

***Agency in Language Policy and Planning: Critical Inquiries***  
**Jeremie Bouchard and Gregory Paul Glasgow (eds) (2019)**

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Having emerged as an extension of applied linguistics in the early 1950s, language policy and planning (henceforth, LPP) has now become an independent academic discipline in its own right. Initial research in the field focussed mainly on resolving the language problems of emerging post-colonial nations of the era through developing macro-level language policy frameworks. Later research influenced by the canons of critical theory started questioning these top-down frameworks for not only ignoring the role of grassroots-level agents in language policy processes but also for turning a blind eye to the socio-political and socio-economic contexts in which these languages were planned. This analytical approach puts forth a politicised and critical understanding of language policies as a mechanism of power recognising the agentive role of individuals in policy discourse and argues that they are constrained by such ideologies that rule institutions at all levels, including the state, religious organisations, schools, and communities (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). Therefore, the critical language policy (hence CLP) framework understands agency as ‘the intention or the capability of an individual to act, initiate, self-regulate, or make differences or changes to their situation’ (Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech 2020: 1). Moreover, governmental policies may also attribute power to certain speech varieties over others by labelling it the standard language, thereby ‘both shaping and being shaped by the agency of individuals’ (Ahearn 2010: 45). This line of research

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moves the focus away from a macro-analysis of national policies to an investigation of how various social actors position themselves vis-à-vis policy discourses. Rather than contrasting divides between ‘social structure’ and ‘human agency’ which has been the inspiration of many CLP studies (see Ricento 2000; Johnson 2013), Bouchard and Glasgow make a genuine effort in this edited volume to harmonise and connect the two notions.

One of the key strengths of this collection is its well-knit structure. It commences with a Foreword by Francis M. Hult that not only situates the ‘vital contribution’ (p. x) within the broad LPP field but also sets the tone ‘through which LPP as an area of scholarship continue[s] to mature’ (p. x). Next comes a robust Introduction the size of a full-length chapter (21 pages) where the editors reveal that their main intention is ‘to carve out a stronger theoretical and empirical understanding of agency in LPP’ (p. 2). It has three sections. They start by describing the common trends in academia to theorise ‘agency though analytical dichotomies’ (p. 3), which is followed by an extensive review of literature on agency in LPP from a critical social research perspective and culminates in a detailed summary of chapters. The book is divided into ten chapters. Drawing on ethnographic research from eight geopolitical regions of the world, it presents nine unique case studies exploring how ‘agency’ engages with a range of key LPP components such as ideologies, multilingualism, language in education, revitalisation, and identity issues, to mention a few. Then come a short conclusion (5 pages) and an Appendix section explaining transcription conventions. Finally, it closes with an index offering an alphabetical roadmap of topics discussed.

Chapter 1, ‘Agency in Language Policy and Planning: A Theoretical Model’, which is distributed in seven asymmetrically distributed sections, can be seen as an extension of the Introduction. Together, they comprise 76 pages. Influenced particularly by Layder’s (1997) domain theory and writings of other realist thinkers such as Margaret Archer, Alison Sealy, and Bob Carter, the editors campaign for an interactive ‘flow diagram’ (p. 16), which not only reveals the intricacies of ‘human communication, of individual, community and national identities and globalisation’ (p. 23) but also facilitates an original perspective to research the ‘full ecology of human life’ (p. 23). When conceptualising the social world as a stratified realm, along with agency and structure, Bouchard and Glasgow introduce culture as one of the essential components since it is the ‘sum totality of ideas, values, beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, myths, religious strictures’ that the community members ‘bring to their dealings with language’ (Schiffman 2006: 112). Although confident about the efficacy of the ‘flow diagram’ (Figure 2, p. 70), the editors warn the readers about the limitations of the volume and call

for more empirical research to test the model. It is also worth mentioning here that the chapter may appear somewhat lengthy and theoretically dense to some readers, but, personally, I found it intellectually invigorating, provocative, and engaging. Since policies are socially situated and context-specific, the following nine chapters offer empirical evidence of how linguistic culture, structure and agency influence policy decisions at all levels including regional to federal levels and the layers in between.

