

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF APPLIED LINGUISTS TO RECENT LANGUAGE POLICY INITIATIVES IN NEW ZEALAND: AN ARGUMENT FOR GREATER INVOLVEMENT

Alison Hoffmann

Victoria University of Wellington

The purpose of this paper is threefold. It outlines some of the contributions applied linguists have made to language policy development in New Zealand; it stresses the difficulties applied linguists face today in attempting to contribute to language policy; and it makes a case for greater involvement in the policy cycle.

### Background

The most widely publicised contribution of applied linguists to government decision making in recent years was to the Government funded discussion document *Aotearoa* (Waite, 1992). Although it was intended by all contributors in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a precursor to a Government endorsed language policy statement along the lines of the Australian National policy on languages (Lo Bianco, 1987), there was, to the disappointment of many, no formal acceptance of the discussion document, that is no resulting comprehensive, government language policy. At the time this was difficult to understand, but hindsight now makes the reasons clear: by the time *Aotearoa* was published in 1992 two vital changes to government had been firmly cemented in place. One was the application of market philosophy to government decision making, the other was the greater autonomy given to government agencies, as well as the fragmentation of governmental functions through the establishment of specialised units.

Government market philosophy is conveniently expressed in the following example, taken from a publication intended for the training of policy analysts (State Services Commission, 1992, pp.16-17): "... analysts need a method for putting perceived social problems in context. When is it legitimate for government to intervene in private affairs? The answer to this question has usually been based on the concept of market failure - a circumstance where the pursuit of private interest does not lead to an efficient use of society's resources or a fair distribution of society's goods. However, the form of the intervention should not involve consequences which would inflict greater social costs than social benefits." The assumption underlying this set of values is that market forces will almost invariably be more efficient than government actions, so that government interventions need to be carefully weighed and argued for in the provision of policy advice. Market forces values prevail throughout the public sector

by means of briefing documents such as this one, and applied linguists wanting to contribute advice need to appreciate this.

At the same time, the compartmentalisation of government into autonomous units, each with a limited budget and a set of contractual arrangements with the relevant minister, has meant that the prioritising and planning of policy advice is now done (and carefully argued for and costed out) on an agency by agency basis. Financial autonomy means that any policy collaboration between agencies needs to be negotiated. Given their limited budgets, agencies need to be convinced of the financial benefits to themselves of collaboration, in addition to the wider economic benefits. Overarching, multi-agency policy has thus been made very difficult, and language matters are treated, like other problems, as they arise on an agency by agency basis, and solutions put forward are likely to be subject to a market analysis. The formulation of policy advice in terms of economic insights such as risk management, user pays, profit motive and so on, has meant a reduction in the role of those providing advice in terms of individual rights and equity. When applied linguists are consulted for their expertise in today's climate, it is often on a limited, technical basis. Recently, for example, the Ministry of Education let a contract for the development, by an applied linguist, of an economic rationale for the teaching of foreign languages in the school curriculum.

Constructive involvement by applied linguists in government policy-making has become more difficult since the early 1990s. There are now many more agencies, each of which has to be convinced of the need for specific actions. Yet, as applied linguists address language matters in a wider social context, they are well placed to analyse the relevance of language to society in wider than economic terms, including the vital question of values. Unfortunately, policy on language issues has largely been developed without this advice. If those responsible for policy formulation do not always seek the advice of applied linguists, should linguists perhaps take the initiative by volunteering it?

### **Recent policy developments**

In fact, from 1992 until August 1998 the language policy-making landscape in New Zealand looked particularly uninviting from the perspective of contributions by applied linguists. However, in the last several months, with the announcement of a Government initiated Māori language revitalisation policy, and, more recently, seemingly positive changes to immigration English language rules, the situation has changed. Applied linguists have had input into both lots of decision making, even though, (at least at the time of writing), the decisions still amount to little more than policy announcements with no publicly stated plans for implementation. Nevertheless, the fact is that both announcements have been accompanied by publicly stated recognition of previous poor policy making, and indications, at least in the

Māori language policy work, that there is again a willingness within Government to make language decisions with the assistance of language specialists.

