Introduction to Part 1

Literacy:
A new frontier for Canadian language policy research

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This volume presents the results of two separate seminars organized by researchers at the Official Languages and Bilingualism Institute, University of Ottawa, around the topic of language policy.[1] Part 1 deals with the interaction between public policies, policy-making processes, and outcomes with respect to the role of literacy in the integration of immigrants to Canada. In other words, Part 1 is a broad case study of research into language policy. Part 2 consists of selected papers from an invitational seminar held at the University of Ottawa with early career researchers to discuss the new contours of language policy studies. The over-arching objective of the two parts is to examine how language policy is now being researched within broader frameworks than those usually adopted by most media coverage and Canadian academic writing, all of which gravitate toward discussion of governmental intervention and regulation.

The readers of the volume will immediately note that the traditional Canadian focus on bilingualism involving two languages — English and French — is far too narrow to encompass the whole. The inadequacy of the old focus reflects both demographic changes in Canadian society and a growing awakening to the reality of what Europeans now call *plurilingualism*. In spite of academic

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[1] The seminar on *Language Policy and Adult Immigrant Literacy* at the annual meeting of the Canadian Association od Applied Linguistics, Ottawa, May 29, 2009 and the invitational seminar on *Language Policy, Language Planning, Public Policy and the Politics of Language: From Former Boundaries to New Frontiers*, Ottawa, April 28, 2010.

concerns about precise definitions and implications, the term plurilingualism may be understood in common parlance as referring to the capacities of persons who have *some* communication ability in more than one language. That communication ability in a given language may be highly variable from individual to individual, ranging from rudimentary deciphering of text in the language to the highest levels of speaking and composition. Each range of skills constitutes an individual's linguistic *repertoire*[2] (or *repertory*) for a given language. Even very low levels of linguistic skill may be useful, as can be attested by any hungry tourist peering at a menu in a foreign country where the waiters do not speak the tourist's language. Generations of immigrants to Canadian cities have included persons who spent their first days coping with the difficult task of sorting out street names and the meaning of commercial signs on storefronts.

The implications of linguistic repertoires are obvious in any discussion of language policy today. For example, the criterion of language knowledge used by the Canadian census to measure bilingualism is whether the respondent claims the ability to sustain a conversation in a given language other than the mother tongue. The marker is chosen well above the minimum threshold of a linguistic repertoire but still far below the broad, varied levels of mastery shown by highly literate and expressive individuals. Throughout the volume, the researchers must cope with the complexity of linguistic repertoires.

In this brief introduction, we would like to discuss how literacy constitutes a new frontier of research for language policy. The topic may not be clear for all readers, because firstly, the terminology used by researchers and educators to discuss literacy as developed in schools is not usually known to the general public and, secondly, policy discussions around immigration and similar topics often adopt an even narrower outlook. For the press and many influential political commentators, being "literate" is equated with simply *not* being "illiterate," that is lacking the skills to read and write a given language at a minimum level.

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[2]The term may apply either to individuals or to a speech group orcommunity. We use the terms *repertoire* and *repertory* synonymously in their plain language sense of a range of accessible communication capacities rather than the more narrow elaborations useful in discourse analysis. For an example of the latter, cf. a formal definition from an academic website (people.brunel.ac.uk/~hsstcfs/glossary.htm): "**Linguistic repertoire** is a term used in discourse analysis to refer to the resources (discourses, intersubjective meanings, etc.) on which people draw in order to construct accounts" (accessed Aug., 2011).

Literacy as a field of language policy research

The new frontiers of literacy studies have been sketched out over recent decades, leading to a difference of viewpoint that separates researchers and practitioners in the field from the general public and most opinion leaders in media and politics. As a result of conflicting definitions of literacy, public discussion of literacy in Canada today is highly confusing, just as it is in every other country.[3] The implications of current research, such as that presented in this volume, are only clear in the light of the recent emerging consensus of literacy research around what we shall call a new conceptualization of literacy.

