

Reviews



Timothy Reagan,
Linguistic Legitimacy and Social Justice
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Can one language be more valuable than others? How does speaking one variety of a language translate into one's social position? Can a more just world be created if we abandon certain deep-seated preconceptions about language norms? Does our teaching of some versions of a language contribute to social inequality? Such stimulating questions arise after reading the blurbs and introductory parts of Timothy Reagan's *Linguistic Legitimacy and Social Justice* (2019, Palgrave Macmillan). The book, which consists of eleven chapters, 66 pages of bibliography and an index, is a well-researched and broad-ranging discussion of several current themes of critical language pedagogy—an approach to social justice through the recognition of (de)legitimizing ideologies pervading some language norms/uses and, by extension, some language education practices.

Chapter One, Language and Other Myths: “Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt” (pp. 1–28) is a fitting introduction to some of the paradoxes plighting our perceptions of language. While theorists of language tell us that all languages are fundamentally equal (logical, exhaustive, and comprehensive), much of applied scholarship indicates the opposite, with continual debates over normativity, standardization, the status of languages vis-à-vis dialects, and (un)welcome language change. And yet linguistic research is not neutral: it has had profound implications for language teaching and learning, language policy, and language rights. Another paradox is related to the mythology of “standardization” which hides the infinite variability of language uses:

person by person, village by village, generation by generation, and the inevitable fuzziness in the description of actual language practice (unlike *the* idealized language norm). If language such as English is taught in the FL classroom, *only* one version of the language's lexico-grammar is reified and fixed as a knowable subject. The correct, appropriate and, inevitably, "native-like" forms are given priority, prestige, and status, while other forms are dismissed as "wrong" production or "insufficient" proficiency. This, for Reagan, is a manifestation of an ideology of language legitimacy: a form of dominance resulting from an assumption of language "ownership" by certain groups of speakers. Interestingly, this ideology is still persistent in the world in which native speakers of English are outnumbered 3 to 1 by non-native English speakers!

Chapter Two, Conceptualizing the Ideology of Linguistic Legitimacy: "Primitive people have primitive languages and other nonsense" (pp. 29–76) is a sociological polemic with traditional linguistic theorizing. Having established that linguistic legitimacy is a fairly subjective, yet collectively shared, way of judging that some languages are inherently superior/inferior to others, Reagan challenges our common negative perceptions of (1) non-Western/European languages (which might be morphologically/syntactically much more complex than English, Spanish or Russian), (2) languages without a long written literary tradition (which nevertheless might have a richer oral tradition), and (3) languages without established standard orthography. Borrowing the concept of "linguistic capital" from Bourdieu and that of "ideology" (processes of naturalization of the social construction of reality) from Fairclough, Reagan discusses a set of social power relations that underpin the notions of linguistic legitimacy. While any variety of a language is legitimate in a given setting, and while formal properties of a language are not in any way correlated with cognitive or cultural "primitiveness" of any community, institutions, such as national language academies, media and particularly schools (with their middle-class bias) tend to establish prescriptivist rules and legitimize certain forms as "pure," "proper," or "right." The Author gives many examples of language varieties that are wrongly (de)legitimized based on their properties of supposedly "accent-less" elocution, the size of their lexicon, their assumed "logic" of their grammar, or the absence of certain grammatical categories. He concludes that all these are only socially constructed differences in prestige introduced by elite speakers with access to institutional power. He also indicates how dangerous it is in the school context for educators to form beliefs about a student's abilities, intelligence, and potential on the basis of the language variety spoken by him or her, or how destructive it is for children's identity to *force* them to adopt a linguistic variety spoken by a dominant community (whereas no-one would dare to force anyone to change their religion, gender or race to a more "legitimate" one).

African American English, *Race and Language*: “You don’t believe fat meat is greasy” (Chapter Three, pp. 77–110) discusses one of the most divisive issues in American sociolinguistics, namely the status of African American English (AAE), and its implications for classroom teaching. After a systematic overview of AAE’s history, evolution and structures, the Author is reporting on studies devoted to how “Black English” is perceived in the society and how some of these views and stereotypes, when voiced by elite opinion-makers and reproduced in internet-based jokes, contribute to the further delegitimation of this and other dialects of American English. Despite common prejudices, AAE “is not slang, bad English, or illogical, nor are its speakers lazy, ignorant, sloppy, or uneducated” (p. 80). However, some scholars demonstrate that a substantial number of African American failures at school can be directly attributed to their not being sufficiently “bidialectal” to seamlessly switch from their identity-marking AAE syntax and accent to “good” Standard American English expected by teachers. On the other extreme, artificially elevating AAE to the level of “a language of instruction” will not empower racial minorities and obliterate racist stereotypes in the society.