The five overarching language goals for the revitalisation of the Māori language announced by Government in August 1998 look to be the most comprehensive approach taken yet to the worrisome question of Māori language revitalisation, the issue identified six years ago by all sectors of New Zealand's language professionals and practitioners as the most worthy of policy making effort (Waite, 1992). The approach in the August te reo Māori announcements stands in stark contrast however, to other recent announcements about changes to the language rules for the targeted (so-called 'economic') immigration categories: with rapidly falling numbers, English language requirements have been eased in order to reactivate interest in non-English speaking countries in migration to New Zealand. Despite these welcome changes, however, immigration language policy remains in the mould of the ad hoc, reactive decision making of the past. Long-term, principled language decisions regarding ways of ensuring the successful settlement of all non-English speaking background migrants - social as well as economic - are still, it seems, some way off.

The Māori language plan and the Immigration language rules are the only publicly articulated language policies since *Aotearoa*. By "articulated policy" I mean a policy which is grounded in a rationale, and which spells out what is to be achieved, why it is to be achieved, and how. Applied linguists are the obvious advisors on such articulated language policy. Reluctance to engage local applied linguists can be explained by a more general reluctance to allow outsiders undue influence on government decision making. So is there a meaningful role that local applied linguists can play in the formulation of government policy and its implementation? This paper will conclude with some examples of possible areas of advice as one way of answering this difficult question.

### **Māori language revitalisation policy**

At the end of August 1998 Te Puni Kōkiri, Statistics New Zealand and te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori (the Māori Language Commission) released the 1995 National Māori Language Survey results (Te Puni Kōkiri, 1998b). The results do not make particularly encouraging reading with respect to the vitality of the language, although they tell us nothing we did not already know from the preliminary results released at the end of 1995, the year the survey was conducted. However, what is interesting and new is that there are clear indications that government laissez faire attitudes to the health of the Māori language are changing. This can be gleaned from the concluding section of the survey report where the development of a Māori language plan is outlined. The language plan, it is stated, is "underpinned by five overarching policy objectives" intended to actively support the revitalisation of the language. The five objectives are listed as:

to increase the opportunities to learn Māori;  
to improve proficiency in speaking, understanding, reading and writing Māori;  
to increase opportunities to use Māori by increasing the number of situations where it can be used;  
to increase the rate at which Māori develops so it can be used for the full range of modern activities;  
to foster positive attitudes, accurate beliefs and positive values about the language.  
(Te Puni Kōkiri, 1998b, p.65)

These objectives, some of which are admittedly not new, were formally agreed to by a Cabinet decision taken in December 1997. What is new is that a whole raft of interventions have been brought together in a conscious attempt to address a sociolinguistic issue (the perilous state of the Māori language vis à vis English), and the other new factor is that they constitute interventions with no apparent economic benefit.

How the government's five language objectives are to be arrived at remains to be seen, but the move, supported by Treasury, to an articulated language policy statement with an indication of measurable outcomes is encouraging, as is the recognition that "to have maximum impact, policy decisions should be guided by in-depth understandings of language dynamics, sound research and widely accepted principles" (Te Puni Kōkiri, 1998b, p.64). The scope for the input of linguists is clear here. Further, the report is introduced with the words that the government "looks forward to developing a Māori language plan which will provide a collective vision for revitalisation across all sectors of the community" (Te Puni Kōkiri, 1998b, p.3). The inclusiveness of the rhetoric masks the fact that the Government has formulated this Māori language policy, with no formal input from the wider Māori community, at least so far. This has been possible because the policy formulation has so far been restricted to the government sector, the simplest area to deal with. As Waite (1992) put it, "Covered under this point would be programmes relating to the Māori language in education, broadcasting, social services and in Government" (Part A, p.19). However he goes on immediately to say that in the area of education "allocation of resources should favour Māori revitalisation programmes that are under Māori control, set in a context of Māori values, and based on the direct transmission of the language from native speaker to native speaker (thereafter from native speaker to children for whom Māori is their heritage language)". How, and whether, input is to be sought from the Māori speaking community regarding programmes under their control has not yet been spelled out, but as one sociolinguist (Chrisp, 1997) has pointed out, this aspect of policy work is just as urgent as state sector policies, since the language will only survive if it is spoken in Māori homes and communities.

