REVISTA DE LLENGUA I DRET // JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LAW #80

LANGUAGE AND NEUTRALITY: GLOTTOPOLITICAL PROCESSES AND CONSEQUENCES. INTRODUCTION TO THE MONOGRAPHIC SECTION

Maria Rosa Garrido Sardà[*]

José del Valle[**]

Abstract

This monographic section of *Revista de Llengua i Dret* examines whether and how language neutrality is a discursive construction that results from political positionalities and vested socioeconomic interests. Adopting a critical lens on "neutrality" as a political position in a given sociopolitical and language struggle, the five contributions look into language as the vehicle of such a stance in post-colonial language blocs such as *la Francophonie* and *la Lusofonia*, early 20th century Esperantism, and language policies in an international organisation and in two officially multilingual states, Switzerland and South Africa. We propose a historiographic approach to the conditions of production with a focus on ideological tensions, the linguistic work required to (re)produce language neutrality and the resulting social differentiation and exclusion in specific language interventions.

Keywords: neutrality; sociolinguistics; language policy; multilingualism; colonialism; Esperantism; historiography; language ideological debates.

LLENGUA I NEUTRALITAT: PROCESSOS GLOTOPOLÍTICS I CONSEQÜÈNCIES. INTRODUCCIÓ A LA SECCIÓ MONOGRÀFICA

Resum

Aquesta secció monogràfica de la Revista de Llengua i Dret *examina si i com la neutralitat lingüística és una construcció discursiva que resulta de posicionaments polítics i interessos socioeconòmics particulars. A través d'una lent crítica sobre la neutralitat com a posicionament polític en una determinada lluita sociopolítica i lingüística, les cinc contribucions analitzen la llengua com a vehicle d'aquest posicionament en blocs lingüístics postcolonials com són la francofonia i la lusofonia, l'esperantisme de principis del segle XX, i les polítiques lingüístiques en una organització internacional i en dos estats oficialment multilingües: Suïssa i Sudàfrica. Proposem un enfocament historiogràfic sobre les condicions de producció centrat en les tensions ideològiques, el treball lingüístic necessari per (re)produir la neutralitat lingüística i els processos de diferenciació i exclusió socials que en resulten.*

Paraules clau: neutralitat; sociolingüística; política lingüística; multilingüisme; colonialisme; esperantisme; historiografia; debats ideològics lingüístics.

[*] Maria Rosa Garrido Sardà, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. mariarosa.garrido@uab.cat. 0000-0001-9391-3885.

[**] José del Valle, City University of New York. jdelvalle@gc.cuny.edu.

Recommended citation: Garrido Sardà, Maria Rosa, & Del Valle, José. (2023). Language and neutrality: glottopolitical processes and consequences. Introduction to the monographic section. *Revista de Llengua i Dret, Journal of Language and Law*, *80*, 3-9. https://doi.org/10.58992/rld.i80.2023.4144

CC BY NC ND

Within the increasing political tensions in Catalonia, the Catalan immersion public school system has become associated by Spanish nationalist parties with Catalan pro-independence ideologies, parties and associations. Sunyol (2021) shows how the trilingual (Catalan-Spanish-English) policy at an international school has come to index political neutrality for socially-mobile families in the Barcelona metropolitan area. In the eyes of parents, the alleged equality among the three languages espoused by the school – in terms of time allocated and social value – indexes a politically neutral stance. Parents identified the public-school system as "very nationalist" and "very *very* Catalan" in contrast with the "open, plural and global" stance of the international school Sunyol (2021) investigated. The latter was identified as "an apolitical option" and "very neutral". In the neighbouring Balearic Islands, the Spanish nationalist *Partido Popular* mandated in 2013, through a top-down "trilingual decree", that 33% of Spanish, Catalan and English, respectively, was to be implemented in non-university centres. This decision was met with determined resistance from teachers, schools, unions and town halls (see Melià, 2014) because it reduced social access to Catalan: equality does not stand for equity given the unequal sociolinguistic status of the different languages.

