Methods and approaches in language policy research

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Introduction

Language policy is an area of multidisciplinary inquiry, and for this reason, different research concerns, methods and paradigms tend to converge in language policy research. The field of language policy research has been evolving in the last few decades. Its development can be divided into three stages (Johnson, 2016, 2018; Tollefson, 2013; Tollefson & Pérez-Milans, 2018). The stage of early work was perceived as “classic” (Ricento, 2000) or “neoclassical” (Tollefson, 2013) and was characterized by a burst of activities of language planning in many contexts. The coinage of the term “language planning” dates back to the late 1950s when Haugen (1959) reported his study on language standardization in Norway. Here, the word “planning” suggests deliberate efforts put by planning bodies (typically linguistic experts hired by nation-states) to make a difference in the current situation of language use, language system and language acquisition (Tollefson & Pérez-Milans, 2018). The term “language policy” emerged later, either as an interchangeable alternative to “language planning” or as a decision made about language, which would become the basis for subsequent planning activities (Tollefson & Pérez-Milans, 2018). The mission and function of language policy at this stage was often considered in terms of state formation and decolonization.

Beginning in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, language policy research entered the stage, characterized by a critical turn (Johnson, 2018). Inspired by Habermasian and Foucauldian line of thought, Tollefson (1991, 2006, 2013) conceptualized this critical turn in terms of the “historical-structural approach”. This approach focuses on “the impact of coercive policies on language learning and language behavior” (Tollefson, 2013, p. 26). It shares common interests and keywords with critical theory, such as power, struggle, colonization, resistance, hegemony, imperialism and ideology (Tollefson, 2006). Critical approach understands language policies as “mechanisms for creating and sustaining systems of inequality that benefit wealthy and powerful individuals, groups, institutions and nation-states, as well as for resisting systems of inequality” (Tollefson, 2013, p. 27). It helps readers realize that taken-for-granted concepts, such as “diglossia”, “bilingualism” and “multilingualism”, are not scientific facts to be readily accepted, but sociolinguistic constructs to be questioned, challenged and reconstructed (Ricento, 2000).
It can be argued that language policy research in the previous two stages focused too much on activities of nation-states. For this reason, researchers started to conceptualize language policy from a more bottom-up and processual perspective in research in the new millennium. Because language policy development and implementation involve multiple participants and stakeholders, the operative word “policy” was proposed to be treated as a verb rather than a noun (McCarty, 2014). This processual dynamism characterizes research in the third stage in language policy research as researchers no longer see language policy as written texts to be enforced to regulate language use. Instead, language policy is “proposed, interpreted, justified, negotiated, modified, implemented, resisted and evaluated in an ongoing discursive process” in different levels of places by different stakeholders (Gao & Shao, 2018, p. 299). In order to capture the participants’ interpretation and action in the policy process in a specific context, researchers use ethnography and ethnographically informed discourse analytics for collecting and analyzing empirical data. For this reason, the third stage of language policy research is described as an “empirical turn” (Johnson, 2018) that drives a variety of methods, frameworks, paradigms and social theories to be used in research.

The three stages of language policy research described previously depict the development of language policy research as a field of inquiry, but we are aware that some clarifications are needed to prevent the deception from misleading readers. First, the chronological order of stages in language policy research does not mean that approaches and methods in the earlier stages are obsolete. Critical approaches to language policy, for example, still appear to be necessary and useful today when right-wing populist discourse is gaining momentum and when linguistic construction of ethnic borders and its negative effects are witnessed (see Rosenberg, Jungbluth, & Rhobodes, 2015; Wodak, 2015). Second, methods and approaches in a later stage often constitute a response to particular issues that arose at an earlier stage. In addition, the developmental stages of language policy research are largely based on scholarship in Europe and in countries such as the UK and US. They do not necessarily apply to research scholarship in contexts where policy making is still a top-down process. For instance, in China, language planning today continues to be perceived as a “national strategy” (Li, 2016, p. 1), and linguistic experts are still actively involved in language standardization. It is thus inaccurate to claim that “neo-classical” ways of thinking have become history. In view of this, we do not categorize different approaches and methods according to a particular chronological order. We instead use relevant research topics and focuses to group these approaches and methods.

