The economics of Language Policy: An Introduction to Evaluation Work

GRIN, François, VAILLANCOURT, François

Abstract

This chapter presents some of the main empirical methods used by economists who since the 1970s have contributed to the elaboration of language policies. This specific focus is the result of the theme of this book; it is more restrictive than discussions on the economics of language of the economics of language policy evaluation. Furthermore, this leads us to emphasize practice-oriented research using quantitative data, in which economists have addressed questions such as: "How much does it cost to make a unilingual education system bilingual?" or "Do actors really benefit from having second-language skills, and if so, how much?" We thus do not discuss epistemological issues, nor do we debate the role of economists in this process.

Reference


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The science of language encompasses a truly interdisciplinary field of research, with a wide range of focuses, approaches, and objectives. While linguistics has its own traditional approaches, a variety of other intellectual disciplines have contributed methodological perspectives that enrich the field as a whole. As a result, linguistics now draws on state-of-the-art work from such fields as psychology, computer science, biology, neuroscience and cognitive science, sociology, music, philosophy, and anthropology.

The interdisciplinary nature of the field presents both challenges and opportunities to students who must understand a variety of evolving research skills and methods. The *Guides to Research Methods in Language and Linguistics* addresses these skills in a systematic way for advanced students and beginning researchers in language science. The books in this series focus especially on the relationships between theory, methods and data—the understanding of which is fundamental to the successful completion of research projects and the advancement of knowledge.

**Published**

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### Contents

10 Applying Corpus Linguistics to Language Policy .......................... 107
Shannon Fitzsimmons-Doolan

11 The Economics of Language Policy: An Introduction to Evaluation Work .......................... 118
François Grim and François Vaillancourt

12 Analyzing Language Policies in New Media .......................... 130
Helen Kelly-Holmes

13 Historical-Structural Analysis .......................... 140
James W. Toohey

14 Interpretive Policy Analysis for Language Policy .......................... 152
Sarah Catherine K. Moore and Terrence G. Wiley

15 Intertextuality and Language Policy .......................... 166
David Cassels Johnson

16 Mapping Language Ideologies .......................... 181
Adnan Ajic and Mary McCroarty

17 Investigating Relationships between Language Attitudes and Policy Issues .......................... 193
Asa Palviainen and Ari Huhta

18 Using Census Data and Demography in Policy Analysis .......................... 205
Minglang Zhou

19 Making Policy Connections across Scales Using Nexus Analysis .......................... 217
Francis M. Hull

**Public Engagement and the LPP Scholar**

Appendix A Interacting with Schools and Communities .......................... 233
Rebecca Freeman Field

Appendix B Participating in Policy Debates about Language .......................... 235
John R. Rickford

Appendix C Interacting with Politicians and Policymakers .......................... 240
Lava D. Awasti

Appendix D Managing Media Appearances .......................... 244
Kendall A. King

Index .......................... 253

### Notes on Contributors

Adnan Ajic is a PhD candidate in applied linguistics at Northern Arizona University. His research interests include language ideology, corpus linguistics, critical discourse analysis, English as a global lingua franca, and language policy in post-colonial and post-communist societies. His writing has appeared in *Language Policy, English for Specific Purposes*, and the *Journal of Language and Politics*. Adnan is currently working on his dissertation which investigates language ideologies and ethnic/national identities in the Balkans.

Lava D. Awasti holds a PhD from the Danish University of Education, Copenhagen. He is director general of the Department of Education in Nepal. He is also a visiting faculty member at Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University of Nepal, where he teaches advanced research methodologies and diversity education as well as language planning. His areas of interest include social transformation, educational reform, multilingual education, language and ethnicity, oriental cosmologies, and educational research.

Suresh Canagarajah is Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Applied Linguistics and English at Penn State University. He teaches language socialization, World Englishes, and teacher development in writing. His latest publication is *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations* (2013). He is a former editor of *TESOL Quarterly* and president of the American Association of Applied Linguistics.

Shannon Fitzsimmons-Doolan holds a PhD from Northern Arizona University and is Assistant Professor in the English Department at Texas A & M University–Corpus Christi. Research interests include investigating the roles of language ideologies in language policy processes, exploring models of content-based instruction, and applying corpus-based linguistics. Her publications have appeared in *Language Policy, Language Awareness, Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, Corpora, and in edited volumes.

Rebecca Freeman Field is the director of the Language Education Division of Caslon Publishing. She conducts action-oriented research in bilingual schools and communities and has published two books, *Bilingual Education and Social Change* and *Building on Community Bilingualism*. She focuses on developing leadership on PLL.
11 The Economics of Language Policy: An Introduction to Evaluation Work

François Grin and François Vaillancourt

Introduction

This chapter presents some of the main empirical methods used by economists who since the 1970s have contributed to the elaboration of language policies. This specific focus is the result of the theme of this book; it is more restrictive than discussions on the economics of language or the economics of language policy evaluation. Furthermore, this leads us to emphasize practice-oriented research using quantitative data, in which economists have addressed questions such as: "How much does it cost to make a unilingual education system bilingual?" or "Do actors really benefit from having second-language skills, and if so, how much?" We thus do not discuss epistemological issues, nor do we debate the role of economists in this process. Readers interested in a more conceptual introduction to the economics of language and language planning can find it in other contributions by Vaillancourt (1983), Grin (2003), Grin, Stredio, and Vaillancourt (2010), or Grin and Vaillancourt (2011). Owing to limitations of space, the detail of the statistical procedures applied is not presented. Nevertheless, this chapter, by describing, as it were, some of the nuts and bolts of the techniques used in language economics, is intended to make contributions in this area clear and accessible to a broad readership of scholars approaching language issues from other angles—primarily sociolinguistics or other specialties in applied linguistics.

The way in which the information is presented is not the only possible one. It has been designed in order to fit into the structure of this volume and can be mapped onto other typologies available in the literature.

Developing Research Questions

Language economics can be used in the study of a wide range of issues pertaining to very different policy problems, including the effective and cost-effective protection and promotion of minority languages, the teaching of national languages and/or languages of wider communication in education systems, the choice of language regimes for international or supra-national organizations, and the integration of immigrants. However, no matter what research questions we consider, they need to be structured in a certain way if we are to address the issues at hand in an economic perspective or connect language processes with economic processes. Putting it another way, it is important to note that economics (like other disciplines) approaches the world in a specific way; this also applies to economic work on language policy and planning. It follows that research questions have to be developed in a certain way, resting on essential concepts which we present here. We shall present the concepts of "counterfactual," "marginalism," and "aggregation"; we also describe, in this section, the type of data needed to address research questions in an economic perspective.

The first of these concepts is that of counterfactual. The counterfactual is not something that is contrary to the facts, but a point of reference, an alternative, or, more specifically, "that against which the object of study is being assessed." For example, if we want to estimate the cost of using five languages for communication in a public or private sector organization, we must say what the alternative would be: using three languages? Or using only one language — and then, which language? Note that the counterfactual may be hypothetical, and in the case of the ex-post evaluation of a policy (that is, after it has been implemented), it always is, since it refers to "what would have happened if the policy had not been adopted and implemented."

The second key concept used here is that of marginalism, which is used in constructs such as "marginal cost" and "marginal benefit." The principle of marginalism may itself be seen as an application of the logic of the counterfactual, because it refers to an incremental change to an existing situation. For example, how should we assess a program aimed at helping immigrants with Turkish as first language (L1) living in Germany to improve their fluency in German (L2)? The standard economic answer is to start by estimating the benefits associated with accessing each level of