

# A Critical Review of Thomas Ricento, 2000, “Historical and theoretical perspectives in language policy and plannings”, *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 4/2, 2000: 196-213

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## **Abstract:**

“Historical and theoretical perspectives in language policy and planning” offers valuable theoretical insights to diachronic research of LPP work. Ricento detailed the three phases of LPP research and rigorously argued that three stages should be divided from perspectives of the macro sociopolitical, the epistemological, and the strategic factors. The author criticizes that Ricento ignored the fourth phase of LPP research and overlooked approaches of different phases. Some evidence should be added to illustrate the interdisciplinarity of LPP research. In addition, it is a drawback that apparently all the contributors are themselves from Western contexts. Despite its problems, Ricento’s paper does make an important contribution to the broad field of LPP research. The author recommends that scholars can remedy those weaknesses and make progress in further research.

**Keywords:** Language policy, Language planning, critical review

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## **1. Introduction**

Language policy and planning, often referred to as LPP, is defined as an interdisciplinary research field to explore “important questions about language status, language identity, language use, and other topics that fall within the purview of research” (Ricento, 2006). “Historical and theoretical perspectives in language policy and planning” is written by Thomas Ricento, a Canadian scholar in LPP work at University of Calgary. The article is designed to provide a diachronic overview for LPP research, with three stages of its development covering historical and theoretical perspectives. This paper aims to summarize the ideas of Ricento and make an evaluation of his work. From the author’s point of view, there is no doubt that Ricento makes a great contribution to diachronic research of LPP work. However, Ricento’s statement to three phases of LPP research may leave the intended reader confused as it fails to properly answer some questions. These questions at this point are: Is it reasonable to divide three stages of LPP research? Is there a fourth stage that is ignored by the author? Why didn’t Ricento elaborate the research approach of each stage? Why didn’t Ricento explain the feasibility of cross-disciplinary research in LPP work? Therefore, the author argues that firstly, there exists the fourth phase in LPP work; secondly, research approaches of three stages in LPP work are ignored by Ricento; last but not least, more evidence should be adduced to illustrate the importance of applying research methods from other disciplines beyond linguistics.

## **2. Summary**

“Historical and theoretical perspectives in language policy and planning” written by Thomas is to be welcomed, since it provides some of these affected individuals and groups with a diachronic overview for LPP research. Ricento (2000) analyzed the LPP literature from three factors: the macro sociopolitical, the epistemological, and the strategic. He believed that “there is interaction among the three approaches and continuity of themes in the three stages of LPP development”. Therefore, he elaborated the different central elements in each phase of LPP work.

### **2.1 The first phase of LPP research**

The first stage, from 1950s to the end of 1960s, can be called the formative period of LPP. Decolonization, structuralism, and pragmatism are three central elements in this stage. First, in terms of the macro sociopolitical factor, the triumph of World War II had inspired people in Asia, Africa and Latin America to strive for decolonization. With the development of national liberation movements, a large number of new nations had emerged. Many sociolinguists went to these new nations and helped them develop grammars, write systems, and compile dictionaries for indigenous languages. Second, in the case of the epistemological factor, structuralism occupies a dominant position in the social sciences. Sociolinguists trained in structural linguistics were interested in language typologies and keen to explore the approaches to language planning. These scholars believed that LPP not only had great potential for promoting the development of linguistics, but also had benefits for the construction and

unification of new nations. Third, as far as the strategic factor is concerned, pragmatics has a great impact on LPP work. Scholars influenced by pragmatics held opinions that government could solve social problems through the rational planning and new nations had to select a major European language as its official language with vernacular serving other functions. A consensus view among Western sociolinguists was that linguistic diversity would hinder the development of society. Therefore, unification of language through LPP was conducive to the unification and modernization of new nations.

