Language in Comparative Education: Three strands

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Abstract

This article begins by exploring the classical roots of comparative education and related language issues. Three different strands of comparative education are then identified and the approach to language within each strand is discussed and illustrated. Within the positivist strand, language is seen to be neutral, a challenge for translators when educational achievement is being measured objectively across numerous societies, also a potential barrier to modernization in specific historical situations. Within the cultural strand language issues are given greater importance, both in the literal sense of the need to learn languages for in-depth comparative studies and in the metaphorical sense of a concept-sensitive approach to understanding education in different societies. Within the dependency strand of comparative education, language is seen as a potential instrument of power and exclusion, on the one hand, and of awakening and national self-assertion, on the other.

Introduction

Language issues have a special importance in comparative education. This can be seen in relation to the classical roots of the field, as I will suggest in this introduction. Three main strands of thought in the development of comparative education over the past century will then be identified in the paper, in order to explore the different ways in which language issues have been viewed within different approaches to the field. Hopefully this comparative analysis will provide a social and cultural framework for reflection on issues of applied linguistics.

Scholars of comparative education have enjoyed reflecting on Plato's borrowing of key ideas from Sparta in setting forth the educational patterns of an ideal republic for Athens, and Ibn Khaldun's comparative analyses of Moslem culture and Western European culture in the early fourteenth century (Trethewey, 1976, p. 13-14). Marco Polo's account of China for European readers and the later detailed accounts of Jesuit writers (Mungello, 1989),

inspired European scholars to consider China as a model for Europe, in education as well as other areas (Blue, 1993). The educational interactions among China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam involved the borrowing of written language forms as well as educational institutions, and left a legacy of shared educational and cultural understanding in both Confucian and Buddhist thought among the societies of East Asia.

Cultural borrowing, including the transfer of language forms, religious beliefs and institutional patterns from one society to another, has often been regarded as a core issue for comparative education, of particular interest when two or three very different cultures come into interaction. Empires in ascendance have tended to impose their language and culture on others, directly through war and invasion, or indirectly through the powerful influence of superior knowledge and technology. During the Hellenic Age, the superiority of Greek science, arts, philosophy and literature made the language the common one of the whole Mediterranean world. Some scholars have even argued that the nature of the language itself was an important factor in this (Goad, 1958). By contrast the Roman Empire made its conquest through military superiority, effective central government and an advanced legal system. The Chinese empire changed in size and extent over time and did not hesitate to use military force. However, its enormous influence in East Asia took place mainly through the attraction of its language, philosophy and institutions for neighbours such as Korea, Japan and Vietnam.

What makes the study of cultural interaction between China and Europe so fascinating, is the deep-rooted differences between their traditional educational institutions, religions and philosophies, social and political patterns. Take for example the introduction of European models of the university, college and academy to China. Cultural conflicts arose as these institutions, rooted in the thought and languages of Europe, were grafted onto a modernizing Chinese society, whose concepts and values had been shaped by traditional educational institutions such as the *taixue* and the *shuyuan*. It is easy enough translate these terms, suggesting university for *taixue*, academy for *shuyuan*, for example, but an understanding of the conflicting values can only come from extended historical study (Hayhoe, 1996). Comparative education thus has a problem of conceptual definition at its heart.

While scholars of Comparative Education like to trace its roots back to classical and medieval history, the field itself developed only in the modern

period, as a part of the emergence of the social sciences. To some degree, it was predicated on the development of nations, and the emergence of national educational systems. The self conscious development of national languages in Europe, which gradually displaced Latin, and their later popularization through nationally established mass education systems, was an important aspect of modern nationhood. This process was also linked to the scientific and industrial revolutions, and European languages soon took upon themselves an international role, being adopted in many colonial contexts. Later Japanese was spread in similar ways during the period of Japan's colonial domination of Korea, Taiwan and other parts of Asia.

The scientific and industrial revolutions led to a new kind of world domination, different from that of the classical empires which rose and fell. Their influence reached every part of the globe, as scientific understanding grew exponentially, and became the model for all knowledge advancement.

