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Policy recommendations for language learning: Linguists' contributions between scholarly debates and pseudoscience

Some language acquisition researchers not only pursue their scholarly agenda but also act outside academia as experts in language policy making. The idea of being socio-politically relevant can be seductive, and often our universities or funding agencies explicitly ask us to engage with societal matters. But the relationship between scholarly quality and political impact is complicated: Bad science can inform well-meant (and possibly good) policy just as good science can inform bad policy. Only rarely in our domain do we see examples of policy that is based on robust scholarly evidence, and one of the points of this talk is that this is not only the fault of policy-makers and politicians.

In this contribution, I focus on research findings in language learning that have been taken up in language planning and policy -- for example, the notion of linguistic interdependence. Drawing on concrete cases I discuss two problems in the relationship between scientific evidence and policy recommendations: robustness and fit. Robustness refers to the methodological quality of scholarly work: where there are methodological inadequacies in the scholarship this lack of robustness may have led scholars, opinion formers, and policy-makers to problematic or even utterly false conclusions. Fit is the degree to which the theoretical and empirical quality of scholarly investigation is directly related to its usefulness in application: this is often wrongly assumed, and indeed I argue that there are perfectly sound and valid scholarly approaches that nevertheless do not translate directly into policy-relevant applications. A critical review of influential claims in our field with respect to robustness and fit should allow us to determine which theories and research strands may be useful for language policy recommendations and which are probably not. A critical review of linguists' involvement in policy-making suggests that often a more appropriate moniker for so-called evidence-based policy would be policy-based evidence.

In my discussion, I address two delimitation problems: defining the boundary between pseudoscience and real science (in the wide sense of the term, including social sciences and humanities), and defining the boundary between scholarly rigor and political advocacy by academics.