For the sake of convenience, we frame research topics and focuses in terms of the site or level of language policy – that is, the “where” dimension. The question of where a particular language policy applies would generate a taxonomy that includes (inter-)national/regional (macro-level) language policy, institutional (meso-level) language policy, and family (micro-level) language policy (see Table 21.1). This taxonomy is not without problems because the three levels overlap and interact with each other. Consequently, boundaries between these levels are porous. For example, national language policy often mediates institutional language management and personal language practice. Nevertheless, we argue that it is still desirable to envisage and present research focuses, topics and questions at each level for the sake of clarity. The deployment of methods then depends on a concrete research question. The coming sections of this chapter are organized around the interrogative questions “what”, “when”, “why”, “who” and “how”. We are fully aware that this division of interrogatives may seem problematic because, most of the time, these questions should be asked together rather than separately. This division is only for the purpose of deconstructing research questions to delineate relevant methodological implications. It should also be noted that research questions under each approach mentioned in Table 21.1 by no means form an exhaustive list.
The “what” approach: “factual” information

Language policy development and implementation take place in specific contextual conditions. Though it is highly questionable whether researchers can capture such contextual conditions without reconstructions, it is still important for language policy researchers to anchor their research endeavours within such constructed “factual” information. For instance, if we understand language belief, language management and language practice as the three key components of language policy (Spolsky, 2004), an important question would be what the
situation of language belief, management and practice is in the place of interest. Simply put, we want to know what is going on in a specific context before we explore relevant language policy development and implementation.

At the macro level, the “what” approach often focuses on the language situation in a country/region (e.g. a former colony). Major journals in this field, such as Current Issues in Language Planning, Language Problems and Language Planning, and Language Policy, have published reports on language situations in various parts of the world (e.g. Gong & Guo, 2019; Han, Gao, & Xia, 2019; Spolsky, 2018, Yan, 2017). This type of report on language situations aims at presenting panoramic views of language use in all domains of life and is normally constructed through a review of language policy documents, historical accounts, newspaper articles and so forth, as well as analysis of the political, economic, cultural and historical situations the place under study has been undergoing. Another type of report focuses on a national/regional language policy implemented in a specific domain (or institution, such as schools). However, this policy is not to be confused with institution-level language policy because it is implemented over the country or region, e.g., national language-in-education policy (Hu, 2005).

At the meso level, the “what” approach to language policy explores the explicit and implicit language policy, or sometimes the lack of a language policy, in social institutions such as university (e.g., Hu, Li, & Lei, 2014; Han, De Costa, & Cui, 2016) or church and other religious institutions (e.g., Avni, 2012; Barrett, 2017). At the micro level, family language policy remains a popular topic. Kaveh (2018) asked five “what” questions in a family language policy research on Iranian immigrant families in the US to get them to describe their language belief, practice and management. The study adopted a mixed methods design (see Hashemi, this volume) including questionnaire survey (see Iwaniec, this volume) and interview (see Rolland, Dewaele, & Costa, this volume). Due to the nature of such inquiries, it may be less meaningful for researchers to only ask what languages are used by a particular family on what occasions or what languages parents want their children to inherit or acquire. More meaningful questions in family language policy research are “how” and “why” questions that seek social, cultural and economic explanations. As Kaveh (2018) suggests, “a complex web of connections between family language policy and several sociopolitical factors of the wider society was at work in shaping the language profiles of these families” (p. 443).

Another example is Hu et al. (2014), who raised three “what” questions about the institutional/personal goals of an English medium instruction (EMI) program in a Chinese university, regarding the policy measures that were deployed to manage EMI, and the teaching and learning strategies. Research data included policy documents collected from the university’s website. Data were also collected through conducting one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions with professors, EMI students and non-EMI students in the university. Data were analyzed inductively, that is, with a coding process based on several rounds of reading and coding. Researchers first read all data and put relevant bits and pieces under pre-established categories: they used Spolsky’s three components of language policy (ideology/management/practice) as the main categories (Spolsky, 2004). These main categories helped them inductively “identify themes in data, explore complex interactions among these themes, and organize them to uncover important patterns” (Hu et al., 2014, p. 28).

Sometimes, de facto language policy at work cannot be identified by simply asking interview questions and reading policy documents. Ethnography is thus a useful tool for researchers to discover what is really going on in a specific context. Nero (2014), for instance, conducted a nine-month study in three Jamaican schools using classroom observation, interviews and a demographic questionnaire, in addition to reading curriculum documents. Ethnographic methodology
enabled the researcher to find the de facto policy in schools: teachers used their agency to mini-
mimize the use of Jamaican Creole among students in classrooms.