Chapter Four, *Spanglish in the United States*: “We speak Spanglish to the dogs, to the grandchildren, to the kids” (pp. 111–134) discusses the history, demographics, formal variability, and functional applications of hybrid varieties of English and Spanish as used by Latino communities in the US. Either denounced by critics and purists or celebrated as an example of cultural creativity and language mixing, Spanglish has been subject to a variety of analyses from the perspective of “languages in contact.” In contrast to popular beliefs, Spanglish is not just an outcome of bilingual code-switching, but rather a specific lexico-grammatical repertoire that borrows systematically from both languages and evolves progressively. Regularized phonological patterns, productive lexical derivations alongside fossilized remnants, elimination of redundant categories (copula, gender), and back-translations are some of the common features documented among Spanglish speakers. These findings are sometimes used to justify valorization of vernacular Spanglish as a classroom resource to foster critical language awareness and critical literacies revolving around counter-hegemonic discursive practices in education.

Sign Language and the DEAF-WORLD: “Listening without hearing” (Chapter Five, pp. 135–174) reports on controversies and stereotypes around the status of the American Sign Language (ASL). Initially regarded as a set of gestures and facial expressions with “poor grammar,” ASL was subjected to systematic linguistic description by William Stokoe that proved that it was as full, complete, and sophisticated as any human language. Despite the fact that linguists put premium on natural (spoken) rather than artificial (sign) languages in their theoretical and applied research, it is hard *not* to acknowledge sign languages as “real” languages with their varieties (British and American

SL are different), dialects (signing among deaf people differs from signing for hearing people), shared artistic or cultural artefacts, or cultural identities (as a community of the Deaf). The main problem is, however, that manual and visual signs *are supposed to* correspond to spoken English, which is treated as a legitimate mode, as it imparts on the Deaf their status of “literate” people. If one accepts the view of deafness as a deficit (as many do) and of the Deaf as inherently inferior in relation to the hearing, one is likely to view their condition as pathological in need of a technological or medical intervention. This belief diminishes the role of the sign language as an educational and communicative resource in its own right, particularly when it comes to studying ASL as a “deserving” foreign language. However, the conceptual representations within the DEAF-WORLD available through ASL movements and signing spaces can be radically different from the cognitive bases of spoken language(s) and should not be treated as illegitimate. For Reagan, the merits of bilingual or inclusive education for the Deaf can only be achieved if the “tyranny” of the “hearing perspective” is questioned in schools and tertiary education.

Chapter Six on Yiddish, the *Mame-Loshn*: “*Mensch tracht, Gott lacht*” (pp. 175–204) traces the history and status of the language of Ashkenazi Jews. Due to the Holocaust, the language policies in Eastern European countries, and the State of Israel’s reviving of Hebrew, the population of Yiddish speakers has shrunk dramatically. The existence of diasporic, often ghettoized, Judaism and the subsequent evolution of various Semitic language varieties is well documented in religious studies of Arameic and Hebrew liturgical and ritual lexicons. Yiddish is said to have developed most robustly in medieval Germany (most of its words stem from Middle German) and Poland of the 1250s–1500s, with a continued growth in Russia, Moldova, or Ukraine, where Jewish communities were forced to assimilate and introduce Slavic elements to their language. In modern times, unlike Hebrew, which is associated with religion and learned male-dominated scholarship, Yiddish is stigmatized as a vernacular, feminine, secularized mother-tongue (*mame-loshn*), or criticized as broken German—the Jargon. Although it was Hebrew that was elevated to the status of the official language of Israel through a political decision, Yiddish is still spoken in some settings (also in the US) and it has a long and celebrated literary tradition, as well as a prolific presence in American language (borrowings) and culture. Although Yiddish is not predicted to disappear soon (with estimated 1.5 million speakers), it will depend on the social movements and cultural initiatives that aim to help pass it on to the next generations.

Chapter Seven dwells on Created and Constructed Languages: “I can speak Esperanto like a native” (pp. 205–242), and includes a presentation of formal languages of philosophy, logic (G. Leibniz’s *Lingua generalis*) or computer science, fictional languages (J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Sindarin*, G. Orwell’s *Newspeak*), ritual/mystical languages (*Lingua ignota*), contact languages (Papua’s *Tok Pisin*)

or artificial languages (*Volapük, Neo, Lingwa de Planeta*). The last 150 years saw a growing interest in the construction and use of international auxiliary languages, of which only Esperanto became a successful planned *a posteriori* language spoken worldwide (by a million speakers with different degrees of fluency) under the auspices of international and local organizations. Even though it is feared for its expansionism, or derided by critics of artificial codes, the Author highlights the language's literary and cultural contribution to humanity's heritage. However, Esperantists' claim that the learning of the language enhances one's abilities for language learning in general has yet to be confirmed.

