Documenting language capacity: the role of the National Census

Beverly-Anne Carter, PhD

Centre for Language Learning

The University of the West Indies

St. Augustine

Trinidad and Tobago

ABSTRACT

A considerable body of research (British Academy, 2013; British Council, 2013; Grin, 2002; Levitt et al., 2009; MLA, 2007) suggests that one of the challenges of the global economy is having employees equipped with the competencies to work in today's multicultural placements and settings. Linguistic and intercultural competence is highly in demand from today's global workers and as a recent UK study (British Academy, 2013, p. 9) argues, "language skills are needed at all levels in the workforce, and not simply by an internationally mobile elite." An important national imperative then is documenting a country's capacity in foreign languages, a task often completed in the context of the collection of other demographic data, i.e. through the national census. This presentation expands on the importance for a country of collecting data on its citizens' linguistic profile and argues that for Trinidad and Tobago and much of the English-speaking Caribbean where these data are not currently collected, a significant lacuna exists in their demographic statistics.

The presentation draws on examples from both developed and developing countries that show how these states make use of data on the languages spoken by their populations. Although the entry point into this topic is through the lens of competitiveness and workforce skills and the asset that language proficiency represents for the workforce, the examples selected show that documenting language capacity is of relevance to the education sector and to a country's social services to cite just two most telling examples.

Finally, the presentation will look at research being conducted by the UWI's RDIFUND Language and Competitiveness project. One of the major objectives of the project is to develop a language audit, documenting the language capacity of persons residing in Trinidad

and Tobago who have a language other than English/Caribbean/Trinidadian & Tobagonian English as their mother tongue. Ultimately, the project hopes to develop a language map of Trinidad and Tobago, showing where these non-English-speakers live. Unsurprisingly, the absence of primary data has made this into a challenging exercise requiring novel strategies and solutions. We hope that a major impact of this project would be that future national censuses would elicit data on the languages spoken by the population, aligning policy in Trinidad and Tobago and the rest of CARICOM with the policy approach in most developed and developing countries.

The economic rationale for documenting language capacity

A preoccupation of both public and private sectors as the world struggles to regain its footing after the 2008 recession is what needs to be done to spur economic growth. Austerity still plagues Europe. Growth in the US is somewhat better, but still anaemic. The Chinese economy remains vibrant, but there are concerns even within China that its current growth is unsustainable (Yide, 2014). States are compelled to explore all the tools at their disposal to achieve sustainable economic development. Research[1] conducted in Europe and the UK has explored the added value of language and intercultural skills to trade and export. This research shows how language and intercultural competence not only breaks down linguistic and cultural barriers, but also promotes individual employability and company competitiveness. In Trinidad and Tobago, education policy documents have also underscored the link between language, identity and economic development, as the following quotation from Robertson (2010) shows:

> Languages are perhaps the single most significant resource for establishing national identity, for establishing cultural identity, for promoting internal social cohesion, for ensuring social connectedness, for facilitating respect for internal and external cultural diversity and, at the same time, for maintaining proper international connectedness. It is often the case that resources like language, which are all too readily available and familiar, are given little significance in national affairs.

---

[1] CILT, 2009; CBI, 2010; CfBT, 2011; Foreman-Peck, 2007; Grin 1994, 2002; Hagen, 2011; Hagen et al, 2006

There is therefore a critical need to identify such language resources, to understand them, to value them, to nurture them, to promote them properly and to understand the implications of engaging each language for the national good. This is no less true for Trinidad and Tobago than it is for any other nation state.

Management of the language resources of the nation holds the keys to individual and national advancement. Understanding the linguistic resources of a nation and their significance must therefore be at the centre of any attempt at national development.

Linguistic diversity: boon or bane?

How one responds to linguistic diversity is often a function of one's own circumstances and self-interest. The average UK citizen might find the fact that Polish is the second language spoken in the UK, disconcerting. But for exporters hoping to enter the Polish market, the presence of a large number of Polish speakers is probably a good thing. These speakers of Polish could act as cultural navigators, helping exporters adapt their company's websites and their online presence to demonstrate their linguistic and cultural sensitivity to the target market.

The place of Polish as the second language spoken in the UK was a revelation of the 2011 UK census, since the UK like most developed countries collects linguistic data as part of their national census. In the New Zealand, the census also collects linguistic data, asking for example "In which languages could you have an everyday conversation about a lot of everyday things?" The language is plain and simple, an indication perhaps that the census treats the issue of identity and languages spoken as uncontroversial. New Zealand's valuing of diversity and its boast that there are more ethnicities in New Zealand than countries in the world is in sharp contrast to how ethnic and linguistic issues are treated in Bostwana census documents.

