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Fernández Bajón, Ma. Teresa; Pérez Ruiz, Leonor
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EFFECTS OF SCIENTIFIC POLICIES IN THE SPANISH UNIVERSITY: RESEARCH PROJECTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

REPERCUSIÓN DE LA POLÍTICA CIENTÍFICA EN LA UNIVERSIDAD ESPAÑOLA:
PROYECTOS DE INVESTIGACIÓN EN LENGUA Y LINGÜÍSTICA INGLESA

*M^a Teresa Fernández Bajón¹
Leonor Pérez Ruiz²*

Abstract: We briefly explore the relationships between scientific and educational policies and the Spanish university system, and try to identify some converging themes in these fields and some future directions for the improvement of the scientific research done at tertiary level. This article also offers a general view of the different funded research projects in English language and linguistics carried out by Spanish university groups with the aim of reporting on the trends and interests.

Key words: SCIENTIFIC POLICY, EDUCATIONAL POLICY, ENGLISH LANGUAGE, LINGUISTICS, RESEARCH PROJECTS

Resumen: Pretendemos explorar de forma breve las relaciones entre las políticas científicas y las educativas en el sistema universitario español, y a su vez intentar identificar algunos temas concluyentes y futuras direcciones para la mejora de la investigación llevada a cabo en la universidad. También daremos un repaso general a distintos proyectos de investigación financiados que se llevan a cabo por grupos de investigación en universidades españolas en lengua y lingüística inglesas con el fin de señalar las tendencias e intereses de los investigadores.

Palabras clave: POLÍTICA CIENTÍFICA, POLÍTICA EDUCATIVA, LENGUA INGLESA, LINGÜÍSTICA, PROYECTOS DE INVESTIGACIÓN

1. Some aspects of the concept of policy

It is not odd to have politicians publicly recognizing in their speeches how difficult it is to define the term policy. When a government announces a policy, what it is doing is putting forward an ordered and coherent list of ideas, values, general criteria, intentions and objectives that will orient their decisions and lines of action, in a specific field of social life which is considered as a priority.

¹ Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

² Profesora universidad de Valladolid (España) durante más de 15 años. Ha publicado numerosos trabajos sobre retórica contrastiva, análisis del género, lenguajes de especialidad, expresión escrita con fines académicos y científico-técnicos y traducción. Universidad de Valladolid. Dirección electrónica: lperezru@fyl.uva.es.

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In a general sense, we can define policy as the group of logical relationships, conceptual instruments, organizations, financial resources and legal norms, which aim to attain a goal or a set of goals. For Koontz and Wihrich (2001) a policy is a type of scheme consisting of general statements or criteria which orient or channel thought when making decisions, thus limiting actions. But not all policies are general statements, they often simply emerge from the actions of administrators. In other words, policies can be registered or not, as general statements.

Policies are instruments which can help to determine priorities, to deal with the most serious problems and even to tackle situations or conflicts before these turn into real problems. According to Illanes Frontaura (1999), formulating a policy provides the necessary guidelines to make the appropriate decisions in order to accomplish all the set aims. Therefore "*a policy may be defined as a definite course or principle of action selected from among alternatives to guide present and future decisions and actions*" (Vogt, 2008). More specifically, in line with Horton (1997), a policy is a public statement of intent and rules of conduct that are usually standardized. These official statements consist of a set of flexible objectives, a vision, a direction, a set of organizational values and norms or other types of guidelines or principles that any company or social or professional group will unconditionally support and will also remain faithful to in their daily work.

Without doubt, social tensions are channelled remarkably by means of determined policies, but we should be conscious that even though these are necessary and desirable, they cannot guarantee the fulfilment of what they declare. It is in the shaping of these policies that their intentions can be identified or traced. Consequently, if policies are identified by these statements of intent, their success or lack of success is marked by what they accomplish. In fact, we should clearly distinguish between the purpose of a policy and the overall results achieved with the implementation of that policy. The value of a policy can be measured by means of the existing coherence or consistency between the intentions and the results. This consideration focuses and broadens the term governmental policy to governmental actions and attitudes, which are not only connected but formalized.

