

Interview

An Interview with Dr. Ofelia García on the Past, Present and Future of Language Policy

Benjamin Kinsella

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, USA

Interview received 9 May 2016, accepted 16 May 2016, final version 25 May 2016

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5565/rev/jtl3.682>

Dr. Ofelia García is Professor in the Ph.D. programs of Urban Education and of Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Literatures and Languages at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She has been Professor of Bilingual Education at Columbia University's Teachers College, Dean of the School of Education at the Brooklyn Campus of Long Island University, and Professor of Education at The City College of New York. Among her best-known books are *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective*; *Translanguaging*; *Language, Bilingualism and Education* (with Li Wei); *Educating Emergent Bilinguals* (with J. Kleifgen), *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity* (with J. Fishman), *Negotiating Language Policies in Schools: Educators as Policymakers* (with K. Menken), *Imagining Multilingual Schools* (with T. Skutnabb-Kangas and M. Torres-Guzmán), and *A Reader in Bilingual Education* (with C. Baker). She is the General Editor of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* and the co-editor of *Language Policy* (with H. Kelly-Holmes). For the past four years, García has been co-principal investigator of CUNY-NYSIEB (www.cuny-nysieb.org). García's extensive publication record on bilingualism and the education of bilinguals is grounded in her life experience living in New York City after leaving Cuba at the age of 11, teaching language minority students bilingually, educating bilingual and ESL teachers, and working with doctoral students researching these topics.

The interview published in this Special Issue was conducted in the May 2016, following the author's participation in a graduate seminar entitled *Global Perspectives on Language and Education Policy* taught by Dr. Ofelia García and Dr. Carmina Makar. In this interview, several issues relating to the past, present and future of the language policy were discussed.

Interview

Interviewer: Could you define language policy?

Ofelia García: Language policy has been defined in many different ways and this is the way that I would interpret it. I think that mostly when people talk about language policy, they talk about the top down position of what governments and agents, who are really authority figures, say

about how language should be used in different domains. I think since Spolsky and probably since Fishman, we have been very aware of the fact that the practices, the beliefs, and the attitudes about language are also part of language policy. That is, language policy is not made from the top down, but rather impacted by the practices of people and definitely impacted by the ideologies that people have about language. So the idea that language policy can be made and implemented is absolutely not true, except in very authoritative societies. I think that is how it started. Language planning and language policy were certainly systems of control of people, but what we know about language policy is that it could either work to restrict linguistic opportunities, but also to expand linguistic opportunity.

So what really has to be acknowledged about language policy is that it also works from the bottom up like Nancy Hornberger has described it, how Kate Menken and I have talked about it, and how Johnson has shown. Agents shape language policy. Furthermore, it is not just what is imposed, but as people implement language policy, they are also making language policy. Language policy, I think, is a lot more dynamic than it was in the original conception where it was just top down corpus planning, status planning, and acquisition planning. It is a lot more dynamic because the agents are more equally distributed. Sometimes the policy that speakers make is more powerful than the one that has been created and just imposed down.

Interviewer: Have you seen the field of language policy evolve?

Ofelia García: It has evolved since I started studying about language policy. I started studying with Joshua Fishman and during the beginnings of language policy. Even the naming of it was different because we used to call it language planning. The idea was that language could be planned. The whole idea of Fishman was to not leave your language alone. You can plan this, you can plan the corpus of the language, you can plan the status of the language, and you can plan how people acquire the language. And I think, again, that this has unraveled, because the world has gotten more complex. What language policy did was it offered us a description of how things were done. But in doing so, in offering the description, it didn't give us enough criticality to think of how these policies were restricting the way in which people used languages.

I think certainly from the work of Tollefson, who was the one who really introduced the idea of critical language policy, the field has completely evolved. I think both Nancy Hornberger and also Tom Ricento have talked about classical language policy versus critical language policy. And I think that is has gone in a completely different direction, one that incorporates agents, people, speakers, outside of government agencies, and gives authority to people. That is, it is more equally distributed. I also think it has to do with the ways in which we are experiencing globalization, a neo-liberal economy, and technology. I think of this all the time because it is impossible to control language in a world that is technologically enriched like ours. For example, recently I spent all day looking at classrooms in which languages were being taught that had a policy about how the language should be taught. However, the students all had laptops. You could not control the language input because the students were constantly looking at websites that were in English and constantly looking at Google Translate. So language policy cannot be controlled in the same way that it was when the field started after, of course, the independence of all the Asian and African countries. When we had to deal with this, we asked “what are we going to do with all these language problems?” That is the way in which language diversity was looked upon. Whereas today we do not look at it in the same way. We just think of it as affordances that we all have. I think the field has evolved because we all know that language is controlled by people and not by governments or whatever. It cannot be controlled because it's a lot more dynamic than that.