Afrikaans, Language of Oppression to Language of Freedom: "Dit is ons erns" (Chapter Eight, pp. 243–283) unveils the controversies surrounding the rise of Afrikaans, first as a language of nationalism, or independent state of South Africa, which, then turned to be emblematic of the discriminatory practices of apartheid introduced by powerful minority of Afrikaan-speakers. Now with declining numbers of speakers and loss of its prestige, Afrikaans is nevertheless an interesting historical case of a minority dialect infused with Dutch and English colonial lexicons elevated to the highest levels of politics, culture, education, and literature in a competitive atmosphere of a multiracial and multilingual society (SA has twelve official languages). The chapter points to the possible consequences of any "language policy" that functions as a strategy of introducing the *primacy* of one language over others for example, if made a medium of instruction in schools. The Afrikaans case testifies to the fact that top-down technicist solutions to overcome social divisions through "linguistic engineering" are likely to encounter resistance and might even breed violence. To avoid this, Reagan advocates wide-ranging consultations and appropriate provisions guaranteeing "language rights," otherwise the imposed language will always be viewed as a tool of oppression and, sooner or later, it will lose its status, as is the case with Afrikaans in SA's higher education, which is now embracing English to the detriment of local languages.

The problem signaled above is extensively discussed in Chapter Nine, Why Language Endangerment and Language Death Matter: "Took away our native tongue ... And taught their English to our young" (pp. 285–314) with reference to (1) causes and historical examples of languages' endangerment and death, (2) efforts put to language cataloguing and revitalizing, as well as (3) ethical arguments if and why (mostly indigenous) engendered languages should be saved from extinction. Finally, thought is given to examples of educational systems and institutionalized language policies which may become either threats or rescues to moribund languages. Educational milieus that enforce language loss through (in)voluntary language switching and delegitimization of indigenous dialects are a contemporary cause of language death (cf. the history of US government's elimination of "problematic" native minorities through boarding schools). In multilingual communities, economic, institutional, and social incen-

tives to use the dominant language only drive the process of loss of (vernacular) language varieties. These varieties, however, encapsulate cultural and pragmatic values, as well as scholarly data that hold the keys to the better understanding of human history, ecology or cognition. Unfortunately, as the Author reminds us, most attempts at language revitalization (even in the developed countries, as is the case with Maori and Hawai'ian) have been rather unsuccessful.

Chapter Ten, Foreign Language Education in the US: "But French isn't a real class!" (pp. 315–352) tackles a thorny issue of how foreign language teaching and learning (often disparaged because only low levels of proficiency tend to be achieved) allows the ideology of language legitimacy to operate. The restricted number of languages on offer (Spanish, French, German, Chinese), the limited resources for teachers, and the lower status of foreign languages in the curriculum (unlike STEM and English literacy) translate into disregard for this type of education. In addition, attitudes based on xenophobic stereotypes cause further delegitimation of language learning and reproduction of monolingualism and the hegemony of English despite recent investments in specialist language programs, appreciation of "exotic" languages, and recognition of heritage languages. Even multicultural and globally-oriented college programs in the US that take pride in offering communicative skills and minority recognition pay little attention to language diversity (except perhaps immersion courses). For Reagan, the socio-political dominance of English and the cultural imperialist spirit has to be first acknowledged in the context of American education to stop these trends.

The final chapter, Linguistic Legitimacy, Language Rights and Social Justice: "No one is free when others are oppressed" (pp. 353–366) considers the other key notion of the book—social justice. Reagan makes a strong case for addressing the attitudes and beliefs about the role of language in the construction of identity and about the importance of upholding "language rights" of disempowered communities. He sees the need to confront the fact that education is of inherently political nature (p. 361) and that the adoption of the ideology of linguistic legitimacy ultimately influences student-teacher communication, assessment practices and the design of formal curricula (let alone the replication of hegemonic values through "hidden curricula"). He notes that even democratic societies, such as the US, have educational systems that are "supportive of oppressive practices" (p. 360) that compromise the language rights of a substantial number of minority students (here understood not only in terms of ethnicity or race, but also class and gender).

This book carries a thought-provoking argument for putting language and social justice into a common focus based on a broad range of examples from various societies and cultures, including the US, South Africa or Israel. However, the book is heavily focused on the problems currently experienced in the US and does not acknowledge the linguistic policies championed by

some multilingual and multicultural (European) societies. Given its concern with critical pedagogy, it is surprising to find little in-depth discussion of the hegemony of English as a lingua franca (for example in some sectors of the economy, academia, and society) and the rise of World Englishes movement. Nevertheless, it may provide a consciousness-raising experience for readers interested in the current developments within critical pedagogy. It may be of value to language scholars and applied linguists, education policy advisors and teacher trainers, as well as junior researchers and students of sociolinguistics interested in the issue of linguistic legitimacy.



<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9455-7384>

Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska
University of Opole

