3 Commentary – Unanswered Questions: Addressing the Inequalities of Majoritarian Language Policies

Stephen May
University of Auckland

In his visceral and poignant critique of the 'savage inequalities' underpinning education in the United States, the American social commentator Jonathan Kozol (1991) makes a particularly telling observation, which I paraphrase here: The wealthy are always the first to deny to others the privileges that they themselves enjoy. I begin with this observation because it encapsulates, for me, the key concern with critical sociolinguistics' recent deconstruction of standardized languages in favour of the far more complex linguistic repertoires of multilingual speakers (with which I largely agree; see May, 2014) and the almost de rigueur dismissal, on that basis, of language rights (LR) for minoritized speakers (with which I do not; see May, 2012a). Both Stroud's and Wee's thoughtful and elegantly argued contributions reflect this prevailing dual consensus, and in my response to them I aim to disentangle, and problematize, the conjunction upon which it is predicated.

My principal point of disagreement with both contributions is in relation to their *unevenness*. To clarify, this is not a criticism of the quality of Stroud's and Wee's scholarship – which remains, as always, exemplary – but rather their *point of focus*. I will argue here that the ongoing deconstruction and dismissal of minority LR, for all its intellectual merits, has nonetheless specific and deleterious sociopolitical and educational consequences. Most notably, it reinforces or entrenches majoritarian language ideologies and related policy, both of which go largely unremarked and unexamined – an endorsement of the status quo ante, in effect. Relatedly, the dismissal of LR for minoritized language speakers leads, ironically, to

the further entrenchment and reinforcement of the linguistic inequalities experienced by minoritized speakers, particularly in relation to their differential access to, and interactions in, the public or civic realm of nation-states, as well as in relation to their wider social and educational mobility. It seems to me that this is much like examining and critiquing the already poor and marginalized, along with the often highly negative effects of poverty, while ignoring, or at least understating, the social determinants that structure (though do not always determine) the everyday lives and experiences of impoverished peoples. Given the emancipatory concerns that so clearly underpin Stroud's and Wee's critical sociolinguistic accounts, particularly in their advocacy of linguistic citizenship (LC), this is a significant problem. In effect, the dismissal of LR ends up as a *post hoc* validation of existing linguistic 'hierarchies of prestige' (Liddicoat, 2013), something which, I will also argue, is not resolved or remediated by LC or the notion of deliberative democracy (DD) upon which it is based. Let me explain why. In what follows, I will, for reasons of space, focus primarily on Wee's arguments, drawing connections with Stroud's arguments where I can.

Beating the Minority Strawman

Since Frederik Barth's (1969) influential anthropological critique of ethnicity and related forms of social identity, a social constructionist consensus has emerged over the last 40 or so years that is quick to dispense with any claims to collective identities, along with a related rejection of the apparent fixity of such identities; equating both directly, as Wee does, with the politics of essentialism. This broad social constructionist position on identity – disavowing group identities as inherently determinist – is predicated on the plurality, complexity, fluidity and porosity of individual ones, a position akin to the wider promotion of hybridity, to which I will return shortly. It is perhaps best encapsulated by Rogers Brubaker's (2002) dismissive discussion of the problem of 'groupism'. Along with Barry (2001), Brubaker is particularly dismissive of the role of minority elites, who are seen to mobilize ethnicity (and, relatedly, language(s)) instrumentally to particular (self-interested) political ends. In so doing, these collective identities are often (re)constructed in arbitrary and artificial ways, leading to the process of 'reinvention' that Wee highlights. Both Wee's and Stroud's discussion of the artificial distinction between Southern and Northern siNdebele – with Northern siNdebele moving from a dialect of Southern siNdebele to a separate language, via a LR discourse – is a clear example of this retrospective process of linguistic reconstruction/reinvention.

But the siNdebele example also highlights the two key problems with this social constructionist consensus, which both Stroud and Wee uncritically and unreflexively endorse. The first is its disproportionate focus on minority group identities as the strawmen of ethnic/linguistic determinism. After all, *all* identities are socially constructed and, to some extent at least, fictive, even – and, perhaps, especially – majoritarian ones. National identities are a prime example here, given their historical recency, their construction, almost always *post hoc*, from the politics of nationalism, and their attendant, often deliberate, fabrications of historical memory: 'the rewriting of linguistic and cultural history' that Wee, citing Bucholtz and Hall (2004), highlights (see May, 2012a: Chapter 2 for an extended discussion). As the 19th-century French historian Ernest Renan has observed, for example, 'forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation' (1990: 11). And, of course, national identities, and the linguistic regimes that they impose on their citizens, are also highly selective, prescriptive, and exclusionary in relation to individuals, particularly those for whom the 'national' language is not their dominant language variety.