The “when” approach: history and timing

Similar to the “what” approach, the “when” approach offers “factual” information regarding
language use and language policy. The approach may focus on a relatively long historical
period of language policy development and implementation in a specific context from a macro
perspective. It reveals patterns and changes in language policy over time, especially when
significant or drastic changes in society are witnessed during the selected period. Examples
include studies on the imposition of French in Corsica from 1768 to 1945 (Blackwood, 2004);
on the campaign for Spanish language education in the “Colossus of the North” from 1914
to 1945 (Bale, 2011); on English education policy in Korea under US rule from 1945 to 1948
(Kim, 2011); on language policy in Japan-occupied Korea from 1910 to 1945 (Yang, 2017)
and on the evolving college English curriculum in China from 1985 to 2015 (Xu & Fan, 2017).

Archives of textual documents constitute the major source of data for this type of study.

Studies have also framed language policy at particular points of time or specific historical
backgrounds, such as language policies during globalization (Omoniyi, 2003). This kind of
framing reminds readers of these studies that language policy, like any other policies, carries
characteristics of a specific time frame. For example, in 2016, “post-truth” became the Oxford
Dictionary’s Word of the Year, denoting a sense “relating to or denoting circumstances in
which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion
and personal beliefs” (Peters, 2017, p. 563). Is it true that in shaping public opinion about language
policy, the media seems better at stirring strong emotions than reporting “facts” (see Gao &
Shao, 2018; Shao, 2016)? This would be a valuable topic for us to investigate.

The “why” approach: rationale, ideology and explanation

If “what” and “when” lead more to the discovery and construction of phenomena and facts,
the “why” approach to language policy allows further exploration of meanings associated with
language policy. Understanding language policy process as a series of meaningful acts, the
“why” approach seeks explanations and justifications. It deals with the rationale and ideology
behind a specific language policy expressed by policy making bodies. It also invites people to
explain their language practices and their (re)actions to language policy.

It is important to know that neoclassical, critical and constructionist approaches have dif-
ferent understandings of “why” and that they handle it differently. Generally, the neoclassical
paradigm has a straightforward and simplistic understanding of “why”: because there exists
a language problem to be solved, there is a need for a relevant language policy to be de-
veloped and implemented. Indeed, politicians and policymakers usually justify their decisions
by claiming that their policy aims to solve a problem. The underlying assumption here is that
language problems do exist prior to the language policy and they can be identified and isolated.
The neoclassical paradigm thus takes a more positivist stance to language policy. However, it
has now become questionable whether language problems do exist and how language policy
proponents construct the problems. Researchers working in the critical paradigm have a pre-
supposition that a “problem” is produced. This is not to say that policy problems are illusions
or lies, nor that real language problems do not exist. From a critical perspective, problems are
defined by powerful people who have the privilege to participate in the policy making process
and who have the final say. Their policies benefit themselves, and the problem they define is only for justifying their own policy proposal(s). In the eyes of the less powerful, it may not be a problem, or there may be more serious problems to be addressed.

Constructionism (and/or constructivism, see Zhu, 2016) sees policy as constructed in subjective and collective meaning-making interactions. The construction of policy and problem is subjective. However, it is subjective not in the sense that powerful people can construct a policy at will; it is subjective because reality is always mediated and an internal, cognitive process works in different individuals in different ways. Meanwhile, the construction of policy and problem is collective. This collective meaning-making process is never straightforward, though. It is dynamic, polyphonic and complicated. The process of social construction of meaning is what ethnographically informed methodology wants to capture. In other words, while text-oriented methodology discovers rationale and ideology, process-oriented methodology focuses on the process in which different rationales and ideologies collide.

An example of the “why” approach at the macro level is Savski (2016). He used the discourse-historical approach (DHA, see Reisigl & Wodak, 2016), a line of thought in critical discourse analysis, to reveal ideologies in government policy documents, namely, two consecutive versions of Slovenia’s Resolution for a National Language Policy Program. With this discursive approach to language policy, Savski’s research discovered competing hegemonic voices in language policy through historical contextualization, deductive textual analysis (to use DHA’s pre-established categories), and inductive discourse analysis (to analyze linguistic patterns emerged and identify discourse strategy). He was able to identify two values – modern and postmodern – that dominated Slovenian language policy. While one follows the national-state model, the other emphasizes democracy and inclusivity.

In the language policy development and implementation process, different stakeholders may have radically differing rationales and ideologies. These meanings associated with different stakeholders cannot be viewed as isolated, stable and fixed entities. They should be examined together with their identities to make more sense.

