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Ideas, power and agency: policy actors and the formulation of language-in-education policy for multilingualism

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ABSTRACT

The processes of formulation of language policies have not been researched thoroughly. This paper aims to explore the relationship between ideas, power and agency in language policy-making and specifically with reference to the formulation of language-in-education policy for multilingualism in Ireland. Through an argumentative approach to language policy and using a discursive institutionalist framework, the paper examines data from policy documents and interviews with policy actors in the Department of Education and Skills. The paper reports on the ways in which agentive discourses are constrained and enabled by institutional structures. The analysis shows how power resulting from asymmetric internal forces and the hierarchical architecture of institutions prevailed over the capacity of some actors to promote their ideas through discourse. Moreover, it shows how static ideational elements are powerful structural constraints on agency. The paper argues for a conceptualisation of actors in policy-making as agentive individuals who engage in a dynamic struggle over ideas to realise complex and changing policy goals. It concludes by claiming that a focus on discursive forms of power in the policy analysis at the so-called macro level would be beneficial for language policy scholarship.

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Introduction

While globalisation, mobility and social inclusion have led to the most prolific period for language policy-making in history, the processes of formulation of language policies have not been studied extensively (Spolsky 2009; Lo Bianco 2013). The reasons for this include the many challenges in gaining access to the internal activity of governmental institutions and the shift of the focus of language policy and planning (LPP) scholarship away from governing bodies at the so-called macro level to other layers of LPP. With this state of affairs in mind, this paper examines the policy-making process behind 'Languages Connect – Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017–2026' (hereafter 'Languages Connect'), a document that marks a milestone in educational language policy for multilingualism in Ireland. In the broader international context, this policy exemplifies an attempt to respond to the challenges that some Anglophone countries are facing when it comes to foreign language learning (Bruen 2021; Henderson and Carruthers 2021).

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Following current understandings of LPP as dialogic and interpretative (Johnson and Johnson 2015), we consider LPP as any process which leads to decisions being taken at any level of society that influence language (Shohamy 2006). Our focus in this paper is, nonetheless, the institutional sphere and the actors who engage with public policy-making, and we aim to consider the relationship between power and agency to the formulation stage of the policy cycle. We do not simply take language policy-making as administrative or bureaucratic sets of procedures but as fully embedded in a terrain of interests, ideology, politics and power (e.g. Zittoun 2014). In the specific case of LPP, we concur with Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech's (2021, 4) view that 'in the development of most macro-level policy texts, agency is important for understanding how a policy text is formulated and how it evolves'. Along with dynamic approaches that call into question the 'micro–macro question' in processes of institutionalisation in LPP research (Hult 2010), we think that the adoption of an agency-oriented perspective to so-called macro processes such as language policy formulation also involves features of the micro level (Fairbrother and Kimura 2020). We understand macro and micro dimensions as a continuum of intertwining elements (Fairbrother and Kimura 2020) and both structure and agency can emerge discursively and are involved in the formulation of policy documents (Johnson 2018). One of our assumptions is that actors at any level in the institutional realm have agency, that is, the ability and power to influence their institutional context, act autonomously and make their own choices of action (Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech 2021, 2). We agree with Spolsky's (2009, 1) general characterisation of LPP as being 'all about choices' and support the idea that decision-making is of paramount importance. However, this understanding of LPP raises important questions (e.g. What is chosen? Who makes the decisions? How?) that remain without definitive answers when it comes to the formulation of language policies. We return to this in the final section.

In line with this scholarly research work and agenda, we aim to explore how a selection of ideas about language policy for multilingualism has been generated, deliberated and adopted in the Irish educational context. More specifically, we focus on two specific themes. The first is the case for an overarching, integrated language policy as opposed to a foreign languages only policy (i.e. all languages vs foreign languages); the second is an economic-oriented approach to language. Using a discursive institutionalist approach (Schmidt 2010) to language policy-making and data from policy documents and interviews with policy actors, we examine how interactive processes of ideational power (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016) operate in an institutional setting in Ireland. We argue that actors at any LPP level (not only at the implementation stage) are better conceived as both institutionally shaped and institution-shaping individuals and groups. We conclude by outlining the implications of this case study for current discussions on LPP scholarship.

Ideas and power in discursive institutionalism

Our approach lies within the 'argumentative turn' in public policy theory (Fischer and Gottweis 2012), which is an alternative perspective to analytic approaches that impose scientific frameworks on the process of decision-making and make rational assumptions. The argumentative orientation is context-sensitive, focuses on real-world problems, and emphasises communicative and argumentative practices. More precisely, we use discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2008; 2010) as the theoretical underpinning for our analysis.

