

## REVIEW

\*\*\*

## RESENSIE

Jan Blommaert & Piet van der Avermaet. 2007. *Taal, Onderwijs en de Samelewing: De kloof tussen beleid en realiteit*. Antwerp: Epo. pp 117.

Over the past twenty years or so, there has been a heightened awareness throughout the world of a need to acknowledge or strengthen the position of a particular language or of particular languages. The ensuing language policies are inevitably political.

In their extended academic essay, Blommaert and van der Avermaet usefully reflect on what a language policy can and cannot do and the importance of basing it on sound research. Their critique exposes the dangers of the new language education policy in Flanders, which was introduced in response to the marked differences in performance on PISA (an international assessment of skill in science, mathematics and reading) between those who were mother tongue speakers of Dutch and those who were not. This requires an almost exclusive focus on formal knowledge of standard language. The authors see a chasm between the policy and reality. They systematically explore the weaknesses in the arguments the Flemish minister of Education puts forward to justify the policy and the solutions it hopes to effect.

Although their analysis of the ways in which the policy is pernicious relate to the particular situation in Belgium, it has much broader implications. Blommaert and van der Avermaet underline the problem of making decisions based on ideological views of language:

Het problem ontstaat wanneer men die ideologische visie op taal gaat zien als als de realiteit van taal, wanneer taalideologie gaat verwarren met taalrealiteit. Op dat moment gaat twee dingen verloren: één, de rationele basis van beleid, en twee, de relevantie van beleid. (p. 13)

When an ideological view of language is mistakenly seen as reality, two things are lost: both the rational basis and the relevance of the policy. In the case of this policy, the authors have two main concerns. First, an exclusive focus on 'the standard' form of a language is not in the interests of the learners concerned. It will not equip them for the world outside the classroom, and as such is a recipe for greater inequality. Ironically even performance in the PISA assessment requires being able to interpret texts rather than having a mere knowledge of language. For instance, some test items assess multimodal literacy so require cultural capital. Second, exclusively formal learning of language denies the linguistic capital that the learners already have and the many informal means of learning a language that are available.

Blommaert and van der Avermaet begin by identifying the fallacious assumptions which underlie the policy. The first is the assumption that the Pisa literacy test measures language competence rather than only a small part of the way in which language may be used. The test is based on an outdated western European notion that texts are the vehicles that carry information, so that what one could term technical or instrumental literacy is all that is

required. The second is that poor performance in the literacy tests can be laid entirely at the door of inadequate knowledge of a language. Because this reasoning ignores complex socio-economic structures of inequality, it strengthens and entrenches them (p. 19). As Blommaert and van der Avermaet point out, 'zerotaligheid' (little or no Dutch), the term used in the policy document, did not affect the performance of learners from high income backgrounds at international schools who had little or no Dutch; it was only the immigrants at state schools who did so poorly. Despite this, the nature of the literacy problem is defined as a lack of knowledge of 'standard' Dutch.

The third fallacy is that what learners need is the language variety that would provide access to high-level jobs. The authors point out that only a minority of the population can expect to be in jobs of that kind, any way. The fourth fallacy is that setting things right requires a structural approach to language with a strong focus on correct use of grammar, spelling and punctuation. The fifth fallacious assumption is that stringent control in the form of frequent internal and external monitoring and testing is the best way to ensure that the policy is implemented and consequently that all learners will master the standard form of Dutch. The policy also makes provision for English, French and to some extent for German to be learnt using the same approach.

In exploring the contribution that Blommaert and van der Avermaet make, it is important to note that they are not opposed to schools' teaching standard language. What they are opposed to is an exclusive focus on it and also the sense that there is a correct, high status form of the language which should properly be used in all circumstances. Blommaert and der Avermaet give a range of examples to demonstrate that although in academic contexts the standard variety is appropriate, in others it would not be. Surgeons, actuaries and legal practitioners, for instance, would use professional jargon; in most informal or intimate contexts, dialectal varieties or mesolectal forms would be used.

In demonstrating that use of language has to take account of particular circumstances, they point to the fact that Turkish, Arabic, Russian, English and French rather than Dutch dominate in many parts of Belgium. In many ways English offers the kind of mobility, the minister claims for Dutch. English offers access to cable TV programmes, the internet and jobs in international companies. Paradoxically, however, by being given a larger picture of the way a particular language functions in Flanders, learners could gain greater appreciation of the role and function of standard language, in particular the domains in which it is appropriate.