At its root, literacy is the ability to read, write and speak a given language. Until a few decades ago, literacy was generally defined as the opposite of illiteracy, that is to say, an illiterate could speak a language but lacked the ability to read and write it. As public education became universally accessible, an illiterate became synonymous with "uneducated" and, sometimes, "uneducable" (i.e. lacking basic cognitive capacity for learning). In the 1950s and 1960s, when large-scale immigration to Canada from southern and eastern Europe was at its peak, public discourse identified immigrant language issues with the weakness of the prior schooling of the arrivals, a discourse that continues with respect to arrivals from other areas, particularly Africa and Latin America. Lack of literacy in English (or French) among immigrants was often uncritically equated with a lack of many basic literacy skills and schooling in the native tongue, as well as weaker mental capacities.[4]

Recent research on literacy has completely broken with the old definition of literate being the opposite of illiterate. A person may have a low level of literacy skills using English or French without being illiterate in English or French. The word "skill" is the key: the new definitions of literacy (there are several that more or less overlap one another) all focus on the ability to use language effectively. The ability to sustain a conversation in English or French — as noted above, the Statistics Canada definition used to define who speaks one of the official languages — does not mean that the person can actually use the language effectively in everyday life. If a person works in a job dealing with the public, for example, it is entirely possible to respond to questions in ways that use an understandable accent and correct grammar to convey substantively accurate information but which are perceived as insulting or incoherent by a

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[3]Agreeing upon common definitions of literacy in terms usable for designing evaluation studies across different countries has been the difficult outcome of many years of discussion (see Yousif 2003; UNESCO 2004, 2009).

[4]Lack of basic prior education was, and remains, a serious problem for a certain proportion of immigrants; here, we allude to the generalization from a relative few newcomers to create a pejorative stereotype applied to whole groups.

native speaker of English or French (cf. Covato 1991 for a summary of literature related to difficulties encountered by second language speakers in using forms of politeness in verbal interactions).

Linguists have tended to deal with effective language use in terms of four types of linguistic competence, as formulated by Canale and Swain (1981): grammatical, sociolinguistic (social appropriateness), strategic (communication strategies) and discourse cohesion and coherence. The example just given (accent, grammar, substance correct but contradicted by a native speaker's intuitively negative response) can easily be explicated by some combination of shortcomings in one or more of the dimensions formulated by Canale and Swain. All of these dimensions are, of course, implicit in the new definition of literacy.

Newer definitions of literacy extend the concept beyond the linguistic aspects of communication: the new literacy includes as well competence in using language(s) to deal with real-life situations. This means that a person living in a rural environment of a lesser-developed country might well be considered fully literate but, with the same level of basic linguistic skills (assuming the same language is involved in both cases), might not have literacy capacity to cope with everyday life as a citizen in a developed, knowledge-based economy in one of Canada's major cities. Since so much of modern life involves interacting with digital information, literacy is gradually expanding to involve the ability to interact with electronic media and to cope with problems that may require use of mathematical concepts at various levels.

In other words, modern literacy definitions include problem-solving ability, "numeracy" and capacity to communicate and interact with other persons using modern electronic media. Both problem solving and numeracy are subject, of course, to multiple definitions. For theoretical background, readers should refer to the literature summarized in this volume by Jezak as well as to the discussion by Corbeil on the practical and theoretical issues involved in measuring literacy in its modern definition. The chapter by Kayed outlines practical steps that have been taken by the government of Canada to provide a common baseline to gather information regarding existing language training programs for immigrants and their effectiveness in practice. Still, in a practical dimension, it is important not to confuse the ability to process words on computer software with competence in communicating with another person via electronic media: even native speakers of English or French with good prose skills may need special training to craft email messages that are not misunderstood or insulting — "socially appropriate," to use the first of the Swain-Canale dimensions.

The fact that new definitions are being pursued by specialists in the field of literacy does not explain entirely a current paradox in Canadian public pol-

icy development: while a good mastery of writing and use of written materials seems today to be a major factor in the social integration of immigrants, particularly in the workplace, policies still focus largely on the acquisition of a basic spoken language. Researchers must ask the question: why is it that the immigrants' literacy needs in Canada do not necessarily translate into more appropriate language policies? The first answer is that immigrant literacy is off the radar, so to speak, because it is not perceived to be of great importance, an issue to which we return below. The second answer is in the policy process itself.

