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Linguistic Minorities in Education: Practices and Policies

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Abstract

This article describes research into Spanish children and adolescents' hopes and fears for the future at personal, local and global levels, part of a larger current international project with ESF support. Here we analyse a sample of the qualitative data compiled by the UAB team thus far, comparing it with another selective sample of data from previous research by the UCO. The UCO study was an initial framework to test methodology and analysis. There are issues associated with comparing results from two projects of different sample sizes and different aims. Discrepancies in category profiles and variability are inevitable; we suggest that comparison be used in discussing fundamental issues of validity and relevance in sociologically oriented research from different theoretical frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, we try to understand the ways in which minority language issues emerge in educational agendas –both in policy or practice- and to consider the impact diverse perspectives of language practices have on policy and practice outcomes. In this thematic report – which is part of a wider European project entitled EPASI in Europe: Charting Educational Policies to Address Social Inequalities in Europe - we first sketch out the theoretical framework used and in order to do this, we start with the idea that there is a dialogue between social theory and linguistic theory (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Weiss and Wodak, 2003).

> This kind of interdisciplinary set-up is simply characteristic for any valid linguistic pragmatic approach to real-life data. (. . .) there are linguistic dimensions to it, but at the same time, it is clearly caught up in historical and contemporary social structures and processes, interwoven with power relationships and attitudes. (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998: 37)

In our approach to policy, discourse is understood as a conceptualisation of reality at a particular point in time – in other words, any discourse holds certain ideas that are legitimated by logic appropriate to the discourse in question. Social actors will centre their reasoning and construct discourse around other, seemingly logical, socially and culturally formed discursive practices -and their implied meaning- which, in certain circumstances, come to be taken as "natural" in opposition to "deviant" or "marginal." (Bakhtin, 1981; Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 2005; Foucault, 1972, 1980). By placing the theoretical framework clearly between the social and the linguistic fields, we can argue that discourses contain "particular historical narratives of the development and trajectory of the social phenomena in question" (Brodschöll, 2005: 5-6), as in the case of minority language groups. Furthermore, the way discursive practices are negotiated and

constructed can help highlight a 'commonsensical' social and institutional order of discourse (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Goodwin & Heritage, 1990).

Of course, as Risse-Kappen (1994) aptly puts it, ideas do not float freely – they cannot exist without agents – but at the same time, these agents interact in multiple, multilevel sites. Nor are they simply 'carriers' of these ideas, they are social actors engaged in a complex interaction between many different – and sometimes conflictive – discourses. This leads us to the next point -discourses will not construct repetitively the same perspectives of the social phenomena, because different agents construct discourses that are constantly in tension and struggling to become 'hegemonic'[1] (Foucault, 1972; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In his doctoral dissertation, Brodschöll outlined a useful framework for examining policies within their wider social context. He suggested that the different discursive debates, practices and policies can be viewed as "contestations over the meaning of a "nodal discourse[2]" (…) that [knit] together the discourses that are invoked in these debates.

There is a constant interaction between discourses -all of which have the potential of conditioning others- and thus playing a significant part in the way discursive meaning is produced (and reproduced).   Within the social and educational context, certain discourses may become stabilised and create hegemonic discourses, and subsequent "authoritative narratives" (Hajer 1995: 56), which, nonetheless, can be challenged by different discourses, allowing for agency amongst groups that may or may not be the majority group.

In our approach to policy and practice, the idea of agency is relevant to the way this report was undertaken. As Lareau and Horvat (in Monkman, *et al*, 2005) have pointed out, social reproduction of prevalent ideologies is not a smoothly flowing process; it is a process of constant tension, challenges and negotiation between social actors.   By highlighting the 'dialogue' between policy and practice, we not only foreground the way in which ideological notions or categories become linked and 'naturalised' (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998) so that they become recursive 'commonsense' background to other instances of discourse (Garfinkel 1967; Shotter 1984, 1993a, 1993b; Schutz, 1962), we also identify and underline practices that work to legitimate and / or challenge different discourses of inclusion and exclusion of minority language groups in the educational context. With this theoretical framework in mind, we next consider the different ways the notion of 'language minority' is understood.

