Language as Commodity

Global Structures, Local Marketplaces

Edited by
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Education (2008) and 'The social and sociolingustic context of language learning and teaching' (with Sandra Lee McKay) in *Handbook of Second and Foreign Language*, Michael Long and Catherine Doughty (eds) (Blackwell, 2008).

Michael Singh is Professor of Education in the Centre for Education Research at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. He is currently investigating globalization and teacher movements into and out of multicultural Australia, and the globalization of higher education through the Bologna Process, both studies following on from research into student mobility and the globalization of higher education in Australia. He has recently studied the initial development of multi-level, large-scale education and training reforms to the senior phase of learning (Years 10–12); undertaken a meta-analysis of research into quality teaching and school leadership; and contributed a study of the motivation and engagement of rural, remote, low SES and Indigenous boys. His book, *Globalizing Education* (edited with M. Apple and J. Kenway), explores the complexities of local/global connectedness evident in policies and pedagogies governing education. In *Appropriating English* (with P. Kell and A. Pandian) he studied innovations in the local/global business of English language teaching.

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Praise for *Language as Commodity: Global Structures, Local Marketplaces*

Looking at language in relation to current conditions of globalization, this book takes up the key issue of the commodification of languages. With a focus particularly on Asian contexts (Singapore, Malaysia, China, India, the Philippines) the authors in this book ask what happens to languages (and varieties of language, and language learners and users) when languages are seen primarily in terms of their usefulness and value within commercial markets. This book does an excellent job of exploring and opening up for further discussion and investigation crucial questions about how languages are valued differently as commodities, even at times as consumer items. To view language as a commodity is to view language in instrumental, pragmatic and commercial terms, which, as this book well demonstrates, is precisely the dominant discourse on language in many contemporary contexts. The different studies in this book therefore give us ways of taking seriously notions of linguistic capital when applied to languages such as English, Chinese or Malay. For all of us involved in language education, these are highly significant questions for they go to the heart of motivations for language learning, language policy decisions, and the ways in which languages are valued.

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The post-colonial nation making of the 1950s and 1960s is a time of dashed dreams. In the wake of the receding colonialism that had characterised the bulk of the geo-political space of the world new nations were forged and old nations resurrected. Their common aim was to provide linguistic dignity to what their often multilingual realities. In some of these new nations English was given notice, in others it was ejected, in still others it was restricted. Such nationalist and nativist language planning affected all colonial languages but English has returned decisively to where it was distanced, denied or delimited. This is a transformation from Language of Empire to Language of Economy; a bounded commodity traded in borderless commerce, realised in education and training and authorised in official discourse. Linguistic commodification

reflects the ruling rationality of markets, our time, New Times, but probably a contingency awaiting future challenge. In this significant volume educationists, socio-linguists, and sociologists subject this phenomenon of language as commodity to a multi-perspective scrutiny, especially of English as lingua mundi in its unprecedented expansion and penetration of societies in Asia and Africa and elsewhere, producing a series of sharp, critical and engaging contributions on global English and the related questions of language rights, linguistic difference, multilingualism and cross-national communication and exchange.

Professor Joseph Lo Bianco
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Preface

In today's world, languages are frequently in competition with each other and this affects the decision-making of those in positions of power in determining language policies and planning: for example, schools boards or Ministries of Education or even governments deciding on mediums of instruction or the choice of second or foreign languages. Often decisions about language (or dialects or language varieties) are related to notions of usefulness – whether defined in terms of their pragmatic and commercial currency; or their value as symbols of sociocultural identity; or as modes of entry to coveted social hierarchies; or as strongholds of religious, historical, technological and political power bases. Languages are seen as commodities that carry different values in an era of globalization. In this volume, we seek to engage with the issue of the articulation of language policies and positions in relation to the role and function these languages have in the context of particular communities. The chapters examine how the valuing of different languages, defined in terms of the power they have in the global marketplace as much as within the complex matrices of the local sociopolitics, strongly underpin the various motivations that influence policy-making decisions. Operating in tandem or in conflictual positions, and often reinforced by the sociopolitical structures existing within these particular communities, these motivations create the tensions that characterize many language-related issues in the postcolonial, postmodern world we live in today.

