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Review

Epistemological and Theoretical Foundations in Language Policy and Planning

Michele Gazzola, Federico Gobbo, David Cassels Johnson, and Jorge Antonio Leoni de León (2023)

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This timely publication emerges at a critical juncture in the trajectory of Language Policy and Planning (LPP) as an academic field. If the moment at which a discipline reaches the point where it engages in an introspective examination of itself normally attests to its level of advancement, an opportunity for joint analysis in a collegial manner among differing epistemological perspectives and even conflicting strands within that same discipline undeniably demonstrates its maturity. In the specific case of LPP, the undertaking of such an endeavour is a much-needed exercise, as will be explained below. For this reason, the objective set by the authors of the present book to account boldly for 'the diversity of perspectives and the complexity and dynamism of the LPP field' (p. 10) is to be praised.

The volume is co-authored by Michele Gazzola, Federico Gobbo, David Cassels Johnson, and Jorge Antonio Leoni de León. Both the introductory and conclusion chapters are written jointly, while the other four chapters are each written individually by one of the authors. One of the more visible, and tangible, features of this volume is its length: only 144 pages, including the reference list and index. Despite this, the book aims to deal with a task of considerable scope – that of examining the epistemological and theoretical foundations in LPP, as the

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title indicates. However, readers with high expectations will realise in the first pages of the introductory chapter that the book does not completely meet such an ambitious target, as I will go on to argue in detail.

Chapter 1, 'Epistemological and Theoretical Foundations in Language Policy and Planning: Introduction', serves as an introduction to the volume. The authors set the scene by thoroughly exploring the foundational aspects of the field, reviewing classic LPP theory and tracing the evolution of different approaches. LPP is defined as 'an interdisciplinary field which relies on contributions from the humanities and social sciences, and thus demonstrates robust theoretical and epistemological diversity' (p. 1). Drawing on the well-known taxonomy of phases or 'turns' in the history of LPP, the authors present the development of the field with an emphasis on the 'multidisciplinary but also increasingly interdisciplinary, or even transdisciplinary' (p. 10) character of LPP research. After a summary of the content of the chapters, they discuss the difference between language policy and language planning.

In the final section of Chapter 1, the authors explain that the volume began to take shape following the two iterations of a Summer School on Linguistic Policy, Language Planning and Evaluation in 2017 and 2021, both of which were organised and funded by the University of Costa Rica in collaboration with the Esperantic Studies Foundation. The readers are informed that the organisers and the invited instructors – that is to say, the authors – 'felt the need to share their views through a monograph' (p. 10). The book is, therefore, the result of one particular academic event and its scope is to 'provide a short and accessible book deliberately designed for graduate and postgraduate students' (p. 10).

At this point, one can rightly ask if such a relatively short volume can account for 'the complexity and dynamism of the LPP field' (p. 10) and if the low number of authors and chapters, each of which is dedicated to one single approach or development, accurately represent 'the diversity of perspectives' (p. 10) within LPP. For example, the authors say that the chapters in the book 'present *some* of the distinct theoretical and epistemological positions within LPP research, as well as *some* recent theoretical developments' (pp. 5–6; emphasis added), implying that others, without naming them, are not included in the volume. Moreover, the rationale behind the selection of the specific positions and developments included in the book and the dismissal of alternatives is not explained by the authors. A comprehensive exposition of the most relevant epistemological paradigms and theoretical orientations in LPP, ideally including some reference to the ontological understandings of language in sociolinguistics, would have been

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a worthwhile addition to broadening the scope. We can, therefore, preliminarily conclude that the book does not seem to reflect the breadth of LPP and falls a little short of achieving its aims.

Chapter 2, 'Critical Empirical Approaches in Language Policy and Planning' is the first of the four single-authored chapters. David Cassels Johnson provides a very detailed overview of the theoretical and epistemological foundations that gave rise to the critical tradition in the field of LPP, with a focus on the contributions from ethnography and discourse analysis. The chapter delves into the intricacies of critical approaches including both the criticisms of critical perspectives and the limitations of ethnographic and discursive approaches. The chapter also presents current issues in this tradition, in particular the debates about the interplay between agency and structure, the macro-micro dialectic and researcher positionality. The reason for the choice of these topics, and the exclusion of others, is not entirely clear. The author concludes the chapter by calling for a transdisciplinary approach 'to promote social justice in LPP' (p. 34).