In Chapter 2, Chimbutane investigates the agentic role of local community members and international aid organisations in the bilingual school settings of Mozambique where one of the local African languages is being replaced by Portuguese, the colonial language, as a medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards. Whereas the ultimate goal of the ‘early-exit transitional model’ (p. 76) is to develop competence in the L2 (Portuguese), it ensures that during the first three school years of school the focus remains on developing literacy skills in the L1 (local language). Building on ethnographic research data, Chimbutane spotlights the challenges the Mozambican government faces while implementing the policy initiatives on the ground and questions the ‘sustainability of education provision initiatives that rely heavily on support from NGOs and international aid agencies’ (p. 95).

Chapter 3, ‘Language change and social shifts post-2010 in the Kyrgyz Republic’, moves the focus to Central Asia. Language policy in Kyrgyz Republic (hence KR) revolves around the ‘policy document’ (p. 100) titled ‘Concept of the Development of National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic’ (2013) which was written in the backdrop of 2010 Osh oblast protests. Although the ‘Concept’ empowers Kyrgyz as the only official language, it also envisions KR to be a multilingual nation, therefore, promoting the teaching/learning of Russian and English. While evaluating a UNICEF-led Multilingual Education Programme, Ahn examines how the research participants involving teachers, students, parents, and administrators become potential agents of LPP on the ground.

Even though Ahn analyses parental language-related decisions in her chapter, she does not make an explicit reference to the Family Language Policy (hence FLP) framework. FLP refers to the overt choices and decisions that parents make about language use inside the family and implicit processes that legitimise certain language practices over others in the home (King, Fogle and Logan-Terry 2008). As principal caregivers, they often adopt the role of custodians over their children’s everyday language conduct, perceiving this ‘ownership’ as a putative parental right (see Nandi, Manterola, Reyna-Muniain, and Kasares, 2022).

In Chapter 4, Mirvahedi studies the ‘Construct of an ideal parent’ in connection with Azerbaijani-speaking families in Iran. The chapter underscores how certain top-down educational policies ‘influence and constrain the individual agency of parents and children with a minority background [Azerbaijani] leading them to favour and promote the dominant language of the society [Farsi]’ (p. 127). Whilst macro-level data locate community members’ positive attitude towards Azerbaijani, Mirvahedi finds it insufficient to maintain the language in the end.

In his chapter, ‘Constraints on agency in micro-language policy and planning in schools: A case study of curriculum change’ (Chapter 5), Liddicoat presents the results of a three-year-long multisite ethnographical study of educators’ agency in various South Australian school contexts. In his attempt to understand how ‘local ecology mediates possibilities of acting’ (p. 151), the author concludes that the ‘actions taken by teachers as language planners shaped the structure in which they acted’ (p. 166).

Chapters 6 and 7 retain the focus on Singapore. In Chapter 6, Ng investigates the views of individual Singaporeans on the categorisation of languages in the country’s top-down language policy (p. 171). Taking into account the governmental policy documents, census reports, and eight semi-structured interviews with participants who experienced Singaporean LPP since the early 1960s, the author reveals the grassroots-level tensions concerning English, the official language, and local dialects. Ng concludes that the agentive responses of the participants involve a range of bottom-up policy discourses including the issues of mother tongue transmission in the home, ‘the constraint in the use of the Chinese dialects and the teaching of mother tongue subject in schools’ (p. 187). In their study, Chua and Soo (Chapter 7) research how, as policy intermediaries, the school leaders implement the ‘English-knowing Bilingual Policy’ in Singaporean schools. This chapter perceives these policy actors as ‘bounded agents of change’ (p. 191) owing to their capacity to comprehend and interpret policy intentions to educators and transform education into ‘a positive practice’ (p. 191). Akin to Leitner (1994), the authors conclude that school leaders ‘considerably influence teachers’ ability to accomplish both MOE and school objectives’ (p. 209).

