Creating republican machines: Language governmentality in the United States

Nelson Flores [*]

University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, 3700 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, United States

A B S T R A C T

Scholars have traditionally framed the study of early U.S. language policy around levels of tolerance for languages other than English. This article argues that this framing overlooks a larger epistemological shift occurring in the era associated with a shift toward liberal democratic governance. Specifically, the article uses the Foucauldian-inspired framework of language governmentality to examine how early U.S. scholars of language played an integral role in the development of a new language rationality designed as part of a larger political rationality to produce governable subjects to fit the needs of the newly emerging U.S. democracy—what early U.S. leader Benjamin Rush referred to as "republican machines." It then demonstrates how both sides of the contemporary debate on making English the official language of the United States continue to perpetuate this language rationality in ways that reinforce social inequalities.

Scholars of language policy in early U.S. society have tended to frame their study of this time period around levels of tolerance for linguistic diversity. Though some have argued that early U.S. society was a time of tolerance toward language diversity (Crawford, 1999; Heath, 1976; Wiley, 2013), and others have argued that it was a time of ambivalence toward language diversity (Ovando, 2003; Schmid, 2001), the underlying framework for analyzing early U.S. language policy has been fairly consistent. In this article, I seek to use the concept of language governmentality to move beyond this framing of early U.S. language policy. Specifically, I argue that early U.S. scholars of language played an integral role in the development of a new political rationality designed to produce a new type of governable subject to fit the needs of a liberal democratic society—what early U.S. leader Benjamin Rush referred to as "republican machines."

I begin by exploring Foucault's concept of governmentality and examining the ways that it has been taken up by scholars in critical applied linguistics. Next, I provide an overview of the traditional narrative surrounding the early U.S. language policy. I then offer an alternative to this traditional reading of this history through the framework of language governmentality, demonstrating the role of language in the development of a new political rationality that merged a nationalist agenda with democratic discourses as part of the production of republican machines. Finally, I connect this re-reading to the modern English-Only debate and argue that both sides of this debate continue to reproduce this language rationality in ways that reinforce social inequalities.

1. The rise of governmentality

Before the modern era, power relations in Europe were characterized by what Foucault (1978) called *sovereign power* where power was centralized through deference to God and/or a sovereign monarch. With the challenges to this sovereign

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*   Tel.: +1 215 898 7913; fax: +1 215 573 2109.
    E-mail address: nflores@gse.upenn.edu

power that culminated in the European Enlightenment, a new form of power emerged. Foucault (1978) characterizes this new power as "the omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another" (p. 93). That is, under sovereign power there was a clearly identifiable source of power that repressed those who challenged it. With the shift toward modern era power was no longer repressive but rather productive in that it sought to produce ideal governable subjects—it is this reconfiguration of governance that Foucault calls *governmentality*, which he defines as the "art of government" and the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault, 2007).

Governmentality can be best understood as a political rationality that circulates through a multitude of institutions as part of the production of governable subjects within a specific socio-historical context (Miller & Rose, 1990). Importantly, governmentality does not emerge exclusively (or perhaps even primarily) from the State. Instead, it is developed and circulated through a range of *technologies* which Miller and Rose (1990) define as "mechanisms through which authorities of various sorts have sought to shape, normalize and instrumentalize the conduct, thought, decisions and aspirations of others in order to achieve the objectives they consider desirable" (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 8). In particular, Miller and Rose (1990) highlight the power of expertise developed in the newly emerging human sciences of the early modern era as "key resources for modern forms of government [that] have established some crucial conditions for governing in a liberal democratic way" (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 2). That is, through the lens of governmentality the shift toward liberal democratic governance is not understood as a shift away from relations of power but rather as a shift toward new relations of power embedded within a new political rationality embedded within the discourse of an objective pursuit of knowledge.

Language plays an integral role in the circulation of governmentality. As Miller and Rose (1990) note: "it is in language that programs *of government* are elaborated" (p. 6) through the development of "shared vocabularies, theories and explanations" (p. 8). In other words, part of the development of a particular political rationality is the development of a shared way of framing and describing issues. Walter-Greene and Hicks (2005) elaborate on this point and argue that governmentality not only entails shaping the words people use but also how they say them through molding people such that they "regulate and transform their communicative behaviors for the purpose of improving their political, economic, cultural and affective relationships" (p. 101). That is, language is integral to governmentality in that it serves to frame how issues are discussed and how people are expected to use language.

Critical applied linguists have built on the idea that language is integral to governmentality to develop the concept of *language governmentality*. Specifically, language governmentality describes the process of "how decisions about language and language forms across a diverse range of institutions (law, education, medicine, printing) and through a diverse range of instruments (books, regulations, exams, articles, corrections) regulate the language use, thought, and action of different people, groups, and organizations" (Pennycook, 2006, p. 65). Language governmentality challenges the state-centric view of language policy and seeks to examine the multitude of social institutions and practices that intersect in the formation of governable ethnolinguistic subjects (Johnson, 2013; Pennycook, 2002). Informed by Foucault's genealogical method (Foucault, 1984), language governmentality seeks to develop a "critical and effective history [that] disavows the beliefs in transparent language, historical progress, enlightenment, or emancipation, constantly seeking to question the discursive construction of reality, both in the past and the present" (Pennycook, 1998, p. 26).

Importantly, research informed by language governmentality does not rely on predetermined ideas of what language is nor does it seek to discover any objective truth about the nature of language. That is, unlike research on language ideologies, which tends to focus on the ways that language is used as a tool of repression in the hopes of discovering the true nature of language (see Lippi-Green, 1997), language governmentality focuses on the productive aspects of language and the ways that the very meaning of the nature of language changes alongside shifts in political rationality (Pennycook, 1998). Therefore, language governmentality goes beyond an examination of the role of language in framing issues and the ways that language is controlled within a specific political rationality. Language governmentality also examines the ways that understandings of language itself (what I refer to in this paper as *language rationalities*) change as part of a move toward a new political rationality.

Though language governmentality has been a prominent and influential framework in critical applied linguistics, there has been little work on examining the role of language governmentality in the U.S. context. The scant work that does exist has focused on contemporary rather than historical issues (Johnson, 2013). That is, there has not been a systematic examination of the role of language in shaping the rise of governmentality in U.S. history. Nevertheless, critical applied linguistics who utilize the framework of language governmentality have argued that this approach "sheds light on the ways in which the move from supposedly more authoritarian to more liberal government may be accompanied by increasing modes of governmentality through a greater multiplicity of modes of surveillance" (Pennycook, 2006, p. 65). In other words, language governmentality offers the possibility of developing a rigorous historical perspective that allows for more nuanced discussions of the relations of power embedded within language rationalities associated with modern democratic societies (Tollefson, 2006). In this article, I take up the challenge of examining the role of language governmentality in liberal democracies with a specific focus on its role in shaping the early years of the U.S. language policy and its subsequent effect on current U.S. language policy debates.

2. The traditional narrative of early U.S. language policy

Before using the lens of language governmentality to analyze the early years of U.S. language policy, it is first necessary to examine how this history has traditionally been framed. Heath's (1976) seminal exploration of the early years of U.S.