Devaluing of the mother tongue leading to social and economic dislocation

The collection of linguistic data in the Botswana census is somewhat controversial. In that country issues of ethnicity and language are intertwined. The concern seems to be that the way in which census data are elicited leads to the promotion of the majority languages, at the expense of mother-tongue minority languages. The census collects no data on ethnicity and it only captures information on the three or four major languages, marginalising the 30 or so languages spoken by different minority ethnic communities. The effects of this are felt most strongly in the education sector. Prof. Lydia Saleshando[2], an activist for minority communities, argues that educating rural children in the majority language, Setswana, has a ripple effect. Children from minority ethnic and language groups do poorly at school because of their language difficulties. They fail or drop out and ultimately are unable to break of out the cycle of poverty. She notes that "UNESCO views mother-tongue as a quality issue in education, and the quality of education in Botswana is poor due to lack of appropriate language to interact in the learning process at an early age."

Indeed, the United Nations[3] supports the collection of language data during national censuses, offering very clear guidelines in this matter:

> There are three types of language data that can be collected in censuses, namely:
>
> (a) Mother tongue, defined as the language usually spoken in the individual's home in his or her early childhood;
>
> (b) Usual language, defined as the language currently spoken, or most often spoken, by the individual in his or her present home;
>
> (c) Ability to speak one or more designated languages.
>
> In compiling data on the usual language or on the mother tongue, it is desirable to show each language that is numerically important in the country and not merely the dominant language. Information on language should be collected for all persons. In the tabulated results, the criterion for determining language for children not yet able to speak should be clearly indicated.

---

[2] http://www.mmegi.bw/index.php?sid=1&aid=710&dir=2011/August/Wednesday3 accessed October 29, 2014.

[3] http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sconcerns/popchar/popcharmethods.htm

Linguistic diversity in Trinidad

In their pioneering study, "Linguistic exposure of Trinidadian children", Carrington et al. (1974) noted that while Trinidad of that time was considerably less diverse than 19th century Trinidad, it was still more complex than many imagined (p. 14). Anecdotal evidence about the number of recent migrants to Trinidad from the People's Republic of China, from the Middle East, and from South America suggests that Trinidad is even more linguistically complex now than it was four decades ago. Yet, the national census is silent on the question of languages spoken. The assumption is that Trinidad and Tobago is a monolingual English state, with a variety of English-based creoles. The lack of data on any minority languages that may be spoken in the home or other private contexts means that policy-making in the education sector and elsewhere may not reflect the current demographic reality.

Language and Competitiveness: sub-project on bilinguals

In one component of the Language and Competitiveness project, Dr. Maria Landa-Buil, a member of the project team, is investigating the use of Spanish[4] in bilingual families in Trinidad and Tobago. She is looking specifically at language attitudes and Spanish proficiency in children who are being educated in a monolingual education system. She intends to explore whether their Spanish language skills remain primarily Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) or whether they acquire Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Her project will also look at attitudes to bilingualism among members of the family and the nature of the bilingualism, whether additive or subtractive. While the project could be helped by the existence of primary data, it is not entirely dependent on primary data, so research has not been hindered by the lack of census data on languages.

Language and Competitiveness: language audit

A second research project, a language audit on languages used/spoken by non-native born persons living in Trinidad, has, however, proved more challenging since that project relies on primary data. A pilot among international staff at the St. Augustine campus revealed quite a rich diversity of nationalities and languages spoken. But in the language audit project, there

---

[4] An investigation into the language use of Spanish/English bilingual families in Trinidad and Tobago in order propose recommendations for the education sector

are no national census data, nor institutional data on staff nationalities to draw on. This important work to document language capacity in Trinidad and Tobago has to rely on a snowballing effect. We have begun by distributing a survey instrument among known communities of speakers of a language and then asked those persons to invite other native speakers to join the project. The project has met with mixed success, as this approach to data gathering relies on intra-group comity and harmonious social networks, something that is not guaranteed in any speech community!

How linguistic data could be used: the American example

An American example will show what could be accomplished by our academic community, if we were able to go straight to the primary data sources. The MLA language Map is described as follows:

> The MLA Language Map is intended for use by students, teachers, and anyone interested in learning about the linguistic and cultural composition of the United States. The Language Map uses aggregated data from the 2006–10 American Community Survey (ACS) to display the locations and numbers of speakers of thirty languages commonly spoken in the United States. The Language Map Data Center provides data about over three hundred languages spoken in the United States, using data from the 2006–10 ACS, ACS 2005, and the 2000 US Census. Comparative tables and graphs provide a snapshot of changes between 2000 and 2010 in American language communities, showing speakers' ages and ability to speak English.

It is thanks to census data that we know that Polish is the second language spoken in the UK. Census data show that the US has the world's second largest population of Spanish speakers. While this kind of information is a simple fun fact to the casual observer, linguists, educators, policy makers in the health and social services sectors rely on those data to plan.