## **2.2 The second phase of LPP research**

The second stage, from the early 1970s to the late 1980s, can be regarded as a period of reflection in LPP work. The three central elements in this stage are: failure of modernization, critical sociolinguistics, and access. In the first place, considering the macro sociopolitical factor, failure of modernization had become the dominant theme during this period. The expectation of a flowering of modernization and economic take-off did not arrive in new nations and LPP was not as effective as previously thought. Facing these realities, more and more linguists began to question, criticize and reflect on LPP work. Secondly, with regard to the epistemological factor, scholars influenced by critical sociolinguistics questioned some ideas in early LPP work. The continuing challenge to autonomous linguistics leads to some cherished notions important to LPP studies to be criticized or even abandoned, such as “native speaker”, “mother tongue”, and “linguistic competence”. During this period, a large number of scholars were aware of the negative effects and inherent limitations of LPP, and realized that “sociolinguistic constructs were conceptually complex and ideologically laden”(Ricento, 2000). Therefore, LPP studies could not be conducted simply by descriptive taxonomies. Thirdly, in terms of the strategic factor, scholars believed that language selection strengthened or perpetuated social and economic inequality as the new nations only had access to the European language. The choice of European language as “neutral media” would be beneficial to the economic interests of metropolitan countries, but would have a negative impact on the economic, social and political interests of marginalized minority language users. So, scholars believe that language selection could not be regarded as “innovative model” of modernization.

## **2.3 The third phase of LPP research**

The third stage, from the late 1980s to the present day, can be seen as the period of rejuvenation. The new world order, postmodernism, and linguistic human rights are three central elements in this stage. First of all, as far as the macro sociopolitical factor is concerned, a new world order was gradually established in the late 1980s. Along with geographical and political changes, the process of capitalism globalization had been accelerated. Western capitalist countries controlled and disseminated culture worldwide through the penetration of culture and technology in the developing countries. Consequently, the centralization of culture bore on the status of languages, which led linguists to turn their attention to language losses in LPP work. Then, taking the epistemological factor

into consideration, epistemological research methods gradually shifted to postmodernism. Critical and postmodern theorists argued that there were connections between imperial languages and indigenous languages, which could be described in one term “linguistic imperialism”. In their ideas, language was a carrier and approach to propagate a real image of unequal power and unbalanced resources, which means that western capitalist countries could marginalize indigenous languages through structural economic and ideological means as well as legislation. Therefore, the study of language ideology and language ecology attracted linguists’ attention in LPP work. Last, as for strategic factor, the integration of critical theories with the approach of language ecology resulted in the construction of a new paradigm. Linguistic human rights had become an extremely important notion in the field of LPP. However, supporters of linguistic human rights were easy to be blamed. For one, some scholars thought linguistic human rights were dreams of modernist universalism with the color of utopianism. For another, linguistic human rights were considered to be discussed in the context of political sciences. Ricento refuted these ideas and emphasized the significance of new paradigms in explaining language behavior. Thus it can be seen that the desire to protect and revitalize threatened languages and cultures became a major strategic factor in the third phase.

### **3. Evaluation**

“Historical and theoretical perspectives in language policy and planning” written by Thomas Ricento is considered as a classical literature in the field of LPP. Among a constellation of diachronic studies, Ricento made a pioneering contribution to describing three waves of LPP research according to the macro sociopolitical, the epistemological, and the strategic factors. However, this paper is not without disappointment from those who would view LPP as an extremely significant direction in the study of language. Inevitably, several crucial questions are unanswered by this insightful article. Is it reasonable to divide three stages of LPP research? Is there a fourth stage that is ignored by the author? Why didn’t the author elaborate the research approach of each stage? Why didn’t the author explain the feasibility of cross-disciplinary research in LPP work? In what follows, these questions will be noted in details.

#### **3.1 Development phases of LPP research**

Controversy exists with regard to whether there are only three phases of LPP research. Johnson (2016) states that at present the study of LPP has entered a new stage - the fourth wave of LPP research, in which scholars pay more attention to how people study language policy texts and discourses. According to Ricento’s paper, the third phase is characterized by new world order, postmodernism and linguistic human rights, in which scholars focus on “how language ideologies and discourses interact with LPP processes” (Johnson, 2016). There are two hallmarks of the third wave: for one, a dispute about how to balance critical discourse analysis with “empirical understanding of the agency of policy actors” (Johnson, 2016) comes into being; for another, an interest in revealing “how macro-level policy texts and discourses relate to micro-level interactions” (Johnson, 2016)

comes to life. Nevertheless, Johnson (2016) notes that the feature of today's LPP research is to question and reconceptualize the macro-micro dialectic, which can be regarded as the fourth wave in LPP work. Johnson (2016) summarizes three essential features of the fourth phase, including altering the definition of LPP, continuously exploring and testing theoretical frameworks with empirical data collection and increasingly focusing on research methodology and discourse analytic approaches for LPP research. Mostly, scholars pay their attention to "how people study language policy texts and discourse" (Johnson 2016) and apply research methods from other disciplines beyond linguistics, which results in the multidisciplinary of LPP studies. Therefore, as far as the author is concerned, the fourth phase should be discussed in the diachronic research of LPP work.

