ADDRESSING THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

The late David Corson, the General Editor of the first edition of the Encyclopedia of Language and Education, was both an outstanding social theorist of language and a committed activist in the language policy and language education fields. His position was that an acute understanding of theory was a necessary prerequisite for action, not an alternative to it—particularly if one were ever to hope to change existing language conditions that disadvantage, most often, minority groups. Corson articulated this position consistently throughout his work (see May, 2002) and this might explain why the first volume of that first edition of the Encyclopedia, under Ruth Wodak’s editorship, began with the question of the politics of language.

Under Nancy Hornberger’s General Editorship of the second edition, this understanding and commitment remain intact, and the first volume of this current edition again begins with a focus upon the politics of language—highlighting and foregrounding the importance of the social and political contexts of language policy and language education. And yet, for some, this might still seem surprising. After all, for much of its history, linguistics as an academic discipline, particularly in its more trenchant structuralist forms, has been preoccupied with idealist, abstracted approaches to the study of language. But this is precisely the problem. Language has too often been examined in isolation from the social and political conditions in which it is used, resulting in a synchronic or ‘presentist’ approach to language (Bourdieu, 1982, 1991; May, 2005). As the French sociologist and social anthropologist, Pierre Bourdieu, comments ironically of this process:

bracketing out the social . . . allows language or any other symbolic object to be treated like an end in itself, [this] contributed considerably to the success of structural linguistics, for it endowed the ‘pure’ exercises that characterise a purely internal and formal analysis with the charm of a game devoid of consequences. (1991, p. 34.).

The legacy of this decontextualized approach to language analysis can be seen in the ahistorical, apolitical approach that has too often characterized academic discussions of language policy and language
education. In the language policy (LP) arena, for example, this was most evident in the early stages of formal LP development, in the 1960s–1970s. During this period, LP was seen by its proponents as a non-political, non-ideological, pragmatic, even technicist, paradigm (see Tollefson, Language Planning in Education, Volume 1). Its apparently simple and straightforward aim was to solve the immediate language problems of newly emergent postcolonial states in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. While concern was often expressed for the ongoing maintenance of minority languages in these contexts, the principal emphasis of LP at this time was on the establishment and promotion of “unifying” national languages in postcolonial contexts, along the lines of those in Western, developed contexts.

What was not addressed by these early efforts at LP were the wider historical, social and political issues attendant upon these processes, and the particular ideologies underpinning them. As Luke, McHoul and Mey observe, while maintaining a ‘veneer of scientific objectivity’ (something of great concern to early language planners), LP ‘tended to avoid directly addressing social and political matters within which language change, use and development, and indeed language planning itself, are embedded’ (1990, pp. 26–27).

To take just one example: this presentist approach to LP did not question or critique the specific historical processes that had led to the hierarchizing of majority and minority languages, along with their speakers, in the first place. As we shall see, these processes are deeply imbricated with the politics of modern nationalism, and its emphasis on the establishment of national languages and public linguistic homogeneity as central, even essential, tenets of both modernization and Westernization (see, for example, May, Language Education, Pluralism and Citizenship, Volume 1; Branson and Miller, National Sign Languages and Language Policies, Volume 1). Consequently, the normative ascendency of national languages was simply assumed, even championed, by early advocates of LP, and all other languages were compared in relation to them. As Bourdieu again observes of this process:

To speak of the language, without further specification, as linguists do, is tacitly to accept the official definition of the official language of a political unit. This language is the one which, within the territorial limits of that unit, imposes itself on the whole population as the only legitimate language . . . The official language is bound up with the state, both in its genesis and its social uses . . . this state language becomes the theoretical norm against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured. (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 45.; emphases in original)

As Jan Blommaert argues, this kind of approach to LP—or to sociolinguistics more generally—takes no account of human agency, political
section of the wider social, economic and political contexts of language policy and language education is consonant with recent research on the ideological influences of language policy (Blommaert, 1999; May, 2001, 2005; Patrick and Freeland, 2004; Ricento, 2006; Schiffman, 1996; Schmid, 2001; Woolard, 1998). It is also consonant with more critical, postmodernist conceptions of language (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007; Pennycook, 2001). As such, the contributions in this volume incorporate and address the very latest developments in language policy and education.

Section 1 focuses directly on contextual factors. James Tollefson begins the section with a summary of key developments in language policy. Stephen May addresses the highly relevant, and still-often controversial challenge faced by many modern nation-states—how to accommodate cultural and linguistic diversity without prejudicing social cohesion. David Block discusses key trends and challenges in the current globalization of language(s), particularly English. Joan Kelly Hall explores the multiple connections between language and culture, while Aneta Pavlenko and Ingrid Piller examine the intersections of language and gender, particularly in multilingual contexts. These latter two contributions, along with Ben Rampton, Roxy Harris, James Collins and Jan Blommaert’s analysis of language and class, address directly questions of identity politics, as well as their material consequences. The material consequences of language policies, and language education, are also a principal concern of François Grin, who provides a timely analysis of language and economics. The final contribution in this section, by Bill Johnston and Cary Buzzelli, explores the moral dimensions of language education and some of the potential challenges and controversies therein.