The survey results also provide a wealth of up-to-date data on Māori language use and attitudes of Māori to the language. As mentioned already, the overall finding, stated in an



accompanying brief summary report of the main findings, is neither new nor encouraging, namely that "the Māori language is under threat of becoming a language of ritual and symbol only: that close to half (41%) of Māori adults are unable to speak Māori and that only 8% of Māori adults are highly fluent speakers of the language" (Te Puni Kōkiri, 1998c, p.1). Further, the figures are accompanied by the admission that Government policies have in the past contributed to the decline, and conversely, that now, it is only with the help of Government that the language will have a chance of thriving again. These are valuable observations, as they potentially form the basis for data-driven policy making.

Further, a set of thirteen sociolinguistic monographs written by language planners in Te Puni Kōkiri accompany the survey results. They flesh out the background to the report, covering such topics as the results of Māori-English language contact, and recent language history and revitalisation efforts to date. In particular one of the monographs (Te Puni Kōkiri, 1998a), considers the monitoring of progress towards the five objectives stated in the survey's concluding section. Various measures of language proficiency previously used by New Zealand and overseas linguists to measure levels of minority language vitality are described and evaluated. The monograph concludes that there is still much work needed: "... the paucity of research findings and the scarcity of information means that the task of developing indicators to monitor and evaluate the health of the Māori language and to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the mix of Government Māori language policy interventions has yet to be done and will be a challenging one" (Te Puni Kōkiri, 1998a, p.17). The complex mix of government, individual and community ends and means is a further complicating factor in the whole revitalisation process and one which will have to be delicately negotiated, with the help of Māori language specialists, when the language policy is actually implemented.

A further sign of a shift within government towards a serious intention to provide sound language decisions, is an extensive background report commissioned by Treasury in early 1997. The report, the third and final part of which was presented to Treasury in January 1998, spells out in detail an economic rationale for revitalisation efforts, and at the same time addresses some of the macro-level issues involved in restoring vitality to a language. The report, with a full title of *Language revitalisation policy: An analytical survey: Theoretical framework, policy experience and application to te Reo*, was written by two overseas specialists in the economics of language, Francois Grin of the University of Geneva and Francois Vaillancourt of the University of Montreal. It seems that Treasury officials, faced with the prospect of further costly court action and with the task of briefing ministers on the Crown's Treaty of Waitangi obligations to the language, saw the need to formulate a policy position. The economists were asked to provide a framework and a rationale which could underpin cost-effective Government initiated language revitalisation measures that were likely to be effective. In Part I the writers advocate three ways of increasing the use of the language: first, by direct Māori language promotion aimed at changing and influencing attitudes; second,

by the active provision of Māori language services via the media, bilingual service at service points and in publishing; and third by education planning, in this case planning aimed at increasing the number of people able to function in the Māori language, thus increasing the number of Māori-English bilinguals. It is clear that these three more generally formulated revitalisation activities tie in with the five Government objectives stated in the conclusion to the Māori language survey.

Principled policy making rests on values: today economic values - the efficient use of scarce resources - are the predominant drivers of decision making throughout the New Zealand public service. We should not therefore be surprised to learn that economists - specialists in the economics of language - provided the background report to Treasury regarding options for Māori language revitalisation. However, it is interesting to note that the two overseas economists made it clear that other values, such as sociolinguistic values, are as integral to the language policy making process as the economic values they focused on.

Our analysis is located at a fairly general level. Its chief aim is to provide a structured way to think about the relationship between policy interventions and language outcomes. Referring to a macro-level concept of welfare implies that costs and benefits have to be identified, evaluated and compared. The results of anthropological and sociolinguistic work can, and should, be used in the design of specific policies. To make such integration easier, the underlying formal model, presented in the appendix, features variables that are normally ignored by mainstream economic analysis, but that are commonly referred to by specialists from other disciplines.

(Grin & Vaillancourt, 1998, p.15)

From the critiques and reviews written by various policy analysts in Treasury and other ministries, and which provide a kind of commentary to the three stages to the writing and delivery of the report, it is clear that the Treasury officials involved in the policy formulation process also appreciated the limitations of economics. In other words, they appreciated where economics can do some good, and where it cannot.