Discursive institutionalism is an umbrella concept that encompasses approaches focusing on the interplay of policy ideas, discourse and institutions. It is different from other new institutionalisms (rational choice, historical, and sociological institutionalism) in that it is not deterministic and takes a constructivist stance on institutional action and change. Discursive institutionalism does not subordinate agency to structure; instead, it treats institutions both as 'given', structures that constrain the action of agents, and as 'contingent', constructs that enable agentive actions and result from their actions (Schmidt 2008). Agents are conceptualised as sentient and critical actors who engage with the ideas they hold and use discourse strategically to, for instance, argue for a given category of

perception of the social world, persuade others to change their mind about a certain definition of a problem, or impose a particular course of action for the policy cycle (Schmidt 2010).

Discursive institutionalism adopts an action-oriented approach and analyses the interactive processes of policy coordination, argumentation and communication by which agents generate, articulate and contest ideas and discourses. Ideas and discourses are two different concepts (Parsons 2007). In social science research, ideas are increasingly recognised as key factors in politics and policy (Béland and Cox 2011). Ideas are causal beliefs: they are products of cognition, posit connections between things and people, and provide guides for action (Béland and Cox 2011, 3–4). Ideas are the substantive content of discourse, occur at different levels of generality (Mehta 2011), and include two dimensions (cognitive and normative) and different forms (narratives, frames, norms and models). Discourse is a more overarching concept than ideas. It is the institutionalised structures of meaning that convey political and policy thought, and lead to action (Connolly 1983). In line with the idea that discourse is a social practice with a major role in processes of sociocultural reproduction and change (Fairclough 2013), discursive institutionalism considers discourse as the interactive process by which agents represent and channel a body of ideas in a process of wielding ideational power (Schmidt 2008). Simply put, ideas are what agents *think* about what to do and discourse is what agents *say* about what to do. From this perspective, policy construction is understood as the choice of ideas in discourse, which ultimately leads to institutional change or continuity.

We do not only focus on the discourses of elite actors, that is, the top-to-top coordinative or top-down communicative discourse of policymakers and politicians. Our approach includes bottom-up processes such as consultation and participatory practices (Walsh 2012) in which groups invested with fewer resources (e.g. language teachers and lecturers) and stakeholders with no institutional position (e.g. business representative groups and organisations that promote languages and cultures) can inform elite-proposed policies (Erdocia, Nocchi and Ruane 2020). In order to not overstate how significant bottom-up processes may be for language policy-making (Erdocia 2020a; Erdocia 2021), we pay close attention to the authoritative role that policy- and power-oriented figures such as ideational leaders, entrepreneurs (who champion a particular policy idea) and political veto players often play in decision-making. Groups and individuals have different kinds of interests and degrees of power and influence in language policy (Zhao and Baldauf 2012) and we assume the interplay and competition between different advocacy coalitions or alliance of actors who share a particular set of ideas and policy goals (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993).

Discursive institutionalism adopts an agency-oriented approach to policy-making by focusing on the interaction between actors in wielding ideational power. In other words, power is conceptualised in agency-oriented terms through ideas and discourse. Echoing Hay's (2006) conceptualisation of power, Carstensen and Schmidt (2016, 320) define ideational power as 'the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence actors' normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements'. The assumption here is that agency is not only about power but about the exercise of power through discursive means. However, this is not to say that structure and context are unimportant. While ideas can provide power, ideational structure often favours certain ideas over others and may shape how actors exercise their agency (Hay 2006). Following calls in LPP research for a balance between agency and structure (Badwan 2021; Johnson and Ricento 2013) we include in our framework the ideational structures or language ideologies on which agents are dependent.

Along with authors adopting a critical realist perspective (e.g. Bouchard and Glasgow 2019), we share the conviction that structure and agency possess distinct properties and powers. That said, we also understand institutions as built on ideational foundations, that is, as discursive constructions that result from actors' preferences, strategies, interests, relationships and actions (Hay 2006; Schmidt 2008). As Hay (2011, 69) puts it, institutions are the 'very ideas on which they are predicated and which inform their design and development'. Institutions can, therefore, be considered as ideational structures that are internal to agents. Following a discursive institutionalist approach,

ideational structures are contingent constructs of meaning that enable agents to maintain or change institutions.

To be clear, by focusing on the ideational nature of policy construction, we do not deny the existence of objective realities and a material world that are something other than discourse. We recognise that language policy-making is often constrained by a lack of resources and redistribution issues (see Erdocia, Nocchi, and Ruane 2020). But we also believe that discursive approaches are well positioned to understand the interconnectedness of power and agency, and uncover underlying processes (e.g. communicative and argumentative practices) of the social world (Barakos and Unger 2016; Källkvist and Hult 2016). When referring to ideational elements, we understand ideational structure and agency as deeply intertwined and located in people, and that the relationship between them is dialectical and iterative in nature. This interpretation, therefore, positions us along with those LPP researchers who use a constructivist perspective to examine the relationship between structure and agency (Choi 2019; Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech 2021). Yet, we believe, with Johnson (2021), that our subjectivist epistemological position is not necessarily at odds with ontological realism.

