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Commentary: Directions in language planning from the COVID-19 pandemic

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The COVID-19 crisis has touched all of us deeply. One way to take stock, as suggested by Florian Coulmas (personal communication) is to consider what has been the worst of the crisis? What has been the best? What do we hope for the future? As linguists, we might modify these questions to ask what has been the worst from a linguistic point of view? What has been the best? And what do we hope for the future in terms of language aspects of crisis communication?

For me, as a sociolinguist engaged in the field of language policy and planning, the worst was the inaccessibility of emergency language services in the initial two months of the COVID-19 outbreak in Hubei Province. However, this language emergency brought out the best in Chinese language professionals, and I was uplifted by the concerted efforts of Chinese sociolinguistics scholars, multilingual volunteers and students to develop multilingual public communication services in major Chinese cities, such as Wuhan, Shanghai, and Beijing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese sociolinguists were recruited to form the “Epidemic Language Service Corps” (Li et al. 2020). The importance of building state emergency language competence and calls for a systematic planning for linguistic diversity have gained significant attention (Li and Rao 2020), including a coherent framework of language planning involving dimensions of actors, typologies and process (Shen and Kang 2020). With the editors of this special issue (Piller et al. 2020), my hope for the future is twofold: first, that linguistic diversity will be taken more seriously and that we will be better prepared for public emergency communication challenges in the future, both in China and internationally. Second, my hope is also that, as the COVID-19 pandemic has evolved into a global governance challenge, we will see critical shifts in directions, orientations and paradigms in the field of sociolinguistics in the post-COVID-19 era.

The articles in this special issue present a first step in that direction by critically examining, in a number of multilingual crisis communication contexts, language challenges and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The articles focus on different issues in sociolinguistics from Chinese perspectives: conceptualizing national emergency language competence (Li et al. 2020), providing multilingual

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logistics services (Zhang and Wu 2020), mobilizing university language students for multilingual crisis translation (Zheng 2020), problematizing multilingual communication needs of international students which calls attention to the shifting paradigm of multilingualism (Li et al. 2020), catering to the public health information needs of indigenous people (Chen 2020), facilitating COVID communication through Chinese-speaking vloggers (Zhao and Zhang 2020), creating trans-linguaging discourse practices on social media (Zhu 2020), employing classical Chinese poetry to promote intercultural relationships (Chen 2020), providing health information for an ethnic online community (Jang and Choi 2020), and constructing local identity through the medium of fiddle stories (Bai 2020).

In my own work, I have long argued that mainland China is at a crossroads, with multilingual challenges characterized by linguistic diversity and dramatic demographic changes caused by internal and cross-border migrations (Shen and Gao 2019). The articles in this special issue also demonstrate that language challenges emerge from different controversies in the process of fighting COVID-19 pandemic in China. Among these are the tensions between the hegemony of English over other languages spoken in international encounters in the global South; the marginalized situation of minoritized languages or regional language varieties against the backdrop of promoting Putonghua by the government as the national standard for spoken Chinese and the often neglected role of local knowledge embedded in diverse linguistic cultures. Since no policies are developed without first problematizing their territory (Osborne 1997), it is important to understand the representation of language issues within these contexts of linguistic diversity. Although the underlying forces of language challenges are wide-ranging and complex, the research reported in this special issue reveals three orientations that promote ideological beliefs and defining implementational spaces that recur in many contexts worldwide.

1 Languages as challenge

The language as challenge orientation in multilingual crisis communication recognizes the practical needs and circumstances of emergency language challenges, conceptualizing linguistic diversity in the real world as an emergency communication problem which calls for organized activities to solve. The language as challenge in the COVID-19 pandemic posits as a threat to public health communication in need of identification and resolution through language service at the national level (Li et al. 2020). Besides this, local agency exerted in Chinese metropolitan language planning practices succeeded in mobilizing multilingual translation services in Wuhan and Shanghai (Zhang and Wu 2020; Zheng 2020). The orientation that language is an emergency issue to be identified operationally

and resolved through treatments like multilingual plans may be effective if the needs of linguistically diverse populations at all levels can be considered.

2 Languages as right

The ‘rights’ orientation associates individuals and communities with their rights to ‘use [their] languages in the activities of communal life’ and ‘freedom from discrimination on the basis of language’ (Macías 1979:89). It is essential that minoritized languages, often neglected in urban public services, should be taken seriously in public health information systems. With the urbanization of Chinese society, regional varieties and ethnic minority languages were considered to be on the verge of extinction due to demographic and socio-cultural shifts in China (e.g., Gao 2015; Shen 2016). It deserves our applause that, with the assistance of socio-linguistics scholars, medical aid teams arriving in Wuhan from all over China, were able to take local dialects into account and come up with dialect pamphlets for medical communication purposes (Piller 2020). However, at the same time, the multilingual needs of international students from developing countries have not been satisfactorily met in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic in Yunnan (Li et al. 2020). The rights orientation urges language planners to keep the interests of language-minority groups in mind in emergency communication.

3 Languages as resource

The resource-oriented typology of language planning credits language with both ‘intrinsic value in relation to cultural reproduction, [...] identity construction, building self-esteem, and intellectual engagement’, as well as ‘extrinsic value with respect to, inter alia, national security, diplomacy, [...] business, media, and public relations’ (Hult and Hornberger 2016: 39). Though each orientation has its limitations and language planning has often been construed as ‘serving the interests’ of the powerful (Tollefson 2006: 46), this special issue indicates the resource orientation deserves more attention in the Chinese sociolinguistic context. The ‘resource’ orientation, on the one hand, does not break away from instrumental beliefs in the utilitarian value of languages for individuals and communities in the process of emergency communication. On the other hand, the research in this special issue demonstrates that the ‘resource’ orientation arguably provides implementation spaces for different stakeholders to negotiate the development of language policies that value linguistic diversity and contribute to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

In light of the ‘resource’ orientation, the role of English as the language of global communication has been challenged by the intercultural realities in the face of the crisis (Li et al. 2020; Zheng 2020). Plans for multilingual capacities other than English in foreign language education are to be highlighted to create a linguistic reservoir for global mass communication. It is interesting to note that language resources inherent in linguistic culture, such as Chinese classical poems and Mongolian fiddle stories were developed in local contexts serving as emotional ties with indigenous identities (Bai 2020; Chen 2020). The resource orientation was also observed from multiple actors among the Chinese diaspora at the grassroots level who tactically employed social media platforms to deliver public health information (Jang and Choi 2020; Zhao and Zhang 2020). The aforementioned case studies in multilingual contexts illustrate how the ‘resource’ orientation has played out with bottom-up agency in language planning efforts of local grassroots actors.

In sum, all of the studies in this special issue reflect how multiple actors (language policy makers, sociolinguistics scholars, and multilingual individuals) interact with relevant multilingual contexts and make concerted efforts to address the language challenges raised by the COVID-19 crisis. The studies conducted from Chinese perspectives on languages as challenge, languages as right and languages as resource may have implications for multilingual contexts in other geographical locations where linguistic diversity in the local contexts is encountering shifts in language use and language change in a time of crisis.

The studies in this special issue also show that linguistic diversity may be valued as a resource that needs to be fostered for its continued existence. It is essential for language policy makers and sociolinguistics scholars to work together so that multilingual speakers can empower themselves with enhanced capacities to cope with future multilingual crisis communication. Finally, the articles in this volume exemplify new directions in research methodology of sociolinguistics as well as some of the key issues facing policy makers and multilingual communities across the globe. This volume suggests that language policies and planning are central to the fundamental decisions in a time of crisis and sociolinguistics scholars need to be critically engaged in the policymaking processes.

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