

LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

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Summary

Earlier debates concerned with language and education in some metropolitan countries centered on the relationship between communicative competence and the educational underachievement of children from minority social groups. These are problematic areas also in developing countries emerging from colonialism. Here unresolved language problems have raised questions around issues of identity, linguistic and cultural maintenance as well as literacy and the under-development of human resources, and their impact on social and economic development. Lately, language in education has gained in importance as a result of changes taking place within the global cultural economy such as the impact of microelectronic technologies, and mass migration on the sociocultural and economic base of different societies. Culturally, these developments generate tensions and conflicts related to the maintenance of local language ecologies, on the one hand, and the hegemony of international languages and para-national lingua franca on the other hand. In education they emphasize the literacy and communication skills needs of the learning society and democratic citizenship. They also raise questions about the relationship between language education and identity formation within the fractured and shifting cultural landscapes of the contemporary world. Language then is integral to the process of learning how to mean within the interactive global cultural economy.

Taking these complexities into account, this chapter examines the complex relationship between language and ideology, politics, society and culture. Within an interdisciplinary and integrative micro- and macro perspective it focuses not only on the languages that prevail in society, how, where, and by whom they are used, but also their relationship with institutional power processes. These include national language policy and the nature of educational support provided to sustain the language rights of different groups within society.

1. Introduction

Language as discourse involves role relationships, values, attitudes, social and cultural norms as well as different textual conventions including content, form (schemata) and style as well as knowledge and understanding of the context, and operates at different levels of abstraction. But language is much more than this; it is integrally linked with both the expression and exercise of power. Language, therefore, does not exist in a vacuum; it is intrinsic to the lives of individuals and groups as well as the production and reproduction of culture within the broader context of society and politics. Within the nation state the national language has provided the means by which the historical narrative as well as the cultural values, beliefs, aspirations, expectations, dreams and desires of the nation is legitimated in popular consciousness. Thus it represents the means by which the nation imagines itself as a cohesive social, cultural, economic and political community. At the same time, national language policy also is instrumental in circumscribing the linguistic choices as well as cultural, social and political possibilities for different groups of people within society. Monolingual language policies within pluralist nation states centered on preferred official, or common languages curtail the language rights of minority groups. Their adoption as languages for teaching and learning circumscribe levels of access to power in society by making available differential levels of access to literacy and knowledge for particular groups in society. Those whose languages are not catered for in the school curriculum operate at a significant disadvantage within the educational system. This in turn may influence their access to employment opportunities later within the labor market, and consequently their status and power position within society. The displacement and/or subjugation of minority languages within national policy frameworks, historically, support the argument that societal language relations are constituted in discursive power relations.

At the same time, linguistic needs, entitlements and possibilities can also alter, as nations define and redefine themselves, as societies change across time, and also as individuals and groups of people make language choices that are self-empowering. What people **do** with language within the processes and practices of everyday life therefore remains important to be observed, interpreted and analyzed in relation to the demands of prevailing linguistic markets and the power relations in which they are embedded. This chapter juxtaposes historical debates about language in education within the context of the pluralist nation state, with postmodernist and postcolonial discourses on language, identity and cultural power within the interactive global cultural economy. Through this discussion it highlights some of the complexities that surround language and education within the contemporary world.

2. Theorizing Language and Power

As a means of cultural expression language constitutes an important group as well as a self-identifying variable; it represents different ways of being in, and ways of seeing the world. It also provides the terms of reference with which, and through which, people interpret and name the world in which they live. Language provides the means through which versions of lived experience are made available and constructed as self-evident 'truths' in social and political discourse as well as sociocultural practices such as the media, literature and education. Embedded in institutional discourses, language is imbued with ideology and provides the categories of description and classification that shape debates and policy priorities in education. Articulating selective political and ideological perspectives these discourse ensembles mediate a particular worldview on language, learning and society.

Language, historically, has served an important means by which social inequalities and various forms of cultural oppression have been naturalized in popular consciousness. Colonialism, for example, subjugated and relegated colonized peoples to the position of non-citizens in their own countries. Cultural hegemony was consolidated by the imposition of colonial mother tongues on societies having historically different cultural, linguistic and social bases. The incorporation of colonial 'mother tongues' into the educational system, practices and processes provided an important vehicle for the development of selected forms of 'high status' literacies - over and against local culturally validated ways of knowing. Linguistic categories of description and representation in literature and school textbooks played key roles in structuring common sense understandings of cultural inferiority and social 'Otherness'. At a subliminal level, the knowledge content in curriculum-areas such as history and civics/social studies served to facilitate the assimilation of a colonialist worldview in which colonized peoples were constructed generally as acquiescent and subservient subjects. Limited access to education *per se*, constrained the development of adequate levels of communicative competence amongst those who were colonized. The adoption of colonial languages displaced and marginalized local majority languages reducing them, in most instances, to the position of minority, predominantly oral, languages, or with a limited written language repertoire. Since these languages had no political or economic currency their social marginalization effectively contributed to the cultural disenfranchisement of previously cohesive groups of people. Language thus represents an important means of exerting power not only to control meaning, but also to influence the life chances of different groups of people within society.