Based on these ontological and epistemological convictions, we use Carstensen and Schmidt's (2016) categorisation of ideational power for our empirical analysis of the deliberation and adoption of policy ideas in our study:

Power through ideas is the capacity of actors, including those at the bottom, to persuade others using ideational elements to adopt a certain view of what to think and do in policy terms. In short, it refers to the acceptance of ideas through communication and persuasion. This version implies an agency orientation to ideational power.

Power over ideas is the capacity to control and dominate the meaning of ideas. It occurs when elite actors exert coercive power to impose their ideas or resist the inclusion of alternative ideas in the decision-making arena. Here, ideational power connects with more compulsory forms of power.

Power in ideas is about the authority of certain ideas, based on background ideational processes that are constituted by systems of knowledge, historically specific structures of meaning, or institutional setups. In accordance with the concept of ideology, it concerns rather static ideational processes (values, assumptions, beliefs) through which institutional forms of power enhance or diminish the capacity of actors to promote their ideas.

Language-in-education policy in Ireland

In December 2017, the Irish Department of Education and Skills (DES) launched its first policy specifically for foreign languages, 'Languages Connect' (DES 2017a). The DES's intention to exclude Ireland's official languages (Irish and English) from the strategy was clearly stated from the beginning in the 'Framework for the Public Consultation' in 2014 which initiated a participatory process leading to the policy:

> This document does not consider the role of Irish and English, nor will the strategy. Significant work is currently being undertaken separately in relation to the Irish language by the Department of Education and Skills. Instead, it is intended to concentrate on the additional foreign languages that our students may learn in post-primary education and thereafter. (DES 2014, 2)

The decision in 2014 to focus only on foreign languages represented a departure from earlier DES positions on language management policy-making. An unpublished Draft Language Policy developed in the DES in 2009, recognising the multilingual reality of contemporary Ireland in a rapidly changing world, had stressed broader overarching perspectives. That document adopted a plurilingual and competence-based approach in which all languages (Irish, English and foreign languages) are included. The drafters stated that 'any language education policy for Ireland must go hand in hand with measures to support languages in the community' (DES 2009, 2) as well as Irish and, therefore, advocated for an integrated overarching language policy in education.

The all-encompassing view of languages of that earlier document followed the stance that had been taken in the 'Language Education Policy Profile' (2006), published jointly by the DES and the Council of Europe. It argued that the main challenge for Ireland was

> to shift progressively from an official but lame bilingualism (English/Irish) to the full recognition of differentiated plurilingual profiles […], where Irish would have a special place and English a central role, and where other languages would be acknowledged as part of the country's cultural and economic resources and assets as well as linked to individual identities and collective loyalties. (2006, 34)

Calls on policymakers for an overarching language policy had indeed started in the early 2000s. For instance, the discussion document 'Languages in the Post-Primary Curriculum', which was commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, states that 'in the absence of a language policy that includes English and Irish as well as foreign languages, any attempt to make changes to the present system is bound to be piecemeal and provisional' (Little 2003, 42). The Royal Irish Academy (2011, 1) similarly recommended the development of an integrated national policy for languages in education.

Yet against this background, the DES decided in 2014 to limit the focus of the proposed new strategy to languages other than the two national languages. The planned consultation and the resulting strategy would concentrate only on foreign languages because, the DES argued, they 'had received little attention up to that point' (2014, 15).

The making of 'Languages Connect'

The global financial crash and subsequent 'bailout' in 2008 introduced a prolonged period of economic austerity in Ireland, during which the government prioritised support measures for increased trade with emerging global markets. Under these circumstances, both the 'Action Plan for Jobs' in 2012 and the 'Action Plan for Education 2016–2019″ included the need for a foreign language policy to revert national deficits (low provision and proficiency standards) in foreign languages and make Irish traders and the market more competitive overall.

In line with public policy norms in Ireland, a public and stakeholder consultation on foreign languages commenced in August 2014. Language practitioners, scholars, cultural institutes and enterprise organisations contributed 71 submissions. The DES convened stakeholder seminars and meetings seeking contributions from a range of sectoral interests based on whole-of-government principles. The first of these focused on the secondary education context, and the second on higher and further education and training, and industry. The DES Minister Richard Bruton led a final round table with stakeholders in 2016.

A high-level DES team, reporting to the minister, was then appointed to draft the strategy. It was made up mainly of senior officials (assistant secretaries and above) drawn from the Management Committee (an advisory group that supports the management of the DES) and other senior professional and academic officials with direct knowledge and experience of language-in-education policy. Members represented different sectoral interests including the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit, the Languages Inspectorate (a DES unit, dedicated to the evaluation of language teaching and learning in schools), higher and further education, industry and others. Broad economic and public policy reform issues were foregrounded.