A key concern that threads throughout this volume is given particular attention in Section 2. This section focuses on the importance of addressing, and where possible remedying, underlying, often highly
discriminatory processes that stigmatize and undermine minority languages and their speakers—not only linguistically, but also culturally, socially, economically and politically. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas examines how linguistic human rights for minority language speakers might ameliorate existing contexts of linguistic disadvantage and/or discrimination, arguing strongly for their further development in both national and supranational contexts. Fernand de Varennes discusses this issue also but in relation to wider developments in international law, outlining the history of minority rights protection schemes and the possibilities that recent changes offer for the further development of minority language rights, particularly at the supranational level. Teresa McCarty explores how the world’s indigenous peoples have established a highly effective international movement over the last 40 years or so, aimed specifically at redressing the long colonial histories of minoritization and disadvantage they have faced. This has included a particular focus on the revitalization of indigenous languages and cultures, and the crucial role that education has come to play in this. Jan Branson and Donald Miller conclude this section by focusing on the language rights of deaf communities around the world, with a particular focus on their long struggle for the recognition of sign languages.

Section 3 focuses on key theoretical and related pedagogical developments in the language education field. Alastair Pennycook provides an overview of the critical turn in sociolinguistics and language education, discussing the ongoing development of the still nascent field of critical applied linguistics. Hilary Janks explores the impact of such developments on language pedagogy and practice, particularly via the emergence of critical literacy approaches to teaching and learning, which highlight and deconstruct notions of power. Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope examine these developments from another direction—the emergence of an educational approach focused on the promotion of multiliteracies. Multiliteracies include those new literacies needed in a digital age and in relation to new forms of work in an increasingly globalized world. The remaining three chapters in this section explore the implications of these various developments in critical language theory and practice in relation to particular fields of education. Suresh Canagarajah examines, and at times problematizes, the arena of second language education, particularly in relation to the increasingly global reach of English. Terrence Wiley discusses the field of teacher education and how neophyte teachers might be better equipped to address positively these new literacy demands and the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of our student populations. Noeline Wright extends this analysis into schools themselves, exploring what schools require in order to change their literacy practices along these lines.
Section 4 completes this volume by providing a wide range of contributions that focus on the language policies and language education characteristics of particular regional or national contexts. While this section is inevitably selective, there has been a deliberate attempt to include more non-Western contexts—extending the range of contexts discussed and providing at least the beginnings of a more representative overview of such contexts. Links are also made throughout this section with the more general issues and concerns discussed in the previous sections. Robert Phillipson begins by analysing language policy developments at the European supranational level. Naz Rassool discusses language policy in Britain—including the often-overlooked areas of Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Thomas Ricento and Wayne Wright provide an overview of language debates in the USA, including the latest developments in the so-called English-Only movement. Enrique Hamel discusses Mexico and Juan Carlos Godenzzi the region of the Andes, with both authors highlighting the significance of indigenous language education initiatives within their respective regions, as well as the ongoing legacy of Spanish colonialism. Barbara Burnaby updates the language policy context in Canada, while Joseph Lo Bianco discusses recent developments in Australian language policy, most notably, with respect to the retrenchment of some of the key multicultural language policy initiatives of the 1980s. Kathleen Heugh provides an overview of the latest language policy and language education developments in South Africa, highlighting how the potential of the new ostensibly multilingual South African Constitution is being undermined by an increasingly de facto English-language education approach. Lachman Khubchandani examines the multiple challenges and opportunities for language policy and language education in multilingual India, while Tariq Rahman focuses on the similarly multilingual language context in Pakistan. Sachiyo Fujita-Round and John C. Maher discuss language policy in Japan, while Agnes Lam concludes this volume by examining the complexity of language policy and language education in China and its Territories.

All of the contributions to this volume acknowledge the centrality of the politics of language in discussions of language policy and language education. Such policies and educational practices are always situated in relation to wider issues of power, access, opportunity, inequality and, at times, discrimination and disadvantage. Returning to the quote by Bourdieu at the beginning of this introduction: language policy and language education are demonstrably not games ‘devoid of consequences’ which can be examined blithely by a synchronic or presentist approach. Rather, as these contributions hope to show, it is only when a diachronic, critical view is taken that we can begin to understand just what is at stake—socially, politically, economically and
linguistically—for all those affected by language policy and language education initiatives. As David Corson would have argued, such an understanding is also the only effective basis we have for changing such policies for the better.

Stephen May

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