Which brings me to the second problem: The tacit acceptance of – and related failure to critique – the wider sociohistorical and sociopolitical context that often necessitates the political mobilization of linguistic minorities in the first place. Returning to the example of siNdebele, though this does indeed comprise elements of reconstruction/reinvention, it is no less so than the earlier construction/positioning of Northern siNdebele as a dialect – the result of impositional majoritarian forms of identity and related policies of linguistic hierarchies of prestige (à la Liddicoat), highlighted earlier. Indeed, the nation-state system is replete with examples of the artificial construction of 'national' languages and the related (re)positioning of minoritized language varieties as 'mere' patois or dialects, along with the negative social and educational consequences that ensue for their speakers.

Meanwhile, the role of elites in mobilizing collective identities for political ends is equally evident in majoritarian movements as it is in minority ones – one only has to think of the conception of the US promulgated by the current Trump presidency to see this trend encapsulated. Wee's discussion of Sri Lanka does capture this majoritarian/minoritarian duality to some extent (along with the sociohistorical and sociopolitical dynamics that result in changes from one to the other). But it also begs the question: If language discrimination against the Lankan Tamils (which was, in turn, linked to their wider political and economic exclusion) was a major catalyst of the longstanding civil war, why can't an LR

approach that recognizes public multilingualism remediate this – *at least to some extent*? Indeed, this is precisely what seems to have occurred since the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. The Sri Lankan government went on to establish the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission in 2011. As a result of the Commission's recommendations, Sri Lanka is currently moving towards a formal trilingual state in Sinhala, Tamil, and English, with a particular focus on fostering greater bi/multilingualism in key public language domains (Herath, 2015).

One final point on the disproportionate focus on minorities in these accounts: The presumption, most evident in Wee's analysis, that the *validity* of a minority cultural, linguistic and/or political movement requires unanimity of support, and uniformity of intent, is never likewise applied (nor should it be) to majoritarian political movements or the (inevitably multifarious, and often fissured) communities they represent. This includes the right to dissent/dissensus and the related right of individuals to enter and exit such movements over time, as one might expect.[1] In short, heterogeneity, dissonance, and fluidity are features of *all* social groups and related movements. So why are these features only pathologized in relation to minority movements and their cultural, linguistic, and political aims? Moreover, it is not without considerable irony that to construct minority movements in this way necessarily entails both a totalizing and reductionist 'groupist' analysis, something that both Wee and Stroud purportedly aim to avoid.

Individualism, Agency and the Fetishization of Difference

And this brings me to the related issue of linguistic hybridity as the seemingly necessary counterpoint or counterbalance to the politics of linguistic determinism – a trope valorized and, at times, fetishized in recent critical sociolinguistic accounts that focus on individual multilingual repertoires (see e.g. Blommaert, 2010, 2013; Pennycook, 2010; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015). As stated earlier, I do not demur substantively from these analyses (see May, 2014) – indeed, they are long overdue. However, I do want to problematize the presumption – also evident in Stroud's and Wee's accounts – that 'transgressive' translanguaging, and the related demolishing of language boundaries, is, by definition, both agentic and emancipatory, a trope of hybridity theory more broadly. This over-emphasizes the influence/impact of individual agency and under-emphasizes, or even simply ignores, the ongoing impact of structural constraints, particularly on the already most (linguistically) marginalized.

My key concern here, as Peter McLaren (1997) has argued of the academic championing of hybridity more broadly, is its 'flattening of difference' – that it presumes, in effect, that all choices are equally available, in this instance, to all multilingual interlocutors. But this is simply not the case since structural constraints often delimit choice(s) and do so differently for individuals, dependent on the social groupings within which they might be situated. Class, ethnic, and gender stratification, and related advantage/disadvantage, objective constraints, and historical determinations inevitably structure identity choices. Failing to address these differential factors puts me in mind of the sociologist Craig Calhoun's acerbic critique of cosmopolitanism – the championing of new global identities over so-called local and national identities – when he observes that it 'obscures the issues of inequality that make [such] identities accessible mainly to elites and make being a comfortable citizen of the world contingent on having the right passports, credit cards, and cultural credentials' (Calhoun, 2007: 286). By framing cosmopolitanism appeals to humanity in individualistic terms, he continues, 'they are apt to privilege those with the most capacity to get what they want by individual action' (Calhoun, 2007: 295).