The work of this team led to the publication of a document, 'Languages Connect', consisting of two parts: 'Strategy' and 'Implementation Plan'. The implementation plan is not of interest to us here; we will focus specifically on the strategy itself. The strategy sets out four broad overarching goals focusing on language proficiency, diversification, developing language awareness in society, and enhancing engagement with employers. Importantly for this study, the document departs from an all-encompassing view of languages and focuses only on 'foreign languages', as noted above. In addition, the idea of language as an economic resource is the driving force behind the strategy (for a detailed textual analysis of the policy process, see Erdocia, Nocchi, and Ruane 2020).

The study

In this study, we focus on two specific themes (all languages vs foreign languages, and an economic-oriented approach to language), which emerged as foundational ideas of the document in a previous textual analysis of the policy process (Erdocia, Nocchi, and Ruane 2020). Our methodological approach involved the collection and analysis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four policy actors.[1] The interviews were conducted using a set of predetermined questions to stimulate participants to comment on the development of 'Languages Connect' in accord with their expertise, experience, role, and actions. The interviews were designed to prompt practical argumentation, namely, a reasoned articulation of explanatory and justifying statements about the formation of the policy (Majone 1989). Some of the questions were about, for instance, the role of and relationship among the different actors involved in the formulation of the strategy, the mode in which opposing ideas and conceptualisations of language were deliberated, how decisions were made, and the final policy formulation. Each participant was provided with the questions in advance, so they would have time to recall events that had taken place between 2014 and 2017, that is, between six and three years before the interviews. The three authors conducted the interviews and fully engaged with the interviewees. The interviews lasted for an average of one hour and were held via videoconference, recorded, and transcribed. The four participants had all been directly involved, in different roles and at various stages, in the elaboration and development of the language policy. We will refer to the participants using the pseudonyms Robin, Kim, Alex and Charlie. All are public officials with varying levels of experience in education policy and language-in-education policy.[2]

We engage in a combined analysis that consists of mapping out the thematic content of our data and an in-depth analysis of the argumentative statements. Firstly, we immersed ourselves in the policy documents and transcripts of the interviews, which revealed a wealth of information about the participants' experiences, thoughts, ideas and values. Secondly, we identified common thematic material contextualising the conditions surrounding the interview and the global circumstances of the discursive production. Although the presentation of the analysis relies mainly on the interviews, policy documents represent important reference points in the conversation with our participants (see background section for excerpts of policy statements). Following Fairclough (2013), we view texts as parts of social events which are shaped by the causal powers of structures, practices and agents. We adopt a relational view of texts and text analysis, and connect the internal relations of policy texts (content) with their external relations (interviews) through the mediation of the interdiscursivity of different kinds of texts (Fairclough 2013). For our analysis, we concentrate on specific instances of argumentation where a participant talks about how and why particular policy decisions about our two selected themes were made (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012). This set of data allows us to explore the ideas, goals, processes and policy-making dynamics in the formulation stage, which will shed light on the relationship between power and agency. As mentioned above, in our interpretation we follow Carstensen and Schmidt's (2016) tripartite framework of ideational power as power through ideas, power over ideas and power in ideas.

Ideational power in the formulation of 'Languages Connect'

The analysis is organised into two sections. First, we discuss the issue of policy relating specifically to foreign languages rather than to all languages. Following that, we consider participants' views on the market-value view of languages.

The scope of the policy: For all languages or for foreign languages?

In the public participatory process, some contributors positioned themselves against the use of the term 'foreign' in the strategy. They argued that keeping national languages out mistakenly assumes

that these are the first language(s) of all the population, that communities now living in the country do not consider their languages as being foreign but heritage languages, and that the term 'foreign' creates an 'us vs them' divide (DES 2017b, 3–4). It must be noted, however, that supporters of a general strategy for languages acknowledged that a distinction should be made within the overarching strategy between English and Irish on the one hand, and foreign languages on the other.

How and why was the decision to restrict 'Languages Connect' to foreign languages made and reasserted? The following comment is by Robin, a public official who is passionate about languages and familiar with academic research on multilingualism. They have a long experience in language education policy matters in Ireland. Paraphrasing the 2003 discussion document 'Languages in the Post-Primary Curriculum' (Little 2003) mentioned earlier, they provide insight into the dialectics of ideational power in policy formulation:

Excerpt 1 (Robin)

> 'In the absence of an overarching language policy, anything you do is going to be piecemeal and provisional.' And we kept bringing that sentence up. We'd put it into documents and it'd be edited out by someone further up the line, it was seen to reflect negatively on the department. But it's absolutely true. And we still haven't got an overall languages policy. So the decision was taken to go for foreign languages only.

Here we can see a hierarchical set of relations at play in the writing process. According to this informant, the cognitive validity of arguments based on research evidence and expert knowledge (e.g. a plurilingual conception of language learning and linguistic repertoire) did not suffice to dissuade policymakers from adopting an approach that relies on a national/foreign distinction in language education. To put this in another way, *power through ideas*, the type of ideational power which is used by experts (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016), failed to persuade decision-making actors. Robin goes on to explain their take on the process and refers to decision-makers as people

Excerpt 2 (Robin)

> who aren't, weren't experts, didn't have the background either academically or especially in languages or language education […] So there was nobody prepared really to say 'let's go for an overall policy'. Maybe they just felt it was too much … unrealistic, the kind of thing that academics and maybe people with theoretical looking … theoretical frameworks do, but that it wasn't going to be practical and Irish was already … that horse was already out of the … out of the stables.