What is a linguistic minority and who belongs?

The conceptualisation of linguistic minority groups is quite diverse. According to Thornberry and Martin Esténabez in their report on Minority languages in Europe

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[1] Hegemonic discourse is understood here as discourse that "has become so embedded in a culture that it appears silly to ask "Why?" about its assumptions" (Atherton, 2002).
[2] Nodal discourse is used here as described by Fairclough (2005) – as the influential and widespread discourse that articulate a great many other discourses and thereby organise other, related discursive fields.

(2004), the term "minority language" refers to "languages that are traditionally used within a given territory of a state by nationals of that state who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the state's population and which is different from the official language(s) of that state" (p. 141). These same authors make a distinction between language minority groups and 'non-territorial languages' which are, according to their definition, "Languages used by nationals of the state which differ from the language or languages used by the rest of the state's population but which traditionally were used within the territory of the state". (Ibid.)

Therein lies one of the difficulties of defining language minorities – must they be languages which were spoken *before* the creation of the nation-state? This effectively puts Breton – with a community of 200,000 speakers but with historical ties to France – in a different category from Portuguese speakers in France – who now number 850,000. This distinction between minority languages and non-territorial languages also helps explain the common conception that linguistic diversity is a secondary component of immigration – that is to say 'new' languages being introduced into a homogeneous, principally monolingual nation-state. As Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson (1989) put it, when nation-states are considered as principally monolingual, there seems to be an implicit assumption that "many languages divide a nation" (p. 55).

In fact, the monolingual European nation is a myth. Minority languages are spoken in all of the European countries except Iceland[3]; rough estimates place minority language speakers at approximately 55 million people. Under the official definition of 'minority language' found in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages[4], there are approximately 60 minority languages spoken in Europe. With such high numbers, the fact that some languages are commonly afforded more legitimacy than others can be interrogated by Pierre Bourdieu's theory that some languages are accorded more legitimacy than others through their unquestioned connection to 'symbolic power' (Bourdieu, 1997a; Bourdieu, 1997b; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997). Historically, one official national language, in a standardised form, has been taken on as the 'legitimate' language, (although some variations and different languages may have received public recognition). This is exemplified by the EU policy concerning operative languages in European institutions. While stating that linguistic diversity is one of the operating principles of the European Union, only 11 languages were originally included as official and working languages in the European Economic Community in 1958. Irish was added later, and since the enlargement of the European Union in 2004, 9 more languages were added bringing the list to Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish and Swedish. This brings the number of 'official languages' to 21 – while there are over 60 other languages with the status of 'minority languages' in the EU.

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[3] Statistics on minority languages were found in the regional reports published by Mercator-Education (European Network for Regional or Minority Languages and Education).

4 Treaty opened for signature on 5 November 1992. Article 1 of the Charter defines the scope of application to languages that are traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State's population and are different from the official language(s) of the State. The languages cannot include either dialects of the official language(s) of the State or the languages of migrants.

The fact that some languages have official (or co-official) status in some countries and do not have the same status in others further exacerbates the difficulties of defining language minority groups. Nor does taking into account the number of language speakers help resolve the quandary. It is estimated that there are between 1.5 million and 2.2 million Arabic speakers in France alone, while there are only 100,000 Irish speakers in Ireland and yet Irish is an official EU language and Arabic is not an official language in France or any other EU country (in other words, it is not included as an 'operative' language of the EU). Moreover, these languages may have different status between nations, indeed, within the same country. To give an interesting example, Malta does not officially claim to have any minority, although some argue that Maltese, with 400,000 speakers, is actually an endangered language (Badía, 2004).

