Language policy in Asian contexts — Introduction

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Studies reported in this journal have so far mostly addressed language policy issues in European contexts. This special issue brings together six contributions addressing language policies in Asian contexts. The purpose is to join the discussion of language policies by bringing in Asian insights and experiences as well as from Asian perspectives. It is the hope of this special issue to enable the comparison of language policy research on the basis of the presumably East-West divide, so as to reveal overarching concerns beyond sociocultural and geo-political boundaries and to understand the convergence and/or divergence of language policy issues in different local representations in a wider context.

English is foregrounded as a prominent factor today in discussing language policies in various contexts. Its position in school curricula, its role as a medium of instruction in education, its impacts on language ecology and social fairness, and its political underpinnings have all found their ways into language policies and been subjects of inquiry into language policy. The significance of English in relation to Asia is increasingly recognised in a considerable body of literature (e.g. Crystal 1998, Graddol 2006). Graddol (2006), in his discussion of the future of English, invests a lot of space discussing the long-term impacts of English in Asia on the future of English in global scale. Spolsky (2012: xiii) reiterates the implications of English in Asia for understanding language policies in general and notes that 'the future of English as a global language will depend, it now seems, on what happens to it in Asia'. Given the large population of non-Anglophone speakers in Asia that is learning, using, and reacting to English, understanding language policies centred on English in Asian contexts has far-reaching implications.

While the question what is language is key to the deconstruction of language policy (e.g. Shohamy 2006), current research perspectives of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and world Englishes (WE) remind us of the significance of addressing questions such as: What is English? Which English or what kind of English? in investigating language issues that are relevant or irrelevant, and operating in language policies today. Asian experiences of English have motivated the burgeoning research on ELF and WE pertaining to Asian contexts. Thanks to this, Asian contexts emerge as resourceful places of case studies on language policies with reference to ELF and WE perspectives. This special number is thus put together, including three types of contributions.

The first category includes three articles that address language policy from an ELF perspective. Among them, two articles (Kirkpatrick, Baker and Jarunthawatchai) focus on English as a subject matter of education, and one article (Wang) addresses English as a medium of instruction in higher education. Despite different data in different contexts, the discussion of ELF in relation to language policy converges in these three articles. In the first place, Andy Kirkpatrick approaches 'Language education policy among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)'. He provides an overview of the development of English in ASEAN and compares language policies in the ASEAN with those in the EU. In his view, the development of English in the ASEAN is at the expense of

other languages, while multilingualism is well respected in the EU. To remedy the problem and to promote multilingualism in ASEAN contexts, he proposes to reflect the role of ELF in language education by adopting a lingua franca approach that challenges an exclusive reference to native English norms. He further concretises his proposal by drawing on Myanmar as an example and suggests how to integrate ELF into language education policy in Myanmar.

The ELF-informed investigation of language policy in ASEAN extends to Thailand as a focal point in Will Baker and Wisut Jarunthawatchai's article 'English language policy in Thailand'. In comparison with Kirkpatrick's views of endangered multilingualism in ASEAN, their overview of the language landscape in Thailand points to their argument that the nation is witnessing an increasing awareness of multilingualism, in contrast with the predominant monolingual and monocultural ideologies underpinning education policy. With a focus on language management in Spolsky's (2012) framework of language policy, they see an increasing emphasis on English language education in policy that relates to an ideology about English as key to development and globalisation. As they further point out, however, the policy does not lead to optimism among the Thai populace, given the perceived low achievement in English education. Adopting an ELF perspective, the two authors suggest that current evaluation of English proficiency is based on Anglo-centred models of English and thus inappropriate. This view converges with Kirkpatrick's argument in the latter's suggestion to language education policy in Myanma. Baker and Jarunthawatchai conclude by discussing negative effects on education and social equality of the modeling on native speakers' English. This links their argument with a concern for language ideological issues in the Thai context.