As might be expected, different ideas and beliefs about language learning and the corresponding policy solutions are at play in the policy process. But this comment points to the conflictual dimension of policy formulation and, more concretely, the competing role that advocacy coalitions based on different forms of knowledge, evidence and professional experience (academically informed vs pragmatic public officials) play in the policy arena.

The unsuccessful attempt of experts to influence key policy actors through persuasion in Excerpts 1 and 2 extended to those actors at the lower end of the policy ladder who contributed to the public consultation. Kim, a civil servant involved in the policy process, refers to this specific point and explains how the actors at the top of the policy ladder resisted accepting alternative ideas and, consequently, monopolised the decision-making on this issue:

Excerpt 3 (Kim)

> The submissions and the consultation very much would've suggested that it should've been a languages policy, not a foreign languages policy. But it was the MAC [Management Committee] who decided that Irish should be taken out and that it should be very much focused on foreign languages. […] They felt Irish was already being looked after under a separate strategy.

This excerpt exemplifies a case of *power over ideas*, that is, the capacity of agents invested with structural power to effectively promote their ideas (a foreign languages policy) to the exclusion of others (an all languages policy).

However, ideational power is not only about holding a privileged position with control over the levers of institutional power (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016), such as having a seat on a

management committee. Ideational power also involves ensuring that the ideas of certain advocacy coalitions remain predominant. In the present case, the existence of the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language (Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media 2010), which aims to increase the knowledge and use of Irish, prevailed over other considerations. Another interviewee, Alex, corroborates this point and describes how the final decision of upper-level policy actors was based on instrumental criteria such as effectiveness and efficiency:

Excerpt 4 (Alex)

> We talked about, 'well, what are we going to … how are we going to get this done now?' And it was very clear because the Irish language strategy […] had been published some time previously. And there was a wish not to disrupt that. So it was a very simple decision. At one level it was: we're not going there. […] We're not doing English, we're not doing Irish. We're doing the other languages. And that was that … like it was no more. I know it's a big decision. I do know that, but that's how it got made.

As we can see, some public officials and participants in the participatory process challenged the idea of limiting the strategy to foreign languages, but top actors at the DES were determined to shift from the all-encompassing position towards languages that the DES itself held before 2014. This group of actors ultimately imposed their ideational power on the basis of a whole-of-government approach to language(s) and their proposal for a foreign language policy remained unchanged. The agreement of upper-level policy actors around their shared vision of compartmentalised language policies seems to have cemented their discourse coalition but also provoked a divide with other policy actors.

Our data contains examples of ideational power other than *power over ideas*. Indeed, the comments and responses of our interviewees are frequently interspersed with allusions to Ireland's history and the privileged symbolic position of Irish in the country's collective imagination (see Moriarty 2015), which serve as *power in ideas*. In other words, rather than the decision being based only on a purely pragmatic policy decision, as suggested by Excerpt 4, our participants often embed the need for a strategy specifically around Irish in background ideational discourses that are constituted by historical frames ('after the famine, the Irish language starts to disappear', 'the decision about [having a specific policy for] Irish and English goes back right to the 1940s') and a sense of national allegiance (Irish as a 'sacred cow'). The civil servant Charlie shares this kind of reflection and concludes that

Excerpt 5 (Charlie)

> Irish is difficult to [teach in] primary, like, some schools do it well, some schools don't. And the kids and the parents and everybody … they have, I don't know, they'd shout about Irish, a lot of people … But it's our culture, it's our heritage … And it's important that we have it. Maybe it's taught not in the best ways or whatever. I don't know. But there was very much a feeling that Irish needed as much attention as absolutely possible, you know? So that was all important […] So there was a feeling that because Irish is one of our two native languages, that it needed its own strategy.

Excerpts 3 and 4 represent cognitive ideas, which are proposals for action that serve to justify a given policy by speaking to an interest-based logic and necessity (Schmidt 2008). Excerpt 5, instead, includes normative values (e.g. what policymakers ought to do about Irish) to form the background of policy-making processes and legitimate a policy option (Campbell 2002). Charlie's comment exemplifies how agents exert ideational power (*power in ideas*) by employing normative ideas about the Irish language which resonate with a deeper core of principles, preferences and sentiments of at least part of public life (e.g. the minority status of Irish, Irish as constitutive of Irishness, etc.). Of course, these kinds of deeper-level ideas and discourses may act as a constraint by limiting the range of policy options that top actors are likely to perceive as normatively acceptable, as this case of compartmentalisation of languages shows.[3] This is a good example of how language policies and, more generally, institutional contexts embody the structures and constructs of meaning that are internal to social agents (Schmidt 2010).