…and abused : the American example

The example of Botswana shows that collecting linguistic data is not without its pitfalls. Political interests may prefer *not* to have all the facts on ethnic and linguistic diversity. And even when the data and facts are known, or policy exists, political interests may still

triumph. Linguistic data allow US policy makers to know where languages other than English are spoken. And as early as 1968 the Bilingual Education Act took account of linguistic diversity in the US thus:

> Where inability to speak and understand the English language excludes national origin minority group children from effective participation in the educational program offered by a school district, the district must take affirmative steps to rectify the language deficiency in order to open its instructional program to these students

(Cromwell 1998 cited in Edwards et al. 2008/2009)

Yet, as the "browning" of the US means a more heterogeneous population and a greater diversity of languages, nativists might reject the empirical evidence that children benefit from early education in their mother tongue and as a result, bilingual and dual language programmes become especially susceptible to defunding. Federal public policy on bilingualism could therefore be undermined when there is strong local opposition to those policies. Those nativists, moreover, may claim that their insistence on "English first" is a simple re-assertion of the official role of English in the US. Their argument totally ignores the fact that there *is* no official language in the US. The US is one of the countries in the world (as is Trinidad and Tobago) whose constitution includes no mention of an official language. Indeed, it was intentional and not by omission that English was not designated as the official language (Edwards et al., 2008/2009).

A final example from the American context shows how the tensions surrounding linguistic diversity are not confined to the education sector. The American Community Survey (ACS), which conducts a yearly survey of a sample of the population, allows communities to plan investment and services. The ACS collects data on the demographic composition of the communities surveyed, looking at everything from age, sex, race, language, family and relationships to disabilities and veteran status. But as previously mentioned, nativist demands and hostility to persons who come from linguistically varied backgrounds could mean that essential services, such as access to court and hospital interpreters, are curtailed. Professional language organisations such as TESOL (see, for example, TESOL's position statements on social issues and diversity http://www.tesol.org/about-tesol/press-

room/position-statements/social-issues-and-diversity-position-statements) and ACTFL (see, for example, ACTFL's position statement on heritage and native speaker, http://www.nadsfl.org/docs/pdf/resources/position_papers/ACTFL_Position_Statements.pdf) are often strong voices advocating for equity and fairness in the treatment of linguistically diverse groups.

Closing words

The fact that Trinidad and Tobago does not collect linguistic data does not make it an outlier in CARICOM. Our admittedly very cursory research shows that linguistic data are not generally included in national censuses in the English-speaking Caribbean. Our project has come to the issue of linguistic data collection from our perspective as linguists seeking to document capacity in foreign languages. Examples drawn from Botswana and the US have shown how the (non) collection of data could affect education policy. The issue can be problematic in multicultural societies. But that is not a reason why it should not be done.

This paper has argued that from a purely scientific perspective, there is a need to collect linguistic data in Trinidad and Tobago specifically and CARICOM generally. We contend that a national census that is unable to track the changing linguistic and cultural composition of the population of a country is failing to collect vital economic data from a competitiveness perspective. That country is leaving untapped a vast reservoir of skills and competencies by not knowing what other languages are used in homes and private spaces. But at a basic humanistic level, not collecting linguistic data means that we are not giving our citizens who speak additional languages the space to reveal their full identity, when we fail to even acknowledge their existence in the most fundamental data-gathering exercise in which the country engages.

References

British Council. 2013. The English effect: The impact of English, what it's worth to the UK and why it matters to the world. London: British Council.

Carrington, L. D., Borely, C, & Knight, H. 1974. The linguistic exposure of Trinidadian children. *Caribbean Journal of Education* 1, 12-24.

CBI. 2010. Ready to grow: Business priorities for education and skills: Education and skills survey 2010, EDI/CBI.

CfBT. 2011. The economic case for language learning and the role of employer engagement.

CILT. 2009. Talking world class: The impact of language skills on the UK economy.

Edwards, J. D., Lenker, A. L., & Kahn, D. 2008/2009. National language policies: pragmatism, process, and products. *The NECTL Review*, 63, 2-42.

Foreman-Peck, J. 2007. Costing Babel: The contribution of language skills to exporting and productivity, Cardiff Business School

http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/carbs/research/centres_units/wired/babel3d.pdf

Grin, F. 1994. The economics of language: Match or mismatch? *International Political Science Review*, 15, 27-44.

Grin, F. 2002. Using language economics and education economics in language education policy. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, Language Policy Division.

Hagen, S. 2011. Report on language management strategies and best practice in European SMEs: The PIMLICO Project. Brussels: European Commission.

Hagen, S., Foreman-Peck, J. & Davila-Philippon, S. 2006. ELAN: Effects on the European economy of shortages of foreign language skills in enterprise. Brussels: European Commission.

Levitt, R., Janta, B. ,Shehabi, A., Jones. D., & Valentini, E. 2009. Language matters. The supply and demand for UK born and educated academic researchers with skills in languages other than English. Rand Technical Report.

MLA. 2009. Foreign languages and higher education. New structures for a changed world. NY: MLA.

Robertson, I. 2010.Language and language education policy. Seamless Education Policy Unit. Port of Spain: Ministry of Education.

Yide, Q. 2014. Chinese economy: performances, challenges and prospects. Public Lecture. ECNU, Shanghai, August 19, 2014.