

Negotiating structure and agency in the implementation of language policy: the United Nations as a case study

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There has been a growing focus in language policy and planning (LPP) on the role of agency (e.g., Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021), with an emphasis on studies of educational settings and on individuals as policy arbiters (e.g., Johnson, 2013; Menken & García, 2010) or policy actors (e.g., Hult, 2015). In this presentation I debate whether recent work has led to “an unreflecting adoption of new orthodoxies... [and an] unrestrained embracing of speaker agency [which] has triggered scholarly amnesia over the place of structure in society and language” (Bell 2017: 592), or whether this work is contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between local meaning-making practices and macro-sociolinguistic processes informing LPP. I draw on empirical findings from a larger project undertaken with Francis Hult on language planning at the United Nations, in which we argue for renewed attention to the structure-agency dialectic in LPP.

In previous work I have shown how the language policy at the UN is practiced by a network of individuals working in an extensively hierarchized organizational system consisting of multiple entities (McEntee-Atalianis, 2016). The UN Secretariat has appointed named staff as Multilingual Focal Points (MFPs) to lead and act on the implementation of its language policy in their entities. In this paper I address a question posed by Francis and myself in our recent work: how do MFPs experience the UN organizational structure - as either facilitating or constraining policy agency? Data were collected from MFPs using a survey triangulated with an elicitation task and semi-structured group discussion and analyzed using inductive qualitative coding (e.g., Saldaña, 2021). Findings reveal how some MFPs experience structural constraints related to the allocation of time and money to support multilingualism while they and others also identify opportunities for problem-solving and creative “cost-neutral” measures within the scope of their structurally-defined spheres of responsibility. Making reference to Bouchard & Glasgow’s (2019) model of agency we draw a distinction between actions and actors which/who practice *morphostatis* (the continuation of the status quo), as opposed to those which/who engender *morphogenesis* (structural/cultural change). Our empirical findings reveal the complexity of both agency and structure, and the complexity of the dialogic relationship between the two. We argue that future work would do well to consider equally the role of agency and structure in investigations of LPP.

Biography

Lisa J. McEntee-Atalianis is Reader in Applied Linguistics at Birkbeck, University of London, deputy head of the Department of Language, Cultures and Applied Linguistics and director of the MA programme in Applied Linguistics and Communication. She is a member of the Study Group on Language and the United Nations. She has published widely on language planning and policy and on issues of identity, with a particular interest in communication in international and supranational organisations from an interdisciplinary perspective. She is reviews editor of the journal *Language Problems and Language Planning* and serves on the editorial board of the journal *Sociolinguistica*. Her work is predominantly informed by (socio)linguistics and discourse studies. Her most recent book is *Identity in Applied Linguistics* (Bloomsbury Academic).