The ’critical’ in critical language policy research

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While there are many volumes dedicated to principles and theories of language planning and policy (LPP), methodological considerations have received less attention. This is perhaps due to the historical emphasis on macro-level processes and phenomena. Yet, increasing interest in micro-level LPP processes, and the connections across the multiple layers of policy activity, has engendered a movement within the field toward ethnographic (e.g. McCarty, 2011; Menken & García, 2010) and discourse analytic techniques (e.g. Bonacina, 2012; Johnson, 2011, Mortimer, 2013).

Both critical language policy theory (Tollefson, 1991) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) have proven beneficial for highlighting dominant and marginalizing language ideologies in language policy that subjugate minority and indigenous languages, and their users. On the other hand, ethnographic research has tended to foreground the agency of language policy actors in interpreting and appropriating language policy in creative and unpredictable ways. This paper explores this tension between structure and agency; between critical work that focuses on the power of policy and ethnographic work that focuses on the power of policy agents.

I incorporate data collected in two U.S. states to show how the combination of CDA and ethnography provides a balanced approach to examining the power of policy and the power of agents. Further, I take up researcher positionality in LPP projects by interrogating my own subjectivity and commitment to the educational communities in which I’ve conducted LPP studies. I argue that a ’critical’ approach combines a focus on power in policy processes with an explicit commitment to social justice.

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