Interviewer: What do you think is the current direction of language policy? Are there any needed areas of research within this field?

Ofelia García: I think what we must recognize is that language policy today, again, has to change because of technology. Families are reconstituted because so many of our traditional social factors have in many ways become much more dynamic. I think society is changing. In terms of what research is needed, family language policy is an important area of need. The whole idea has always been, with language policy, that languages had to be separated. Certainly in family language policy the idea is that language had to be maintained and it had to be maintained because one person had to speak one language while the other person had to speak the other language. This was the same thing in language education policy, for example. What we know

now and we understand deeply is that multilingualism is a lot more complex than that. Certainly our familiarity with the African multilingualism especially, and the Asian multilingualism, has made us question some of those assumptions. There are children growing up in South Africa right now that have six languages when they are born that go to school. I am not talking about maybe Johannesburg, but in other townships. They go to schools in these townships and the teachers are not teaching through one language, but maybe in first grade the teacher is a Xhosa speaker and that is what she speaks, and the second grade is in another language medium. There is this range of language practices that are recognized, which were not allowed before in the classroom.

I think that we need more work on this type of more dynamic language policy. How is it that languages interact, but yet reserve spaces and sustain themselves? I recently heard wonderful definitions about sustainability at a dual language school. One of the children said, "You do not just sustain things when you choose to not take something away, but when you also give back. Therefore, it lasts a long time." I thought a lot about language sustainability that way. How do you make sure that you continue to sustain this language, but not in isolation, because we can no longer be in isolation? How do you sustain it in the constant interaction that we have with the other languages? I think there is a lot of work to be done in this dynamic language policy, both empirical and descriptive. I do not think that we have enough descriptions about this dynamic language policy that exists in many African countries, for example. I just came from the *American Association of Applied Linguistics*. There was no presence of African scholars and very few from Asian countries. But at any rate, we do not have descriptions of what goes on that are dynamic in nature. Sometimes, again, it has to do with our own intellectual coloniality. Many of these African sociolinguists come to the West to train and then they pick up all our cosmology about what languages should be, etcetera. They go back to their African countries and repeat the same thing so that they become even more myopic than some of us.

There are a lot of exceptions, of course, and I think that is happening more and more. Certainly there are sociolinguists who are wonderful in this stuff, but I think that it is slow in coming. So descriptions are also needed. For example, in the post-colonial context, many have adopted a dynamic lens. Angel Lin from Hong Kong, for example. When she first started thinking about

this, and when she first started dialoguing with me, she said, “This is what we've done in Hong Kong forever, but we had never described it because it was not supposed to be done this way.” It was supposed to be done in English only or in Chinese only. But if the books are in English, they are discussed in the classroom in Chinese because the students don't have enough English, right? But this practice wasn't accepted and therefore not described. Language policies in families, in societies, in schools, are a lot more dynamic than they are described. It's out there; it's just we haven't described it. No one has described it yet. It's starting to come, it's emerging, but it's slow. I think both descriptions, qualitative descriptions would be welcomed, and of course empirical work is also important. I think that especially in the context of today where empirical quantitative research is valued, I think that mixed methodology has to occur. Both qualitative and quantitative, all of this would be important.

Interviewer: So how does language policy relate to language issues in higher education?

Ofelia García: Well, I think that there are issues at all levels of education and perhaps even more in higher education. Because at least in elementary education and secondary education, when education is required in the United States, Kindergarten through 12th grade, we may not agree with the language policy that the schools confront us with, but it is there in some way. The teachers may subvert them; the teachers may change them, transform them in some way; but at least we are always working with a policy. So it would be, “this is the policy, this is the reality, and how do we bring these two things together?” Sometimes the language policy is constraining, and we cannot do what it is really, really needed, but somehow both of these things are in tandem.