The positivist strand in comparative education

The study of comparative education emerged as a part of this phase of modern development. As the sciences showed their power and effectiveness in 18th and 19th century Europe, the study of society, of language and even of religion began to model itself on scientific method. There was considerable excitement about breakthroughs in understanding through "social physics" or the science of society, as developed first by Auguste Comte in France (Thompson, 1976). Some years before Comte published his famous *Cours de Philosophie Positive* in the 1830s, another French scholar, Marc Antoine Jullien, had put forward the idea of developing a science of education. Jullien's "Esquisse et Vues Préliminaires d'un Ouvrage sur l'Education Comparée," published in 1817, suggested the systematic collection of factual information on emerging modern education systems in Europe as the basis for this new science (Goetz, 1964). Over a hundred years later, in 1926, the International Bureau of Education was set up in Geneva, with the aim of collecting detailed statistics on education from countries around the world, and making them available for the comparative analysis of educational trends (Suchodoloski, 1979). This approach to comparative education, based on positivist sociology, reached maturity in the 1960s, when two scholars of comparative education who are still active today, Harold Noah and Max Eckstein, published an influential text entitled *Toward a Science of Comparative Education* (1969).

3

In this textbook, methods were suggested for the collection of extensive quantitative data about educational phenomena across numerous societies, and their analysis through the application of statistical techniques. Since then a lengthy series of international comparative studies of educational achievement in mathematics, sciences, civic education, language and other fields across a very large number of societies has been carried out by scholars affiliated with the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) (Noah & Eckstein, 1998, p. 179-190). The IEA has recently completed the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS). "The scope and complexity of TIMMS is enormous. The mathematics and science testing covered five different grade levels, with more than 40 countries collecting data in more than 30 different languages. More than half a million students were tested around the world" (Mullis et. al., 1998, p. 1). All tests were, of course, administered in the languages used by the education system of each participating country, calling for extraordinary efforts of translation. Some attention was given to the effects of very different teaching contexts, but the issue of language was largely regarded as a technical one, to be solved by care and professionalism in translation.

There has been an increasing sophistication in the testing and measurement techniques used over the years in these studies, and increasing attention to details of curricula and external context which could not be easily quantified in a search for the causes of higher or lower achievement. Detailed case studies using video tapes were carried out in three countries in the most recent study. There were also extensive analyses of curriculum content, in a recognition of the importance of factors that could not be encompassed by a purely quantitative set of tests (Beatty, 1997).

Language itself, however, has generally been viewed as neutral within this strand of comparative education. Education is viewed as an important means for countries to stimulate economic development and achieve higher levels of modernization. To a degree a similar assumption held for language issues in the process of socialist construction, as can be seen in the relations of the USSR with the minority groups within its borders, up till its collapse in 1991.

Language issues in the positivist strand

Let me turn here to some examples of how language development and language education was viewed within a modernization paradigm that assumed

social convergence, as economic development provided the basis for new forms of social and political development. From the late 19th century up to the 1950s, at different periods and under different circumstances, American educational advisors played a strong role in Japan's modern educational development. Many of them were convinced that Japan would never successfully modernize, without radical reform of the written language system. On several occasions the Japanese government was advised to abandon the *kanji* Japan had borrowed from China, and the complex dual syllabaries of *hiragana* and *katakana*, in favour of *Romaji*, a latinised writing system, much easier for children to learn (King Hall, 1949). Japan, of course, proved them wrong, developing an effective modern education system that carried forward its own language forms.

The case of China was even more complex, involving the style of the written language as well as the difficulties of the ideographic script. The May 4th Movement of 1919 was successful in introducing *baihua* as a spoken idiom for the written language, easier for ordinary people to learn than classical Chinese. However, this did not reduce the number of characters that needed to be learned, and it brought urgency to the task of popularizing one dialect, Mandarin or *Putonghua*, as the national language.