Of particular interest are the points made in four areas: language as a dynamic socio-cultural instrument; the ideal mother tongue speaker myth; informal learning situated in the worlds learners live in; and the multimodality of a language.

The authors' arguments for presenting language as a dynamic socio-cultural instrument are pithy and powerful. The danger of teaching a language as if there were one genre, one style and one register is that it ignores the learners' need to be able to use language appropriately in different circumstances. Formal linguistic competence is not enough: learners need to acquire sociolinguistic generative competences so they have the ability to shape language to meet particular purposes or what Cummins (2000) refers to as situated social competencies. An exclusive concern with denotational correctness ignores indexical meanings such as affective or emotional meaning, epistemological knowledge meanings and socio-categorising meanings.

Learners need to have a repertoire of variants of the languages they study and an understanding of the social practices in which these would be appropriate: their present and future social identities are critically related to the registers they can employ in social, personal and professional situations.

The new policy is based on the myth that mother tongue speakers have extensive receptive and productive knowledge of their language. As Blommaert and Avermaet point out, however, the possibilities of a particular language must not be confused with the possibilities of all its speakers: the majority of Dutch mother tongue speakers would find their book difficult to read, for instance. Ironically, they are likely to find the English words of songs sung by Amy Winehouse or the Beatles more accessible.

In showing the shortcomings of an exclusively structural view of language and the concomitant formal approach to language teaching, Blommaert and van der Avermaet present sophisticated and complex arguments that are directly related to language as a dynamic socio-cultural instrument. A formal, structural approach fails to take account of intralingual diversity because of its overriding concern with discrete or decontextualised activities such as forming or interpreting grammatically correct sentences or the technical ability to connect sentences to form a text. There is no mention of register, genre, purpose or context. Apart from the limitations of developing competence in a vacuum, a formal structural approach denies the power of informal learning. The authors draw on anecdotal evidence from an interview with a ten year old boy who had at that point never had any formal instruction in English. In this case, the boy had learnt quite a lot of English from singing English songs at his school and at his music school, during visits to South Africa and England and from computer games. They also point out that although successful acquisition of a high level of competence in French remains elusive for learners in Flanders, the situation with regard to English is very different. They argue that that is because French is rarely heard in the environment since there are few TV or radio programmes. On the other hand, there is wide exposure to English. Among other things it is used by icons like Eminem, Bob Marley and Madonna; it is the predominant language of the internet; most games are in English; and labels on designer clothes are in English.

Blommaert and van der Avermaet highlight the ways in which formal structural learning marginalises the very learners that the policy is supposed to benefit. Instead of building on the linguistic repertoire that these learners already have and extending that, it places no value on the variants that they have and is concerned to transfer a discrete set of knowledge as if it is not in a continuum with what they already know.

In a related point, they provide a number of examples to illustrate the need to take account of the multimodality of language.

Although their analysis of the reasons that makes the language policy pernicious relate to the particular situation in Belgium, it has much broader implications. One, language cannot provide the sole explanation for poor school or academic performance. The role of complex socio-economic factors, the quality of the teaching and the nature of the curriculum has to be taken into account if disadvantage is not to be entrenched. Two, teaching of language must take account of the linguistic and cultural capital children bring to school and build and extend their repertoires. Three, performance in literacy tests has to be placed in perspective so

that language teaching is not skewed in service of better performance in these tests. Measures of language competence should take account of the literacy practices learners engage in now and what they are likely to engage in in the future. Four, learning the standard variant of a language is important because most published texts are written in this mode and tertiary study requires it. However, learners will require far more than this in their day-to-day social and vocational interactions.

In the light of a current concern to equip educators to function effectively in multilingual environments, the succinct sociolinguistic perspective the authors offer could very usefully form part of teacher education programmes, both pre-service and in-service. Perhaps it would be even more useful for language policy makers because it highlights the way in which a language policy can seriously disadvantage the very people whose interests it aims to promote. It would be important, however, to bear in mind the particular context in which this essay was written. The views of sociolinguists, including the authors, are referred to disparagingly in the policy document. In writing their response, the writers feel called on to state their case very strongly. Without taking this context into account, they could be seen to as overstating their case. It should also be remembered that they do not set out to offer an alternative language policy: their concern is to identify the weaknesses in the new language policy in Flanders, and to open up the complex ways in which language is actually used.

**Elaine Ridge**  
**University of Stellenbosch**