The presence of Spanish throughout Spain has been justified differently at different points in Spain's modern history. For example, for many decades Spain´s School of Philology (organised by Ramón Menéndez Pidal at the *Centro de Estudios Históricos*) embraced a narrative grounded in the natural expansion of Castilian due to its superior qualities (Menéndez Pidal 1950). Such a narrative, however, came to be overrun, first, by philological evidence that showed the multidialectal origins of Spanish and, second, by the ethos of the political reforms associated with Franco's death in 1975, the end of dictatorship, and the transition towards a parliamentary monarchy. The 1978 Constitution created a legal framework that, while allowing for the officialisation and promotion of Catalan, Basque and Galician in their respective communities, consolidated the Spanish language's official status throughout the land. Promoting harmonious bilingualism in communities with languages of their own (Spanish-Basque, Spanish-Catalan and Spanish-Galician) was the implicit goal of the constitution. In this context, a narrative of Castilian superiority was hardly acceptable and, in fact, was replaced by another that, while recognising Castilian as the language of Castile, defined Spanish as an originally koinetic language whose regional neutrality had made it a "natural presence" throughout the kingdoms of Castile, Navarre and Aragon (see also Woolard, 2008a). The Universitat de València´s linguistics professor Ángel López García advanced such a theory in a book entitled *El rumor de los desarraigados: conflicto de lenguas en la península ibérica* [The wondering murmur: language conflict in the Iberian Peninsula], which in 1985 received the prestigious Anagrama Essay Award. The key ideological issue of the case is not whether or not the koinetic theory is factually correct (which is, of course, of importance) but how the association between Spanish and neutrality is mobilised in debates on language policy in the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia.

In this special issue we examine whether and how language neutrality is a discursive construction that results from political positionalities and vested socioeconomic interests. Which linguistic policies and practices count as "neutral" and for whom?

In the broad sense of global crisis, language and narrative are central to the construction of societal responses to disease, climate change, police brutality etc. (Heller and McElhinny, 2017). In turn, "a given promise of language-driven amelioration can be appropriated by various interests, and be made to align with manifold agendas, tactics and imagined ends" (Karlander, 2020, p. 106). Embracing both ethnographic and historiographic perspectives, this special issue explores the articulation between discursive constructions of political neutrality, generally understood as not taking sides in a conflict or crisis with various stakeholders, and of language as the vehicle of such a stance, indexed by some (and not other) language varieties, policies and speakers. What counts as "neutral" when it comes to institutional language recognition and language use and for whom? How is neutrality discursively and linguistically constructed, appropriated and contested at a given sociohistorical juncture? Which and whose sociopolitical and economic interests does it serve? In what ways does it become an axis of social differentiation among speakers and institutions?

The myth of neutrality constitutes the basis for the elaboration of the law (e.g. language policies and prescriptive norms) and constructs various political and social projects as a response to crises and conflict, either in the service of an alternative (e.g. surpassing nationalism and alter-globalist projects) or in order to maintain the status quo under changing conditions (e.g. reinforcing an imperial language in a postcolonial

order). Wee (2010) claims that language neutrality is "deeply ideological in nature" (p. 422) and that it is not possible for an institution to be completely neutral in language matters, because they at least implicitly favour a given variety and its legitimate speakers. In language policy, neutrality is evoked to create an illusion of equality among the different groups and to mask social differences in access to language by virtue of gender, class, race or age. In this volume, we propose that language neutrality is an ideology that, while mobilised in different sociohistorical contexts and therefore showing historical specificities in each instance, masks the situatedness of specific linguistic arrangements through different types of linguistic work[1] (such as standardisation, artificial language creation or multilingual policies) in the hope of diffusing conflicts and tensions that may arise within the unequal distribution of power in a given political economy of language. To date, this articulation between neutrality and language remains underexplored in sociolinguistics, with some research in the history of standard languages (e.g. Rutten, 2016; Sorlin, 2012), in humanitarian and refugee aid work (e.g. Garrido, 2017; Hassemer and Garrido, 2020), Esperantism (e.g. Karlander, 2020; Sokolovska, 2023) and multilingual Switzerland (e.g. Del Percio, 2013).