In Chapter 3, 'Language Policy as Public Policy', Michele Gazzola espouses a public policy perspective on LPP. After showcasing the five-step policy cycle as a model for LPP researchers and presenting key elements of its toolkit, the author advances his view that government is a necessary and central part of the language policymaking process, although the specific nature of LPP as opposed to other forms of public policy is noted. The chapter maintains a position against 'the gradual broadening of the definition of language policy' (p. 46) and deliberately stays away from widespread conceptualisations of LPP, such as Spolsky's (2012) model, by excluding language practices from the core study in language policy, understood as public policies targeting language. The chapter develops the argument, clearly delineated in the introductory chapter where it is juxtaposed with 'neo-Marxist' approaches, that 'official government-driven LPP can be democratic, diversity-oriented, and aimed at reducing inequalities' (p. 5). The author suggests that LPP research should restore its original theoretical and epistemological links with public policy studies as in 'classic LPP' (p. 45), which have been 'gradually weakened after the "critical and ethnographic turns" in LPP' (p. 43). The chapter concludes that LPP as a discipline would benefit from giving more consideration to theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions from policy studies.

Chapter 4, 'Corpus at the Core: The Epistemology of Language Planning', aims to delineate the parameters of language planning in its intricate relationship with language policy. More concretely, it shows how to epistemically disentangle language planning from language policy. Federico Gobbo warns of 'the terminological chaos surrounding LPP' (p. 76) and proposes the method of

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levels of abstraction, which scholars from different traditions could follow. The author illustrates a procedure to perform the epistemic analysis of LPP contexts and suggests that case studies should compare at least two language systems. He claims that the core of language planning should inform language policy experts.

In the last solo-authored chapter, Jorge Antonio Leoni de León explores the relationship between LPP, theoretical linguistics, and natural language processing. The author begins Chapter 5, 'The Relationship between Language Policy and Planning, Theoretical Linguistics and Natural Language Processing', by stating that LPP researchers should pay more attention to how changes in technology could contribute to language revitalisation. The author argues that minority or endangered language communities cannot directly avail themselves of the same technologies that speakers of dominant languages enjoy as a result of these technologies being developed in ways that serve the interests of private companies. The chapter includes 30 questions on methodological and ethical matters for researchers and practitioners to consider in order to increase the chances of success of technological language projects. The chapter concludes that the development of technological language applications requires appropriate educational processes and the empowerment of linguistic communities.

In Chapter 6, 'Conclusions', the authors jointly close the volume by listing five issues that, they argue, deserve more attention: a leveraging of the epistemological and theoretical variety present within the field; an examination of the circumstances in which LPP can exert impact on language change; a clear acknowledgement of the epistemological assumptions in research; an engagement with information technologies for language-based applications; and a recognition of the differences between scholarly LPP and real-world LPP activities. The authors end the chapter with an open, and intriguing, question about how to identify the epistemological limits of the already epistemologically diverse field of LPP. The authors recognise that it is not possible to clearly establish the methodological and theoretical foundations of LPP because of the multiplicity of approaches and admit that this seems paradoxical as a conclusion in a book that sets out to explore precisely this issue. However, they argue that, in fact, this 'is not necessarily a shortcoming, as long as researchers are clear about their epistemological foundation and the field encourages dialogue' (p. 133).

Overall, the book provides an accessible, albeit partial, introduction to the scholarly field of LPP from an epistemological and theoretical angle. The book's writing style is clear, and both the structure and the organisation of the chapters provide a logical and effective means of conveying intricate concepts and complex ideas. However, the volume would benefit from more conceptual

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precision. Centrally, for the aim of the book and the target audience of students and postgraduate researchers, it is not always clear what the differences are, if any, among research approaches, epistemological positions, theoretical developments, and even methodological traditions. The same applies to the use of the terms multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary research approaches for which explicit definitions and demarcation of boundaries would be advisable.

Contemporary LPP research is depicted throughout the book as both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. A potential way forward for developing the field, the authors claim, is achieving transdisciplinary integration. Despite the assertion that 'taken together, the chapters in this book suggest a path towards a transdisciplinary approach' (p. 130), no specifications about how such transdisciplinary meetings could or should be facilitated are advanced. Moreover, a comprehensive articulation of such a transdisciplinary framework and practice is critical for statements of good intentions, such as '[s]cholars from diverse epistemological, methodological, and theoretical backgrounds – linguistics, economists, educationists, political theorists, etc. – will all be needed' (p. 34), to produce meaningful outcomes and to ensure that calls for transdisciplinarity are not futile. The authors, nonetheless, provide a very valuable open question worth further discussion and tangible action: '[H]ow do we shift from making connections across disciplines to superseding disciplinary boundaries?' (p. 130).

