

Language Research Bulletin, 22, ICU, Tokyo

Scholarship and Activism on Language

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Language teachers and language researchers have the most detailed and reliable knowledge about language in society, yet in many language-policy debates, teachers and researchers play only a marginal role. Instead, public discussion of language is often dominated by anecdote rather than research evidence, disorganized analysis of language problems, and a disregard for the expertise of language professionals. This paper proposes explanations for the failure of language professionals to have impact on language policy by focusing on the tension between two competing responsibilities of language professionals: to develop theoretically sound understandings of language in society, and to apply those understandings to the solution of important language problems. It is argued that three important factors affect language-policy debates: tension between the “objectivity” of scientific research and the demands of social activism; the role of “common sense” in policy discussion; and the failure of language specialists to understand how to be effective in the rough-and-tumble struggles of language politics.

In an important analysis of public debate about bilingual education in the United States, Cummins (1999) found that most participants in the debate demonstrated an aggressive disregard for research on bilingual education and “blatant internal contradictions” in their own arguments (p. 13). In studies of newspaper editorials and letters to the editor in major newspapers in Arizona, Donahue (1995, 2002) found that public discussion about declaring English as the official language of the state was characterized by almost complete lack of scientific data about language policy and language use, chaotic and disorganized attempts at logical analysis, and virtually total disregard for the views of scholars who have examined the impact of official-language laws in the United States and elsewhere in the world (see Grove, 1999). In the 1996 Ebonics controversy about the attempt by the Oakland, California, School Board to acknowledge the use of African American Vernacular English by students in the classroom and the need for teachers to take special measures to teach Standard English, linguists and other specialists had little impact on public debate, while the opinions of non-specialists were highlighted in virtually all media coverage.

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The resulting frenzy of media coverage was so emotional and irrational that it may be called a “language panic” (Lippi-Green, 1997). In the run-up to the vote on Proposition 227 to severely restrict bilingual education in California (which passed in the 1998 election), Ron Unz, a financial-software millionaire with no background in education, no children of his own, and no first-hand experience of bilingual education (he had never even visited a bilingual classroom), became the leading and most often quoted “expert” in much of the press coverage, while researchers and teachers who had devoted their lives to the education of speakers of English as an additional language were widely ignored and often viewed as members of an entrenched bureaucracy motivated solely by their own economic self-interest (Crawford, 1998b).

What unites these cases of political conflict about language is that all are characterized by what Donahue (2002) describes as an almost complete absence of rational analysis, widespread disregard for research, dominance of anecdote over scientific evidence, and little influence over public opinion by language teachers and scholars. Individuals with little or no understanding of the central issues of language and dialect are frequently given extensive media coverage, despite their complete lack of familiarity with the research and scholarly literature on language issues. Indeed, language-policy scholars increasingly bemoan their widespread failure to play a significant role in shaping public policy (e.g., Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002). Moreover, the emotional and irrational debate that accompanies language policy issues in many contexts means that citizens are often asked to make important decisions about language with little or no accurate information about the policies or their likely consequences.

Why has scholarly research on language in society had so little impact on public policy in the United States and other settings? What is the proper role for educators and language-policy scholars in public-policy debates? Should educators and scholars play a role in such debates or do they risk losing their scientific objectivity if they do so? Is it possible to develop robust theories of language in society if language professionals are also involved in the political action that characterizes public-policy debates? This article explores these issues by focusing on the tension between two primary responsibilities of language specialists: to carry out research on language in society and to apply that research to the solution of important social problems.

Language and Social Problems

Many important social problems fundamentally involve language policies. For example, medium of instruction decisions are among the most important issues in many educational systems. In multilingual post-colonial states such as

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Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong, should the colonial language be adopted as the medium of instruction or should one or more local languages be used? In countries without a colonial heritage, such as Japan, with the spread of English and its growing importance in the global economy, should English be used as the medium of instruction in specific contexts (such as the new technology university planned for Okinawa)? Among large linguistic minorities, should the home language be used along with the dominant local language in a bilingual program or should the home language be used as the primary language of learning until the second language is adequately acquired?

Such questions require complex decisions grounded in research on education in the local context; data on language variation, language use and language acquisition; and in-depth understanding of the social status of different language varieties. Too often, however, individuals who have that knowledge, including researchers, language teachers, and other educators, are excluded from policy debates, ignored, disregarded and often viewed as unreliable and self-interested.

Why do language specialists often have little impact on policy? Three factors may be identified that limit the impact of specialists. One factor is that many researchers believe that involvement in the nitty-gritty politics of policymaking risks their scientific objectivity. A second factor is that popular notions of “common sense” play a particularly influential role in language policy, compared, for example, to debates over economic policy. A third reason for the limited influence of language specialists on policymaking is that educators and researchers have been effectively marginalized by political actors who are more experienced and more effective in the take-no-prisoners public debate that often characterizes language policy issues.