Given the diversity of factors in defining 'minority language groups' in each country, it is relevant to focus on how these languages groups are positioned in education and in which ways each language group (majority and minority) are at an advantage or disadvantage within the education system. To do so, we now give broad strokes (due to sake of brevity) to describe some of the ways in which minority language groups are constructed in the different educational policies encompassed in the different reports. We also consider the way in which multilingualism is constructed (in a positive light or more negatively and which languages in a multilingual site are seen positively or negatively).

Overview of constructed categories of multilingualism and minority language groups

A 'nodal discourse' (Fairclough) of multilingualism that is significant to this thematic report is that multilingualism is frequently categorised as result of globalisation (mobility of populations; flow of goods; capital, etc.). In most of the educational policies examined, the concept of globalisation is closely tied to the issue of immigration (student mobility; newcomers to the school system, etc.) and language teaching in the schools. Directly or indirectly then, some languages are valued as worthy of promoting and reproducing (e.g. major European languages) while others (for example, languages introduced into societies through immigration) are categorised as problematic. In most of the countries included in this report, minority languages which are directly linked to immigration tend to be seen as more problematic than minority languages with historical ties to the country. Thus there is a dichotomy between the concept of problems stemming from immigrant minority language students and students belonging to minority language groups with established recognition (politically, socio-economically and/or culturally). This is exemplified in the different ways in which the language minorities are conceptualised in the policies aimed at them (compare quotes 1 and 2 below).

> Quote 1
> Especially children from ethnic minorities have language and learning problems. They also experience more social and emotional problems. The primary schools have insufficient means to deal with these problems." (Quote taken from Netherlands general report, p. 25).

Quote 2
Most Gaelscoileanna (schools in which the teaching is in Irish) are of recent creation (end of the 20th century), although Gaeltacht areas have always had Irish language primary and secondary schools. They are created at the initiative of parents. Most all-Irish schools are denominational and under the patronage of a voluntary organisation (the Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna Lán-Ghaeilge). (Quote taken from the Ireland general report)

In many cases, the minority language groups establish themselves as a singular community, linking language and cultural identity in order to gain political recognition and autonomy. Education in the minority language is often the initiative of private and/or community enterprises which is then acknowledged by the national educational policies but not necessarily supported; although some subsidies or 'coooperative agreements' may be in place. This can be seen with the German-speaking community in Greece, Sweden and Denmark, the Arabic-speaking community in Malta, Irish schools in Ireland, Basque schools in Spain, private bilingual schools in Denmark and the Hungarian, Ukrainian, German or Bulgarian communities in Slovakia. The depth and scope of minority language teaching is varied: it ranges from extracurricular language lessons for a few hours during the week or at the weekend to full-immersion bi- or tri-lingual scholastic programmes.

The idea of languages tends to be associated with nationalities or groups; individual plurilingualism is not usually considered within the educational and political arenas. Thus, as seen above, if the member of the linguistic minority group is within the geographic area officially associated with the linguistic group, they have access to diverse educational resources in their language. For instance, according to the Slovak Constitution, national minorities have the right to be educated in their mother tongue, however this is susceptible to the availability of schools in that language. Interestingly, students in Slovakia trying to access university are allowed to take part of their entrance exams in the language used during their basic schooling, which is policy that comes closer to recognising individual plurilingualism than do most of the other policies studied in this report (France and Spain also have university entry examination is so-called 'regional languages; although this is sometimes poorly resourced). Another policy which recognises individual plurilingualism is the use of cultural mediators for individual students in Luxembourg.

There are also inherent tensions in the different categorisations of language diversity. At the European level, linguistic diversity is seen as a patrimony that must be protected, thus leading to the promotion of the teaching of major European languages and promoting plurlingualism through these languages, with specific policies and organisations established to promote them (e.g. European Council of Modern Languages – ECML). This 'nodal discourse' of prestige languages is clearly hegemonic in most of the countries in this study wherein foreign language teaching focuses on the major foreign languages and an abundance of private schools offering language immersion in French, English or German.
At the same time, the maintenance of minority languages is also seen as a priority at the European level although specific policy measures are not usually given. (The way in

which this has influenced specific policies being implemented will be discussed further on.)

