A cultural politics of languages additional to English and Maori in New Zealand English medium schools

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This paper mobilises the theoretical work of Jean Francois Lyotard to examine the historicity and currency of additional languages in New Zealand education. Working with Lyotard’s theoretical concepts of performativity, metanarrative, difference and the redemptive petit recit, particular questions arise such as: whether and how additional languages operate in schools to assist the production of a publicly monolingual society and how school language policies and practices might be tied to the ‘performativity’ of the system, that is, the drive for greater and greater efficiencies of all kinds, in timetabling, funding, learning time and teacher training, as well as in society more widely. Lyotard strongly disputed calls for communicative consensus and we can think of societal public monolingualism as one form of this, effectively requiring a tangible silencing and disenfranchisement of ‘the other’. New Zealand’s public monolingualism remains firmly entrenched despite it being categorised as a super diverse society with more than 150 languages spoken privately. This and the fact that New Zealand has a wide range of trading and diplomatic relationships, many with non Anglophone countries mean that additional languages education should be important in New Zealand schools. However, New Zealand students have relatively limited access to languages other than English during their compulsory education. Limitations relate to the age at which additional languages can be learned, the amount of instruction in additional languages, the range of languages available in schools, consistency across transition points, connections to home languages, the place of languages in schools in relation to other subjects, and the language and intercultural proficiency of language teachers. The performativity issues that arise in this study are linked to the accelerated status of English as the main language of international communication and a key driver of global capitalisms of all kinds.

Keywords: Additional languages, Languages education policy, Lyotardian theory.