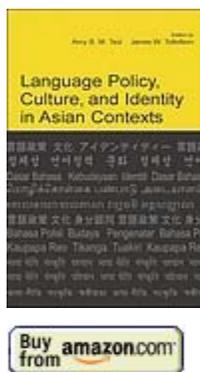


Rethinking Language Policy and Cultural Identity

A review of



Language Policy, Culture, and Identity in Asian Contexts

by Amy B. M. Tsui and James W. Tollefson (Eds.)

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Reviewed by

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Language Policy, Culture, and Identity in Asian Contexts is edited by two internationally recognized psychologists, researchers, and educators in language policy and cultural identities, Amy B. M. Tsui and James W. Tollefson. Imbuing language policy with cultural identities, this helpful volume situates the impact of languages solidly in concrete cultural and sociopolitical contexts of Asia. As both editors claim, "The lived experiences of Asian countries in a range of sociopolitical contexts suggest that the relationship

between language policy and national cultural identities is dialectical" (p. 17).

The volume appears in the market at quite an apposite time. Our globalizing world today is interwoven in cultural identities, languages, politics, and economics that bring together people as they live in and experience various cultural situations. It is in this manner, specifically, that "language policy" exerts an impact in Asian countries totally distinct from that in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere. For example, while many Asian countries are speaking English, European countries are also absorbing and using many different languages. People in the United States are comfortable living bilingually and are used to seeing English and Spanish together in many situations, such as prescription information, telephone instructions, and instrument manuals.

This book pioneers an exploration of the impact of language policy and cultural identities on four counts. First, the book is edited by two scholars in Hong Kong and Japan who have conducted research on standard principles and contents of language policy and cultural identities in connection with Asian cultures. Second, this book covers three themes: globalization and its impact on language policy and cultural identity; language policy and the (re)construction of political and cultural identity; and language policy and language politics. This wide coverage indicates how pervasive language policy penetrates intimately into so many areas of people's lives and their identity. Third, this book is quite comprehensive and profound, comprising no less than 14 contributors, all specialists in language policy, cultural identity, and Asian cultures. Fourth, this book creatively sifts through many Asian countries, New Zealand and Nepal included, to present varied theories of language policy and cultural identity.

Overall, the 14 chapters in this book are classified in three parts: (1) Globalization and its Impact on Language Policy, Culture, and Identity; (2) Language Policy and the (Re) construction of National Cultural Identity; and (3) Language Policy and Language Politics: The Role of English. The first part has five

chapters that explore language policies, cultures, and cultural identities of Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and Cambodia. The second part has three chapters on language policies and reconstruction of national cultural identities in Hong Kong, Brunei Darussalam, and New Zealand's Māori language. The third part has five chapters on language policies, language politics, and the role of English in India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

As the reader surveys the contents, it is clear that this is a critical book in language policy and identity. As a trailblazer in the field, the book evokes my reflection on some desiderata concerning language policy and identity, specifically on its scope and coverage of Asian countries and implications and intergroup and intragroup differences, both of which lead to my conclusion.

Scope and Coverage of Asian Countries and Implications

This book covers many Asian countries, but China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Sumatra, and Indonesia are not there. None of the 14 contributors come from these countries or have an academic affiliation with these cultures. I wonder why not. It seems all too natural that language policy and cultural identity also interact to have an impact on people in China, Taiwan, the Philippines, and so on.

The notion of language policy is a unique inroad into understanding people's current national and cultural identity. For example, the history of the past two centuries in China shows that Chinese culture has complex relations with Western cultures and specifically the English language. During the Qing dynasty, Chinese culture changed its attitude toward Western cultures and the English language from extreme suspicion and belligerence to explicit admiration after undergoing defeats in many wars with Western imperialism. The change of attitudes was reflected in language policies in China, from explicit prohibition to strong

endorsement of English.

Now, do these changes of language policies also reflect national outlook and cultural identity among the Chinese people? Do these changes subtly make the Chinese people perceive themselves as somehow inferior to Westerners? I wish this book included a chapter on language policies in China, not at all a negligible culture in Asia, to explore these important linguistic-cultural questions.

