Analysing language policy, ideology and practice from a critical-discursive angle. Challenges and opportunities

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Recent language policy initiatives in Wales have integrated Welsh into the realms of employment and economic life with the aim to further normalise bilingualism and enhance the prestige and status of Welsh vis-à-vis English. This development indicates that language endangerment discourses (Duchêne and Heller 2007), hitherto negotiated in spaces such as education and the media, have shifted to the field of business for promoting bilingualism. This paper addresses this novel ‘ideological space’ (Hornberger, 2002) and analyses language policy, ideology and practice through a set of top-down policy and bottom-up survey data collected in Welsh businesses.

The aims of this paper are twofold. First, I propose a discursive approach to language policy. It starts from the essential premise that language policy is constituted, enacted, interpreted and (re)contextualised in and through language. This approach extends the critical language policy framework provided by Shohamy (2006) and integrates perspectives from the context-sensitive discourse-historical approach to critical discourse analysis. It incorporates discourse as an essential lens through which policy mechanisms, ideologies and practices are constituted and de facto language policy materialises. Second, I address methodological challenges and opportunities that an investigation of language policy from a critical discursive angle invariably raises. What do notions such as text, discourse and genre bring to the understanding of language policy? What are the nodal points of language policy, ideology and discourse?

Putting such questions up for debate, this paper argues that conceptualising and analysing language policy as a discursive phenomenon enables a better understanding of the multi-layered policy mechanisms that shape corporate bilingualism in Wales. It may also be a meaningful addition to the vast variety of approaches to language policy that share a critical endeavour by addressing and aiming to remedy the creation of social inequality.

Keywords: language ideologies, critical discourse analysis, language policy.