The angle of the policy: what are languages for?

Overall, the economic approach to language learning shows up in our data as a 'frame of reference' or example of *power in ideas*, which seems to naturally draw all actors together through a common understanding of language skills as relevant for employability. At the policy level, this shared understanding of speaking a language functions as *power in ideas* because it limited the scope of 'Languages Connect'. That said, we find different kinds of ideational power (*power in ideas* and *power over ideas*) interacting and competing with each other. An example of this can be found in the following excerpt, which provides a glimpse into one interaction during our interviews. The public official Robin, who supports the economic dimension of language learning, explains how they encountered opposition to introducing a more balanced perspective in 'Languages Connect':

Excerpt 6 (Robin)

> **Robin:** The other thing is … the shift between previous work and the eventual 'Languages Connect' was that the emphasis [before] would've been very much on the benefits of plurilingualism for all sorts [of reasons]. The 2009 draft [Draft Language Policy; DES, 2009, 4] says 'there's a significant body of research which demonstrates the many benefits associated with bilingualism and plurilingualism. These benefits are cognitive, social, cultural, communicative and economic', [with 'economic'] in the last place …
> **Interviewer:** This is actually part of our questions in a certain way: what seems to strike in the ['Languages Connect'] strategy is that it goes the other way. So 'economic' actually is pushed first …
> **Robin:** Because you remember, we are coming out of a crisis, out of a collapse. And therefore, you could see that if you were going to get anything published that was going to run and have money put into it, you couldn't say 'we're doing this for cultural reasons' or 'we're doing this for cognitive' or 'this is all to help people to read Dante and Boccaccio' […] So that's what politicians do … they're not really interested in cognitive, culture, intercultural or … But that's the real world in which we live in.

With a tone of resignation, Robin underlines the unequal position of actors and groups in policy formation and depicts language policy-making as a predominantly unidirectional top-down form (Shohamy 2006) of imposition of ideas (*power over ideas*). This comment represents the classic understanding of power as controlled by political actors invested with institutional and structural authority (Barnett and Duvall 2005). However, from an argumentative perspective, this comment can also be interpreted as an example of how language policy-making is fundamentally a discursive struggle over the conceptual framing of language. What was at stake is the emphasis on the value of the goal(s) that languages can help achieve (see Erdocia, Nocchi, and Ruane 2020).

In Robin's comment, we also find an external factor that seems to act as a background ideational element by limiting the range of options available: the period of exceptional policy-making due to the economic circumstances. Indeed, Robin eloquently explains how the particular conditions of uncertainty in the post-Celtic Tiger Ireland of the early 2010s and the subsequent discursive context of crisis were embodied by policy actors and shaped the instrumental approach to language as an economic resource (Bruen 2013).

Kim provides a closer look at the formulation process and how *power over ideas* materialises. They talk about their view of why the market-led valuing of languages became so prominent in the strategy:

Excerpt 7 (Kim)

> **Kim:** The economic emphasis, from my perspective, that would've come very much from Richard Bruton, who was the minister [for Education and Skills] at the time. He was very involved. I mean, he used to read drafts and write on them, his handwriting was on earlier drafts of the strategy, which is very unusual for a minister […] he was very focused on enterprise [he was Minister for Enterprise and Employment in 1994–1997 and Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation in 2011–2016]. […] So there were some things that wouldn't have come out in submissions during the consultation, but got included because of the minister.
> **Interviewer:** So are you saying that if the minister was another person, then the final documental outcome would've been different?
> **Kim:** I'd say so, yes.

Kim's response to our question is in line with two tenets of institutional constructivism (Hay 2006): the contingent nature of policy contest and outcomes, and the fact that the preference sets or logics of action of policy actors cannot be merely derived from the institutional settings in which they are located. The market-led approach in 'Languages Connect' does not derive from (or cannot be attributed to) *a* minister but derives from (and can be attributed to) constructs of meaning internal to *this* minister, as well as some of the other actors involved, in times of economic malaise. This example encapsulates the dialectical nature of the relationship between structure and agency. It also illustrates Gusfield's (1989) idea that policy formation is an ownership activity, meaning that the economic emphasis of 'Languages Connect' is connected to the identity and background of its proposer (the minister).

The relation between income and trade on the one hand and language skills on the other was an important topic in our interviews, one that provided us with the only clear example of *power through ideas* – or the persuasiveness of ideas – in our data. In *power through ideas*, an idea is persuasive if it is relevant, applicable and coherent (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016). The next excerpt exemplifies the use of this type of ideational power. After pointing out that knowing English is not enough in the global market and that the Irish economy needs to overcome its shortage of competent speakers of foreign languages (Schroedler 2018), Charlie explains that the economic approach was about getting the policy right:

Excerpt 8 (Charlie)

> Higher Ed[ucation], they're very good at promoting themselves. They have a great marketing going on, which you hear so much about it in the media, you know? Well, modern languages didn't have that cachet or didn't have that push. And that's why we got enterprise, IBEC [Irish Business and Employers Confederation], and people from the Department of Enterprise involved in the conversations as well. Because we felt if we didn't get the mammies of Ireland to realise, and I'm dead serious about this, to realise the importance of modern languages [for their children] we were wasting our time […] the one thing I insisted on was with the last sentence of the strategy […] 'Learning a foreign language is no longer a luxury for some, but a necessity for most. It is an international key which upon turning will open many doors and opportunities for those that embrace and enjoy the challenge [DES 2017a, 40].'

