BOOK REVIEW


Language and the market, edited by Helen Kelly-Holmes and Gerlinde Mautner, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 304 pp., £55.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780230210608

In this comparative review I first briefly summarize and comment on the contents, then I attempt to weigh up the relative merits or otherwise of two books. Language and the Market (henceforth LATM) is one in a series of books entitled ‘Language and Globalization’, edited by Sue Wright and Helen Kelly-Holmes. It contains 20 separate chapters, by 25 contributors, including the two editors who also preface the volume with an introduction. They claim that the volume ‘is intended as a snapshot of the role of market processes in the work of linguists’ (4). The chapters are all fairly short, about 11 pages each on average, thus making space for many different topics, methodological approaches and a wide-ranging coverage of data to be included. But simultaneously this broad scope prevents the reviewer from commenting on every contribution or even being able to do full justice to the volume in this comparative review. LATM’s chapters are grouped into six separate parts, if we exclude the conclusion by Mautner: I Theorising Language and the Market, II Language, the Market and Employment, III Commercial Multilingualism, IV Revitalisation and the Market, V Ideologies, Markets and Languages, VI Corporate Discourses. With possibly two exceptions, all the authors either originate from or work in Europe or North America. This fact does not preclude treatment of non-European settings; indeed Part II contains three chapters on Asian locations. These deal with the accelerating role English is playing in the recruitment and selection of workers in the Indian call centre industry, how maid agencies in Singapore place staff from Asian countries and what the analysis of job adverts in Sri Lanka can uncover about the gate-keeping role English is playing in that country. Also ‘Commodified English in East Asian Internet Advertising’, by Jamie Shinhee Lee, throws an interesting light on the ways English is influencing corporate websites written in both Korean and Japanese.

Some of the remaining contributions to LATM which are not explicitly theoretically oriented offer case studies and data on the following languages: German (Suzanne K. Hilgendorf on ‘English and the Global Market: The Language’s Impact in the German Business Domain’), French (Elizabeth Martin on ‘Language Policy and Multilingual Advertising in France’), languages used in the Netherlands (Loulou Edelman and Durk Gorter on ‘Linguistic Landscapes and the
Market’). Part IV treats the use of languages on the fringe of Europe: with John Walsh on Irish in ‘From Industrial Development to Language Planning: The Evolution of Udarás na Gaeltachta’, Daniel Cunliffe, Nich Pearson and Sarah Richards on ‘E-commerce and Minority Languages: A Welsh Perspective’ and Sirpa Leppänen and Sari Pietkäinen from Finland in a fascinating if somewhat displaced piece ‘Urban Rap goes to Arctic Lapland: Breaking Through and Saving the Endangered Inari Sámi Language’. Language policy in the United States is treated in one chapter, Swedish company policies on diversity in another, while a study of so-called international marketing textbooks demonstrates how academics in the English-speaking world appear to be blind to the phenomenon of multilingualism.

Now, what do we find in Language as Commodity: Trading Languages, Global Structures, Local Marketplaces (henceforth LAC)? The volume consists of 12 chapters plus an introduction by the editors. According to the editors of LAC, the contributors in their differing ways characterize the tensions between the local and the global. They do this ‘in a way that acknowledges the complexities, contradictions and ambiguities that surround the use of English as an international language and its relation to other languages within the global, political and cultural economy’ (13). A total of 14 contributors, most of whom, judging by their names and biographical notes, come from or work in places like Singapore, Hong Kong, South Africa and India. Several work in Australia, North America or Britain. The length of the chapters varies but they are on average longer than those in LATM. Not only this or the Asian focus distinguishes it from LATM. The main thrust of all chapters views languages instrumentally as skills to be traded as resources, that is commodities, in local and global labor markets. Language-in-education policies are a further common strand that link the chapters

Paul Bruthiaux, in ‘Dimensions of globalization and applied linguistics’, provides an, in parts, rather superficial survey of how applied linguists bring discussions of globalization into their work. Chapters 2–5 all consider how language choices and language policy are affected by Singapore’s participation in the changing global economy. Lionel Wee in ‘Linguistic instrumentalism in Singapore’ highlights the shift towards an emphasis on the economic value of the mother tongues such as Chinese used in Singapore. Lubna Alsagoff discusses ‘The commodification of Malay: Trading in futures’, while Chng Huang Hoon disputes Wee’s claims in ‘Beyond linguistic instrumentalism: The place of Singlish in Singapore’ and Ng Bee Chin provides an empirical study problematizing the use of colloquial English and Mandarin in ‘Linguistic pragmatism, globalization and the impact on the patterns of input in Singaporean Chinese homes’. The next three chapters deal in depth with the economic role English is playing in different countries. One of the editors, Ruanni F. Tupas, considers its role versus others in the Philippines, while, in ‘The English language as a commodity in Malaysia: the view through the medium-of-instruction debate’, Peter K.W. Tan analyzes the political and ideological construction of English in Malaysia as presented in the press. Rani Rubdy demonstrates in ‘English in India: The privilege and privileging of social class’ how English privileges the middle class over the vast majority of the population. Two further chapters address, first, on the basis of ethnographic interviews the disparate values of different languages in China (‘Negotiating language value in multilingual China’ by Agnes S.L. Lam and Wenfeng Wang) and, second, how politicians in African countries continue to be affected in their language-in-education policies by colonial language policies and how this affects the status of indigenous languages (‘Language policy,
vernacular education and language economics in postcolonial Africa’ by Nkonko M. Kamwangamalu). In Chapter 11, David Block argues on the basis of interviews with children of immigrants in Britain for a more realistic or pragmatic assessment of issues of language maintenance and shifts in ‘On the appropriateness of the Metaphor of LOSS’. The final chapter by Michael Singh and Jinghe Han presents the difficulties of integration into the teaching profession in Australia that knowledge workers from the non-Anglophone world experience in ‘The commoditization of English and the Bologna Process: Global products and services, exchange mechanisms and trans-national labour’.

