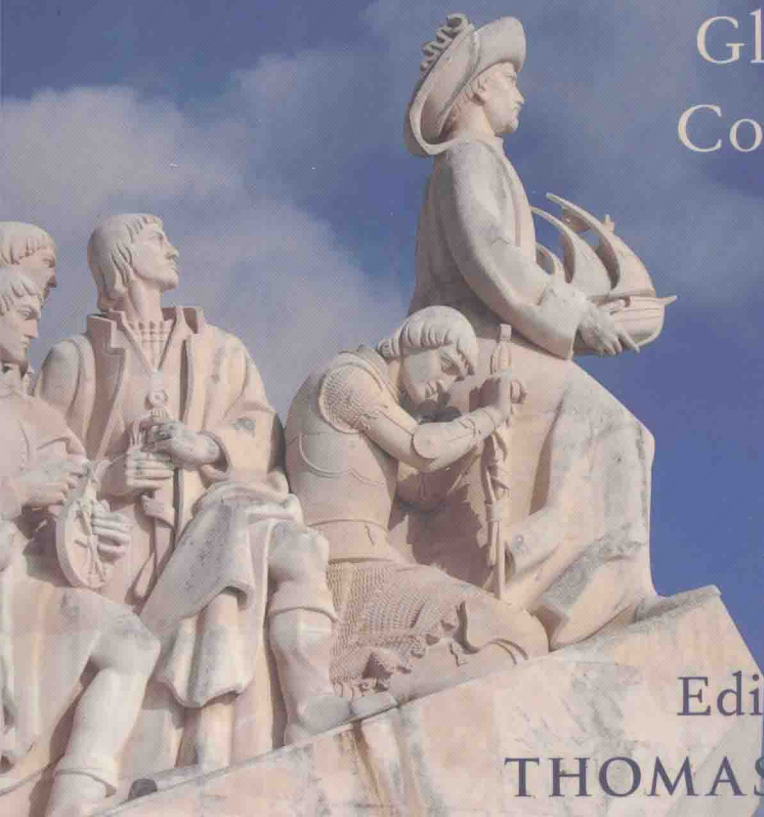


LANGUAGE POLICY & POLITICAL ECONOMY

English
in a
Global
Context



Edited by
THOMAS RICENTO

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LANGUAGE POLICY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

**Per i miei genitori,
Domenico e Flora**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Any authority that I might claim on the subjects dealt within this book is derived in large measure from my life experiences as a language learner and teacher in varied contexts. My first professional experience as a teacher of English as a second language (ESL) occurred at the Cardinal Cushing Center for the Spanish-Speaking in South Boston, Massachusetts, where I taught ESL in the early 1970s. It was there that I witnessed firsthand the dedication and commitment of a Cuban-born teacher who insisted that students lacking literacy in their first language (Spanish) should acquire Spanish literacy to aid their learning of English, a seemingly radical idea at the time. Decades later, this commonsense approach, validated many times over in empirical research, is still questioned and often resisted in countries around the world; yet, the intuitions and unwavering commitment of that teacher to help her students succeed influenced my thinking about the difference that one teacher can make in the lives of her students. I remember with fondness a group of talented and dedicated high school English teachers in Japan who I came to know in my role as professor and “teacher trainer” from 1989 to 1991; their love of and expertise in English and their dedication to teaching were awe inspiring, despite the fact that their primary and expected role was to prepare their students for a high-stakes university English exam mandated and developed by the Ministry of Education, and *not* to instill a love for Hemingway, Steinbeck, or Fitzgerald, authors they cherished and desperately wished to share with their students. More recently, I remember conversations with professors and graduate students in Santiago, Chile, in November 2012, who commented that in order to advance professionally they had to publish research in international English-language academic journals, even though the circulation of such journals was limited in Chile and they were more comfortable writing in Spanish. The contributions to knowledge that they, along with tens of thousands of Spanish-speaking colleagues around the world, could have made was lost, and we are all, in the end, diminished by that loss. Finally, my recent collaboration with refugees in Calgary has shown me the

amazing resilience of human beings whose lives have been turned upside down but who remain determined to overcome linguistic, cultural, and social obstacles that most of us would find unbearable and insurmountable. These are but a few examples from my personal experiences as an English teacher, collaborator, professor, researcher, and “expert” scholar in contexts where I have seen firsthand how language policies have directly affected the lives of individual human beings. It is experiences like these that, in the end, have motivated my interest to understand why beliefs about language—what it is, how it is acquired, how it is valued (or not) in particular contexts—develop and persist, despite empirical and experiential evidence that beliefs often inform practices and policies that can undermine the goals of democratic inclusion and social equity across diverse ethnolinguistic groups.

