Opinion articles

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How to learn from history? Some policy-relevant research possibilities on the circulation of ideas and beliefs about language

by Andreas Krogull and Jeroen Darquennes

In this article, Andreas Krogull, Postdoctoral Researcher in Historical Sociolinguistics at the Leiden University, and Jeroen Darquennes, Professor of German and General Linguistics at the University of Namur, issue a challenge to researchers of historical sociolinguistics to tackle research questions in ways that yield insights to inform contemporary real-world decision-making.

1 Introduction

Current thinking about languages in Western Europe relies heavily on ideas and beliefs that emerged in parallel with nationalism and nation-building in the long 19th century. This includes questions of 'standard' or 'non-standard' languages and varieties, 'correct' and 'acceptable' linguistic forms, or the notion of the 'native speaker'. All of these have created or nurtured asymmetries and inequalities among languages and language users. Often unconsciously, the ideal of monolingualism in a national standard language is still reverberating in current thinking, while increasingly clashing with 21st-century linguistic realities. For language policymakers, it is vital to understand how a whole array of ideas and beliefs that crystalized in the past continue to have an impact on the perception, discussion, and management of language diversity today. With this opinion article we intend to spark a discussion on *how* historical sociolinguistic research can both help us to inform language policies and to give insights into multilingual and linguistically diverse contexts.

We argue that the **multidimensional** and **chronological study** of the **multilayered circulation of ideas and beliefs** surrounding and nourishing language policies is the way forward to learn from history. Our approach follows research in historical sociolinguistics (e.g. Rutten 2019) and is inspired by the ecology of language (Haugen 1972), language ideological debates (Blommaert 1999), folk linguistics (Niedzielski and Preston 2000) and the ethnography of language policy (Johnson 2009). We argue that it can serve as a welcome complement to approaches in critical sociolinguistics and the sociolinguistics of globalization that occasionally propose thought-provoking concepts to help policymakers manage contemporary language diversity (Coupland 2010). We realize that our rather abstract opinion article reflects our own restricted European point of view. However, we hope that our thoughts will be constructively challenged by researchers and policymakers active in different corners of the world.

2 Some general observations

2.1 The open-ended semantics of concepts and dichotomies

Most concepts used in the language sciences, in public debates on language, and at the level of language policy, represent hierarchical and asymmetrical relations in the form of dichotomies: 'language' vs. 'dialect', 'mother tongue' vs. 'foreign language', 'majority' vs. 'minority languages', 'indigenous' vs. 'immigrant languages', 'native' vs. 'non-native speakers', and so forth. In the European realm, these concepts came to be fraught with 'language ideological content' during the long 19th century. To this day, many of them (if not all) have been debated by different types of actors including individuals, interest groups, dignitaries, politicians and researchers. Since these actors use different reference frames when pursuing different kinds of objectives in different kinds of environments, the concepts and dichotomies can be said to have open-ended diachronic and synchronic semantics. By this we mean that the interpretation and meaning of these concepts and dichotomies varies greatly, from both a historical and a contemporary perspective.

2.2 The need for a multidimensional historiography of ideas and beliefs

When studying the historical dimension of language policies, there is an obvious tendency among scholars (including ourselves) to proceed within their own disciplinary boundaries. However, discipline-specific approaches to the study of language policies often go hand in hand with discipline-specific interpretations of concepts and dichotomies. There also is a tendency to study more 'easily' accessible sources, such as official language policy documents. These two tendencies combined may risk rendering a considerable part of the open-ended semantics of concepts and dichotomies invisible, unless care is taken to engage in a historiography of ideas and beliefs that surround and inform language policies (see Blommaert 1999). A multidimensional account of ideas and beliefs puts the focus on 'language politics' as the political process that discursively precedes, yet also accompanies

the development, the implementation, the acceptance and/or the contestation of language policies.

2.3 The dynamic power relations between types of actors

The added value of a detailed multidimensional study of 'language political discourse' is that it reveals a lot about the dynamic power relations between the different types of actors seeking to control or regulate the form, the transmission, the prestige, and the use of one or more languages or varieties in society (Labrie 1999). Such a multidimensional study can help us understand how different types of actors interpret and give meaning to certain concepts and dichotomies that play a role in language policies. It can also shed light on how different types of actors engage in language policy creation, circulation, interpretation, appropriation, and evaluation (see Johnson 2009).

2.4 The chronology and tradition of persistent ideologies

Studying the continuity of debates, fed by a multitude of actors and concerning a specific language policy, can help us to assess the 'tradition' of ideas and beliefs about language over a longer period of time. It can reveal why certain interpretations and concepts persist, even when it is clear that the socio-political context has changed, and the concepts and dichotomies used for many decades may no longer be in line with the dynamic realities of the 21st century. In other words: Analysing the continuity of debates can help us to identify those factors or forces that hamper a more up-to-date interpretation or even a complete revision of certain concepts that are used both to come to terms with and, simultaneously, to shape reality.

2.5 'New' historical awareness versus new concepts

A fine-grained study of debates helps to illuminate their discursive richness, revealing variation underneath the surface of apparently ingrained concepts, ideas and beliefs. Historical analysis of this kind can complement entirely new concepts introduced to account for current challenges. New concepts, for instance those contesting the so-called boundedness of languages and stressing their fluidity as well as the dynamic identities of their users, force us to approach reality in a fresh way, and that is to be applauded. However, there is a strong need to reconcile 'new' thinking with the past, given the historical continuity of concepts, ideas and beliefs not only within the language sciences, but also in politics and public opinion. It is particularly at these levels where persistent concepts, ideas and beliefs tend to be instrumentalised to strengthen linguistic and societal inequalities.

3 The way forward

We propose two interrelated, complementary research directions that could help us to more systematically and purposefully use historical sociolinguistic findings to inform language policies aiming at coming to terms with present-day multilingualism and language diversity.

First, a periodized **multidimensional study** of the **multilayered circulation of ideas and beliefs about language** in different settings is needed. Paying attention to a great variety of languages, such a study will help to unravel the debates that have coloured the entire policy cycle (i.e. from the identification of a policy need to its implementation and evaluation), as well as the interpretation and appropriation of policies among different actors. It will also allow for a much needed 'thick' description of beliefs and ideas, as well as of the semantics of concepts still in use today.

Secondly, a shift from studying relatively limited timespans towards a greater chronological depth is needed, to gain deeper insights into the persistence of ideas and beliefs about language and their continuous evolution and (re)interpretation. An uninterrupted **chronological study** of the **multilayered circulation of ideas and beliefs** enables us to join the dots between historical scenarios and 21st-century issues.

Some foundations have already been laid by historical sociolinguistic research at the universities of Leiden (e.g. Rutten, Krogull and Schoemaker 2020), Brussels (e.g. Vosters et al. 2012), Namur (e.g. Boemer and Darquennes 2012), Vienna (e.g. Rindler Schjerve 2003) and New York (e.g. del Valle 2013). However, to meaningfully learn from the implications of historical cases, stronger links with researchers working on contemporary language policy settings must be established. Ties with political scientists, sociologists and language policy officials trying to fathom contemporary as well as historical language problems also deserve to be strengthened. Together we have a much better chance of creating a common research agenda, ultimately seeking to overcome the 'methodological nationalism' in which much of our current thinking is still rooted.

Further reading

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