Critical lens on language and neutrality: Questions and approaches

Contrary to the traditional conception of language as an abstract and non-political system of representation in which most of Linguistics has been grounded, the basic assumption in this volume is in sync with Critical Sociolinguistics (Heller 2011) and Glottopolitical Studies (Del Valle, 2017; Guespin and Marcellesi, 1986): language is a practice that constructs sociopolitical subjectivities and projects in situated interactions – whether verbal, written or signed – within broader language policies and political economies. We adopt a critical lens with the objective of "describing, understanding and explaining the role of language in constructing the relations of social difference and social inequality that shape our world" (Heller, 2011, p. 34). We are also inspired by glottopolitical studies, an intellectual project that examines the role of language, its metalinguistic representations and its institutional management in social processes of negotiation and struggle over the access to and exercise of power (Del Valle, 2017). In this special issue, we are interested in responses to crises not only from the centres of power, such as state agencies or international organisations, but also from the margins, as in social movements. Our conceptualisation of neutrality as a situated discursive and linguistic process to reduce or erase the tensions in (the aftermath of) a glottopolitical conflict raises three main interrelated empirical questions about conditions of production (why?), sociolinguistic processes (how?) and material consequences (and so what?):

1) **Why?** What are the sociopolitical and discursive conditions for the production of "neutrality" in/through language? In other words, why is neutrality as a sociolinguistic process necessary to mask tensions in, e.g., nation-building, armed conflicts or knowledge production?

2) **How?** What kind of linguistic work (e.g. official language policy, dictionary compilation, diplomatic encounters with interpreters, demographic representation of multilingualism, *conlang* creation) is involved in the construction of neutrality? Who is it done by and for whom? Which and whose logics are mobilised?

3) **And so what?** What are the symbolic and material consequences of the creation of legitimate "neutral" varieties, speakers and spaces in linguistic practice and policy? Put differently, how does "neutrality" act as an axis of differentiation among people and institutions? What is the impact on people's lives and livelihoods in situated contexts?

In order to illuminate the genesis, sociolinguistic construction and consequences of neutrality through language intervention, this volume will explore different "language ideological debates" (Blommaert, 1999) in various social contexts and ideological projects. These debates in which language is a central topic articulate, transform and enforce certain language ideologies within a wider sociopolitical and historical background of power relations, forms of discrimination and identity formation, among others. Beliefs and statements about language and speakers, known as "language ideologies", are not only about language. They are "locally and historically specific framings, suffused with the political and moral interests of the social positions and projects in which they are embedded" (Gal and Irvine, 2019, p. 2). They mediate between discourses about language(s) and

1 We would like to thank Alexandre Duchêne for proposing the notion of "neutralisation" as a process in our early discussions.

categories of people associated with them. The linguistic ideologies of authenticity and anonymity (Gal and Woolard, 2001) are particularly relevant to this volume. Authenticity construes language as an ethnic marker "from somewhere", grounded in a territory, whereas the ideology of anonymity constructs a public, standard and universal voice "from nowhere". Authenticity is based on the logics of (national) identity and native speaker models. Anonymous languages "appear not to belong to any identifiable individuals but rather seem to be socially neutral, universally available, natural and objective truths" (Woolard, 2008b, p. 5). This latter ideology constructs some languages and speakers as more iconic of neutrality than others.

