Recasting diversity in language education in postcolonial, late-capitalist societies

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Colloquium Abstract:

Social realities of increasing (super)diversity, mobility and the corresponding high valuation of linguistic competences and skills are currently not developing or recognized – as was expected - into egalitarian systems and structures in multilingual communities characterized by linguistic hybridization. On the contrary, much evidence has been put forward that shows how former inequalities, prejudices and social hierarchies are still active and even amplified in many apparently liberal societies today. This panel will pay attention to precisely this: it will examine how various late capitalist and postcolonial regimes recast new forms of diversity (often into old moulds) through the implementation of language education policies and programs. Our aim is to develop an understanding of what the social, organizational, and even theoretical conditions are that contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities that were supposed to be removed in postcolonial paradigms.

One of the key factors we will examine is the extent to which the impact of late capitalism in education and the perpetuation of the knowledge and ideologies produced within a colonial order, feed off each other. In late capitalism, schools and other educational institutions in different countries have faced funding cuts, while having to compete for students and resources. Within this context new language educational programs are a powerful strategy of recruitment and legitimization of schools. In schools with dedicated bilingual and dual language programs, only selected students are suitably prepared for access to education and to an increasingly globalized job market. Within this competitive climate, increasing mobility obliges schools in multilingual cities to offer programs that teach the languages of instruction to a diverse body of students who often have had trans-national trajectories. Ethnographic studies on the management of linguistic resources within classrooms have shown how, in spite of claims about the commodification of languages, these language programs and the languages of their students are rarely seen as a profitable resource. In countries with a recent colonial past, the same inclusive function is assigned to bilingual programs in both languages – colonial languages, endangered languages, and languages with limited social currency, which have profited in limited ways from decolonialization. Previous research shows that these programs and how they are implemented are still shaped by similar hierarchies of students, knowledge and languages. These hierarchies have in turn been shaped by the economic prominence of certain groups, but also by racism deeply rooted in coloniality. However, recently new social agents have entered the scene, challenging implicit educational policies that exclude large numbers of learners, and alternative ways of educating languages are emerging.
Participants:

Inmaculada García Sánchez  Anna De Fina
Temple University  Georgetown University

Christine Anthonissen  Ofelia García
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Luisa Martín Rojo is Professor of Linguistics at the Universidad Autónoma (Madrid, Spain), member of the Scientific Committee of the International Pragmatics Association, and Chair of the Iberian Association of Discourse in Society (EDiSO). Her research focuses on the management of linguistic diversity through linguistic policies and everyday linguistic practices. Her ethnographic, sociolinguistic research examines the construction of social difference and inequality in and through social interaction, and how both are naturalized and legitimized. Recent books include Constructing inequality in multilingual classrooms (Mouton de Gruyter, 2010), and A Sociolinguistics of Diaspora. Latino Practices, Identities and Ideologies (edited with Rosina Márquez Reiter, Routledge, 2014).

I. Immigrant Students’ Experiences with the Regulation of Bilingualism in the US and in Spain

Inmaculada M. García-Sánchez
Temple University

Abstract: Given the global nature of contemporary migrations, schools’ management of multi-/bilingualism, as well as the language ideologies underlying institutional policies and programs directed at immigrant students, has increasingly become an important focus of elaboration in the scholarly literature across a number of related fields, such as educational sociolinguistics, the linguistic anthropology of education, and comparative education. In countries with a long history of immigrant settlement, like the US, as well as in countries with shorter histories of immigration, like Spain, this body of literature has documented, among other things, (1) contradictions between policy agendas and ideologies and practices on the ground; (2) the socio-political stratification of languages and modes of bilingualism that often goes hand-in-hand with a hierarchical racialization of immigrant students’ identities; and (3) the positive and negative impacts that the actual implementation of language programs can have on the educational trajectories of bilingual immigrant students (See e.g. Barlett & García 2011; Martín Rojo, 2010; Mijares and Relaño Pastor, 2011; Wiley and Lukes, 1996; Wright 2005).