I think that what happens with higher education is that we have not even begun to think about language issues or language policy in higher education except to say, for example, “well, in order to get into, for example, content courses, you have to have adequate English.” How this is done depends very much on the university. Every higher education institution that I know of does this differently. In some cases they keep students out until they pass exams. In other cases they let them in and they do more content language-integrated instruction. There is a need for clarity as to what should be happening. I think also you have to recognize that there is a difference between

language policy in higher education for immigrant students, and for international students. With international students, for English, we are a lot more tolerant of their English performances; whereas with immigrant students, we are a lot less tolerant of it. This is obvious if you compare a small community college to one of the big private universities that have a lot of international students. Somehow there is a lot of support for the international students. A lot of professors are willing to not care that they have appropriate grammar. Whereas with the immigrant students, if English is not standard English, as it is understood, they cannot advance. Also, you have to think, how does one learn language? One learns language and one performs in language when one has the opportunity to use it and when one has the affordances. So the more we restrict those opportunities, the less students are going to be able to develop English. I am always troubled by these divisions that we make between the international students who we are very willing to be tolerant with because they are paying our tuitions and keeping our universities alive, and the lack of tolerance that we have towards students who have come here, live here, and sometimes are born here. We think that they have to have the standard, “appropriate” English before they can acquire content, which is ridiculous because the more content we have, the more language we have. The more we know, the more we expand our language repertoire and language performances.

As far as languages other than English are concerned, I think that there are less and less language policies in higher education that support the learning of a language other than English. We know that most universities do not require a language other than English. When they do, they require one year. We know that 80% of students of languages other than English in universities in the United States only take first and second level courses. They generally do not go beyond that. So there is a complete absence of policy even though the language practices of students at the university, in colleges, in higher education, are quite multilingual. We have all this diversity of languages and we have this richness of language resources. However, in no way do we recognize it. We certainly have many more speakers of languages other than English in the United States than we have language learners and language classes.

As a matter of fact, in this article that I did with Terry Wiley, we included a study of six languages and four states (Wiley & García, 2016). It was interesting. French and German were the only languages where there were more students than speakers in the states. We included California, Texas, New York, and Florida. Those were the four states. Only in French and German there were more students than speakers. Except in Florida, of course, where there were more speakers of French than students of French. Of course that had to do with the Haitian community. It makes you think, well, what is going on here?

Interviewer: And what variety of French, you know?

Ofelia García: Yes, that is right. The idea of, “it is not valued at all if you are a racialized minority.” That is very important to understand. With the other languages, even with Spanish, there were certainly more Spanish speakers than Spanish language students. And now that I think about this, this is not at the university level, but at high school. This is just high school. There is just no interest in languages other than English, even though there are tremendous resources. I would think that there should be more policy that encourages the multilingualism that we already have so that it is not lost or wasted in any kind of way. In the last 20 years, we have had no federal involvement in policy to teach languages other than English except when it has been for security defense purposes. The Critical Languages Act gave some support. But otherwise, the Foreign Language Assistance Programs for foreign languages have been cut back tremendously.

Interviewer: So in what ways could institutions in New York City adapt to linguistic diversity?

Ofelia García: It would not be hard. There is so much linguistic diversity here that the idea that they have to adapt, it is sort of the wrong idea. The idea is that they have to value it and acknowledge it, and then use it in some way. I am struck by the number of languages that are spoken by children in this city, which could be used for us to become more language aware and more culturally aware. This would provide a better understanding of cosmologies and how different people make meaning out of things. It is so valuable for children to understand the different scripts, its different directionality, and that there are different ways or looking at the world. There are different ways of narrating the news, there are different viewpoints about

everything like wars and the things that surround us. I think this is a wonderful richness that could be really acknowledged in schools.

So how does one work with it? How does one work with linguistic diversity? I think you have to be a little bit humble about what you know, and understand that you do not know it all. When you are in contact with linguistic heterogeneity, you are always a learner because you cannot know what other people know about their language practice and their cultural practices. You are always put in the position of the learner. That is, you have to be a co-learner. You cannot have the attitude and the stance of, for instance, “well, I know about this group, or that group, or whatever, and therefore I know it all.” I think this is very important. Furthermore, the world changes so fast. I always say, well, even if you adapted to linguistic diversity in the sense of, for example, by the time you finished learning Spanish, another group is going to become important and you have to really understand what is going on. Within the Spanish community there is the Spanish speaking community, there are now many speakers of indigenous languages, Mixteco, Quechua, etcetera. You have to be able to recognize that diversity and also value it; understand that it may not be something that you are teaching in your school, but it is valuable and important for that family. So you adapt by understanding that it exists and that it is here. Whether you acknowledge it or not in schools or in society, it is around us. You can either dismiss it all together, or you can embrace it and use it as a learning tool because we have a lot to learn from this linguistic diversity.

Interviewer: Could you describe translanguaging and how research on this topic could inform teaching in higher education?

