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Deconstructing the instrumental/identity divide in language policy debates

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Abstract:
Debates about language and literacy policies are increasingly constructed at national levels in relation to their potential contribution to the 'knowledge economy', and to the ability of nation-states to compete economically in an increasingly globalised world. Invariably, this instrumental approach to language privileges the role of English as the current world language. Thus, in contexts where English is not spoken as a first language, English is increasingly viewed as the most important and/or useful additional language. In English-dominant contexts, monolingualism in English is seen as being a sufficient, even an ideal language model, while literacy *in English* comes to stand for literacy (and related social mobility) per se. Where other languages are countenanced at all in these latter contexts, the instrumentalist approach continues to dominate, with so-called international and/or trading languages being constructed as the languages other than English most worth learning, or perhaps even as the *only* other languages worth learning.

The growing dominance of economistic, instrumental approaches to language policy, and the valorisation of English that is associated with them, clearly militate against ongoing individual and societal multilingualism. The languages most at risk here are so-called minority languages, particularly indigenous languages. In the new globalised world dominated by English, and where the perceived 'usefulness' of language is elided with language value, such languages are increasingly constructed as having neither. This paper deconstructs and critiques this positioning of indigenous and other minority languages, along with the wider instrumentality of much language and literacy policy of which it forms a part. In light of this, it also explores how such languages can be actively, justifiably and effectively maintained and promoted, particularly in English-dominant contexts.

Keywords: language policy; language rights; identity; mobility; New Zealand; Wales

Introduction

I want to begin with a New Zealand example that provides a useful illustration of the wider issues that I want to explore in this paper.

On 16 June 2003, the New Zealand Ministry of Education announced, as the result of a 3-year curriculum review, that all schools should be required to offer a language other than English from years 7-10 – that is, for students aged 10-13 years. This announcement was significant for a number of reasons:

1) It was very publicly backed by the New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark, who invoked the European multilingual language model (along with the promotion of key European languages) as one that New Zealand might eventually follow.

2) As with discussions of language policy in Australia (see, for example, Rudd, 1994; see also below), the significance of Asian languages was also highlighted for their potential as regional trading languages, thus linking economic growth directly to greater multilingualism.

3) There was an allied recognition that more resources, including the training of more language teachers, were urgently needed if this proposal was ever to be meaningfully implemented. Given this, the New Zealand government is aiming to implement this programme gradually from 2006.

These developments acknowledge, at least tacitly, the need for a more coordinated and diverse language education policy, in turn the result of a growing awareness of the limits of English monolingualism. But these developments are also highly problematic and highlight some of the key inconsistencies around language policy and the role of English that I want to explore further in this paper.

For a start, as laudable as the broad aims of this language curriculum initiative might be, they stand in stark contrast to the *present* linguistic demography of NZ, which remains resolutely monolingual in English. In the early 1990s, over 9 out of 10 speakers were first language speakers of English, making New Zealand one of the most linguistically homogenous nation-states in the world at that time (Te Taura Whiri i te reo Maori, 1995). This is now slowly beginning to change, particularly as the result of increased migration from Asia over the course of the 1990s, but even so, over 80% of New Zealanders still speak English as a first language (Peddie, 2003). So In this light, it is clearly one thing to talk about the need for greater bilingualism and multilingualism; quite another to bring it to pass – particularly when the linguistic base in New Zealand is so palpably monolingual to begin with.

A second, related problem is that the mode of teaching suggested – foreign language instruction, in effect – is, as any research on bilingualism will tell you, unequivocally the *least* effective means of successfully fostering bilingualism. For example, only 1 in 20 students in the US become effectively bilingual as the result of foreign language instruction (Baker, 2001).

This leads to the next obvious question – why then is foreign language teaching being touted as such an important and useful intervention? Certainly, if we take the bilingual education research seriously, it has very little to do with its pedagogical effectiveness (see Baker, 2001; Cummins, 2000; Corson, 2000). Rather, it has to do with the *particular* languages involved – prestige European languages and/or important regional trading languages. These languages are simply seen as *worth* learning, however badly, because of their perceived wider status and significance.

And this brings me to the final conundrum that I want to highlight by way of this example. This announcement, as speculative and tenuous as it appears to be, was regarded almost universally as a 'sensible' and 'useful' way forward in language policy. It excited very little critical comment, let alone opposition. In contrast, debates on bilingual education in New Zealand – i.e., approaches where meaningful educational instruction is in a so-called 'minority' language – excites far greater opposition. The most obvious example here is Maori-medium education which, unlike the teaching of other languages, *is* already well-established, with a strong track record of educational effectiveness, along with international recognition for its role in revitalising the Maori language (see May 2004).

