

Language and Social Change

An Introduction to

# Language Policy

Theory and Method



Edited by **Thomas Ricento**



**Blackwell**  
Publishing



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# Language and Social Change

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The series explores the relationships between language, society and social change, and encompasses both theoretical and applied aspects of language use. Books in the series draw on naturally occurring language data from a wide variety of social contexts. The series takes a broad view of the relationship between language and social change. It includes work on groups that are socially marginalized and that were previously neglected by sociolinguists. It also includes books that focus primarily on wider social issues concerning language, such as language ecology. The series takes a critical approach to sociolinguistics. It challenges current orthodoxies not only by dealing with familiar topics in new and radical ways, but also by making use of the results of empirical research which alter our current understanding of the relationship between language and social change. Above all, language will be viewed as constitutive of, as well as reflective of, cultures and societies.

1. *An Introduction to Language Policy: Theory and Method*  
Edited by Thomas Ricento





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# Preface

This book is designed to provide the reader with a thorough introduction to the principal theories and methods which are used in current research in language policy. The book aims to be accessible to non-specialists from a variety of fields in the social sciences, and to position language policy as an area of research within sociolinguistics and, more broadly, within the social sciences and humanities. The common element to all of the chapters in this book is language and its role in social life. If there is any "argument" that I wish to put forward it is that in order to understand how and why language is imbricated in all aspects of social life, we need to avail ourselves of a variety of perspectives from core social science disciplines: ethnography, geography, historiography, linguistics, political science, psychology, and sociology. The theories and methods described in this book provide frames (or lenses) through which we can examine the role(s) of language in social life; readers will be able to ascertain the relative usefulness of these theories and methods for their own research interests in language policy.

A logical question at this point is: what topics fall within the purview of language policy? Some examples are provided in part III, "Topical Areas in Language Policy"; these were chosen because they have been the focus of research in recent years, because they can be studied in diverse contexts, and because they have tended to generate controversies (and social science research often gravitates toward controversy). As with any academic field, a complex set of factors is involved in choices about what is studied and how it is studied. This is especially true in the social sciences, in which major developments have often been motivated in large measure by the desire to change the social system, to validate existing social policies and practices, or to counteract hegemonic beliefs about human nature. For example, in



recent years research in language policy has been motivated, at least in part, by concerns about the accelerating loss of languages worldwide. This has led to theorizing about how language policies are connected to economic, political, and social structures and processes, and to examination of the effects of ideologies about language and society on language behavior and policies. Policies (and policy approaches) are then proposed and/or evaluated on the basis of their relevance in slowing or even reversing language loss and shift (see chapters 14, 15, 17, and 19 for some examples). This desire to effect social change is what drives the research agenda, rather than theory-building for its own sake. Theories and models have heuristic value as tools to advance our understanding of language behavior in diverse contexts. This interplay between theory and practice is what provides language policy research with a certain vitality, unpredictability, and attractiveness as an area of research for persons who wish to combine theoretical/methodological rigor with social advocacy. This book provides a starting point for those who wish to begin these sorts of investigations.

Any book of this scope and ambition is a collaborative effort. I first want to extend my sincere gratitude to the contributors who have made this volume possible. I feel fortunate that such eminent scholars from a range of academic disciplines were committed from the start to producing authoritative, yet accessible, essays in their areas of expertise. All of the essays were written expressly for this volume and for the purpose of engaging the interest of persons wishing to investigate how and why language matters so much in human society. Each of the chapter authors has compiled an annotated bibliography of major works in their area of expertise; these are followed by discussion questions, which can be used by instructors or individuals interested in applying the ideas presented in the chapter to real-world problems or to hypothetical situations. All of the contributors were genuinely interested in learning what their colleagues were covering in their chapters so that they could avoid duplication while also referring to each other's work.

My thinking on language policy has been influenced by literally hundreds of scholars in the social sciences and humanities, especially from critical theory, linguistics, philosophy, political science, and sociology. Certainly, the work of the contributors to this book has had a large impact on my development over the years. Also influential has been the work of pioneers in the field, including Charles Ferguson, Einar Haugen, Heinz Kloss, and Joan Rubin, among many others too



numerous to mention. Bernard Spolsky, Robert Kaplan, and Richard Baldauf have written authoritative books on language policy in recent years, and have also founded and edit the journals *Language Policy* and *Current Issues in Language Planning*, respectively. Sue Wright has also made a significant contribution to the field, especially with regard to Europe. The work of these and many other scholars has helped put language policy on the map as a serious scholarly endeavor.

I would like to thank Blackwell Publishing for inviting me to do this book in the first place. It has been a pleasure to work, first, with Tami Kaplan and, later, with Sarah Coleman; they have been supportive and accessible from the beginning of this project. I would also like to thank Jennifer Coates, Jenny Cheshire, and Euan Reid for developing the Language and Social Change series in which this book appears.

Very special thanks are owed to Kelly Lynne Graham, a (now former) graduate assistant in the Division of Bicultural-Bilingual Studies at the University of Texas, San Antonio. Without her tireless and meticulous attention to detail, including keeping track of changes, attending to consistency in documentation, contacting authors, looking up facts and references, and countless other chores, this book would not have been possible. These tasks were handled flawlessly and without complaint for the better part of a year; thanks for all of your great work, Kelly!

Finally, I want to thank the University of Texas, San Antonio, for support I received through a mini-grant from the College of Education and Human Development, and a Faculty Development Leave, 2004, to complete writing of the overview essays and introductory chapter. I would also like to thank the doctoral students who participated in my advanced topics in language policy seminar, fall, 2002, for their spirited engagement, probing questions, and commitment to scholarly inquiry.

