Local language practices in a postcolonial time and space: The management of linguistic diversity in health care settings

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The purpose of this paper is to analyze how linguistic diversity is both perceived and managed in health care settings that are located in postcolonial contexts. I will take the case of some of the contemporary French overseas territories (Wallis, South Pacific – Mayotte, Indian Ocean – French Guiana, South America) in which French, though the only official language, is not spoken by all the inhabitants. Doctor–patient interaction therefore often involves the absence of a shared language. It can then be argued that doctor–patient interaction is embedded in a broader political context, which notably comprises the nation-state language policies. The prefix ‘post-’ in ‘postcolonial’ will be discussed: it seems to imply a sequential order in the process of (de)-colonization, one which is rarely followed. Nevertheless, the articulation of this large political frame with the actual local language practices still needs to be described in its complexity. I show that in health care settings the management of linguistic diversity appears to some extent as the reflection of a “national order” (Blommaert, 2009) as much as it provides new grounds to renegotiate it locally. In the absence of any detailed language policy that would include multilingualism as an acknowledged specificity of the postcolonial territory, the social actors are left with a wide range of possible interaction modalities. I rely on ethnographic data that display the variety of stances that characterize the management of language diversity in French public hospitals in postcolonial territories and in metropolitan France – from the most extreme declared nationalist position (Léglise, 2007) to language scaffolding attempts that are openly presented as a political conception of equality in access to health care. In other words, I analyze doctor–patient interaction as examples of “local economies of communication” (Stroud, 2007:43) that index the “nature of the state–citizen relationship” (ibid.).

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