In Chapter 8, ‘Structure, agency and the ‘Teaching English in English’ policy’, Choi investigates the agency of policy actors who have ‘the power to formulate policy’ (p. 214), a demographic that Zhao and Baldauf (2012: 3) describe in their study as people who retain ‘the power to influence change’. In the sociolinguistic scenario of South Korea where the knowledge of English represents a high

degree of social capital, English language education policy has been pivotal to many political debates. The author analyses three interviews and around twenty email exchanges with an important government official who negotiated with different policy stakeholders to implement the ‘Teaching English in English’ policy at the local level. The study not only reveals the extent and nature of policymakers’ power over policy but also elaborates on how the agency is exercised ‘in relation to structural constraints and emblems’ (p. 232).

Tulloch, Lee, and Arnaquq offer an autoethnographic account in Chapter 9 of their involvement in educational language policy formulation and implementation concerning the Inuktitut language in Nunavut in northwestern Canada. Despite statutory support for the Inuktitut bilingual education and positive Inuit leadership over the past decades in the region, the authors identify a range of key policy actors in form of parents, educators and policymakers who question community interests in maintaining or reviving the Inuktitut language (p. 237). A combination of a historical structural approach (Tollefson 2012) and indigenous research methods (Kovach 2010) allow the authors to unveil the various levels and forms of agency, whether individual or organisational, exercised in the Inuktitut bilingual education policy framework (pp. 260–261).

In the final case study (Chapter 10), Vanek, Cushing-Leubner, Engman, and Kaiper investigate the origins of an Adult Basic Education (hence ABE) Language Policy in Minnesota (USA) and its effect on teacher agency. While examining the ‘interactive agentive determinants that teachers of adult English learners navigate’ (p. 267), the authors underscore how top-down policy discourses are sometimes self-contradictory, leading to a reduced effect on its implementation at the grassroots. Vanek and colleagues introduced the term ‘vacant-core policy’ to refer to policies with similar characteristics (pp. 284–285). While discussing the policy implications, the authors suggest that policy intermediaries such as government officials, researchers and educators join ‘efforts to recognize the loopholes provided by the vacant-core policies’ (p. 292). Having discussed the nine case studies, Bouchard and Glasgow summarise the main findings of the volume in the ‘Conclusion’. In this short chapter (just 5 pages), the authors revisit the main research questions (p. 297), summarise the broad themes discussed (p. 299), and offer directions for further research (p. 301). While discussing the wider implications, the editors are particularly cautious about the limitations of this volume. Although there is no theoretical and methodological consensus displayed by the chapters, they argue that ‘the overarching conclusion among contributors departs to some extent from common depictions of agency in LPP as people’s ability to resist and/or work around language policies’ (p. 297). They also remind the reader that the nine case studies presented here

should not be seen as representative and can thus be generalised for all situations. Nonetheless, they provide valuable insights on the grassroots dynamics of LPP processes revealing the intersection between structure and agency.

In my opinion, one of the major limitations of this volume is its methodological dependence on mainly ethnographic and discourse analytical tools. As the editors themselves acknowledged, there are other key methodologies for studying LPP processes, especially those from quantitative traditions (cf. Hult and Johnson 2015), not thoroughly dealt with in this book. Moreover, not every author in this volume complies with the realist framework (except those chapters written by Mirvahedi, Chapter 4, and Choi, Chapter 8) as envisioned by the editors at the outset (see Introduction and Chapter 1). Although the reader will appreciate the variety of data discussed in the book, more cross-referencing among the chapters would make it an epistemologically and theoretically coherent volume. But these are minor issues. Researchers new to the critical language policy framework will find the book particularly useful since various chapters provide an outline of the theoretical and conceptual bases of the field. Moreover, the extensive use of tables and figures throughout the chapters in particular allow the reader to get through the complex interplay between structure, culture, and agency. Overall, the current volume is indisputably an excellent contribution to contemporary sociolinguistics and will be a valuable reference book for scholars.

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