Moreover, colonial language policies played an important role in shaping the linguistic habitus of individuals and groups within colonized societies. In addition to circumscribing their language use within formal arena, the power associated with colonial languages also influenced the language choices that people made in their everyday lives. This includes which languages they spoke, where, when, how, and with whom. In some colonized societies this contributed to language shift taking place amongst certain, mainly elite, social groups in favor of colonial languages. The linguistic and cultural hegemony thus shaped has influenced language choices of individuals, groups and society in postcolonial nation states. As is discussed below, language in education played an important role in securing colonial cultural hegemony. Incorporating colonized peoples thus into the hegemonic cultural project, colonial

language policies represented potent forms of symbolic power.

Language also represents an important marker of social change. At the beginning of the 21st century new metaphors revolving around the notions of the ‘information society’, the ‘knowledge economy’, ‘globalization’ and the ‘learning society’ representing our social experience, collectively, and individually, are emerging in educational discourse. These concepts bring with them the possibility of new social languages with which to describe, interpret and analyze the interactive yet fragmented world in which we live today. In contrast to older meta-narratives and universal theories grounded in the principles of the Enlightenment, postmodernist and postcolonial discourse frameworks provide alternative ways of thinking about language, culture and subjectivity. These approaches engage with discourses of ‘Otherness’, and placing emphasis on modern life marked by cultural discontinuities, they foreground discursive and multiple realities and identities articulated in a plurality of voices and narratives. In doing so, they contest the notion of a stable, linear, and immutable ‘Self’ in relation to society and culture, the existence of universal ‘truths’ as well as the idea of a grand narrative describing a homogeneous and inherently stable social reality. Postcolonial and postmodernist discourse frameworks position language as providing a primary means through which different groups of people define themselves in relation to the social world, i.e., by which they name and articulate their social experience and, in the process, transform aspects of their lives. This view of language is active and represents a critical engagement with the world involving individuals and groups in a reflexive process of self-definition. Language, and the way that people use it, therefore, is imbued with ideological meaning. The relationship between language and the naming of experience has been central to identity struggles articulated around ethnicity, culture and religion within pluralist nation states during different historical periods. Ethnographic research informed by postcolonial and postmodern theories are gaining in importance in documenting and understanding the multiple social realities and complex linguistic experiences amongst pupils from transmigratory groups within the shifting ethnoscaapes that characterize the global cultural scenario.

At the same time, the transformative power of language not only includes issues, practices and processes related to language, identity and culture; it also refers to the materiality of language. That is to say, that language has concrete meaning in the life of society and culture. As a communication practice rooted in the everyday lives of people and social institutions, language has potent political and economic currency, and therefore it has an exchange value. Within the rapidly changing world of the 21st century increased international market competition has created labor demands for high levels of technological capability, communicative competence, and continuous skills upgrading. Within this context, language, literacy and communication constitute key elements in the process of lifelong learning. As a result, language in education assumes a central position in national development priorities, and language choice remains a key policy issue in many societies. How individuals and groups operate in relation to these demands within culture and society raise issues related to personal efficacy as well as social and economic development.

Within the democratic process language plays an important role in providing access to knowledge and information as well as a means of interrogating constructed truths in

different textual and discourse frameworks. The skills to analyze, discriminate, interpret, evaluate, make informed decisions, and critique within a variety of communication contexts, therefore, are essential factors in accessing power within a democratic society. Hence, language also represents a potent form of cultural power.

Language relations then are inextricably linked, on the one hand, with power structures and, on the other, with the everyday lives of diverse groups of people in society. As a result, historically, language has provided an important site of struggle over meaning, and control over cultural and educational resources.

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Biographical Sketch

Naz Rassool is Reader in Language in Education at the University of Reading, Berkshire, UK. She is Programme Director of the Masters in Organisation, Planning and Management in Education. She is on the editorial board of *Journal of Education Policy*; *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*; *International Journal of Inclusive Education*; *Gender and Education*. She has published in the field of linguistic diversity with a particular emphasis on language and identity amongst multiple transmigratory groups, the language rights debate, and multiliteracies within the global cultural economy.