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Introduction[1]

Peter K. W. Tan and Rani Rubdy

Let us take you through three attested vignettes.

The first is that of a classroom of an independent college in Britain. The pupils are mainly white and they are carefully following the pronunciations of words in Mandarin Chinese. The head teacher, Richard Cairns, has recently made Mandarin Chinese a compulsory subject in this college, and he justifies his decision thus: 'We in Britain need to face up to this challenge, see it for the trading opportunity that it is, and ensure that our nation's children are well-placed to thrive in this new global reality' (BBC 16 January 2006). His is not an isolated view. Another advocate of more Chinese in British schools is Anthony Seldon, master of Wellington College, who says, 'If current and future generations of children do not have access to lessons in the main Chinese language, this will disadvantage the UK economically and culturally' (BBC 27 February 2006). This seems to be the brave new world where languages are learnt to gain economic advantage.

The next vignette is in South Korea – a camp some 40 miles from the capital Seoul, where there are many Korean middle school (lower secondary school) pupils. The buildings are an unusual mix – with European-style terraced houses and castle structures and the place is known as the English village. The children have come through a mock passport control station to enter the English village, and once in only English can emanate from their mouths (Faiola 2004). And the reason for this? More and more English is used in businesses, even within Korea: 'South Korea's top companies, Samsung and LG Philips, have begun conducting job interviews partly in English. Philips is gradually moving toward an English-only corporate e-mail policy, company officials said.'

The third vignette requires us only to cross the Sea of Japan. English has been firmly established in the Japanese school system, and pupils learn it for at least six years in middle (lower secondary) school and high (upper secondary) school, and the government has indicated that 'all Japanese [should] acquire

a working knowledge of English' in a globalized world where English is a 'prerequisite for obtaining global information, expressing intentions, and sharing values' (Prime Minister's Commission 2000). And yet as we wander around the Japanese cities, we hear little English but might see what look like English words used in shop names or on commercial items. We enter a shop and might pick up a photo album that has the following emblazoned on its cover: 'The wind has shifted to the south-east. I am exposing myself comfortably to it' (McArthur 1998: 27). The English there is for decorative rather than communicative purposes. If we listen carefully to the Japanese language, we might also hear loan-words from English – manshon (like 'mansion', only it means 'apartment'). Despite the rhetoric of a globalized world, it is interesting to note that English is kept at arm's length in Japan. As Seargeant puts it, 'the English language is not imported whole as a communicative tool, but unpacked and its component parts reconfigured in unfamiliar contexts' (2005: 314).

The first two vignettes seem to show conscious decisions to devote greater attention to particular languages that seem to give the lie to the standard textbook dictum that all languages are equal. Of course, we know that this is correct at the grammatical or social level. Here, we see conscious decisions being made both by those with authority (head teachers and multinational companies) and those who vote with their feet (school pupils and their parents) to favour particular languages simply because these languages are perceived as being advantageous to other languages in the benefits that they can bring to the user – or, in Bourdieu's terms, they see linguistic capital inherent in these languages. Languages are therefore being evaluated as commodities that command an exchange value. Linguistically, we also appear to be moving into the postmodern age (as Graddol (2006) describes it in *English Next*) when multilingualism is the norm as opposed to the modernist norm of a single language identified with the nation state. These earlier-established notions and ideologies surrounding language such as national identity through language (Heller 1999) give way to complex identities through the notion of globalization because never before have there been more options in linguistic choices.

The third vignette shows a challenge to globalization: where English as the global language is accepted in Japan, but not before taming it and Japanizing it and rendering it acceptable for Japanese consumption.