### **3.2 Research approaches of LPP research**

Research approaches of three stages in LPP work are ignored by Ricento. Johnson (2013) states that the approaches of LPP research are diverse and influenced by other disciplines, such as political and legal theory, communication and media studies, linguistic anthropology, economics, and interpretive policy analysis. On the basis of Johnson's studies on research approaches in LPP work, Zhang (2016) points out that there are five main approaches to LPP research abroad: Early language planning analysis, historical-textual analysis, political and legal theory analysis, media discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis in LPP work. In his opinion, according to Ricento's classification, different research approaches are applied in different phases of LPP work. Early language planning work and historical-textual analysis are mainly applied in the first stage of LPP research while the latter three approaches are mainly used in the second and third stages of LPP work. Johnson (2013) notes that the focus of early language planning work is on reports of the processes of LPP work in national polities, which depends on empirical observation or historical research. As for historical-textual analysis, it traces "the history of a policy or policies in a particular context". Based on these two approaches, linguists used these two approaches to help new nations develop grammars, write systems and compile dictionaries for indigenous language in the first phase of LPP research. However, in the second and third phases of LPP research, scholars pay more attention to how political and legal theories create language policies, how the media reflect and engender ideologies about language and how "language policies create social inequality among dominant and minority language users" (Johnson 2015). In that case, LPP research is becoming interdisciplinary or even superdisciplinary. Furthermore, ethnographic and discourse analytic research methods have emerged to help scholars explore the processes of LPP through multiple levels of activity and within different contexts. To sum up, the thread of Ricento's elaboration becomes lost in an overlook of research approaches in different phases.

### **3.3 Research methods of LPP research**

Without entering into detail of interdisciplinary research in LPP work, Ricento should adduce more evidence to illustrate the importance of applying research methods from other disciplines beyond

linguistics. In the third stage, linguistic human rights is considered as a key topic in the field of LPP. However, the term human rights is an important concept of political science, so a concern raised by scholars is that “discussions of language status are couched in the rhetoric of political science”(Ricento, 2000). In refuting scholars’ doubts on linguistic human rights, Ricento notes that interdisciplinary research is beneficial to the evolution of disciplines because some specific “science” may be separated from the other “science” in the process of interdisciplinary research, later becoming a new discipline. Anthropology that comes from the separation of biology from cultural studies is a typical example to support this idea. Boada (2013) states that people study issues of LPP from fragmentary perspective and LPP research is interrelated and overlapping with other disciplines. Making headway towards an interdisciplinary approach can help people understand language realities. According to Terborg & Garcia (2006), they note that institutions or bodies have to take individual’s mental representations, linguistic habits, economic interests, sociocultural environments, and prevailing and changing ideologies into consideration when they make decisions about LPP. Hence, this fact makes the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches to LPP clear and obvious, and then drives a need for profound theoretical and practical development in the discipline. In a word, many scholars analyzed the rationality of applying interdisciplinary research in LPP work, but Ricento paid less attention to illustrate its importance. In the author’s opinion, despite the refutation of scholars’ doubts on human rights, Ricento should make an analysis of the interdisciplinarity of LPP research.

#### 4. Conclusion

“Historical and theoretical perspectives in language policy and planning” offers valuable theoretical insights to diachronic research of LPP work. Ricento detailed the three phases of LPP research and rigorously argued that three stages should be divided from perspectives of the macro sociopolitical, the epistemological, and the strategic factors. The author criticizes that Ricento ignored the fourth phase of LPP research and overlooked approaches of different phases. Some evidence should be added to illustrate the interdisciplinarity of LPP research. In addition, it is a drawback that apparently all the contributors are themselves from Western contexts. Despite its problems, Ricento’s paper does make an important contribution to the broad field of LPP research. The author recommends that scholars can remedy those weaknesses and make progress in further research.

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