It is a fact that policies are initiated when the existence of an important problem that needs to be addressed is stated. They undergo a real metamorphosis, becoming State policies instead of government policies when they go from being merely representative of the government's

convictions and aims to reflecting the aspirations and ideas of society, thus acquiring the greater adhesion and stability that State policies have.

Atherton (1978) defines policy as a general statement of intent that helps translate the objectives of the programmes into achievements, providing administrative guidelines for decision making and implementation. She gives her own ideas about policies and procedures by affirming that policies are guiding standards whereas procedures constitute the exact wording of the execution details. In other words, she implies that every procedure indicates the best means of developing a task or reaching a goal, usually in a logical and chronological way. Policy, on the contrary sets its limits on action.

Likewise, Koontz and Wihrich's opinion is that there is a close relationship between strategy and policy; they mark out, orient and structure plans and they also affect all the areas of administration; although these authors also acknowledge that there are at least two views regarding strategies. All in all, policies are instruments or techniques of the administration to accomplish the planned goals. The aim of a policy is to ensure that the decision making process or the action process does not go beyond certain restrictions or boundaries.

2. Scientific policy

The basic premise of our argument is that scientific policy has the mission of disseminating the culture of science: how it is produced, how it progresses, as well as the role of current society and its significance for the countries' economy. Its duty is to play a major role in promoting and spreading knowledge of research and its value as a source of economic development and wellbeing.

Faced with this prospect we agree with Primo (1994) that scientific policy is a set of government regulations which are aimed at organizing the research potential of a country and directing its activity towards scientific, technological, economic and social developmental objectives, within its global policy. These policies, whether scarce or plentiful, indicate on the one hand the importance a specific society gives to science, and on the other hand, what governments are really interested in.

There is no doubt that the existence and reality of these policies is reflected in the quantity and quality of the resources that allow the researcher to carry out his investigation and to

publish and propagate it. Thus, scientific policy is, above all, a policy of objectives; it has to be integrated in the social and economical policy of the government and strongly coordinated with it. Therefore it has to be planned in the long term and it should be agreed on among the opposing political forces, and not affected by government changes.

As it is well known, science is progressively more connected with government boards due to different reasons; not only because of the officials' need of scientific and technological information in order to make political decisions, but also because they are the basis of economic development. Indeed, present society has shown us how government policies are conditioned by scientific and technological realities, and that politicians know them and keep them in mind when making decisions. This idea was expressed by Mitterrand during a gathering with 75 Nobel laureates in 1988; he stated that science tends to change our habits, determine our preferences and design our future; that is why politicians should be modest about science. Hence, politicians should have a clear picture of the value of science and of scientific and technological research to the economic development and the economic policy of a country. When this is not so, the result is negative. All in all, research is a social concern and politicians should be fully aware of this in order to face it.

But this influence is reciprocal, and society also affects science; in consequence science should adapt to a country's social and economical needs. Science has been attributed a social function that sets the guidelines of our research and is therefore involved in our society's problems and in our worries as citizens, thus responding to social demands.

Scientific research is channelled through the temporary plans of R&D (research and development) which are considered as the base of national competitiveness, and they are created when governments become aware of the fact that scientific and technological research are basic to the countries' survival. A general opinion, also stated by Primo (1994), is that R&D's policy should be decided in terms of the general socio-economic policy and never independently from it. This means that the majority of the scientific community should adapt their objectives to the technological, economic and social problems of their people.

Another important aspect that should be considered in connection with scientific policy is the existing interaction between documented information policy and scientific research policy. What is more, whatever is fostered and developed in the former, will be of advantage to the

latter. Beyond any doubt, the root of any documented information policy comes from the citizen's implicit constitutional right to information i.e. searching, receiving and disseminating information.

Considering the social, cultural, scientific and economic implications that many countries are currently having in their developmental policies, the study of information and documentation policies is currently an important turning point. The connection between scientific policy and national information policy makes us consider the former as a subsystem immersed in the national policy and in the culture and education fields.