I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge at least some of the many scholars who have greatly influenced my thinking on language, language policy, and political economy, topics that I have been thinking and writing about, in one way or another, for the past two decades. Certainly the work of Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas has been seminal and influential in a number of ways; it certainly started many critical conversations about global English and language policies that continue to this day. David Harvey’s explanation of Marx’s critique of capital, and his lucid explanations on the rise and influence of neoliberal economic and political policy over the past forty-five years, should be required reading for anyone doing research in the social sciences and humanities. Immanuel Wallerstein’s many contributions to our understanding of world systems—what they are and how they operate—are highly significant and foundational to a critique of social science theorizing and research that too often separates the political, the social, the historical, and the cultural as isolated areas of inquiry. Jan Blommaert, sociolinguist par excellence, shows us how the movement of people across time and space results in dislocations and conflicts that cannot be adequately addressed by systems of governance and surveillance that are incapable of “translating” ontologically mismatched worlds of meaning.

I especially want to acknowledge the outstanding scholars who have made this book possible; not only do all of them command the highest levels of scholarship and intellectual acumen, but they are all deeply committed to understanding the workings of human society with the goal of effecting social change in the direction of greater inclusivity and, ultimately, human happiness and well-being. Working with such fine scholars has been an optimal experience, personally and professionally.

I want to acknowledge the generous support that I have received as Professor and Research Chair in the Werklund School of Education, the

University of Calgary, over the past seven years. I could not have asked for a more congenial circumstance in which to conduct research, organize conferences, and collaborate with talented graduate students and postdoctoral fellows.

I acknowledge the support and guidance of Hallie Stebbins, my editor at Oxford University Press, who made the process of producing this book a smooth and happy experience. I also want to thank Brian Jansen, doctoral student in English at the University of Calgary, who assisted me in editing the chapters, improving clarity of expression and attending to small details with unflagging care and precision. I would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments and helpful suggestions on how this book could be improved.

Finally, I dedicate this book to my parents, whose love of language played an important role in my life. Neither of my parents imparted Italian—their first language—to their three children, instead following an English-only policy for us at home, while speaking Italian with their parents and siblings and using both languages fluently in particular contexts for particular purposes. In retrospect, I have come to realize that their choices and calculations regarding the relative value and utility of English and Italian in the United States reflected their assessment of social expectations and social “reality.” Understanding how my parents—and millions of other speakers of minority languages—experienced and acted upon their sociolinguistic environments continues to motivate my own research on the complex ways that language and power operate in society.

I have tried my best throughout my career to respond to Noam Chomsky’s challenge to intellectuals that they “tell the truth about things that matter to the right audience.” Whether or not I have succeeded in that regard I leave to others to decide.

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Thomas Ricento, Calgary, Canada
May 2014

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INTRODUCTION: LANGUAGE POLICY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

Thomas Ricento

English is the common denominator that unites the work presented in this volume; it provides a focal point to illustrate the ways in which a political economic approach is particularly useful in accounting for a range of phenomena in diverse settings in which a “global” language has attained a special status as (an often perceived) tool for socioeconomic mobility. The focus is on postcolonial contexts, such as India and South Africa, and countries where English is widely studied as a foreign or additional language, such as South Korea, countries in the Mekong River Basin, and in many other countries in Asia and in Europe. The findings reveal the complex ways in which governmental leaders and policymakers, as well as communities and individuals in those communities, make decisions within a global economy about the languages that will be taught as subjects or used as media of instruction in schools. Whether or not the “Straight for English” policy that has become popular in various countries in southern Africa and elsewhere is a good or bad idea, in terms of improving school completion and literacy rates, English is often promoted by its advocates as a social “good” with unquestioned instrumental value; yet access to quality English-medium education in low-income countries is mostly restricted to those with sufficient economic means to pay for it.

The research and conceptual analyses that comprise this volume reflect the diverse backgrounds of its contributors whose training is in the fields of socio- and applied linguistics, economics, political theory, sociology, English, and education. Their methodological approaches include ethnography, critical discourse analysis, economic models (capitalist and Marxist), historical, geographical, and linguistic analyses; the conceptual tools of economic and political theory are used to address issues that have been raised, and often strongly contested, in various literatures concerning the nature and effects of English as the most widely used language on the planet. Perhaps the most fundamental questions that