During the period of revolutionary activism and learning from the Soviet Union, Chinese Communist leaders toyed with the idea of adopting the Latin alphabet in order to be able to achieve mass literacy in a short period of time (De Francis, 1950 p. 128). Once they gained power in 1949, however, this was abandoned in favour of a program to simplify some commonly used characters so as to ease literacy work, while at the same time standardising *putonghua* as the language of education and radio broadcasting (Hayhoe, 1979, p. 28). When economic development surged forward under Deng Xiaoping's leadership after 1978, the foundation that had been laid through these language policies was an important though unnoticed factor in the success that has been achieved.

A third fascinating case of the relation between language and modernization is that of Turkey, where Ataturk made the controversial decision in 1928 to abandon the Arabic script that had been used for the Turkic language for centuries, as a part of its connection to the wider Islamic world, and adopt the Western alphabet (Bereday, 1964, p. 34-37). Ataturk saw this as a significant means of cleansing the minds of his people of traditional ideas and mentalities which might hold back economic development, and of connecting them to a

European world that they should emulate. It is instructive to compare this choice with that made by Japan and China, and the outcomes for modernization.

The policies adopted by the Soviet Union for the many satellite states and minority groups that formed part of its socialist empire are worth reflecting on, in terms of the intention to bring about "socialist construction" as an alternative form of modernity. There was no less conviction of the scientific and universalist validity of the project here, if anything a more focused and purposeful effort. The Soviet Union set a model, later emulated by China, whereby each language group was encouraged to maintain its own language for effective basic education, where feasible. In many cases this resulted in active script development campaigns and considerable translation of mainstream texts from Russian or Chinese into minority languages.

However, the content of the school curriculum was to be uniform across all language groups, with the use of minority languages intended to ensure effective dissemination of officially embraced concepts of socialist construction. No traces of the religious or cultural heritage attached to each language were allowed into the classroom. This changed only with the demise of the Soviet Union, and China is still slow in allowing local cultural knowledge into the textbooks used by minority children.

Traditional language forms and associated ideas as a barrier to modernization, language reform as an instrument of modernization or socialist construction, the assumption that achievement can be measured in an objective way across forty to fifty societies, with translation as a technical tool of facilitation, these are all ways of thinking that fit within the positivist strand of comparative education. Languages issues are viewed in a somewhat technical or neutral way, within a larger framework of goals for education to serve societal development.

The cultural strand in comparative education

A second strand, which might be called the cultural strand, gave language a different role in the understanding of education across a number of societies. In 1958, just as the positivist vision of what the social sciences could achieve in advancing the understanding of human society was being widely embraced, a slim volume appeared in England by the philosopher, Peter Winch, under the title *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*. In this book,

Winch argued that "the notion of a human society involves a scheme of concepts which is logically incompatible with the kinds of explanation offered in the natural sciences" (p. 72). Later in the book he insisted that "social interaction can more profitably be compared to the exchange of ideas in a conversation than to the interaction of forces in a physical scheme.... It is because the use of language is so intimately, so inseparably, bound up with the other, non-linguistic, activities which men perform, that it is possible to speak of their non-linguistic behaviour also as expressing discursive ideas" (p. 128). Winch's critique of positivism in the social sciences signalled the blossoming of forms of interpretive sociology, ethnomethodology and phenomenology. Rather than being a neutral tool in the process of modernization or socialist construction, language was seen to lie at the very heart of social understanding.

For comparative education, this was not a new insight. Alongside the positivist strand initiated by Jullien and culminating in a full blown comparative methodology in the 1960s, another quite distinctive strand had developed. One of its early proponents was Sir Michael Sadler, a British scholar and educator who was responsible for setting up an Office of Special Reports in the early 20th century to advise the British government on educational matters, through providing information and analysis on education abroad and in the colonies. Sadler was best known for his reports on education in Germany and India, but his interests ranged widely, and resulted in comparative educational information and analysis being available to British policy makers at an early period (Higginson, 1979).

Sadler is famous for his caution against cultural borrowing:

We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. A national system of education is a living thing ... it has in it some of the secret workings of national life" (Quoted in Hans, 1967, p. 3).