A similar criticism applies to Stroud's and Wee's advocacy of LC, a form of DD, as the alternative to a LR framework. For a start, both LC and DD presume the relative equality of participants in democratic conversations, along with (as above) unfettered individual agency. Wee argues, drawing on Stroud's (2001: 353) summary of LC, for example, that it 'denotes the situation where speakers themselves exercise control over their language, deciding *what* languages are, and what they may *mean*, and where language issues … are discursively tied to a range of social issues – policy issues and questions of equity'.

While laudatory, this once again fails to account for the wider sociohistorical and sociopolitical conditions that inevitably precede/prefigure (and often confine) these choices. This is not to diminish the importance of agency and voice. Rather, it raises the question of the extent to which such agency and voice can actually achieve substantive change without simultaneously acknowledging and addressing systemic conditions and constraints. And, of course, even when it appears to do so – as Stroud's example of Afrikaaps highlights – there is, ironically, an implicit acknowledgement that the latter necessarily takes both *collective* effort and engagement over time to have any chance of doing so. What's more, such action requires a carving out of autonomous linguistic space (in this instance, from Afrikaans) and yet autonomy, particularly in Wee's account, is constructed as non-dialogic and inward looking, by definition.

To the contrary, autonomy, as many LR advocates argue, is a necessary precondition for a more *even* and *reciprocal* engagement with majoritarian linguistic groups, rather than the unidirectional (majority – minority) one that still so predominates worldwide, as the example of Afrikaaps rightly highlights.

Pathologizing Standardized Language Varieties

Finally, I want to problematize the pathologizing of standardized language varieties that is also a feature of both Stroud's and Wee's accounts. The argument here is that because oral multilingual repertoires are far more complex, fluid, and dynamic than any standardized language variety would allow, the latter can only be seen as yet another artificial linguistic construction and, thus, best avoided. In so doing, Stroud and Wee take particular aim at so-called mother tongue education programmes, arguing that these simply reinforce existing linguistic inventions, and hierarchies, rather than dismantling them. Makoni (2012) makes a very similar argument in relation to his dismissal of indigenous mother tongue education programmes in Africa as merely a vestigial feature of colonization and a further denial of indigenous emancipation rather than its validation. But, as I responded to Makoni at the time (May, 2012b), and it is a response that applies equally to Stroud's and Wee's accounts, this misses a key point: Access to standardized language varieties is pivotal to educational and wider social mobility, all the more important for those who are already linguistically (and educationally) marginalized. Thus, the question becomes which standardized language varieties best serve this purpose? In dismissing indigenous language education programmes, for example, and returning to the issue of the wider deleterious consequences of these arguments, indigenous peoples are once again denied access to any of their *proximal* language varieties in the education of their children. Instead, the *de facto* context of majoritarian language varieties as the only languages of instruction is simply reinforced. This, of course, also entrenches the ongoing colonization and cultural and linguistic (as well as social and political) disenfranchisement of indigenous peoples.

And this is why, for all the potential limitations of LR (and I have acknowledged them widely; see May, 2005, 2012a), I think Stroud and Wee are too hasty in dismissing them *tout court*. Indeed, the recognition of individual (private) multilingualism – again, a welcome development in itself – is not *necessarily* antipathetic to a concomitant recognition of public (communal) multilingualism, despite the inevitable attenuation of the complexities of actual multilingual use, in so doing (Busch, 2012;

May, 2017). Language diversity on the ground will always deconstruct standardized conceptions of languages, to be sure. But this should not, *ipso facto*, preclude the possibility of the public recognition of, and support for, minority languages that LR affords and that LC, for all its potential merits, has yet to prove it can achieve as effectively.

Note

(1) I do not have space to address further the issue of the 'right to exit' with which Wee and other sceptical commentators of minority movements are so concerned. However, I have discussed at length elsewhere how the distinction between 'external protections' and 'internal restrictions', outlined by the political philosopher Will Kymlicka (1995, 2001), can remediate the charges of coercion and (potential) illiberality levelled at such movements (see May, 2012a: Chapter 3).

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