Building on this body of literature, this paper explores an aspect of this phenomenon that has not figured quite as prominently in the literature: immigrant students’ own perceptions and experiences of ideologies, policies and programs underpinning how the schools they attended attempted to manage linguistic diversity. How do immigrant students themselves recount their participation in special language programs and assess the impact they have had in their educational trajectories? Using linguistic anthropology’s rich tradition of narrative analysis (Ochs and Capps, 2001; Ochs 2004; Wortham 2001), this paper analyzes the narratives of personal experiences of Moroccan immigrant children in southwestern Spain and Latino youth in a U.S. western mountain state. The narratives analyzed were told in the course of ethnographic interviews (Briggs 1986), conducted as part of larger studies about the social lives of these children and youth.
II. Exclusionary Effects of Obscuring Multilingualism in Primary and Secondary Education in South Africa

Christine Anthonissen,
Stellenbosch University

Abstract: Language policy in post-apartheid South Africa has raised the official status of the nine most widely distributed indigenous African languages, so that the first languages of more than 90% of the linguistically diverse population are now constitutionally recognized. This implies that in public spaces such as government funded primary and secondary schools, services should be available in these languages - and particularly so in the languages widely represented in a particular region, such as isiXhosa in the Eastern and Western Cape, isiZulu in KwaZulu-Natal, or Tshivenda in the Limpopo province. This paper will refer to two regions, the Eastern and the Western Cape, where the effects of such a new, liberal language policy can be tested. It will report on the use of indigenous languages as Media of Instruction (MoI), considering specifically the MoI in schools where foundational work is done and learners are prepared for further education and training as well as for employment. It will refer to the ways in which MoI-practices perpetuate ideologies that still to a large extent exclude L1 speakers of African languages such as isiXhosa.

The paper will argue that post-colonial policies deliberately or inadvertently perpetuate linguistic and cultural distinctions that are disenabling to a majority of youngsters that a former dispensation slighted and that the new dispensation does not sufficiently protect and socially advance.

III. Language practices and language ideologies in a multilingual Sicilian school

Anna De Fina
Georgetown University

Abstract: Migration flows determined by globalized economic forces have transformed many modern cities in multilingual and multi-ethnic spaces creating unprecedented challenges for schools in Italy, as in other European countries.

This paper investigates the case of an inner city school in Palermo, Sicily, one third of whose students come from a variety of foreign countries, as different as Bangladesh, China, Morocco and Senegal. Data come from an ethnographic project involving participant observation that I conducted in 2011 with one fifth grade elementary classroom. In particular, I investigate what kind of language practices are enacted by teachers and students, to what extent they are shaped by traditional language ideologies and what kinds of insights they provide on the way both individual students/teachers and the school cope with the changes brought about by these new migration flows. I show that even though the diversity of experiences and cultural backgrounds of the students and their families has created and imposed a variety of new practices in the school and in the classroom, language practices still reflect a rigid “division of labor” in which institutional spaces are reserved mostly for Italian and traditional foreign languages such as English, while the languages spoken by the children of immigrant origins together with the Sicilian dialect are cast into the space of private communication, play and fight among the children. I also discuss the emergence of language hierarchies in the classroom reflecting different migration histories in Sicily.
IV. Language, Diversity and the Common Core State Standards

Ofelia García

City University of New York

Abstract: Although the complexity of new ways of languaging are increasingly being recognized by language scholars, teachers of language, and in particular teachers of language minoritized students entering schools conducted in dominant national languages are now faced with teaching and assessing students according to stricter and more conventional language standards than ever before. This presentation will use the case of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) recently adopted by 46 states in the US to show how despite the advance in the theory of language use that the CCSS proposes, it maintains a theory of “the English language” as a well-bound separate code that can be acquired and taught as a linear build-up of grammatical structures and vocabulary. That is, inherent in the CCSS there is a contradiction between language use as human action that students “do” in the Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening Standards, and the Language Standards that consider language simply as English structures that can be decomposed so that students “have” them.

This presentation reminds us that a language cannot be defined in terms of a set of essential linguistic features and that national languages are not natural linguistic objects, but are instead constructed for social and political purposes. By insisting that students meet standards of “the English language,” educators contribute to a cycle of social inequality in which language minoritized students are not valued for their linguistic proficiency — the ability to express complex thoughts effectively, to explain things, to persuade, to argue, to give directions, to recount events, to tell jokes — but on proficiency in features of a national language that has been socially constructed. We end by proposing that to engage deeply with what school offers educationally and develop ways of using language appropriate for academic contexts, language minoritized students need to use all their language features without always having to adhere strictly to socially and politically-defined language boundaries.