Research and Scientific Objectivity

Traditionally, scientific researchers have claimed that they restrict personal involvement in political action in order to avoid losing their necessary scientific objectivity (Davies, 1996). In the past generation, however, particularly in the social sciences, a “critical approach” argues that all research is “interested,” and that efforts to deny the inevitably political nature of scholarly research serve to maintain existing unequal social systems (e.g., see Pennycook, 1989, on the interested nature of teaching methods; Phillipson, 1992). In critical language analysis, a primary focus of research is the role of language in inequality and development of effective programs to undermine systems of inequality. That is, social action is an essential scholarly concern.

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Yet the demand for “objectivity” persists in opposition to the critical approach. Indeed, one objection to critical analysis is that critical scholars are biased; to the extent that they advocate particular changes in language policies, they become “activists” rather than “researchers.” This critique of critical language studies is an example of a broader objection to an activist role for language scholars: That scholarly research is incompatible with (and ultimately undermined by) involvement in policymaking. From this perspective, “objectivity” in research requires that scholars avoid involvement in politics by removing themselves from advocacy of particular policies.

In response to this criticism, advocates of the critical approach argue that “objectivity” is an illusion that generally supports existing system of social inequality. For example, in her long career as a language specialist, Skutnabb-Kangas has emphasized social activism, she has been a vocal advocate for linguistic human rights, and her scholarly work has consistently aimed at the activist’s goal of social change (e.g., Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). In contrast, Brutt-Griffler (2002; also see Skutnabb-Kangas, Brutt-Griffler, Canagarajah, Pennycook, & Tollefson, 2004) emphasizes the central responsibility of scholars for developing theories of language in society. Without good theory, she argues, social change is impossible. She points to the failure of the linguistic human rights movement supported by Skutnabb-Kangas as an example of what happens when social action is not grounded in well-formed theory. Though sympathetic with the linguistic human rights movement’s concern for the economic well-being of linguistic minorities, Brutt-Griffler believes that the movement has failed to protect the human rights of minorities, in part because the movement is based upon discredited theories of language in society, and therefore it can never be an adequate basis for language policies in the real world. Thus the primary work of language scholars, in Brutt-Griffler’s view, is theory-building, not policymaking.

The contrast between Skutnabb-Kangas and Brutt-Griffler reflects two competing orientations of language researchers: While Skutnabb-Kangas is primarily concerned with the activists’ goal of social justice, Brutt-Griffler focuses on developing an adequate theory of the spread of English and, more generally, of language in society. Are these two orientations incompatible? Does theory matter to the development of effective public policy? Williams (1992) has argued that language studies remain on the margins of the social sciences because they are undertheorized and therefore have little to offer sociologists and other social scientists. Similarly, Fishman (1992) has repeatedly pointed out the need for language researchers to develop more sophisticated social theories that draw from advanced work in sociology. In his view, the continued lack of interest in language among sociologists is a striking indication that theories of language in society have little to offer that field. Both Williams

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and Fishman argue that language policy—like economic policy or foreign policy—requires highly sophisticated theoretical models; without them, policies are based on nothing more than guesswork and speculation. The paucity of theoretical work in language policy thus undermines any effort by scholars to influence language policy in real-world contexts. In this sense, theory-building and policymaking are inextricably linked. (For further discussion, see Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Ricento, 2000, 2006.)

“Common Sense” in Language Policy

Although Fishman and Williams argue that policies must be grounded in sophisticated theory, much of the policy debate in many areas (particularly in education) ignores theory and research, relying instead on anecdote and common sense rather than evidence grounded in theory. The contrast of public attitudes towards language policy on the one hand and economic policy or medicine on the other is instructive. While many—perhaps most—ordinary citizens doubt their ability to understand highly sophisticated research in economics or medicine, and thus they accept a central role for specialists and research evidence in policymaking, nearly everyone uses language and has attended school, and therefore “common sense” seems like a reasonable basis for language-in-education policy. Donahue (2002) found, for example, that newspaper coverage of official-English proposals in Arizona often focused on dramatic individual stories, such as English-speaking parents who complained that their children could not learn English well because they were too often exposed to Spanish. Research about the benefits of bilingual education may be met not with counter-evidence from research, but instead with personal opinion and individual stories that express widely held beliefs about language (e.g., Wildermuth, 1998).

In his attempt to understand the appeal of common sense in language-policy debates, Crawford (1998b) argues that “most people feel like experts when it comes to language...Perhaps that’s because our speech defines us ethnically, socially, and intellectually. It’s tied up with a sense of who we are—and who we are not—evoking some of our deepest emotions.” Yet, as Crawford points out, “science is often counterintuitive,” and many common sense notions about language are simply wrong. For example, learning two languages simultaneously may seem to some monolinguals to be especially difficult and likely to lead to confusion, yet a large body of research suggests that confusion is unlikely, simultaneous acquisition of two languages is commonplace, and bilingualism offers some cognitive advantages (Hakuta, 1986). Nevertheless,

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despite such research findings, common sense attitudes about the dangers of bilingualism persist in the United States and elsewhere.