Epistemological and theoretical multiplicity in an academic field is often not without tension. This is the case in the field of LPP, in which divergent epistemological orientations (and particularly contending approaches) coexist but interact thoroughly only occasionally. Consequently, while the authors suggest that transdisciplinarity will lead to the effective integration of epistemic resources, implying the likelihood of ultimate compatibility and reconciliation, it is unclear that this will in fact be the outcome. Likewise, it remains far from apparent how 'being explicit about the epistemological foundation for particular research projects' can contribute to 'cross-fertilisation across disciplines, so as to enlarge its epistemological horizon' (pp. 8–9), as the authors suggest in the introduction and the conclusion. It is also unclear from reading the book whether the authors believe that opposing epistemologies in LPP research enrich the field and whether they feel that such diversity is something to be celebrated.

It goes without saying that, taken as a whole, LPP researchers are a relatively cohesive research community in diversity. Accordingly, the authors scrutinise the heterogeneity of the field in a constructive spirit. However, a somewhat unfavourable tone towards critical approaches to LPP is sometimes implied (especially in Chapter 3 'Language Policy as Public Policy', e.g., on p. 43). This perception is potentially exacerbated by the limited inter-dialogue observed

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among the chapters, especially between Chapters 2 and 3. The book certainly offers an explicit recognition of differences between approaches but not so much a negotiation of compatibility or a practical illustration of convergence (see, e.g., Erdocia, Nocchi, and Ruane, 2022).

Here I return to my initial portrayal of the present state of LPP as one of a field at a crucial juncture, which is the focus of my review. A number of recent publications, principally from scholars within the economic or public policy strands within LPP and notably pioneered by François Grin (see, e.g., Grin, 2022), but also from those within sociolinguistics (May, 2018; Edwards, 2022), have questioned some of the approaches of the 'critical turn' in LPP. This critique of critical approaches, which is acknowledged in Chapter 2, 'Critical Empirical Approaches in Language Policy and Planning', is not new. For instance, in 2009, Lo Bianco challenged, among other aspects, the refusal of critical studies to engage in the processes of language policymaking. But at a time when prominent LPP figures such as Spolsky (2022:14) invoke controversial terms ('radical and dangerous wokeism') to characterise certain aspects of critical approaches (see Pennycook, 2022 for a response), it becomes increasingly evident that the field is at a momentous crossroads.

The divide is visible in the differing and at times seemingly irreconcilable, editorial approaches adopted by the three main journals that focus their scope on LPP research: *Language Policy*, *Current Issues in Language Planning*, and *Language Problems and Language Planning*. Something similar applies to some edited volumes (Barakos, 2020). Let me take as an example the case of two recent handbooks in LPP (Tollefson and Pérez-Milans, 2018; Gazzola, Grin, Cardinal, and Heugh, forthcoming). The very publication of two handbooks in the same field in a relatively short period of time is probably telling. *The Oxford Handbook of Language Policy and Planning* includes a good number of chapters that adopt critical approaches, which, according to the editors, 'have become central to some of the most productive research' (Pérez-Milans and Tollefson, 2018:728) in LPP scholarship. Scholars from the economic or public policy strands have little or no representation in this volume. *The Routledge Handbook of Language Policy and Planning* is scheduled to appear in 2023. The fact that this handbook is forthcoming obliges me to be cautious in referring to its content. I will, therefore, only say that the description on the publisher's website indicates that the handbook 'approaches language policy as public policy that can be studied through the policy cycle framework' (Routledge, 2023), presumably ignoring scholars adopting critical approaches to LPP. This assumption appears to be corroborated by the title of the sections and chapters.

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It is against this backdrop that the present book, albeit with shortcomings, is a useful read for postgraduate researchers and a welcome addition to the LPP library. Moving away from the logic of academic struggles to occupy the centrality of scholarly disciplines and the pursuit of epistemological hegemonies between old and relatively established strands (Erdocia and Soler, 2022), the book constitutes a stimulating attempt to bridge distant epistemological positions, build synergies, and create linkages among groups of researchers. Most importantly, the book represents a laudable call for dialogue and collective action.

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