The responsibility for the literacy rights of immigrants is negotiated in Canada between the decision makers at macro-, meso- and micro-policy levels: vertically, between various levels of government (federal and provincial), and horizontally, between different provincial and local authorities as well as a host of non-governmental participants, the business sector and community organizations. The result is a certain lack of coherence reflecting unclear demarcations between the respective responsibilities of the various suppliers of programs, the necessary decentralization and variability of language services offered and a perception that resources for the language training of immigrants are seriously insufficient. The consensus among researchers is that available data sources render it impossible to paint a precise portrait of the language services offered to immigrants, despite certain federal or provincial standardization initiatives, such as the Canadian Language Benchmarks.

At the same time, this complex political structure embraces implicitly a particular discourse on literacy. Unlike specialists in the field, decision makers at the macro-policies level do not favour a holistic vision of this phenomenon. Thus, in the official documents, there is a perception of literacy as a set of individual cognitive skills and not as a social practice. From this perspective, it seems possible to activate the specific literacy skills *à la carte*, for example, by a workplace literacy crash course — a bit like choosing snacks in a cafeteria. In its more refined forms, political discourse equates literacy with "the use of printed material to function in a society", though many practical issues are discussed at local levels with undertones that suggest the old idea of "remedying illiteracy," which shifts blame to the "illiterates" for any failure of policies or programs. At best, the functional aspects of literacy are highlighted, rather than the humanist dimensions put forward by the specialists, or the personal security and well-being of immigrants as promoted by community representatives.

In spite of the complexity of political structures for decision making, the dominant assumptions of the past decades are being increasingly challenged. Surveys of literacy conducted mainly by Statistics Canada (see the chapter by Corbeil) reveal that adult immigrants have significantly lower levels of literacy in official languages than the average Canadian-born citizen. Among both

native-born and immigrant populations are groups that do not reach the minimum threshold of skills necessary to function in our knowledge-based society.

While this volume emphasizes issues related to immigrants, it is important to note that major sectors of native-born Canadians suffer from serious literacy shortcomings due to historical insufficiencies in educational services and/or ongoing mismatches between educational services and their linguistic and cultural needs. The literacy issues affecting the Métis, First Nations and Inuit populations, in particular, deserve consideration in a far more multifaceted way than can even be sketched in the context of this publication.

One of the challenges to current policy and practice derives directly from research methodologies. Questions must be asked about the adequacy of the literacy indicators available for analysis of immigrant literacy. Currently, immigrants' literacy profiles are analyzed mainly by using simple indicators such as age, ethnic origin and schooling. This way of proceeding leads to an understanding of broad tendencies but can result in contradictory interpretations of causes of problems and related solutions. One cannot translate a socially complex phenomenon into simple indicators, a dilemma largely recognized nowadays in social sciences. The difficulties for policy making arise because the broad tendencies require solutions that address the diverse social phenomena involved that affect individuals and sub-groups.

We believe that the political decision makers would be more open to engage in the dialogue on literacy needs if they were presented with a more differentiated system of indicators as a means for interpreting the immigrants' results. Reconsidering literacy indicators is an important challenge of great social relevance which requires deliberate cooperation and dialogue between researchers and policy makers. This volume represents one contribution to that interaction.

Every indication is that significant advances require that public policies address literacy in its much broader definition and its real-life implications for individuals and society. Literacy levels affect all citizens, not just those of recent immigrant origin or citizens-in-waiting. From the new formulations of literacy, it follows that literacy abilities are context-dependent rather than absolute. Gone is the old distinction between illiterate and literate. The simple dichotomy is replaced by a sliding scale of ability whose value depends on where people live and what they do. The massive transformations in Canadian society during the past 150 years mean that many citizens born in Canada with English or French mother tongue share with immigrants the same problems of adapting to new literacy needs. If policy makers can find ways that will better address the needs of adult immigrants, it is imperative that the beneficiaries of new policies should also include persons born in Canada, not just immigrants.

In this brief introduction, we have shown that literacy represents an area

where language policy converges with other policies to create a new frontier of research. The first basis of this is that the field itself is shifting, in the light of new social needs that dictate adopting different definitions corresponding to literacy. And, if it is not already obvious, it will be evident from the articles in this volume that, in the public sector, many different types of economic, social, educational and legal policy affect literacy — even if they are *not* in the linguistic domain nor even nominally language policy in overt content — and must be considered, therefore, language policy in terms of impact. A policy that differentially affects members of any group because of their language affiliation, linguistic repertoire or language culture, *must* be considered a language policy.

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