Neither of the books under review has the word ‘English’ in the title. But several of the articles in LATM do; as indeed do some of those in LAC. True, they ARE written in English. So what is the relation to the phenomenon that is known as ‘englishization’ (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1999)? Is the use of ‘language’ in the title euphemistic, obscurantist or simply an indication of how ‘naturalized’ discourse on the cultural, communicational and linguistic aspects of so-called ‘globalization’ has become. Are readers expected to ‘think’ ‘English’ for ‘Language’? At any rate the word language is most definitely not simply a ‘descriptive’ term. This is made evident by the accompanying terms: ‘market’ for LATM and ‘commodity’ ‘trading’ and ‘marketplaces’ for LAC.

Here a fundamental problem with both volumes raises its head. Gallant efforts on the part of the editors or publishers to find ‘catchy’ or ‘trendy’ titles still do not preclude the almost inevitable need to focus on abstractions and generalized concepts which may well have a quantum of meaning only for some and not all potential readers. They appear to be aiming at a moving target that is either too vast (what is ‘language’, what is meant by ‘market’ and so what?) or may be attempting to situate, however tentatively, linguistic issues within a presumed dichotomous world, where ‘global’ and ‘local’ set up a species of tension to contextualize that ‘commodity’ concept.

But perhaps that is unfair; what after all is the function of a book title? Just as we might dispute whether we can judge a book by its cover, so too the title is clearly an insufficient guide. But, what of the covers? Interestingly both volumes have images on their covers; LATM has black and white photograph at the bottom of what may well be a shop or bank-like sign with the words ‘MONEY’ and ‘CAMBIO, EXCHANGE’ plus two Chinese pictographs on a green background (echoing the uniform pattern of the series already mentioned). LAC has a photograph of colorfully painted Russian dolls of varying sizes at the bottom with the title in white against a black background. What is this supposed to suggest? Perhaps they symbolize the dialectic between the global and the local. For on closer examination the dolls appear to have been hand painted, since small details give this away; they ‘look’ similar, but are not identical. After all they are ‘typical’ commodities produced not only for local purchase. Tourists to Russia often buy dolls of this kind as souvenirs or as gifts for family and friends. But they are also produced for export purposes, so arguably the interplay between title and cover image is quite apt. Hence, books with ‘market’ and ‘commodity’ in their titles may well be epitomizing the commercialization and marketization of modern life; only that which can be bought or sold counts as valuable in capitalist society. Content is considered to be of secondary importance, if at all; this is all very reminiscent of the point about the development of the mass media made nearly half a century ago by the Canadian scholar, Marshall McLuhan (1964), that the medium is the message.
Certainly, the chapters in LATM present views of the market and how language is involved that are at times complementary and at times competing. Yet the editors have worked hard to bring together many scholars who appear implicitly to share a common objective. The authors bring to bear varying methodological and epistemological, as well as disciplinary positions and critiques of the economic processes and marketization that reshape and disrupt so many lives and communities under the rubric of corporate globalization. By throwing more light on the linguistic epiphenomena accompanying it, they have done a great service to students and young researchers wishing to get to grips with this problematic area.

Reading the chapters in relation to one another highlights the fact that the experiences of and the conceptualizations of how markets and linguistic behavior interlock can most certainly be viewed in a multivariant fashion. Simultaneously, however, LATM remains firmly within a Eurocentric frame. On the other hand LAC, as indicated, has a broader multicultural and multilingual focus. The majority of the contributors deal with how commodification in post-colonial settings can be shown to have very serious and far-reaching implications for language policies and practices. Both books could be seen as containing statements concerning multilingual language users and how the impacts of globalization processes in localized contexts work through and deeply affect especially economic and thereby social life more generally. An interesting exercise to undertake would be to check how the ‘g’-word (globalization) is (being) used. How often, for instance, is it prefaced by ‘corporate’? After all we are patently living in a system of corporate-dominated capitalism whose international dimensions have multiplied in the past three decades. A simple empirical test to affirm this consists in switching on the TV when the World Cup or a similar international sports event is on air and counting the number of seconds there is NOT a corporate branding or advertising symbol, slogan or logo to be seen somewhere on the screen. There is of course plenty of other evidence, but this can suffice for the time being. So how do the authors in these books understand or elaborate globalization, if they do at all?

One definitely is made aware of the hegemonic tendencies of more than language. Language is an epiphenomenon where political and economic power is concerned. Areas of life beyond language proper are affected. The past decade and a half has seen many states experiencing fairly radical rearrangements of their linguistic, educational and other cultural, social, economic and related resources in response to the extension of the global market and neo-liberal policies, to put it euphemistically. And some of the studies, especially in LATM, demonstrate this most graphically. But the analytical treatment of what these globalization processes actually are is very unevenly provided in both volumes. Some authors make very explicit links to the real world changes that these language shifts accompany. Others appear to ignore how they are affected and simply affirmatively accept them as given, while yet others only partially critique the dominant discourses and voices of capitalism and neoliberalism. Obviously, one does not need to claim that Englishization is one of the proximate causes of global inequality. But a correlation with real-world socioeconomic processes and structures on the evidence provided in these volumes is surely undeniable.

I have already mentioned the Eurocentric frame and choice of topics of LATM and the Asian or predominantly non-European focus in LAC. In the eyes of this reviewer, these two books certainly can be recommended to researchers and students...
interested in the linguistic dimensions of globalization both for the ample data they provide and the complementary fashion in which they deal with it.

References

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