The influence of common sense, combined with the relatively underdeveloped state of language policy theory, is not merely a concern for researchers like Skutnabb-Kangas, Brutt-Griffler, and Crawford, but it should also gain the attention of anyone who is concerned about the soundness of public policy (see Crawford 1998a). As Donahue (2002) points out, when the discussion of language policy is incoherent and unscientific, and characterized by emotional appeals to stereotypes and fears, dominant groups that control access to mass media can more easily manipulate public opinion. Based on his analysis of public-policy debates, Donahue (2002) concludes that “a frustrating sense of anomic normlessness” (p. 138) and profound ideological confusion characterize most discussion of language policy in the United States, a situation that preserves “an extraordinary advantage for those in power” (p. 159). As a result, in Gramsci’s terms, relying on common sense beliefs about language sustains the ideological hegemony of powerful, dominant groups (Gramsci, 1971).

Scholars and the Politics of Language

A third reason that language specialists have had relatively little impact on public policy is that they have been weak and ineffective in policy debates. In part, the problem is that scholarly discourse and public media debates differ in form and content. Scholarly discourse is often impersonal, requiring an air of detachment and objectivity. In contrast, the discourse of mass media is often intensely personal and emotional. Educators accustomed to the rigors of scholarly discourse may be unprepared and ineffective in the bare-knuckle conflicts carried by the mass media. For example, Ron Unz called Crawford and other bilingual education advocates “academic loonies [who] have done more damage to the education of more immigrant children than (possibly) any other bunch in the history of America” (Crawford, 1997). A week before the vote on Proposition 227 banning bilingual education in California, the magazine *New Times LA* (Stewart, 1998) published a cover story about Stephen Krashen (1996), one of the most outspoken scholars opposed to the Proposition, that claimed he had become personally wealthy through his involvement in training bilingual teachers. The article cited his purchase of a Malibu home, sales of his popular textbooks, and teachers’ enthusiastic response to his training sessions as evidence that he had achieved cult-like status in the profession, thereby creating enormous personal wealth. The article suggested that Krashen’s personal

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financial stake in bilingual education made him an unreliable source of information about Proposition 227.

For scholars accustomed to scientific debate, such personal attacks may seem demeaning and trivial, and ultimately irrelevant to important decisions about language policy, such as whether bilingual education should be eliminated. Thus scholars often ignore such personal attacks. Yet this take-no-prisoners approach to public debate can be remarkably effective: Simplistic and misleading statements are often more effective in garnering media coverage and swaying public opinion than complex and nuanced scientific analysis. As a result of the experiences of Krashen and other bilingual advocates in California, supporters of bilingual education in Colorado in 2002 responded quickly to such attacks. Their strategy of rapid and coordinated response may have been one reason that voters rejected a proposed law to eliminate bilingual education in Colorado. (For an analysis of the strategy to defeat the proposed law, see Escamilla, Shannon, Carlos, & García, 2003).

Media Reporting

The three factors discussed here (the emphasis on objectivity in research, the influence of common sense, and the ineffectiveness of language professionals in the politics of language) are especially problematic for educators and scholars who wish to influence public policy because media coverage of language policy (and other policy areas) favors actors who can harness striking anecdotes, emotional events, dramatic personalities, and simplistic but memorable arguments. In his analysis of media coverage of language policy, Crawford (1998b) identifies three aspects of media coverage that make it difficult for language professionals to influence the debate. First, language policy is generally covered as a purely political story rather than a technical one; thus the focus tends to be on polling data, the winners and losers of public debates, and the interest groups that support or oppose particular points of view. Participants with no experience or expertise in language are given credence, as long as they are able to articulate a point of view that is attractive to the mass media. This ability to attract media attention raises a second aspect of media coverage: Memorable, coherent messages are more easily given media coverage that is often limited to a few seconds of television news or a small article in a city newspaper; in contrast, complicated and nuanced scholarly arguments based on long-term research are not easily summarized in limited media forums. As Crawford points out, research evidence “is rarely as clear and unambiguous as one might like” (1998b), whereas simple phrases can become effective sound bites for the local news.

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A third characteristic of media coverage of language issues is particularly relevant to language policy in education: The conventional wisdom about public education—that it is largely a failure—leads to cynical media coverage. Reporters are skeptical of educational success stories, and media audiences expect to hear a continued litany of public education failures. In this rush to criticize and condemn education, research evidence is largely irrelevant. Public outrage replaces reasoned discussion, and the subtle arguments that often accompany complex research are drowned out by the constant claim that education is in crisis (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

Conclusion

Language is at the center of some of the most important public policy issues: human rights, medium of instruction, due process in the courts, citizens' access to government services, and health and safety. Yet too often language policy debates are characterized not by rational analysis based on research evidence, but on myth, prejudice, anecdote, and manipulation. The policymaking process can be significantly improved if specialists in language play a more influential role. In some settings that is already taking place (e.g., Hong Kong, see Tsui, 2007). In most contexts, however, language specialists must seek ways to play a more active and decisive role. To do so, however, language specialists must develop new knowledge and skills: an understanding of how to communicate effectively through the mass media, the ability to translate technical detail into memorable terms that can be understood by non-specialist citizens, and a commitment to constantly seek ways to apply experience and expertise to public policy decision-making. Graduate and undergraduate programs that prepare language specialists should begin to find ways to teach such skills, in order to better prepare scholars, teachers, and other educators for an active role in language policymaking.

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