Ethnography of language policy

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Background

- A method of studying language policy by combining critical discourse analysis of policy texts with meso-level ethnographic research on implementation in some local context.
    - *Example*: Title III of No Child Left Behind as implemented in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP)
- A four-year ethnography (2002-06) included participant observation and field notes in classrooms, teacher meetings, and language policy meetings.
- Johnson also followed politicians' debates leading up to the passing of the law.

Findings

There is "a chain of policy process in which all actors potentially have input" (p. 142). This chain has at least five aspects:

1. **Agents**, or people involved in policy interpretation and implementation
2. **Goals** as stated in the policy text
3. **Processes**—creation, interpretation, appropriation
4. **Discourses** (e.g., how this policy is good/bad, how it connects to other discourses)
5. **Contexts** (social, geographical, historical, etc.)

In the case of Philadelphia, the school district director, who was a Title VII/Title III grant writer and a supporter of developmental bilingual programs, liked the law even though the discourse privileged English over Spanish.

She liked the law because the effect of the law was to allocate funds to the district based on the number of students, rather than making it a competition between districts [the change from Title VII to Title III]

- She felt her district could continue having pretty much the same developmental bilingual programs, developing both languages in students to high academic levels, but with guaranteed funds from now on

- She said: "They changed the name of the Office of Bilingual Education to the Office of English Language Acquisition—(the focus) couldn't be clearer…as long as they haven't changed the (right) so much so that I can't include dual language and I can't include other types of bilingual education—that's fine, I don't care what they call it." (pp. 145-146)

Her successor, however, implemented more transitional bilingual programs [i.e., Spanish is used to support English acquisition and then when students speak English well enough Spanish learning stops], believing many students' Spanish wasn't good enough to benefit from the developmental bilingual programs anyway

The drafting of the law was also contestable: the House made it English-focused, but after it was sent to the Senate, the Senate inserted more focus on bilingualism into the document

Government policies are "ideologically inconsistent and tend to be heterogeneous (containing varying and sometimes contradictory stylistic and semantic values)" (p. 149)

- Hence, there can be a wide range of interpretations of any given policy

Thus, both the creation and implementation/appropriation of language policy involves negotiation and conflict.

Summary

- "The community of individuals who have an impact on policy is fluid and porous, with new members coming and going… there is perhaps not one, but several overlapping communities" (p. 156)
- Ethnographers working at different levels can contribute to the maintenance of quality programs

Original Text: Johnson, D.C. (2009). Ethnography of language policy. *Language Policy, 8*, 139-159. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-009-9136-9

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