Ofelia García: Translanguaging is nothing more than thinking about the fact that bilinguals have one mental linguistic system. This linguistic system has consequence for practices, that is language practices, which are diverse from monolingual practices. The premise is that there is one language system and that therefore this has as a consequence, practices which are fluid. Of course, in society and especially in schools, you have to recognize which of the features you have to suppress and which of the features you have to activate. I think one important thing about translanguaging, because people misunderstand it, is to remember that we are talking about the

internal repertoires of the bilingual speaker, of himself or herself. Societally, we have divided these practices into different, named languages. Those languages have real and material consequences and they have always had them, and they will continue to have them. The important point is to think that if you have a translanguaging stance, you begin from a different place because you begin by thinking, “all right, what this student has is one language system from which he or she is constantly activating and suppressing features. What he or she has is more extensive than someone who just has features that are associated with one language.” So in a way, we are saying that repertoires have been expanded, but that in school you have to restrict it somehow, which is fine. It is the way that the world operates. Some languages are more powerful than others. I think that in a lot of ways translanguaging disrupts these linguistic hierarchies, because it acknowledges the fact that people inside of their language system have one thing, not two. But, it also acknowledges the fact that society values these languages differently. I think the idea is that you start with one language repertoire, which is very complex and very extended. In schools you have to restrict it. I think that it is a totally different take than when you think that these children come in and they lack things. Because I think what translanguaging lets us see is that “it is the school that actually lacks things because we restrict language.” I think that is an important conceptualization for teachers to have.

In higher education, I think it is the same as in schools. I think that we all have to learn to suppress some of our features and to activate others according to the social situation in which we are immersed. Again, I just think we have to acknowledge the fact that what we do in school and in higher education, for example if the class is in English only, restricts what a bilingual student is capable of. I think that is a huge contribution conceptually because it makes you think of school as constricting and that bilingual students are much more expansive. I think that is important in terms of valuing the language practices that people have from home.

Interviewer: Of course. Because it is ideology, too.

Ofelia García: Right. And I do think that one of the issues with either English only classrooms or bilingual classrooms that do English only and Spanish only, or Chinese only, or whatever it is they are going to do only — the issue is that that they do not acknowledge the fact that language

practices and bilingual communities are a lot more flexible and a lot more fluid. What you are saying when you do not acknowledge these language practices is telling these students that what they speak at home is not valuable and that it is not correct. But the languaging of bilingual students is naturally going to contain features that sometimes are associated with the other language. It is natural. But, if you understand it as, “well, okay, this child has still not understood how to suppress this feature, and to substitute it for this other feature and to activate this other feature” instead of saying, “oh, this guy does not have anything,” I think that that makes a huge difference in the way that you approach teaching.

Now, higher education has to, like all schools, work on this. Unfortunately in the United States especially, we have this English only ideology. I just had a student (Sarah Hesson) who finished her dissertation and she talked about, which I liked a lot, the English dominant spaces and Spanish dominant spaces, instead of English only spaces and Spanish only spaces. I think that is the way to go. To realize that when you are in an English dominant space, you are going to have students who have language practices that are very different and who are constantly translanguaging in order to make sense of that English language dominant space. But again, this is not solely an English only space, because what the students are doing is they are bringing the resources to make meaning of those resources with features often from the other language.

Recently I saw students who were doing lessons in, let’s say, French. The process that the students went through was one in which they were constantly reading the web and reading in multiple languages. They even used Google Translate. Compare this to saying, “sorry, but here you cannot make meaning in other languages, except in English only.” That does not make any sense. This is especially true with adults. The college students are adults who are people that have learned something, know something, and have something to contribute. So you cannot just say, “now forget everything you learned because now we are going to start from reading these very basic texts.” This is just not what you should do.

References

Wiley, T., & García, O. (2016). Language policy and planning in language education: Legacies,

consequences, and possibilities. *The Modern Language Journal*, 100 (1), 48-63.
DOI: 10.1111/modl.12303

Author's information: Benjamin Kinsella is a PhD student in the Bilingualism and Second Language Acquisition program at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. His line of inquiry explores two interrelated avenues in the field of sociolinguistics: education policy and the increasing Hispanic presence in the New York metropolitan area. Currently, Benjamin is investigating microstructural and macrostructural aspects of oral narratives, examining Spanish language maintenance and intersibling variation among children of Mexican descent in Central New Jersey.
Email: benjamin.kinsella@rutgers.edu

To cite this article:

Kinsella, B. (2016). An interview with Dr. Ofelia García on the past, present and future of language policy. *Bellaterra Journal of Teaching & Learning Language & Literature*, 9(2), 120-130. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5565/rev/jtl3.682>