3. Scientific research and university

University research with a training orientation is an important area of scientific policy. In fact, for Ortega y Gasset (1982) the mission of the university is basically to train the university specialists required by society, to be a repository and promoter of today's culture, and to produce new science and train scientists; as we see it, these functions concern us all and have a direct relation with culture. Therefore, the university cannot live isolated from its social environment.

Luis Bermejo (1929), vice-chancellor of Madrid's Universidad Central, suggested that the university flourishes or declines depending on its perception of the support, interest or lack of interest of society. He added that the Spanish university has its origin in the broad spirit of thirst for knowledge, universality and tolerance. He also admitted that national difficulties are always an insurmountable obstacle for most activities, especially teaching and research. In this respect, the university should try to meet the needs of society. Following Primo, if scientific research is the source that provides power to the university and if this is basic to society, it is clear that the analysis of the characteristics and performance of the university should be important to society.

The mission of the university in terms of research has a twofold purpose of informing and refreshing its educational and cultural functions. Only if research is done, can the dynamics of every type of science be felt; that is why research is essential for the university, not only because of the science it produces but for the mere action of producing it authentically.

The research done at the university is essentially formative. Its paramount objectives are to instruct teachers and to train scientists. So, if the university's most important goal is to prepare good professionals and scientists, what is desirable and what is pursued is that teachers become good researchers and educators. Authors like Desantes-Guanter and López Yepes (1996) take up in this idea by saying that the university is an institution where, by working in research projects, researchers are trained.

University research is sovereign; nevertheless, the different scientific policies may find ways of attracting that research towards social areas, of priority interest, without distracting it from its educational mission. According to Primo, producing scientists is more important to the university than producing science, despite the fact that both aspects go together. In a word, the university should stimulate creative imagination, educate the spirit and train students in the research methods.

4. Research Projects in English Language and Linguistics

Researchers, when reflecting on their techniques of inquiry, should assume that methodological literacy means not only mastery of skills, but also informed choices and decisions. In fact, the university teacher has to be aware that his function at university is twofold: he has to carry out a teaching activity and he has to do research work. The two actions are not independent or isolated and should together seek the common goal of searching for valuable new sources in order to better integrate theory and practice. In other words, teachers' research work should be helpful to them in their teaching practice and be beneficial to their students.

In 1994 TESOL Journal launched a special issue on teacher research (1994/4), in which it was stated that research is a practical part of the teacher's daily working life "*because we seek answers to questions about (...) phenomena*" (Selinger & Shohamy, 1989, p. 6). In the above-mentioned volume several interesting articles were published on the subject: *Dialogic Approaches to Teacher Research: Lessening the Tension*, *An Action Research Look at the Communication Strategies of Adult Learners*, *Teacher/Researcher Collaboration: Studying Student and Teacher Goals in Oral Classroom Activities*, *Advice for the New Teacher/Researcher*. After analysing the different contributions we can only agree with the editors that:

Teachers, learners and researchers are involved in a continual quest for knowledge, fashioning their day-to-day reflections into working frameworks for their own professional contexts, and pitting provisional knowledge against principles they have developed through lifelong experience and training. (Burton & Agor, 1994, p. 5)

In fact, teachers should be seeking a theory of practice that does justice to the applied character of pedagogy and to the full complexity of decisions and influences that shape a practitioner's work inside and outside classrooms.

Following Yihong et al (2001), research methods in applied linguistics in the western countries have evolved from being characterized by an increase of quantitative research from the 70s to the mid 80s, to afterwards producing a large number of qualitative methods. By quantitative methods they understand experimental vs. non-experimental design, inferential vs. descriptive statistics and multivariate vs. univariate. These authors consider the following subcategories within the qualitative group: text analysis, ethnography, narrative accounts, verbal reports and classroom interaction analysis.