And yet Maori-medium education continues to struggle for wider educational and public support – many parents and educators still construct it as potentially harmful to students' ability to master English. Maori-medium education also remains relatively under-resourced, in terms of both appropriate learning materials and qualified teachers – the very resources that the recent announcement suggests should now go to other languages.

Given these difficulties with what is a relatively well established bilingual programme, the result in turn of a political commitment to foster Maori as the indigenous language of New Zealand, co-official with English, it should come as no surprise that other ethnic minority groups in New Zealand, notably Pasifika and more recent Asian migrants, fare even less well. There is virtually no opportunity for these other groups to pursue a meaningful bilingual education in their first language – because of the ongoing hegemony of English and associated de facto monolingualism in NZ, and because of the pejorative status attached to their languages (for further discussion, see May, 2002a,b).

I have discussed this example at some length because I believe it highlights clearly some of the key wider issues and concerns associated with national language policies in English-dominant contexts. In the remainder of the paper, I want to unpack these issues – and the inconsistencies attendant upon them – in order to see what can be done for so-called 'minority' languages, and their speakers, who regularly get overlooked and/or constructed pejoratively in these language policy debates. I want to do this by focusing on two key, interrelated issues.

1. Language and mobility

2. Language and identity

1. Language and mobility

One of the key tropes that emerges from any public discussion of language education policy is the elision of language *use* with language *value*. In other words, languages are only valued if they are deemed to be useful. Moreover, the idea of language use itself – as we have seen – is constructed in relation to the perceived status of the language(s) concerned. The more prestigious the language, the more 'useful' it would appear to be.

Much of this construction of language use and status has to do with the apparent link between majority, or dominant languages and subsequent social mobility. This is the basis, of course, for privileging English (or more accurately, certain varieties of English) in so many national language policies.

We see this in its positioning as an essential additional language for those who do not speak it as a first language and in the construction of English monolingualism as the default position in English-dominant contexts. As we have seen, where other languages are countenanced at all in English-dominant contexts, this tends to be limited to other 'prestige' languages that are deemed useful to learn for either cultural or economic purposes.

In contrast, the promotion of other 'minority' languages – indigenous languages, or ethnic minority or 'community' languages are constructed in exactly the opposite direction – as consigning, or ghettoising minority language communities within the confines of a language that does not have a wider use, thus constraining their social mobility (see, for example, Schlesinger, 1992; Barry, 2000).

The stated logic of this argument goes something like this:

- Majority languages are constructed as 'vehicles' of mobility, while minority languages are perceived as mere 'carriers' of identity, possibly important for 'sentimental' reasons, but not much else

- Learning a majority language is thus the best (perhaps only) means of providing individuals with greater economic and social mobility

- Learning a minority language, while (possibly) important for reasons of cultural continuity, actually delimits an individual's mobility; in its strongest terms, this might amount to 'ghettoisation'

- If minority language speakers are 'sensible' they will opt for mobility and modernity via the majority language

- Whatever decision is made, the choice between a majority or minority language is seen as oppositional, even mutually exclusive. You must choose one or the other, not both

Whether we like it or not, it seems that majority languages are those (and only those) that are the most *instrumentally* useful – they are 'vehicles' of modernity associated with opportunity and expansion – while minority languages are merely 'carriers' of identity, often perceived as barriers to progress. This is a difficult argument to refute and may well explain why it is so difficult to advocate for the inclusion of minority languages, and for bilingual education, in language education policy, especially in English-dominant contexts (for further discussion, see May, 2003).

Certainly, the social justice arguments underlying this position – that everyone should be entitled to continue to speak their first language, if they so choose – are hard to fault, but still seem to be simply ignored in the Realpolitik of national language policy development. As John Edwards has (resignedly) observed:

> The brutal fact is that most 'big' language speakers in most societies remain unconvinced of either the immediate need or the philosophical desirability of officially-supported cultural and linguistic programmes for their small-language neighbours. (Edwards. 1994: 195)

Australia might have provided a possible exception to this had the development of the *National Policy on Languages* (NPL), championed in the late 1980s by Joe Lo Bianco (1987), borne any significant fruit. The NPL stressed the *complementarity* of English and Australia's other languages and thus was broadly committed to fostering individual and societal multilingualism. However, the NPL's broad concern with ethnic identity, language rights, and language diversity as a social, cultural and economic resource was quickly eclipsed by a more economically rationalist approach to language within Australia, as seen in the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP). The ALLP once again peripheralised the issue of minority languages by solely emphasising their (limited) instrumental value as potential 'trading' languages – excluding, in the process, all minority languages (including indigenous languages) that do not meet this criterion (Ozolins, 1993; Herriman, 1996).