The “who” approach: identity, agency and subjectivity

Stakeholders and participants lie in the center of the language policy making process. It is people who make policy for (or against) people. The “who” approach takes us directly to the center of language policy with a lot of relevant questions: who has the power to make policy? Who shall face direct impact of the policy? What is the role of teachers in a national language-in-education policy? Who always makes language-related decisions in a family? Many questions can be asked that require an answer about people, their multiple and changing identities, and their agency and subjectivity.

Some keywords here deserve a closer look. As an everlasting dualism haunting all kinds of social theories, the structure/agency pair is important for researchers to understand people in the language policy process. From the macro-level perspective, people sometimes might be seen as prisoners of culture, knowledge, history, politics, economy, language, and many other structures and mechanisms. For example, language was in existence before us and is given to us. As individuals we actively use language while following rules that are not made by ourselves. Similarly, we are subject to beliefs, rules, norms and power relations in other domains of social life. These macro structures shape our behaviors and ways of thinking. However, the mechanisms and structures that constrain us exist and reproduce themselves in our daily actions. Because people have the ability to reflect on what they are doing, they may wield their agency in pursuit of change. Hence, when investigating the development and implementation of a particular language policy,
both structure and agency should be considered. This is the view of the realist paradigm (see Zhu, 2016). For realists, the “who” question in language policy could, for instance, focus on how people with different identity aspirations exert their agency in the policy process.

Pease-Alvarez and Thompson (2014) illustrate a vivid example of teachers working together to resist and revise top-down language-in-education policy that they believe would have detrimental effects on students. Seeing all stakeholders as participants in the language policy process, they considered the role of teachers specifically and looked into the role of teacher agency. The teachers formed a collective named “Educators Advocating for Students (EAS)”, a grassroots organization of teachers from schools that belong to the same district where the majority of the students are Latino Americans. As members of this association, the authors’ firsthand experiences offer a story from the insider point of view. They collected data from field notes, audio recordings, internal documents and online postings, and interviews with active members. Findings suggest that when facing pressure from above, the group members did come up with some solutions to counter institutional constraints. For example, they protect untenured teachers through anonymity. This insider view is very valuable in that researchers as outsiders sometimes face difficulties in winning participants’ trust, and data merely collected from interviews seem less reliable, especially when the topic is of some political sensitivity.

While agency is celebrated in the realist paradigm, a post-structuralist perspective would celebrate the death of the subject. This claim may sound weird at first. What it rejects is, in fact, the concept of a free subject who is able to “use” agency at will. From this point of view, the reason California teachers in Pease-Alvarez and Thompson (2014) have some agency is merely because the system allows them to. Their grassroots organization, for example, would find it difficult to exist in totalitarian and post-totalitarian societies such as China. Following this logic, if there are no “free” subjects, how to account for subjectivity? A post-structuralist perspective would not see policy as constructed by subjects. Conversely, it may see policy as constitutive of (shaping) subjectivity. In other words, policy constructs us as specific types of subjects. It is policy (and discourse and structure) that grants us different identities. In Shao and Gao (2019), the authors show how people living in Shanghai were defined as real citizens, new citizens, and fake citizens and outsiders according to their language use. While some may think that labels for segments of the population cannot cause undue harm, these constructed identities are not just labels in discourse. Linguistic construction of identities and borders has real-life effects and consequences. A post-structuralist approach to the “who” question will be able to showcase identities constructed in language policy and the benefits and sufferings of those on whom the labels are forced.

The “how” approach: effect, attitude, (re)action, process, and all

Finally, the “how” approach to language policy leads to all sorts of questions, of which the frequently asked ones include how the policy affects people, how people perceive the policy and different languages, how people react to the policy, how a policy proposal becomes an actual policy and so on and so forth.

Typically, when a new national language policy arises, it is both necessary and important for the government and researchers to conduct attitudinal studies and find out whether the policy has support among the public. A questionnaire survey is a faster and more efficient tool to elicit opinions from a relatively large sample size. For example, following some major changes in language policy, Marley (2004) conducted a study on language attitudes in Morocco.