Another instructive and complex example is Taiwan, which Japan occupied for half a century (1895–1945). During the occupation, Taiwanese people were forced to learn Japanese, even to adopt a Japanese last name. Taiwanese were told point-blank that Japanese culture was superior to their own Taiwanese one, and such Japanese superiority did much to put down cultural self-identity among the Taiwanese people. After World War II, Japan retreated from Taiwan and the Chiang Kai-Shek regime took over. The Taiwanese were then ordered to adopt Mandarin as the official language. We clearly see here that language policy is an efficient tool to create, reinforce, or else sadly diminish cultural and national identity. Thus, those Taiwanese people who have lived through three political regimes—the Qing dynasty, the Japanese occupation, and the Chiang regime—have had to adjust themselves to three different cultural and national identities. I wish this book had a chapter devoted to the intimate and complex portrayal of the traumas the changes of language policies brought to the residents in such a politically and culturally turbulent island as Taiwan, and the impact it has made on their identities and, by extension, their overall well-being.

Intergroup and Within-Group Differences

Given the critical roles language policy plays in cultural identity and political psychology, I wish that this book further informed readers on two questions. One, what are the intergroup differences

in the impact of language policy on identity between the Asian countries? Do they overlap, or do they differ entirely? For example, if two countries adopt a similar language policy, does this policy have a similar, if not the same, impact on the identity of people in these two countries? If yes, why so? If not, why not?

Two, I wish this book also informed readers on the *etic* versus the *emic* aspects in indigenous psychology. Many cultural psychologists use these terms to refer to studying phenomena across cultures (*etic*), on the one hand, in contrast to the internal exploration of local cultural terms (*emic*).

In the early days, some Western psychologists simply used psychological notions and instruments that were designed, produced, and validated in the Euro-American setting alone to conduct research on psychological phenomena in other cultural and national settings. This approach is limited in interpretations of how culture is related to psychological functioning, which is properly the area of *etic* research. *Emic* research, for its part, focuses on culture-specific psychological phenomena and is expected to produce intimately culture-based meanings of language policy that are probably missed in an overall *etic* approach.

Thus it is inevitable that both *emic* and *etic* approaches must be used in studying the relation of language policy to cultural identity. I wish this book had at least one chapter to describe the history of reflection on how language policy relates to cultural identity, and then how language policy, culture, and national identity relate one to another, among different cultures, and compare their similarities and differences.

Here is another point on *emic* versus *etic* approaches. Leong and Brown (1995) also pointed out an important relationship between cultural validity and cultural specificity. When, for instance, limitations are found in the cultural validity discovered by certain theories of language policy designed for Western cultures, these limitations can often be accounted for, if not remedied, by culture-specific considerations, such as on Asian cultures. I wonder

what the position of this book is on this issue, because it focuses on Asian contexts. Can the book's findings on the relation between language policy and cultural identity apply to nations outside Asia? How does the application proceed?

Conclusion

This book on language policy and cultural identity challenges the mainstream traditional understanding of national and cultural identity to compel us to rethink, in radical, fundamental ways, our assumed basic theories of culture and identity. We are witnessing an emergence of Western cultures that are almost overwhelming Asian countries in culture, politics, and economics. This book also compels us to rethink afresh the impact of language policy on Asian cultural identities and the influence of English on Asians.

The big challenge to language policy and cultural identity, however, is not to continue compiling specific cultural differences in various facets of language policy related to cultural identity but to develop some overall theoretical models and conceptual frameworks that accommodate and account for how human identity is both similar and different, as shaped in terms of language policy.

This book should inspire Western people to reflect on their own language policies. For example, are Europeans confused by multiple cultural identities as they are compelled to learn many languages? What can Europeans learn from Asians' experiences in language policies as having impact on cultural identities?

In the coming decades when China emerges as a major economic power in the world, as many economists predict, can the theories and principles of this book account for Western people's identities? It is a genuine praxis of globalization when Asian's experience serves as a lesson for the Western cultural world, which in turn stimulates Asian nations to enrich themselves.

This book thus benefits scholars and students of language

policy, education, sociolinguistics, linguistics, cultural psychology, and cross-cultural studies. It can be profitably adopted as a text in graduate and advanced undergraduate courses on language policy, psychology, education, and cross-cultural linguistics.

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