In fact, since that time, the advocacy of a coordinated approach to national language policy has disappeared from the public arena in Australia entirely (Clyne, 1998), replaced by single-issue policies on Asian languages, and literacy (or rather literacy *in English*). And even here, these debates have continued to be constructed most often in terms of a narrow definition of language status/use. Thus the Rudd Report (1994) on Asian languages argued that Indonesian, Japanese, Korean and Mandarin should be the 4 'priority Asian languages' to be taught in schools because of their regional (read: economic) significance, but that other Asian languages should continue to be treated as mere 'community' (read: low status) languages.

Much the same pattern has occurred in New Zealand where a Draft Languages Policy, modelled along the lines of the NPL, was developed in the early 1990s by Geoffrey Waite (1992a,b), only to be ignored and subsequently replaced, in the late 1990s, by more instrumentalist initiatives concerned specifically (or, rather, narrowly) with literacy in English (although the generic term 'literacy' was invariably used to describe it – e.g., the National Literacy Taskforce).

Or, let us take another context, the USA, where the English Only movement has been extremely successful in arguing against the expansion (or even maintenance) of Spanish-English bilingual education on the grounds that maintaining Spanish – a minority language in the US context – delimits a child's longer-term social mobility, *consigning* them *inevitably* to the social and economic margins. Or so the story goes. As Linda Chávez, a former President of US English, has argued for example: 'Hispanics who learn English will be able to avail themselves of opportunities. Those who do not will be relegated to second class citizenship' (cited in Crawford 1992: 172). A more recent example can be found in US English advertising in 1998: 'Deprive a child of an education. Handicap a young life outside the classroom. Restrict social mobility. If it came at the hand of a parent it would be called child abuse. At the hand of our schools…it's called bilingual education' (Dicker, 2000: 53).

This position is also broadly endorsed by significant academic commentators. Thus, Thomas Pogge (2003), a prominent US political theorist, could argue recently that minority parents who opted for an education for their children in a minority language may be 'perpetuating a cultural community irrespective of whether this benefits the children concerned…'. In other words, it is illiberal and injurious for parents to 'consign' their children to a minority language education.

Two other political theorists, David Laitin and Rob Reich, have also recently argued that 'individuals have no influence over the language of their parents, yet their parents' language if it is a minority one…constrains social mobility'. As a result, 'those who speak a minority (or dominated) language are more likely to stand *permanently* on the lower-rungs of the socio-economic ladder' (2003: 92). Indeed, they proceed to observe that if minority individuals are foolish enough to perpetuate the speaking of a minority language, then they can simply be regarded as 'happy slaves', having no one else to blame but themselves for their subsequent limited mobility.

Leaving aside the patronising and paternalistic tone of their discussions, the principal problem with the construction of this general argument is that it confuses cause and effect. It is clear that a lack of knowledge of a dominant language *will* limit the options for those who do not speak that language variety, for reasons already outlined. But that is not the *only* reason why such individuals might find themselves 'permanently on the lower-rungs of the socio-economic ladder'. This is because arguments asserting that English is the key to social mobility, and conversely that its lack is the principal cause of social and economic marginalisation, conveniently overlook the central question of the wider structural disadvantages facing minority language speakers, not least racism and discrimination. After all, African Americans have been speaking English for 200 years and yet many still find themselves relegated to urban ghettos (Macedo, 1994). Likewise English is almost as inoperative with respect to Hispanic social mobility in the USA as it is with respect to black social mobility. 25% of Hispanics currently live at or below the poverty line, a rate that is at least twice as high as those Hispanics who are not English-speaking (Garcia, 1995; San Miguel and Valencia, 1998). Even when language *is* a factor, it may have as much, or more to do with the linguistic intolerance of the state, judiciary, or the workplace, than with the individuals concerned. We see this clearly demonstrated in the US context by the proscription of Spanish in many US workplaces.