Blommaert (1999) called for a "historiography of language ideologies" (p. 1) to investigate political interventions, agency and power in the making of language ideologies with "an ethnographic eye" (p. 7) for the actual discourse producers and institutional actors, their interests and their alliances. We should historicise the glottopolitical processes through historiographic knowledge and discourse analysis, illuminating how different decisions or debates on language are closely intertwined with situated political issues. We aim to analyse language ideological debates that mobilise discourses of neutrality to construct hopeful visions of an alternative social organisation (Heller and McElhinny, 2017) or to uphold the status quo. The contributions in this special issue will draw on a historiographic approach to illuminate the impetus behind these linguistic (policy) projects, namely why they matter in a particular sociohistorical context. Humbert and Garrido Sardà will additionally adopt an ethnographic lens on the linguistic work behind them, including texts, interactions and the unspoken. In terms of data, international treaties, national policies and institutional guidelines about language, as well as the narrated experiences and metalinguistic comments of speakers, will allow us to unveil the interests behind the discursive and sociolinguistic production of "neutrality". These are all reflexive activities that are simultaneously a practice and a commentary on that practice (Gal and Irvine, 2019, p. 1). These metadiscursive activities are anchored in people's positioning at a particular sociohistorical juncture and in language projects as part of broader social projects such as nation-building, internationalism or military alliance.

We borrow somewhat freely from Raymond Williams (1976) and approach neutrality as a "keyword" (Williams, 1976) that, in interaction with others and as part of struggles over the entextualisation of social experiences, is differently interpreted according to cultural, legal, sociolinguistic and sociopolitical contexts across space and over time. Going beyond semantics:

> We find a history and complexity of meanings; conscious changes, or consciously different uses; innovation, obsolescence, specialization, extension, overlap, transfer; or changes which are masked by a nominal continuity so that words which seem to have been there for centuries, with continuous general meanings, have come in fact to express radically different or radically variable, yet sometimes hardly noticed, meanings and implications of meaning. (Williams, 1976, p. 17)

A keyword such as *neutrality* is a sign that is taken up and builds different or variable meanings through connections with other keywords such as *universality*, *commonality*, *consensus*, *impartiality, dialogue* or *norm* in different places, at different times and for different purposes. As social and political conditions change, discursive strategies rewrite history and circulate a legitimate, but not the only, narrative about a named language variety and its speakers. The crosscutting issue of how to communicate across difference creates two coexisting reactions: solutions to communicate effectively with common and universal resources, on the one hand, and accepting (even sharpening) the incommensurability of difference with rising particularities, on the other. The present volume will explore the former through the illusion of standard language, notably in post-colonial "language power blocs" (Pujolar, 2007, p. 86), and the search for a "universal language" that is orderly and is politically neutral, exemplified by Esperanto. The latter reaction is linked with multilingual regimes for coexistence among different groups in a nation-state, as in Switzerland or South Africa, and in international organisations such as the UN.

Individual contributions in this volume

To situate the five original articles in this volume, we will divide them into three interrelated types of "sociolinguistic work" to produce political neutrality: 1) multilingual policies to create and maintain a pluralistic construction, 2) standard language policy traditionally behind nation-state building and imperialism and 3) artificial language creation to surpass nationalism and to bring about alternative political projects.

As far as multilingual policies are concerned, Sunyol's (2021) research in an international school in Catalonia illustrates the construction of political neutrality in the equal treatment of languages in policies, which erases the different status of social groups and language varieties. In their contribution, Zimmermann and Ronza examine representations of English in education in two rather different yet multilingual national settings: Switzerland and South Africa. The authors show that neutrality appears as an ideological manoeuvre that naturalises sociohistorically contingent linguistic scenarios by rhetorically attaching the neutral to progress and success. Today, the international image of a humanitarian, neutral and multilingual Switzerland has been capitalised for international cooperation and diplomacy in Geneva (Garrido, 2022). Garrido Sardà's article explores the articulation of the humanitarian principle of neutrality and language as an index of this political stance at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), headquartered in Geneva. For delegates, neutrality seems to be less linked with foreign nationality as an institutional requirement and a contextual and relational concept emerges, based on language repertoire, racialised embodiment and cultural closeness.