More than ever, these vignettes indicate that the monolinguistic model, where a single language is deemed sufficient for all functions, is giving way to a multilinguistic model, where speakers need to be able to switch languages; and this is the sticking point: how the complementary relationship between languages can be negotiated. Should one be kept at an arm's length as in the

Japanese vignette, or be welcomed with open arms? How can the relationship between various languages be maintained, and should we or governments be concerned if a language encroaches upon the traditional space of another language? And now that there is some choice in linguistic options, what are the reasons given for preferring one language to another? Is it really true that we now treat languages like commodities that we invest in and can await capital gains in time?

The complexity of today's world and the changing needs of societies mean that individuals, communities, Ministries of Education and governments are making decisions about the merits of learning, promoting or insisting on particular languages. They need to balance the positions of various languages in multilingual contexts and to decide whether to encourage, ignore or attempt to limit the encroachment of a language into the traditional sphere of another language. Treating languages as commodities comes to a head in the context of linguistic rights and language-in-education debates.

This then is the focus of this book: it explores issues surrounding treating languages as commodities. Here languages 'constitute a saleable commodity with regard to business and marketing, whilst for the clients they represent an investment in cultural capital which can then be exchanged within the global labour market' (Rassool 2007: 148). The contexts discussed are by and large postcolonial societies such as Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, India and South Africa, where although local languages feature centrally in the discourse of nationhood, colonial languages, in particular English, have continued to be emphasized as key elements of modernity and have retained high exchange value. But also featured are more international settings such as the United Kingdom and Australia where immigrant populations and professionals alike must attain acceptable degrees of proficiency in English if they wish to assimilate into the global cultural economy of the host communities. The inclusion of China is timely in that it represents a unique situation where earlier preference for Russian as the most favoured foreign language has been completely supplanted by English due to its economic clout. English language teaching is a booming industry in China today, motivated by its newly acquired membership of the World Trade Organization and anticipation of the 2008 Olympics, with governments encouraging citizens to learn English and parents persuading, even forcing, their children to speak it.

Many of these countries are being affected by the changes taking place in the global labour market with language popularity closely following market trends. As the economic status of these countries improves and they come to be regarded as important trading partners within the global economy, their

languages grow in value within the international language market. Thus the value profiles of languages and language varieties often reflect how they are positioned in global as well as local markets. Recall, for instance, the popularity of learning Japanese during the 1980s when Japan had assumed a leading position in the world economy. The current ascendance of Mandarin Chinese in response to China gaining importance as a world trading partner and its potentially vast but as yet untapped consumer market is a more recent example. Thus, while Singapore's education policy requires that all Singaporeans learn their ethnic 'mother tongue' as an additional language, that is, Chinese children learn Mandarin, the Malays learn Malay and the Indians choose from one of the Indian languages offered by the school curriculum (English is the first language in Singapore schools), many non-Chinese Singaporeans currently wish to learn Chinese so as to be better prepared for trade with China – subscribing to much the same rationale as the head teacher in our first vignette above.

At another level, many countries with advanced economies are increasingly 'going offshore', tapping into a vast supply of low-skilled, low-paid labour located within developing countries. A huge range of services are affected by the fact that cheap communications now allow many of them to be carried out in distant locations such as India, the Philippines, Taiwan and China. Graddol observes that

> As national education systems create suitable employees, transnational companies are shifting their research and development centres to these countries. . . . Everywhere, in both developed and developing economies, there is a new urgency to increase the educational level of the workforce to maintain a country's competitive advantage as it loses advantage in less skilled areas to countries lower in the development chain. (Graddol 2006: 36–37)

Many of the postcolonial contexts discussed in this volume are bilingual or multilingual, ethnically complex societies where policy makers often have to negotiate between competing concerns such as the need to promote an international language for the purpose of modernization, the need to develop national cohesion through a common language as well as the need to retain their indigenous languages for cultural integrity. The status accorded historically to former colonial languages, combined with contemporary changes taking place within the global cultural economy, has left an enduring dilemma with regard to language planning and policy in these countries. Catapulted into a highly competitive international financial, commodity and labour market in which they had to compete, many of these countries adopted