### **Immigration and adult ESOL policy**

Not all sections within Government have the same wider view of the relevance of social, as well as economic values, that should underpin decisions on language issues. In the immigration portfolio, recently announced language policy changes have signalled the fact that government has also been concerned with addressing the language needs of new migrants. The purpose of the changes was made clear on 16 September 1998, when strong hints as to the nature of the changes to immigration language policy were announced under the headline: "Package to lure 'quality' migrants: Big-money Asian investors targeted" (Gamble, 1998, p.A3 ). The Minister was reported as saying that the aim of the proposed package of proposals was to entice back

'quality' immigrants, particularly from Asia, who had "stopped coming because of tough entry requirements, and a worsening economy". Mr Delamere also expressed the view that the English language rules for business migrants needed to be changed: "If someone is coming here to invest \$1 million or \$2 million the fact that they speak or don't speak English should not matter. If they are businessmen or women they will find their way around it with their own interpreters". In an interview with Kim Hill on National Radio the same day Mr Delamere also stated he was "looking at removing the \$20,000 bond on immigrants, because that "plainly hasn't worked" and instead he "would be looking at coming out with some other English language solution". This comment was in response to the criticism and considerable unease expressed about the ineffectiveness of the English language bond introduced in 1995 to act (it was claimed) as a motivating force in the learning of English.

The Minister released the details of the language policy changes in a press statement on 12 October 1998, in which he announced that the \$20,000 bond was to be replaced with the pre-purchase of English language tuition, and that there would no longer be any requirement for business migrants and non-principal applicants to sit the IELTS test. In explaining the reasons for the changes, the Minister noted that rather than acting as an "incentive to motivate non-English speaking migrants to seek training within the first few months of arriving in New Zealand, the \$20,000 bond had stopped people from applying to come altogether" (the Honourable Tuariki John Delamere, 1998). Evidence of this effect can be found in the substantially reduced number of approvals for residence for migrants from Asian countries compared with steady and even rising numbers from Great Britain, India, and South Africa between 1996 and 1998. Further, the Minister provided evidence that the bond was not acting as an incentive to learn English. As at 30 September 1998, of the 184 migrants who paid the bond in 1996/7, 101 had forfeited the entire bond. Original estimates had been that around 10 per cent of those posting the bond might forfeit it. The figure given by the Minister is close to 55 per cent and represents a net revenue of slightly more than \$2 million in 1996 to the Immigration Service. It will be remembered that there was no provision for ESOL tuition from these funds, as they were regarded as being compensation by migrants to the Crown for the costs that their lack of English would sooner or later impose on the New Zealand taxpayer.

Thus the New Zealand Immigration Service has abandoned two controversial language policies which the Government introduced in 1995: the requirement that all targeted migrants reach a particular level in an international English language test, the IELTS General Training Module, and the requirement that accompanying family members of principal applicants in both the business migrant and skilled migrant categories pay a refundable English language fee (later called bond) of \$20,000 if they could not meet that proficiency level when they entered New Zealand. Now, business migrants, and spouses of general skills migrants whose English does not meet the required standard of IELTS level 4 (business) or level 5 (general skills category) will simply need to pre-purchase English language tuition at its "dollar cost" plus an

So, while these language rules are an improvement on inadequate previous practice, they remain a new form of user pays, the underlying principle of which appears to be that targeted (economic) migrants should only represent a benefit, never a cost to the country, and in keeping with this narrow focus, actual English language outcomes do not feature in the policy analysis.