With this oft quoted remark, Sadler initiated a pattern of reflection on educational systems that was modelled on ecology rather than physics. It was close to the interpretive linguistic understanding suggested by Peter Winch.

Language in the cultural strand

Two of the most influential comparative educators who developed the field along lines pioneered by Sadler were themselves emigrés - an experience which may have influenced their thinking on the language issue. Nicholas Hans left Russia shortly before the October Revolution and lived out his life as a scholar, teacher and thinker in the University of London Institute of Education. George Bereday emigrated from Poland to the United States and spent the most significant years of his career at Teachers College, Columbia University.

In his definitive textbook, *Comparative Education*, published first in 1949, Hans laid out an approach to comparative education that emphasized historical and philosophical understanding, and the integral links between education systems and nation building (Hans, 1967). The very organization of his book is an expression of this. The main focus is on the natural, religious and secular factors that shape national identity, which provide the context for a brief sketch of the education systems of England, USA, France and USSR in the end of the book. One whole chapter is devoted to language, as one of three important "natural" factors. There are many interesting discussions of language differences, the relation of language to culture and the different approaches taken to language in national development. The contrast between the French decision to standardise language with the Académie Française ensuring its purity, and the German pride in encouraging different dialects in each of its Länder (p. 43-44) is one of many observations on language development.

Hans introduced the three families of languages, as understood in the linguistic science of the time - agglutinative, flexional and isolating - and pointed out the different educational consequences of a bilingualism involving two related languages, and one that involved very different types of languages, as was often the case in colonial situations. Although he believed that universal principles of the relation between education and social development could be found, and that quantitative methods would become more and more useful to comparative education, language would always need to be given special attention. "In the case of a nation, language, as the repository of racial and national memory, should be considered as the most important influence in the formation of national character. The native tongue.... often decides the adherence of the individual to a particular nation irrespective of the place of his birth or citizenship. National systems of education by using national languages as the medium of instruction put into operation the most powerful tool in moulding the minds of the rising generation. Bilingualism or the knowledge of foreign

languages is on the other hand the surest method to wean the mind from national prejudices" (p. 11-12).

George Bereday published his definitive textbook, *Comparative Method in Education* (1964) fifteen years later. He tried to introduce greater systemization into the comparative study of education systems, and model it more closely on the emerging social sciences. He regarded political science, particularly international relations, as a kind of parent discipline to comparative education (p. 5) At the same time, he insisted on interpretation as one of four important stages in comparative analysis, to be prefaced by description, and followed by juxtaposition and comparison.

Bereday devoted a whole chapter to arguing for the importance of mastering several languages for comparative education research, and the need to use that linguistic understanding in the interpretation of educational data before comparative analysis could proceed.

> ... a knowledge of language lets one in on the intimate secrets of the nation under study," he commented (p. 139). He also emphasised the value of multilingualism in the development of young scholars: "To be privileged to read each and the same day about current events, not in one but in two or more languages, not from one but from several national points of view, is a lesson in humility and understanding not easily matched anywhere (p. 139).

Bereday ended this chapter with a plea for language education as essential to all aspiring comparative educators.

> A seal of approval for those aspiring to be specialists should include language skills. The Russians have recognized this by instituting experimental schools at which language experts are trained almost entirely in a language of specialization beginning from the second grade. The loss of potential that occurs when Americans, a great many of whom have had at least one foreign grandparent, fail to utilize their national heritage should not be permitted to continue. Given their history, Americans should be a nation of polyglots (p. 142).

Language was stressed in a rather different way by Edmund King, affectionately known as the King of Kings because of his long association with King's College at the University of London. In looking at King's classic text, *Other Schools and Ours* (1979), which was reprinted over and over and

9

translated into many languages, one is struck by the sensitivity and forward looking character of his writing. He consciously adopted ecological terminology and resisted notions of predictability associated with positivism in favour of indeterminism and the constant changes introduced by feedback loops.