Neutrality is a central discursive trope in standard language ideology (Rutten, 2016; Sorlin, 2012). It acts as an axis of differentiation that hierarchises language varieties, speakers and collectivities in the imagined nation-state constructed by grammarians and mainly transmitted through education. The perception of a standard language as a "variété neutre intrinsiquement supérieure" (Sorlin, 2012, p. 92) that puts order among the chaos of regional dialects is hegemonic even among non-standard dialect speakers. Major European languages such as Portuguese, French and Spanish have a new basis of linguistic authority as a global language of "encounter", masking social inequalities of distribution and ownership. Transnational language communities (e.g. *a Lusofonia*, *la Francophonie*) serve the economic and political interests of European imperial powers (Del Valle, 2011). In his article, Lagares uses a comparative approach and analyses the deployment of neutrality as a feature attributed to Spanish by certain Spain-centred linguistic institutions in contrast with the absence of such a concept in Portuguese-speaking areas. Lagares sets out the different historical post-colonial conditions that result in a different outcome with regard to the public mobilisation of linguistic neutrality. In turn, Humbert's article examines the discourses legitimising the production of statistics on the French language worldwide in the *Observatoire de la langue française* (Observatory of the French language) and the *Observatoire démographique et statistique de l'espace francophone* (Demographic and statistical observatory of the Francophone space). Although the term "neutral" is not used in institutional reports and interviews with scientific actors, the purported objectivity of quantifying French is linked with discourses of linguistic diversity and the UN sustainable development goals to erase colonial interests.

Artificial (or invented, constructed) languages construct their linguistic authority as anonymous languages not linked to a nation-state and open to all. Auxiliary languages like Esperanto were meant to be politically and religiously neutral (Sorlin, 2012, p. 55) and their shared goal is to remedy language barriers that, in their creators' view, caused conflict among nations and prevented international exchange. According to Sokolovska (2023), "également désigné comme 'langue neutre', l'espéranto a été imaginé comme un outil de communication internationale sans obstacles et, par conséquent, porteur de la vision d'un nouvel ordre" (p. 201). This ameliorative vision was also appropriated by national and cosmopolitan imaginaries, as a means of both overcoming and safeguarding linguistic diversity (Karlander, 2020). In this volume, Di Stefano zeroes in on the early 20th century and analyses neutrality as a feature of Esperanto in discourse issued by two separate entities: the International Association of Scientific Academies and the international Anarchist movement. Her analysis shows that, while both embrace Esperanto's neutrality as a value for its auxiliary character and universal ambition, scientists see it as a tool for the protection of the scientific status quo while anarchists welcome its emancipatory power for humanity.

In the epilogue, Joan Pujolar discusses the transnational or international nature of language policy and legitimisation through discursive tropes of neutrality in all five contributions. The final discussion foregrounds the lingering colonial models and discourses of language, anchored in raciolinguistic ideologies (Rosa and Flores, 2017), and the tensions arising from the globalisation of English as a taken-for-granted lingua franca. In this respect, Pujolar calls for future research into the legitimising bases for English as a neutral language belonging to no one, and yet desired by many, within the neoliberal economy.

References

Blommaert, Jan. (1999). The debate is open. In J. Blommaert (Ed.), *Language ideological debates* (p. 1-38). Mouton de Gruyter.

Del Percio, Alfonso. (2013). Capitalizing on national diversity: Modern ideologies of multilingual Switzerland and the regimentation of the nation's promotion under late capitalism. [Unpublished PhD dissertation]. University of St. Gallen.

Del Valle, José. (2017). Glotopolítica y teoría del lenguaje. In Diego Bentivegna, José del Valle, Mateo Niro and Laura Villa (Eds.), *Anuario de Glotopolítica 1* (p. 15-39). Editorial Cabiria.

Del Valle, José. (2011). Transnational languages: beyond nation and empire? An introduction. *Sociolinguistic Studies*, *5*(3), 387-397.

Gal, Susan, & Irvine, Judith T. (2019). *Signs of difference: Language and ideology in social life.* Cambridge University Press.

Gal, Susan, & Woolard, Kathryn A. (2001). Constructing languages and publics: Authority and representation. In Susan Gal and Kathryn A. Woolard (Eds.), *Languages and publics: The making of authority* (p. 1-12). St. Jerome.

Garrido, Maria Rosa. (2017). Multilingualism and cosmopolitanism in the construction of a humanitarian elite. In Adam Jaworski and Crispin Thurlow (Eds.), *Elite discourse: The rhetorics of status and privilege, Special Issue of Social Semiotics*, *27*(3), 359-369.