T. R.  
San Antonio, Texas



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# Theoretical Perspectives in Language Policy





# Theoretical Perspectives in Language Policy: An Overview

Thomas Ricento

To begin, the word “theory,” as Ronald Schmidt informs us in his chapter, traces its roots to the Greek philosophers of the classical era, especially Plato and Aristotle. It comes from the Greek word *theoria*, which means “seeing,” as in “a place for seeing” or being a “spectator.” A theory, then, is a statement, or series of statements, proposed by an individual or group of individuals, about a position on an understanding of the world (where “world” encompasses the material and non-material), or some aspect of it. Theories can be focused on a particular domain of human experience or ability (for example, the theory that the capacity for human language is an innate and highly specified faculty localized in the brain; cf. Chomsky), or it can be more abstract and general (for example, the theory that truth is constructed and reproduced in the discourses of the powerful; cf. Foucault). These examples suggest something of the range of theories about language (e.g., what it is, where it is “located,” its role in social life) that inform research in the field of language policy and planning (LPP). Let us briefly rehearse some of these theories of, or about, language as reflected in the chapters in this part of the book and consider the implications for policy.

The assumption underlying most of the theoretical work described in these chapters is that a language is a code with various forms (written, spoken, standard, non-standard, etc.), functions (usually expressed in terms of domains and relative status within a polity), and value (as a medium of exchange, with particular material and non-material qualities). Postmodern characterizations of language problematize the idea that a language is a fixed code. Linguist Paul Hopper (1998) (cited by Alastair Pennycook in chapter 4), argues “there is no natural fixed structure to language. Rather, speakers borrow heavily from their previous experiences of communication in similar



circumstances, on similar topics, and with similar interlocutors. Systematicity, in this view, is an illusion produced by the partial settling or *sedimentation* of frequently used forms into temporary subsystems" (pp. 157–8). This theory of language – namely that it is not *languages* that exist so much as *discourses*, which may be shared by various overlapping communities of speakers – has important consequences for research in LPP. One effect of this theory is that grand narratives, for example, about the role of "big" languages – such as English – in killing other languages (a position identified with linguistic imperialism; see Robert Phillipson, chapter 19, and Thomas Ricento, chapter 1), based on conceptions of English as a discrete code shared by millions of individuals and speech communities, are viewed as simplistic and deterministic. Rather than "English," under this view (or theory) of language, it is more appropriate (and accurate) to discuss "Englishes" as hybrids reflecting complex processes of borrowing, mixing, and styling with other language varieties (or discourses). Relatedly, "English" serves a variety of symbolic and practical functions in the diverse settings where it is used; it does not adhere to any particular cultural or socioeconomic perspective. Therefore, within this theory of language – that is, as having multiple and numerous discourses, functions, and statuses – it is not possible to assume or predict a particular, or even necessary, relation between a given language (or language variety) and the role(s) it might play in a given setting, whether local or national/supranational. Thus, while evidence does exist that speakers of local languages (and especially minority languages) may shift to a majority language, and that subsequent generations may no longer speak the original (local) language, or may use it only in certain domains as a result of the promotion of former colonial languages, for example, in Africa, it is also the case that a former colonial language, English, was adopted by the African National Congress (ANC) in the successful struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The evaluation of these two possible outcomes of language contact (i.e., language shift, leading to domain loss, and language adoption/adaptation in the service of social change) as relatively "good/desirable" or "bad/undesirable" will be based largely on extralinguistic factors related to theories of what constitutes the social "good," including minimal criteria necessary to facilitate socioeconomic equality and fairness (discussed later in this overview; see also James Tollefson, chapter 3). Furthermore, language change is an inevitable consequence of prolonged language contact, seen for example in the thousands of English words from hip-hop, technology, and advertising



that have found their way into the discourses of hundreds of language varieties world-wide, just as English varieties have incorporated tens of thousands of words from French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, Latin, Italian, and many other languages over the centuries.

This view of language has implications for conceptualizations of language status. Status is widely understood within LPP as the perceived relative value of a named language, usually related to its social utility, which encompasses its so-called market value as a mode of communication, as well as more subjective features rooted in what Harold Schiffman (chapter 7) calls a society's linguistic culture. The value(s) attached to or associated with a language, therefore, do not depend exclusively, or even necessarily, on any official or legal status conferred by a state through its executive, legislative, or judicial branches. For example, as Schiffman (chapter 7) notes, French became the national language of France not because it was given any special legal or official status (such status, Schiffman points out, was at best minimal), but because of powerful mythologies about both the language and the policy. Schiffman's research reveals, for example, that the French populace and even some French scholars who have written on language policy believe that legal provisions regarding the use of French exist which in fact do not exist, and did not until certain laws, known collectively as *la loi Toubon*, were enacted in the 1990s (Schiffman, p. 117). Further, according to Schiffman, the tendency to control many details of life (*jacobinisme*) is part and parcel of French linguistic culture. From the time of the French Revolution, the idea has persisted that non-standard languages (*les patois, les idiomes, les jargons*) "were not just defective or inferior, but even worse, they contained undesirable qualities, even ideas or ideologies, that were a threat to the Revolution, and which had to be extirpated" (p. 120). Thus, mythology, aesthetics, and political ideology (among many other possibilities) are central elements in the ascription and achievement of language status; language-policy goals which seek to enhance or modify in some way the social role(s) and functions of language(s) cannot override the effects of what Schiffman calls a society's linguistic culture. Schiffman provides examples of the effects of linguistic culture in other contexts as well, including Tamil in India and German in the United States.

In addition to the role of ideology in the ascription and achievement of language status, as Nancy Hornberger (chapter 2) notes, language planning nearly always occurs in multilingual, multicultural settings in which planning for one language has repercussions on other languages and ethnolinguistic groups. Decisions about which languages