Data elicited from surveys and interviews alone may have some inaccuracy and limitations, because how people perceive and value language is directly embodied in how they practice
language and react to language policy in everyday life. Ethnographically informed methodology sometimes produces intriguing findings which can hardly be captured without an insider’s view. A good example at the institutional level is the Confucius Institute. These organizations invest Chinese taxpayers’ money in various educational institutions around the world, including a secondary school in London attended by students from working class families. The funding body requires that the results of a standardized test of Mandarin that assesses the degree of memorization of written characters should meet expectations. Pérez-Milans’s (2015) ethnography reveals how teachers and students “coordinate their actions to overcome the constraints of the official policies and discourses that shape their daily practices” (p. 170). Based on the multiple sources of data collected during the research, a thick description was produced that shows the process in which teachers and students “create a sense of smooth language learning environment, even when the majority of the students have difficulties in achieving outcome targets” (p. 153). Such findings would have been difficult to uncover if the researcher had a non-ethnographic design.

Similarly, an ethnographic case study by Codó and Patiño-Santos (2018) examines the implementation of a Spanish government scheme, the Plurilingual Experimentation Plan (PEP), that introduces content-and-language-integrated learning (CLIL) in primary, secondary and vocational education. Their research site was a state secondary school near Barcelona. After their ten-month period of stay, they were able to determine how “different groups of actors rationalise their engagement with the programme differently, while still aligning themselves with the official imagination of PEP, and constructing a collective ethos of commitment and hard work to improve the school’s reputation” (p. 479).

These cases show us why ethnographically informed methodology is capable of capturing what is really going on in language policy implementation. This is because implementation “is not just what happens after policy is made” as some would imagine (Johnson, 2009, p. 142). Rather, it is “a link in a chain of policy processes in which all actors potentially provide inputs” (Johnson, ibid.). Text-oriented methodology alone may not be sufficient because too often than not people do not live up to what they say. In the case of Pérez-Milans’s (2015) inquiry, Confucius Institutes’ annual reports would certainly not cover the everyday local practices of collusion between students and teachers.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter we have demonstrated different approaches in terms of what, when, why, who and how at different levels. To avoid misleading readers, we would like to reiterate three critical points to clarify our position and conclude the chapter. First, and very importantly, in empirical studies, these questions should be asked together. For example, after reporting what the current situation of language use and language policy is, it is natural to ask why this is the case. At the same time, research focuses on “why” and “how” cannot delegitimize the merit of “what”. As research in humanities and social sciences emphasizes various meaning-making interactions that constitute the social world, sometimes scholarly reports on “what” are perceived as “too descriptive” or “contributing less”. We do not see it this way. Reports on the current situation of language planning and language policy in places that have not been overstudied, especially places that have been ignored or marginalized in research, are very important as they help broaden horizons and extend understanding. We appreciate the practice of Current Issues in Language Planning that in every volume this journal publishes some original reports on language and policy practices in different countries and regions from a panoramic perspective. These reports on new or neglected contexts can solicit further research studies from scholars working in this field.
Second, one (trendy) paradigm, methodology or approach cannot delegitimize another. For example, top-down approaches were criticized for focusing too much on nation-states and ignoring stakeholders’ agency in the policy process (Tollefson, 2013). Sometimes, agency plays a critical role: Palozzi (2006) reports two studies on the attitudes of registered voters towards selected language policy issues in the US. Voting is a demonstration of agency and a powerful expression of people’s language attitudes that may result in a change in language policy. However, in many contexts where policy making is generally top-down, voting or other effective means of resistance is not an option. These contexts still warrant focus on the state’s actions, perhaps together with some bottom-up perspectives. Similarly, approaches that capture the dynamic language policy process cannot delegitimize content-, text- or discourse-oriented approaches. The latter was often criticized as taking-for-granted “stable macro-societal processes” and projecting them “on the discourse as background facts” (Pérez-Milans, 2012, p. 60). However, as we stated earlier, policy making bodies have to justify their rationale. They have to explain why they propose a particular language policy that will affect or change people’s way of living. In deconstructing these rationales, researchers do not necessarily have to take any “stable macro-societal process” as granted. It is policymakers who wish the policy process to be smooth, and who wish their version of reality to be taken as background facts. Discursive approaches to language policy see their justifications and explanations as texts contested in other texts. A critical-discursive perspective is able to deconstruct ideology-laden statements and taken-for-granted positions. In fact, ethnographic data collection has been accompanied with fine-grained discourse analysis, although the philosophical underpinnings behind the adoption of discourse analytics may be different for ethnographers (Johnson, 2018).

Lastly, there seems a new wave of language policy research that considers the combination of “research with application”, “observation with action” and “critique with advocacy” (Johnson, 2018, p. 65). As many research approaches, and discursive approaches in particular, focus exclusively on deconstruction rather than co-construction of knowledge, researchers’ participation in, and co-construction of, language policy would be both an interesting research topic and a meaningful deed.

References