Garrido, Maria Rosa. (2022). The evolution of language ideological debates about English and French in a multilingual humanitarian organisation. *Language Policy*, *21*, 47-73. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-021-09586-0

Guespin, Louis, & Marcellesi, Jean-Baptiste. (1986). Pour la Glottopolitique. *Langage*, *83*, 5-34.

López García, Ángel. (1985). *El rumor de los desarraigados: conflicto de lenguas en la península ibérica*. Anagrama.

Hassemer, Jonas, & Garrido, Maria Rosa. (2020). Language as a resource with fluctuating values: Arabic speakers in humanitarian and social work. In Kamilla Kraft and Mi-Cha Flubacher (Eds.), *The promise of language: Betwixt empowerment and the reproduction of inequality. Special Issue of International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *264*, 131-161. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2020-2097

Heller, Monica, & McElhinny, Bonnie. (2017). *Language, capitalism, colonialism: Toward a critical history.* University of Toronto Press.

Heller, Monica. (2011). *Paths to post-nationalism: A critical ethnography of language and identity.* Oxford University Press.

Karlander, David. (2020). Ideological indeterminacy: Worker Esperantism in 1920s Sweden. *Language & Communication*, *71*, 95-107. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2019.12.004

Melià, Joan. (2014, 31 October). El TIL a l'atzucac. *Blog de la Revista de Llengua i Dret*.

Menéndez Pidal, Ramón. (1950). *Orígenes del español: estado lingüístico de la península ibérica hasta el siglo XI*. Espasa-Calpe.

Pujolar, Joan. (2007). Bilingualism and the nation-state in the post-national era. In Monica Heller (Ed.), *Bilingualism: A social approach* (p. 71-95). Palgrave Macmillan.

Rosa, Jonathan, & Flores, Nelson. (2017). Unsettling race and language: Toward a raciolinguistic perspective. *Language in Society*, *46*(5), 621-647. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404517000562

Rutten, Gijsbert. (2016). Standardization and the myth of neutrality in language history. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *242*, 25-57. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2016-0032

Sokolovska, Zorana. (2023). Langues artificielles et utopies en tension. In Luc Léger, Mireille McLaughlin & Émilie Urbain, *Appartenances, marchées et mobilités: penser la valeur des langues* (p. 201-208). L'Harmattan.

Sorlin, Sandrine. (2012). *Langue et autorité. De l'ordre linguistique à la force dialogique.* Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

Sunyol, Andrea. (2021). Now it's "on demand": the Catalan language in an elite international school. *Revista de Llengua i Dret, Journal of Language and Law*, *75*, 126-143. https://doi.org/10.2436/rld.i75.2021.3591

Wee, Lionel. (2010). Neutrality in language policy. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *31*(4), 421-434. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2010.489951

Williams, Raymond. (1976). *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. Oxford University Press.

Woolard, Kathryn A. (2008a). Les ideologies lingüístiques: Una visió general d'un camp des de l'antropologia lingüística. *Revista de Llengua i Dret, Journal of Language and Law*, *49*, 179-199.

Woolard, Kathryn A. (2008b). Language and identity choice in Catalonia: The interplay of contrasting ideologies of linguistic authority. In Kirsten Süselbeck, Ulrike Mühlschlegel and Peter Masson (Eds.), *Lengua, nación e identidad. La regulación del plurilingüismo en España y América Latina* (p. 303-323). Vervuert/Iberoamericana.

Acknowledgements

The contributions to this special issue of the *Journal of Language and Law* are the result of the workshop "Language and neutrality: glottopolitical processes and consequences" organised by the guest editors at the University of Lausanne (May 2022) thanks to a Scientific Exchanges grant (ISZEZ0-201280/1) from the Swiss National Science Foundation. We would like to thank all the participants in our discussions about this topic, including all the authors, Jorge Alvis, Suresh Canagarajah, Alexandre Duchêne, Monica Heller and Anne-Christel Zeiter.