While saying little about languages in the sense of foreign languages, he emphasized learning people's "'language of life' as far as possible - a far more important matter than literally learning their language. We must 'make sense' of their conditioning in their idiom" (p. 45-46). His view of social change was expressed in terms of three idioms, that of pre-industrial times which he summed up in the monastery school or fortress school, that of the industrial age, which was epitomized in the factory school or training school, and that of the technological age. His foresight in describing this third phase, in the early seventies, was quite remarkable: "It looks forward to a 'communications society' and the restoration of a common humanity or civilization in which all teach and all learn together all the time.... for the first time in history it is technologically possible and perhaps technologically essential. ... That old amalgam - an 'engineered' and controlled civilization, characterized by competitive capitalism and national self-sufficiency - is in any case crumbling because of world-wide interdependence and instantaneous interaction of every kind" (p. 42-43).

Throughout his writing, King is highly conscious of language, and makes it a kind of metaphor for comparative understanding:

> Civilization is a sort of conversation down the ages. Whatever else educators do, they have always felt that they were doing or saying something of wide or universal significance; and to that extent they are participants in the great conversation of civilization. Within this noble mission, the teacher is a teacher only in so far as he brings about learning in someone else; and he becomes an educator when that other person takes up the conversation and extends the process (p. 497).

Here we can hear clear echoes of Peter Winch's idea of a social science, and the role of language in social interpretation.

Noah & Eckstein found King's work somewhat anecdotal and personal, out of touch with the "canons of social science" when they reviewed it in 1975 (Noah & Eckstein, 1998, p. 45-49). Brian Holmes, another influential scholar of the time, also felt it lacked a scientific basis. The "problem approach" to comparative education, which he developed, involved a sophisticated attempt to create a post-positivist model of scientific method, drawing upon Dewey's

pragmatism and Karl Popper's philosophy of post-relativity science. This approach gave considerable importance to values and the freedom of human action, but was close to the positivist strand in seeing language as largely non-problematic (Holmes, 1981). For one reason or another, it was never widely understood or accepted, while the positivist and cultural strands, with their very different approaches to issues of language, have continued up to the present.

The lively interest aroused by the recent IEA· study of mathematics and science achievement shows that the positivist strand remains vitally alive and is being improved by ever more sophisticated quantitative methodologies, while also benefitting from the integration of qualitative approaches. The increasing interest of comparative educators in ethnography and the recent development of post modern approaches to the field (Paulson, 1996) strike me as a continuation of the cultural strand. One can see here both an emphasis on the importance of languages in the literal sense of learning other languages in order to carry out in-depth comparative studies, and also in the metaphorical sense of an interpretive, concept-sensitive approach to understanding education in different societies.

The dependency strand in comparative education

A third strand in comparative education, quite distinct from the positivist or cultural strands, has viewed language in a different way again. This approach blossomed in the era of decolonisation and the establishment of numerous new nations after the second world War. Martin Carnoy's *Education as Cultural Imperialism* (1974) might be seen as the opening salvo, and this approach was developed in important texts such as Altbach and Kelly's *Education and the Colonial Experience* (1984) Robert Arnove's *Philanthropy and Cultural Imperialism* (1979) and many others. Rooted in Marxist thought, this was nevertheless very different from classical Marxist theory, which had led to universalist or modernist ways of dealing with languages within both the Soviet Union and China, as we have seen earlier.

The main focus of works in this strand was on issues of equity and power. How had education reinforced patterns of economic and political domination which had persisted after de-colonisation? What kinds of educational policies could support increasing self-reliance, and the affirmation of cultural and social distinctiveness? Probably the most striking cases of de-linking from what was seen as an oppressive world system, and fostering self-reliance through

education, were Tanzania under Nyerere, and China during the Maoist extremes of the Cultural Revolution. In both cases, one could see some reason in protests against continuing neo-colonial influence and Soviet social imperialism, yet the results were deeply disturbing, especially in the case of China.

While many aspects of the dependency argument are flawed (Noah & Eckstein, 1998), the concern over issues of power and equity in a global context remains a strong one in the comparative education literature. This is thus an interesting framework for reflecting on language issues.