A third case of studying the implication of ELF for Asian language policies is sourced from China. In her article on 'Language policy in Chinese higher education: A focus on international students in China', Ying Wang investigates the medium of instruction in higher education provided to international students by Chinese universities. She integrates Spolsky's (2012) language policy model with Ricento and Hornberger's (1996) multiple approach to form her analytical framework. Her study reveals a policy vacuum with regard to English as a medium of instruction in Chinese higher education oriented towards international students, whereas the signification of ELF is found to be readily accepted by international classroom participants. In the meantime, the data provide insights into a dilemma between language proficiency and disciplinary expertise, as well as conflicting and questionable language ideologies, among teachers as agents in the process of internationalizing Chinese higher education. Bringing the findings together, Wang takes issue with the language policy vacuum and discusses its negative effects on both international education practice and multilingualism in China against the background of global mobility. She concludes the article by suggesting possible solutions to the issues as reflected in her study. Joining the first two articles (i.e. Kirkpatrick, Baker and Jarunthawatchai), Wang argues for the need to integrate ELF in language policy, which is applicable to China's higher education, and further discusses the integration in theoretical and practical dimensions.

The second category of articles engages research into language policy from a WE perspective, including two articles that challenge Anglophone orientation in postcolonial contexts. Here the ownership of English is reclaimed and the use of English is adapted by local people to question the relevance of Anglophone English for local communities. One contribution is Stephen Evans's article 'Language policy in Hong Kong education: A historical overview'. Evans provides a sociolinguistic and historical overview of the development of language policy in Hong Kong education, with the focus on the medium of instruction. He considers sociolinguistic, political and historical impacts on the development of medium of education in Hong Kong in three phrases whereby English was for

elite, for the masses, and in competition with Chinese. Based on the examination, Evans argues that the demarcation between Outer Circle and Expanding Circle as mapped in Kachru's three circle model of the spread of English is necessary in understanding EMI-related policy and practice. Despite the difference, however, Evans draws on the experience of EMI in Hong Kong to point to potentially negative impacts on European education of pursuing Anglophone-oriented EMI in European universities.

Another WE-relevant contribution is Yingying Tan's article on 'Singlish: An illegitimate conception in Singapore's language policies?'. Tan contextualises her study in vigorous movements in Singapore that aim to eliminate Singlish to promote national image and economic development, which in her view, however, contradicts with the very representation of Singaporean identities and linguistic repertoires. She engages the dilemma between Singlish as a shared medium of communication among Singaporean populace and Singlish as an illegitimate form in national language policy. By adopting Mufwene's (2001) theory of language ecology, she examines the development of Singlish as respondent to the socio-political environment that Singapore features as a multilingual nation with postcolonial history. With a focus on Singlish users' language practice, she criticises the assumption that Singlish is an indicator of linguistic poverty and invites the question as to whether Singlish relates to empowerment or disempowerment. In her conclusion, she argues that the movements against Singlish reflect a colonial mindset, leading to a question of the ownership of language in relation to national identity.

This special number introduces an on-going doctoral project that investigates educational polices with regard to English as a subject of learning in Japan. Akiko Otsu reports her study in the article 'the gap between educational policies and actual workplace communication in ELF: a Japanese case'. She adopts an ELF perspective and problematises education policies in Japan that reveal a general goal for the promotion of ELF in explicit education policies in contrast with a lack of specific measures regarding how to achieve the goal through concrete implementation. She sets out to address the gap in this context and compares recordings of conversations that actually happened in real life classrooms and workplaces. Through data analysis, she argues that there is a mismatch regarding the conception of English between what is expected to be achieved through education and what is actualised in real-life practice, and proposes to teach what is actually needed in work place. Her argument converges with the proposal to teach and learn ELF within language classrooms and to match what is needed in work place.

Taken together, the six contributions suggest an alternative way of considering English in relation to multilingualism. By challenging the taken-for-granted wisdom that English refers to Anglophone English tied to Anglophone origins of English, the contributors deliver a shared message in their studies that the popularity of English does not conflict with multilingualism but works with multilingualism. The Asian experiences provide examples as to how to negotiate between the national need for economic development associated with English and the respect for sociolinguistic diversity overlapping with multilingualism.

References:

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