Carstensen and Schmidt (2016) distinguish between the political and policy spheres in the process of persuasion. In the political sphere, agents use 'communication discourses' to translate their ideas into terms accessible to the general public. These agents aim to engage with stakeholders to form a mass public opinion that understands and supports the proposed policies. We see this in Charlie's explanation about how the group of policymakers tried to communicate with the public to persuade them about the rightness of the market emphasis in 'Languages Connect'. 'Mammies of Ireland' is the public here, an expression used to refer to those who make decisions about the educational choices for Irish pupils. For Charlie, translating the ideas developed by policy actors into language that resonates cognitively and normatively with the public is important because the public's decision will ultimately determine the success or failure of the policy.

Processes of persuasion also involve the second sphere, the policy sphere, in which actors engage in 'coordinative discourses' of policy construction with other members of the epistemic community (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016). The last part of the above excerpt exemplifies this point. Charlie strategically uses their capacity to access, persuade and convince other top actors to get that particular utterance included in the strategy. Charlie's final comment ('I insisted on'), and the contrast of the outcome here with the unsuccessful use of *power through ideas* by Robin in Excerpt 6, suggests that the success of processes of persuasion in ideational power are dependent on the position that actors occupy with respect to key decision-making centres. Charlie's reference to 'many doors and opportunities' can be interpreted as epitomising access to the global market. If this interpretation is correct, Charlie's successful process of persuasion has to do with their discourse sharing the same assumptions as those held by the elite.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Our analysis shows that the more structure-oriented versions of ideational power (*power in ideas* and *power over ideas*) played a greater role in the decision-making process that led to 'Languages Connect'. Actors certainly made use of persuasion or *power through ideas* but processes of persuasion that went against the tide of pre-established policy goals (compartmentalised language policies and an economic-oriented approach to language) were unsuccessful. Three structural factors seem to have constrained the capacity of some actors to effectively promote their ideas: a hierarchical set of relations among policy actors; static ideational processes held by top actors, such as assumptions, preferences and beliefs about language and language-in-education policy; and contingent and unpredictable circumstances such as the severe economic crisis in which Ireland was immersed.

What do these empirical findings tell us about the nature of the agency-structure relationship in LPP contexts? On the one hand, the minister's and other elite actors' leadership determined the policy process and outcome. Their actions, however, did not follow a path-dependent logic, which in this case was marked by the overarching perspective towards languages that the DES, along with the Council of Europe, had previously embraced. Structure, therefore, did not constrain the agency of elite actors, who established their own path-shaping logics and dynamics of policy change. These agentive actions arched back to influence structure but, in turn, constrained the agency-oriented ideational power (*power through ideas*) of non-elite actors. Unlike the tenets of discursive institutionalism, this study shows that the power resulting from asymmetric internal forces and, more generally, the hierarchical architecture of institutions prevailed over the agentive capacity of some actors to promote their ideas through discourse. Further research is needed to understand under what circumstances agentive discourses and actions of non-elite actors can bring about policy and structural change. On the other hand, hegemonial, static ideational elements (e.g. language skills as an economic asset and the symbolic power of Irish) are powerful structural constraints on policy agency. Although ideologies are discursively constructed products and agentive forces can potentially change them over time, they do not show up as such in our analysis (cf. Bouchard and Glasgow 2019; Liddicoat 2019). This paper shows the ideological nature of language policy formulation.

We return to Spolsky's (2009) well-known depiction of LPP as a matter of choices: as with any of the stages in the policy cycle, policy formulation is also about choices. The decision-making examples demonstrating the notion of *power over ideas* in our analysis clearly point to explicit 'efforts by language managers to control the choices' (2009, 1) in policy formulation. However, in our case study, we find a significant discrepancy with respect to Spolsky's model of LPP. Drawing on Cooper (1989), Spolsky (2021, 127–129) distinguishes between two categories of actors: managers and advocates. Managers have and exert power; advocates, unlike managers, do not have the authority assigned by governments or institutions. In other words, authority, control and force characterise the former category while promotion and persuasion are the realm of the latter. Spolsky's distinction may be useful to understand the impressive range of world cases that he presents. But the organisational and procedural configuration of our particular case study most clearly shows the model's limitations for certain situations. These include, for example, contexts where power is not exercised against one part of the population or for more *routine* national language-in-education policies in which the function of the state is less about political problem-solving (see Sharma 2021 for the language struggle in Northern Ireland) and more related to structuring and coordinating policy processes.