However, there is a second problem here – and that is one of consistency. On the one hand, we have the construction of minority languages in these accounts as essentially anti-instrumental, as merely 'carriers' of 'identity'. And yet on the other hand, when such languages do become useful instrumentally in the public realm, this is held against them as well!

This overt double standard is highlighted clearly in another recent political theory book, Brian Barry's *Culture and Equality* (2000). Barry mounts a widespread attack on the politics of multiculturalism and dismisses, along the way, minority languages in all national contexts for their lack of utility. And yet, taking Wales as a specific example, he also bemoans the labour market advantages of those with an educational qualification in the Welsh language because local authorities in Wales increasingly require knowledge of Welsh as a condition of employment (see 2000: 105-106). This is rich indeed, given that Barry makes these exact same arguments without apology on behalf of majority languages, and particularly English.

Such commentators simply can't have it both ways – deriding minority languages for their lack of utility, and then opposing their utility when it proves to be politically inconvenient. Regular cries of discrimination on this basis by majority language speakers are also largely spurious, since in almost all cases (the Baltic states being a possible exception), the formalisation of a minority language in the public realm does not preclude the ongoing use of the majority language which, by definition, remains dominant in most language domains anyway.

Indeed, opposition to minority languages in the public domain, usually couched in the rhetoric of individual language rights, is based primarily upon the implicit, sometimes explicit, wish of majority language speakers (particularly English speakers!) to *remain* monolingual. This is not a defensible language *right*, merely a language *choice* – and a deliberately uncooperative one at that. Levelling charges of 'racism' with regard to language requirements for education or employment – which often occurs as a result of such minority language policies – can be seen in this light rather than as a legitimate or a sustainable argument.

Likewise, returning to the argument of utility, how can Welsh in Wales be regarded as somehow less 'useful' than French, for example. You might well be able to use French in other parts of Europe but, on a daily basis, being able to speak Welsh within Wales is surely more immediately useful than speaking *any* other language – the same principle applies, of course, to Maori in New Zealand. If it is deemed not to be, this is clearly a question of perceived language status, itself the product of wider (unequal) power relations, not a discussion of the usefulness of Welsh or Maori in these contexts, or of bilingualism/multilingualism per se (see, for example, May, 2000).

2. Language and identity

Opponents of language policies that promote, or at least allow for, the maintenance of minority languages also often equate this minority language maintenance with the wider politics of primordialism. In this view, maintaining minority languages is seen as a counterproductive (as well as largely futile) exercise in cultural nostalgia: one,

moreover, based on the inevitable reification of language and culture and a related essentialising and homogenising of particular language groups.

There is, of course, an obvious inconsistency here that seems to escape these commentators – that they dismiss such group-based language claims for their supposed homogenising tendencies, while, at the same time, almost always advocating exactly the same principle on behalf of majority languages (i.e we must have a *common* language to 'unite' us; see May, 2001 for an extended discussion here). But even more problematically, the ineluctable linking of minority language rights with primordialism and essentialism is simply wrong. While some proponents of minority language maintenance may well present us with a culturally and linguistically determined basis for their claims, not all do, nor do they need to.

Herderian arguments for linguistic nationalism, for example, have long since been dismissed as both essentialist and determinist, and rightly so. In their place, we have seen the rise of constructivist accounts of nationalism (within sociology and politics) and ethnicity (within anthropology and sociology) that argue, for the most part convincingly, that language, or any specific cultural aspect of ethnic and/or national identity for that matter, *must* be recognized as a contingent factor in that identity; to suggest otherwise is to reinforce an essentialist conception of groupness. Language clearly does *not* define us, and may not be an important feature, or even a necessary one, in the construction of our identities, whether at the individual or collective levels.

I agree broadly with this constructivist analysis – indeed, who could not? Where I beg to differ is in refusing to take the next step that is often then taken by constructivists. That is, to assume that if language is merely a contingent factor of identity it cannot therefore (ever) be a *significant* or *constitutive* factor of identity. In other words, contingency is elided with unimportance or peripheralism. This position is extremely problematic, not least because it simply does not reflect adequately, let alone explain, the heightened saliency of language issues in many historical and contemporary political conflicts, something I have discussed at length in my recent book, *Language and Minority Rights* (May, 2001; see also Weinstein, 1983, 1990; Blommaert, 1996, 1999). This is particularly apparent at the intrastate level where 'minority' languages have been most often proscribed, or at least vitiated as a result of the nationalist principle of cultural and linguistic homogeneity. In the subsequent conflicts that have arisen, particular languages clearly *are* for many people an important and constitutive factor of their individual, and at times, collective identities.

