Linguistic Diversity and Language Policies

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1. What is linguistic diversity?

Linguistic diversity is a universal truth: humans, over the course of history, have used many different languages, and have used those languages in different ways. These differences in both languages and how they are used matter; they help to shape human lives and experiences. One important form of linguistic diversity is **multilingualism**--when more than one language is used in a given context, by a particular individual, and/or among a community. Multilingualism has been and continues to be the norm among individuals and groups around the world. People have spoken more than one language with their neighbors, trading partners, family members, and strangers for millennia, enabling communication with one another. Sometimes this use involves various means to keep the languages distinct (like codeswitching, or the alternation of languages); other times, people have mixed languages, drawing together resources from different languages as they interacted. For example, in some formal language teaching and learning contexts (e.g., schools) there is a focus on immersion, the "target language", and "one language at a time" classroom and institutional policies. In training for interpreters and translators, students are encouraged to focus on "A", "B", and "C" languages, which may serve to reinforce clear boundaries between and among 'codes.' These teaching and learning practices may or may not coincide with the dynamic ways that people use language in their everyday lives.

During times of conflict, colonization, nation-state formation, and other periods of social change, hierarchies among languages have been created, always putting the language(s) of the most powerful above those of the least powerful. In some cases, the creation of these hierarchies has involved belief systems (ideologies) where linguistic diversity (the presence in a community of more than one language, or the regular use of more than one language together) becomes devalued and contrasted to an idealized image of one language as desirable. For example, the formation of the French nation-state involved instituting French (the language of the elite, and just one among many that was spoken within the geographical area that became France) as the official language of the new state. This national policy continues to shape how people use language, perceive what is good or correct language, and interact with each other. Movements to "purify" languages and speakers, in other words, to erase linguistic diversity, are always political and shaped by power and inequality.

2. How are language and community connected?

It is common for people to connect *who they are* with *what they speak*. Indeed, languages may serve as symbols of identity, through which speakers display to others who they are and who they belong to and with. This may occur in monolingual settings (where only one language is used), as well as multilingual communities where many languages may be in common use. Mutual comprehension may or may not be prioritized when people who align with one language

interact with those who associate themselves with another. People may speak many languages but claim one language as their own.

For several centuries, however, there has been a growing tendency to equate community belonging and the ability to speak only certain languages--English in the US, for instance, or Mandarin in China. Although speaking more than one language is the norm across communities, in some places multilingualism is reframed as posing a risk to community belonging, social integration, and even the ability to communicate. These are ideological and political efforts, which may be shaped by linguistic or scientific facts or findings but can also mischaracterize them. To claim that either community cohesion or effective communication depends on a single shared language is a political assertion based as much on exclusion as inclusion, and can function to produce inequality, discrimination, and linguistic prejudice.

3. What are restrictive language policies?

Restrictive language policies intervene in relationships between linguistic diversity and communities by designating only certain languages as acceptable in a given society. These policies are frequently rooted in the assumption that only some languages should be used in any society, whereas others are positioned as alien or even inferior. By drawing rigid boundaries around languages and their contexts of use, restrictive language policies attempt to erase the reality of historical and contemporary linguistic diversity.

In everyday communication, languages are deeply intertwined with one another. In the contemporary US, for example, what many people might think of as English language place names (e.g., Montana, Colorado, Nevada), in fact derive from Spanish usages. These English and Spanish forms, in turn, interact with Indigenous place names that preceded them in this settler colonial context. Additionally, languages such as English and Spanish are associated with profound internal diversity historically and contemporarily. What might be considered “English” is a West Germanic language with French and Latin influences. What many call “Spanish” is Castilian, in fact one among many languages used in Spain, including Catalan/Valencian, Galician, Basque (Euskara), and Aranese. Restrictive language policies, by focusing on one language at a time, seek to deny the complex, dynamic, and ubiquitous nature of linguistic diversity.

Restrictive language policies have taken a range of forms across distinctive historical moments and societal situations. In colonial contexts, restrictive language policies have included efforts toward the suppression or elimination of Indigenous languages. In various nation-states, minoritized languages and their users face linguistic restrictions and discrimination in schooling, the workplace, and various spheres of public life. In some cases, restrictive language policies involve the establishment of official languages in contexts of widespread linguistic diversity, like Bahasa Indonesia in Indonesia. Such policies can also involve the limitation, elimination, and/or prohibition of resources for minoritized languages and their users, such as in the recent Executive Order in the US that limits resources to support the use of languages other than English. These policies may also promote assimilation to monolingual and/or monocultural

norms, as was common across Soviet Russia. Across these various types of restrictive language policies, one can see linguistic diversity framed as a problem to be solved rather than affirmed as a basic fact of human existence.

4. **Why do linguistic anthropologists examine and educate about linguistic diversity, language and community connections, and restrictive language policies?**

Restrictive language policies are linked to ideas about relationships between possible and desirable forms of communication, as well as possible and desirable societies. As linguistic anthropologists, we are attentive to efforts to contain and control linguistic diversity, and narratives that frame linguistic diversity as a societal exception or a crisis. These efforts and narratives might suggest that meaningful civic participation and cooperation are only possible through a single shared language. However, restrictive approaches to language do not contribute to societal unity in any straightforward way; conversely, linguistic diversity does not necessarily coincide with societal disunity.

Insofar as the creation and implementation of restrictive language policies often coincide with the reproduction of various forms of marginalization and vulnerability for the populations they target, it is crucial to draw connections among linguistic diversity, language restriction, and the protection of collective wellbeing. A crucial linguistic anthropological insight is that ideas about language are never just about language. By extension, restrictive language policies can function as forms of regulatory control over populations and their practices. Alternatively, critical engagement with restrictive language policies can invite reconsideration of sociopolitical and linguistic borders and hierarchies.

Resources and further reading:

Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective. 2009. Ofelia Garcia. Wiley-Blackwell.

Language and Social Justice in Practice. 2018. Netta Avineri, Laura R. Graham, Eric J. Johnson, Robin Conley Riner, and Jonathan Rosa, eds.Taylor and Francis.

Language Policy and Political Issues in Education. 2017. Teresa L. McCarty, Teresa and Stephen May, eds. Springer.

Linguistic Diversity and Social Justice. 2016. Piller, Ingrid. Oxford.

Linguistic Society of America Statement on the Designation of English as the Official Language of the United States: https://www.lsadc.org/content.asp?admin=Y&contentid=468

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, International Association's Statement on the Designation of English as the Official Language of the United States:

https://www.tesol.org/news/tesol-statement-on-the-exec-order-designating-english-as-the-official-language-of-the-us/

American Association of Applied Linguistics' Statement on the Designation of English as the Official Language of the United States: https://www.aaal.org/aaal-ec-statement-on-the-executive-order-designating-english-as-the-official-language-of-the-united-states

This brief is inspired by the excellent model provided by the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL), which can be found here.