Take, for instance, the bottom-up mechanism of the policy process that we outline in the background section (for a detailed analysis see Erdocia, Nocchi, and Ruane 2020). A variety of individuals and groups who would normally be considered advocates in language matters contributed their ideas to the participatory consultation in 2014: scholars, practitioners, activists for language diversity, and non-profit and cultural organisations. But a range of other groups that would not be considered 'advocates' in terms of their resources, their capacity for influence and their closeness to

decision-making centres also took part in the public process: for example, economic organisations, government bodies and state agencies. As suggested in Excerpt 8, only business organisations seem to have enjoyed a prominent position to effectively promote their ideas in the development of 'Languages Connect'. From an analytical perspective, even allowing for the fact that both language teachers and economic interest groups must rely on persuasion and promotion as influencing strategies (Spolsky 2021, 127–128), it seems difficult to argue that the two groups should both fall within a single 'advocacy' category.

Actors who attempted to change the policy idea set by the DES in 2014 are located both outside and within the institutional policy sphere. At the 'management' level, ideas that in other contexts can be considered as belonging to traditional 'advocacy' figures (e.g. language experts or scholars) were particularly embodied in our data in the public official Robin, casting doubt on a stark divide between managers and advocates. Robin's ideas (of an overarching and balanced language policy) and their lack of success in having these taken up, or their lack of *power through ideas* (Excerpts 1, 2 and 6), do not appear to fit within the prototypical idea of 'managers' as unknowing policy enforcers, bureaucrat 'language tsars' (see Ayres-Bennett 2018, 236) or powerful elites (Zhao and Baldauf 2012). Persuasion and communication are strategies that also apply to public officials, administrators and policymakers in the LPP realm (Lo Bianco 2019). This is not to say that managerial operations were absent from the policy-making in the Irish context, as shown by the examples (Excerpts 3, 4 and 7) of the resistance of top actors to the inclusion of alternative policy ideas (*power over ideas*).

Spolsky seems to be aware of this broad-brush depiction of roles, actors and activities in policy-making and recognises that

> the challenge is to show which sectors or members of government actually play a role in the language management process […] We have few studies of this, unfortunately, and so are forced to speak about an undefined 'they' who constitute 'government'. (2009, 184)

As a result, he admits the necessity to rely on 'speculative suppositions about the beliefs of legislators and government ministers about language policy' (2021, 170–171).

In our study, the constantly changing configuration of academics, public officials, political actors and working groups in a non-linear, cross-government formulation process that lasted from 2009 to 2017 makes it certainly difficult to establish a clear cut typology of actors, roles and strategies. Our analysis provides empirical evidence for the field of LPP to dismiss the general misrepresentation of policymakers, government committees and public officials as both a homogeneous group and unknowing policy enforcers (see also Lo Bianco 2019; Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech 2021, 4–5). Moreover, our study has implications for the very notion of authority in language policy-making as it shows how actors relying on different frames of knowledge and professional experience (e.g. technical, academically informed, or pragmatic argumentation) compete for the authority to make decisions. Authority, therefore, appears as co-distributed among multiple levels and networks in the institutional sphere.

By bringing together ideas and power, our approach opens up new avenues for LPP scholarship to examine agency–structure dynamics in governmental actions. Such an approach overcomes the shortcomings that Ricento (2000) noted in research looking at the activity of governmental institutions in the earliest period of LPP, which was structure-oriented and did not consider agency. Our study unravels the contextual and organisational intricacies associated with the processes of decision-making by policy actors who bring different stocks of knowledge, interests and ideology (Källkvist and Hult 2016; Poudel and Choi 2021). Indeed, policies are the result of processes that are highly context-dependent. However, it is important to note that language policy texts such as 'Languages Connect' are often declarations of intention, which may turn out to be unreachable compromises. The non-inclusion of the implementation stage of 'Languages Connect' is one of the limitations of this study.

Language policy formulation is a process in which agentive individuals or groups with their respective strategic orientations engage in a dynamic struggle over ideas, often under contingent circumstances, in order to realise complex and changing policy goals in conjunction with configurations of other actors. We conclude by claiming that a focus on discursive forms of power in the policy analysis at the so-called macro level would be beneficial for LPP scholarship (Lo Bianco 2019; Bouchard and Glasgow 2019; Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech 2021). We hope that a renewed and more refined interest in language policy formation may not only increase the social impact of our field and the visibility of our scholarly work outside the academic realm but open doors for applied linguists and LPP scholars to reach and engage with institutions where policy decisions are made. We also hope that such an engagement will contribute to overcoming some of the structural constraints found in institutional contexts and bringing about language policy change.

Notes

1. An informed consent to participate was obtained. The Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee approved this research (DCUREC/2019/140).
2. To guarantee the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, the description we provide here is deliberately limited.
3. For a different approach to the management of language diversity in education in a European minority context, see Erdocia 2020b.

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