Another significant conceptualisation which comes into play in the educational policies concerning minority languages is 'linguistic competence'. Inevitably, the judgement of being a competent speaker is not based strictly on use or 'form' of the language in question. There are many other dimensions which come into play – judgement of how someone talks, e.g. cognitive abilities, judgement of moral worth, social membership, etc (Gumperz; 1982). As Bauman and Briggs (2003) have shown, the judgements of 'norm' and 'deviance' have been closely linked to language use. Languages are codified, standardised and ideologised and become a resource or dimension of judgement and evaluation, making the concept of linguistic competence relevant for both policy and practice. Linguistic competence tends to be measured in reference to an 'idealised' native speaker, while transcodic cues (switching between languages) are often seen as 'errors' (Nussbaum & Unamuno, 2006) or as deficient language proficiency thus signalling a need for 'official intervention' (e.g. language classes for second generation immigrants).

This is the case of several countries which include this group in their policies concerning language support as a direct link to concepts of competence levels in the majority language (usually the official language of the nation-state). This is a fairly wide-spread conceptualisation which has been transferred into educational policies that evaluate different language groups for 'diagnostic purposes'. Diagnostic testing may be used for the distribution of economic resources and measures. In other cases, lack of proficiency in the majority language may be grounds for schools to refuse enrolling a child, or to the child experiencing feelings of exclusion (Lodge & Lynch – Irish report). The association of deficient competency in the majority language (language of the school) also allows for linguistic minority groups and special education groups to be linked in the same category, as occurs in a few of the country reports. There are explicit cases that link second-generation immigrant children with difficulties in literacy and therefore problems in school and with their school-careers.

> . "…it is often children from home where education is not recognized as important. And there are also many bilingual among them…" ("…er ofte boern fra hjem, hvor uddannelse ikke star hoejt på dagsordenen. Her er der er ogsa mange tosprogede imellem") (Det mener Ministeren, 2007).

In such cases, issues of literacy development and illiteracy prevention are often juxtaposed with the need for (majority) language teachers specialised in teaching students whose L1 is not the majority language.

General tendencies in policy implementation

There are considerable differences between countries in the EPASI report concerning the position of minority languages in education and their role in relationship with the national language. In some countries, the minority language has played a central role in the struggle of different regional minorities in vindicating differentiated identity, political and economical autonomy and so forth. The degree of success in this struggle is reflected in the education policies of the country, as is the case of the Catalans in Spain,

some Germans in Greece, regional languages in France and different language communities in Belgium. Significantly, the minority language may be an instrument of re-affirming 'ethnicity' and 'culture' in contrast to the nation-state while at the same time, in relation to immigrant groups, the learning of the minority language is promoted as a means of solidarity and to construct a more just, pluralistic society.

In a few cases, bilingual education exists – although the pattern of bilingual education is not consistent across the countries. In Malta, both Maltese and English are official languages, while other minority languages are taught through private associations. In some cases, the minority language co-exists or even pre-empts the majority language in the public school (e.g. Catalan) whereas in other cases the minority language receives public support in private schools (Basque in Spain) or community associations (Arabic in Malta). In Greece, a bilingual curriculum (Greek and Turkish) curriculum is applied in minority schools in Thrace (where most people are either Turkish or Greek native speakers) although, despite the multicultural character of the Greek school population in the last years, the school curriculum remains strongly nationally orientated and monolingual.