Perhaps it is important to be philosophical about strict criteria for targeted migrants who must be able to make it alone in the local business scene and on the New Zealand job market, as well as settling in as members of local communities. But as the newspaper headlines indicate, the purely economic driver for the change in policy heralded by the new Minister is clear: not nearly enough quality or wealthy immigrants are coming, so the Immigration Service needs to turn on the tap by loosening the English language criteria. Despite the definite improvements to policies, this is language policy making driven by short-term economic thinking. Three years ago there were also significant economic drivers - but then too many were coming and a mechanism was needed to "manage the surplus of quality immigrants", "refine the mix of skills targeted" and "remove sources of tension" (New Zealand Immigration Service, 1995, p.4). At that time the firm claim was made that modest levels of English are needed in order to transfer "human capital" (defined as "the skills and experience migrants bring to New Zealand") (p.5) and that "lack of English can be costly to everyone" (p.4). The bond, in particular, recognised "the cost lack of language skills can impose on New Zealand" (p.4), costs which would be minimised by requiring that migrants met the standard off-shore, or at least at their own expense if on-shore. Now it is recognised that this was "wrong": that it takes longer than three months to a year to learn English and that migrants should have the chance to learn the language here in New Zealand provided they pre-purchase the tuition. Interestingly, pre-purchasing of tuition was an option floated by Immigration Service officials in 1995 but rejected by the then Cabinet as being too complex and posing too many risks to Government. Now it seems officials have been able to persuade Cabinet with the evidence of the low numbers arriving, that targeted non-English speaking background immigrants may well be seen primarily in an economic light, but they also have social needs. One of these important social needs is the need to familiarise themselves with the New Zealand accent and idiom, a need that is impossible to meet off shore. This is a good start, but there is more to a settlement language policy than the pre-purchase of a quantum of English language tuition. A settlement language policy should suggest ideal language outcomes, and will need to embrace other categories of immigrants (family re-unification categories and those who came as refugees). Until then, narrow economic values still determine immigration language policy and thus limit the kinds of policy decisions that are likely to be taken and the scope of applied linguistic advice.



### **Language in education policy**

Language policy in the compulsory schooling sector is an area where we would expect to find principled policy statements on language issues as a matter of good educational practice. Yet when policies are announced in circulars and budget statements none of these statements has been based on publicly articulated rationales. At times in fact, decisions seem fragmented and difficult to explain, for example the decision to introduce the teaching of Korean into New Zealand schools when the cost of teacher development and accompanying resources and assessment is clearly very high for what must be a very small return (Shackleford, 1996), and similarly the decision to introduce School Certificate Samoan without formalised plans for Samoan teacher training. Most of the recent language policy decisions in the Ministry of Education have in fact been primarily about practical matters, such as the implementation of curriculum innovations: for example Ministry of Education decisions to support the teaching of Japanese and Spanish by funding curriculum-based video and teacher training materials, to support the teaching of international languages through the secondment of experienced teachers as roving language advisers, the Second Language Learning Project (a short-term funding of language teaching pre-secondary school) and, at the secondary level, recent decisions to drop Bursary Russian and to introduce Bursary Chinese. Even with respect to English for Speakers of Other Languages in the compulsory school sector, there have been budget announcements but no long-term strategy, though the provision of a three year funding programme for the support of the teaching of non-English speaking background students was based on practitioner and theoretical insights. However in all of these areas public policy statements drawing on the insights of applied linguists are non-existent, and decisions seem to be taken largely on a response to problem, ad hoc basis.

### **Conclusion**

It is true that without external pressures (for example, the likelihood of costly court action in the case of Māori and the need to stem or turn on the immigration flow in the case of immigration policy) language matters are not high on the Government's agenda. The reason for this is that they are primarily social issues, involving government spending but not normally generating revenue. If we look at what *is* on the agenda it is values like: community self-reliance, innovation and initiative in business, individual responsibility, and local solutions to local needs. Currently, government policy works according to the principle that we should only spend when the cost of not spending is greater than the cost of spending. Seeing decision making from this perspective allows us to be realistic about what applied linguists can achieve in terms of influencing government decision making.

So what contribution can applied linguists make to the formulation and implementation of language objectives, at the national level? I believe that their contribution is relevant in every phase of the policy cycle. Applied linguists can contribute to the formulation of objectives and

advise on whether they are realistically attainable (for example, the five objectives agreed to by Government for the revitalisation of te reo Māori); applied linguists can contribute to an understanding of the tacit drivers of such policy and to the consequences of policies (for example, the decision of the Ministry of Education to develop the teaching of Korean); applied linguists can advise on successful implementation strategies (for example, linguists can advise on realistic timeframes for acquiring given levels of English); finally, applied linguists can evaluate the success of current or future policies (for example, whether a Māori language channel is likely to (or does in fact) have positive effects on language proficiency). While in the present climate there appears to be no likelihood of any form of comprehensive language policy, specific policies are nevertheless being developed and specific decisions on language matters are being taken. The fact is language practitioners are well able to both add value to current initiatives, and to minimise ad hoc decision making by encouraging those making the decisions to ground the decisions in principled and effective rationales. The challenge is mainly to find a means of getting one's voice heard.

#### Note

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