Moreover, the issue of experience and commitment to a particular language applies in both directions, so that we are not just talking about the emotional attachments of minority language speakers, as is often assumed, but also majority language speakers as well. How else can we explain the vociferousness of those who argue for the ongoing retention of a singular national language (which is almost always the language they themselves speak)? There is clearly something more than questions of utility, mobility and political expediency going on here. In theory then, language may well be just one of many markers of identity. In practice, it is often much more than that.

Indeed, this should not surprise us since the link between language and identity encompasses both significant cultural and political dimensions. The former is demonstrated by the fact that one's individual and social identities, and their complex interconnections, are inevitably mediated in and through particular languages. The latter is significant to the extent that those languages come to be formally (and informally) associated with particular ethnic and national identities. These interconnections also help to explain why, as Fishman (1997) has observed, a 'detached' scientific view of the link between language and identity may fail to capture the degree to which language is *experienced* as vital by those who speak it. It may also significantly understate the role that language plays in social and political organisation and mobilisation.

Taking this more evenhanded approach also helps us to reconnect the instrumental and identity aspects of language. This is important because, as we have seen, majority and/or national languages are often dichotomised with minority languages on an instrumental-identity basis; majority languages fulfil the former function, minority languages the latter. What I want to suggest is that *all* languages – whether minority or majority – accomplish *both* for those who speak them, albeit to varying degrees, depending on the social and political constraints in which they operate (Carens, 2000). Thus, in the case of minority languages, their instrumental value is often constrained by wider social and political processes that have resulted in the privileging of another language variety as the language of the nation-state – or, in the case of English, the current world language. Meanwhile, for majority languages, the identity characteristics of the language are clearly important for their speakers, but often become subsumed within and normalised by the public and instrumental functions that these languages (are allowed to) fulfil.

Pursuing this latter point further, one can argue that if majority languages do provide their speakers with particular and often significant individual and collective forms of linguistic identity, as they clearly do, it seems unjust to deny these same benefits, out of court, to minority language speakers. This does not preclude cultural and linguistic change and adaptation – all languages and cultures are subject to such processes. But what it does immediately bring into question is the necessity/validity of the unidirectional movement of cultural and linguistic adaptation and change *from* a minority language/culture *to* a majority one.

What we see here then is actually the opportunity or potential for holding *multiple*, *complementary* cultural and linguistic identities at both the individual and collective levels (although, of course multilinguals do this at the individual level all the time). On this view, maintaining one's minority ethnically affiliated language – or one's national majority language, for that matter – avoids 'freezing' the development of particular languages in the roles that they currently occupy. Equally importantly, it questions and discards the requirement of a singular and/or replacement approach to the issue of other linguistic identities that arises specifically from the nationalist principle of linguistic and cultural homogeneity. Linguistic identities – and social and cultural identities more broadly – need not be constructed as irredeemably oppositional. Narrower identities do not necessarily need to be traded in for broader ones – one can clearly remain both Spanish-speaking and American, Catalan-speaking and Spanish, or Welsh-speaking and British. The same process applies to national and

international language identities, where these differ. To insist otherwise betrays, ironically, both a reductionist and an essentialist approach to language and identity.

Conclusion

To conclude, the issue of promoting greater bilingualism and multilingualism in modern nation-states, and in recognising the associated language rights of minority speakers, has clear political consequences. And, of course, it is no easy task. But one thing is clear, the long-held practice of making no such accommodations is not so readily defensible in today's social and political climate. Ignoring the language resources and rights of minority language speakers – most often articulated on the grounds of 'national unity' – is actually *more* rather than less likely to undermine that unity – fostering discontent, rather than mitigating it. As Fernand de Varennes has observed, under these circumstances, 'any policy favouring a single language to the exclusion of all others can be extremely risky ... because it is then a factor promoting division rather than unification. Instead of integration, an ill-advised and inappropriate state language policy may have the opposite effect and cause a *levée de bouclier*' (de Varennes, 1996).

This, in turn, poses a central challenge – how to rethink nation-states, national language policies, and education itself in more linguistically plural and inclusive ways.We must do this in order to *better* represent *all* the various and varied cultural and linguistic communities situated within them and, crucially, to *give them voice*. This is a challenge for all nation-states, but a particular challenge for English-dominant ones such as New Zealand. Despite the advances of recent years – particularly with respect to Maori-medium education – we still have a long way to go in New Zealand language policy before that happens.

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