In the case of immigrant languages (several pertaining to groups that have been historically settled in the countries for several decades), some, but not all countries promote the development of the mother tongue both as educational and cultural instruments and in order to maintain and improve their links with their culture of origin. In such cases, the policies see the development of multilingual competences (in the language of the nation-state and in the minority language) as a means of achieving more complete integration. There are also cases where the promotion and maintenance of the mother tongue of immigrants is seen as a positive element for the overall development of the child, as is the case in Sweden and the UK. In Sweden, official human and material resources are destined for supporting mother tongue teaching and learning. Literacy in both Swedish and the students' mother tongue is promoted. In another example, in an experimental school in Athens (Greece) where 70 % of the students were non-native speakers (mostly from Albania but also from Egypt, Sudan, Nigeria, Iraq, Syria, China, Poland and former countries from the USSR), the student's native language is used to help the student to adapt to learning procedures and as a measure to help prevent school failure and drop-out.

The UK, where there are also a wide range of linguistic minorities and bilingual pupils has special programmes for the promotion of Welsh, which is one of the most widely spoken languages other than English, and increasing numbers of areas of Wales now teach primarily in Welsh, particularly at primary level. Nearly all Welsh speakers are in practice bilingual, with equal fluency in English. Other minority languages are less well catered for. For instance, there are no schools teaching only in Gaelic in Scotland.

However, in the UK, the languages of children and families from minority ethnic backgrounds are now more widely recognised, and sometimes valued, than was the case twenty or thirty years ago. Schools in some areas will offer examination courses in Urdu, Punjabi or Turkish. Pupils for whom English is an additional language (EAL) are identified, and additional resources channelled to schools - particularly primary schools - where there are significant numbers. Still, inequalities include the non-recognition (and

sometimes denigration) of minority languages. Overall, the promotion of the mother tongue is not a main priority in many of the educational policies covered in report. In some countries some measures have been taken, but they are rarely been integrated into the mainstream education system, in many cases measures are taken through bi-lateral agreements with the countries of origin – displacing the onus of responsibility from the state education system and implicitly positioning immigrant minorities' languages outside of the realm of cultural and linguistic heritage of the host country. In other cases, minority languages, and especially immigrant languages, are incorporated into the more general approach of intercultural education in schools.

Other policies place more emphasis on 'full' competence in the national language, citing this as a means of social promotion for the individual and social cohesion for the society. In France, for instance, it is not permissible to signal out different groups according to ethnic origins, religious beliefs and linguistic differences – in the latter case because French is the "*language of the Republic*" (the French constitution admits only one official language[5]). Although France signed the International Pact dealing with civil and political rights, the government opposed some restriction towards article 27 - in the name of the Republican unity and universalism- thus the French State does not officially recognize linguistic minorities, only regional languages that co-exist with the French national language. There are provisions for regional language use at all school levels, however there is a problem with a drastic shortage of regional language teachers that overshadows the future of teaching these languages.

Concluding remarks

Research shows that education in the mother tongue is the most effective way for children to learn – especially very young children. With this precept in mind, the promotion of teaching in the L1 of minority language groups, at least in the initial stages, seems reasonable. This does not mean that the minority language should exclude instruction of the official or majority language considering that a certain level of competence in the official language is an important means to avoid exclusion from employment or educational opportunities, but it does mean re-thinking the more commonplace notion of monolingual education. This should this be taken to mean that only one or a handful of pupils in a region automatically gives rise to a right to be taught a minority language in a public school as, this is not economically nor pedagogically feasible. However, measures for promoting minority language learning in mainstream education is possible. This inevitably requires a new organisational framework within the wider curricula of many countries; more emphasis on teacher training in this area; recruitment of teachers from minority language communities; development of educational materials; promotion of new technologies for minority language teachers (which is often ignored commercially); better cooperation between bilingual communities and, perhaps most importantly, explicit acknowledgement of minority languages by majority language communities. Hopefully, through carefully planned implementation of policies and practices that accommodate the minority language, educational equality for this segment of the population can be ensured.

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[5] Cf. Sénat, compte-rendu intégral des débats de la séance du 16 février 2005, http://www.senat.fr/s200502/s20050216/s20050216002.html

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