Language in the dependency strand

Language issues include the imposition of the languages of Europe on colonies that then failed to develop their indigenous languages effectively, and the ways in which education offered through a colonial language served to maintain or reinforce patterns of subordination in an intellectual or symbolic sphere, long after political independence had become a reality. Altbach's detailed analysis of academic publishing worldwide in *The Knowledge Context* (1987) showed how this sphere maintained what might be described as patterns of neo-colonialism, long after colonialism per se had gone.

What has come to be known as the dependency argument in comparative education tended to critique ongoing educational assistance from Europe and North America to developing countries for maintaining relations of neo-colonialism, and to advocate the promotion of indigenous languages within education, over former colonial languages. This was complex and difficult in many situations, however, due to the large number of local languages, and the degree to which the colonial language had become an important *lingua franca* in the region as well as internationally. In East Africa, there was an effort to adopt Swahili as a regional language, while encouraging the various tribal languages, and maintaining English as an international language. In India, several local languages were used more and more widely in education, but English remained important both as a pan-national and an international language. Nevertheless, the practical encouragement for the support of indigenous languages within this strand of literature has been important.

We should not underestimate the difficulties involved in maintaining and developing local languages as scientific knowledge grows exponentially and English takes on a stronger and stronger role as the international language of

business, science and the internet. Even the European Union is likely, in the end, to carry out much of its business in English. In this respect, I was struck by the comment of a Japanese scholar in economics who spent a period of time in India under a development project. He spoke of his experience teaching in a university in India, where the main language of instruction was Hindi. While Hindi was adequate for teaching purposes, he noted that once Indian intellectuals got into complex theoretical discourse they tended to switch over to English. By contrast, he noted, Japanese was fully capable of the most abstruse or esoteric intellectual discussion, since all of the best literature in the social sciences has been translated into Japanese (Hayhoe, forthcoming). The same would be true of Chinese, and also of most European languages. Perhaps this is one of the areas where the legacy of a colonial history can never be fully overcome.

This brings me to one final question that I would like to end with, a question that perhaps may serve to link the fields of comparative education and applied linguistics. This is the question of English and its potential for cultural imperialism. I guess the most basic issue here is how long English is likely to last as the undisputed world language. If we look back over history, languages such as Greek, Arabic, Latin, Chinese and to a degree German (in terms of science at least) had their day and then retreated - will that be true of English some day, or will it have a different destiny?

A related issue is that of the link between language and culture, national identity, or region. There is no doubt about the history of English, and about the role of the British Empire in its spread around the globe. Perhaps now, however, we are reaching a stage when it has become a fully international language, less the language solely of Britain and North America than the language of a large number of different countries and regions which have developed their own ways of using it.

Alastair Pennycook has developed the concept of the "worldliness of English", "to suggest the ways in which English is embedded in social, cultural, political and economic relations, is both a global and a local language, and is constantly involved in people's struggles over how they are represented and how they can represent themselves" (Pennycook, 1996, p. 72). He has used the framework of dependency theory in comparative education to locate a very important dilemma and opportunity that faces those teaching and using English in various parts of the world:

13

What I want to suggest is that those of us involved in education through English....need to consider what we do in terms of a diremptive/abrogative and redemptive/appropriative project. That is, we need to look very carefully at the relationship between English and forms of culture and knowledge, and to seek, first, to oppose those central standards of language, culture and knowledge that are spread from the central institutions and, second, to open up the possibility for alternative, local forms of culture and knowledge to emerge through English. In the same way that postcolonial writers have tried to seize English and turn it to their own ends, have sought ways to claim English for their own and to turn it into a powerful anticolonial weapon so those of us involved in different ways with English need to pursue means and opportunities to help our students become postcolonial students" (Pennycook, 1996, p. 78).

Conclusion

I would not wish to leave you with the impression that these three strands - positivism, the cultural strand and the dependency argument - are either comprehensive or mutually exclusive. However, I think they illustrate distinctive ways in which language has been viewed within comparative education: as a neutral tool for effective communication, as an eye into the culture and the soul of a people, and as a potential instrument of power and exclusion, on one hand, or of awakening and self expression on the other.

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15

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