Another great change in the way researches work nowadays is the virtual disappearance of solo research in favour of group research (Murria, 1993). Indeed, this type of research is very well considered by the Spanish education officials, and when university teachers are evaluated in terms of their research activity, group research is often highly regarded. Also, funding is more easily obtained when researchers work in groups than when working independently. Therefore, it is now common to see Spanish university teachers carrying out research in groups, often multidisciplinary, and even from different universities. In fact a great deal of useful work has already been done and has been published.

In line with this, we intend to analyse the research activity that in the past few years has been taking place in the different subfields of English language and linguistics, with the intention of reporting on the trends of different research groups of these areas in Spain. More specifically our intention is to give a broad view of the types of research projects funded by regional, national or international education authorities, in which diverse groups of scholars in these areas of study working in Spanish universities are involved.

Until recently there used to be a split between the study of the various areas of language, i.e., in the linguistic field, linguists used to work at the sentence level, and rhetoricians at the next level, there also used to be professional divisions between EAP research and research on writing in the disciplines, between L2 and L1 teaching, between US research and that done in other countries, etc. But at present many studies on English language and linguistics use a cross-over approach, combining separate fields or areas of study.

This is what we have perceived when we have reviewed the various funded research projects still in progress or already completed during the past ten years in Spanish universities. Even though they can be grouped into several sections (English language learning and teaching, translation, new technologies, lexicology, lexicography and terminology, corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, etc), the distinction between sections cannot possibly be done categorically, since in many cases we can witness an overlap between two or more fields of study, as most projects have a manifold approach: empirical, generalist, multilingual, multidisciplinary, etc. An example of this is the research project titled "Intercultural competence for professional mobility" (ICOPROMO) a joint research project of the universities of Jaen (Spain), Coimbra (Portugal), Johannes Kepler (Austria) and Anglia Ruskin (UK). The main interest of this research group is to help employees in the European Union overcome the intercultural difficulties they are increasingly faced with in their professional context. In fact, they intend to develop intercultural communication and interaction competencies, both in L1 and L2, from multiple disciplinary areas (within the scope of social sciences), with basic, intermediate and advanced linguistic levels and with different degrees of experience in terms of intercultural interaction in professional contexts. Indeed, as we observe, studying the phenomena of interculturality from such a wide perspective necessarily implies a highly multidisciplinary approach.

Within the group of projects we have revised, we have seen some very wide-ranging examples. In the web page of the project "Cognitive linguistics applied to the study of the English language" of the University of Murcia (<http://www.um.es/lincoing/>), the research group points out that they are interested in any application of cognitive linguistics to the different areas of English Philology –grammatical analysis, application to translation and automatic translation, application to literary studies or to ESP, as well as to the study of metaphors in English, and in general, to any aspect related to the teaching and learning of the English language. As we see, researchers in many cases tend to broaden the scope of their research

field greatly, and since legislation is not precise in this aspect, researchers are free to narrow or widen the scope of their research as they wish. Let's now review other instances in which the projects can be categorized within a more limited range.

Under the umbrella of "English language learning and teaching" there are various projects devoted to second language acquisition: primary, secondary or university level, non-verbal communication, or even for hearing-impaired learners. The *Group of Research on Academic and Professional English* of the University of Jaume I, have participated in the project "Linguistic flows in English among first year university students" which has focused on the research and analysis applied to both teaching and learning English at university level of different disciplinary areas. Language acquisition also has to do with investigation into the acquiring of different skills –writing, reading, oral, listening- and for different purposes – English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Educational Purposes (EOP)- and/or by means of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Within the area of "English language learning and teaching" there are also projects dealing with language-teacher's education from a reflective approach, i.e. the thoughtful processing of how individuals, teams and organizations carry out their work. An example of this type of research projects is the one entitled "Applied linguistics to the teaching of English language" (LAELA) of the University of Jaume I, which is interested in the use of a reflective approach towards language teaching and learning. In other words, they are concerned with the need to develop a content-sensitive pedagogy and a correct instruction of teachers and learners. Other projects have to do with methodology, i.e., the study of pedagogical practices in general or whatever considerations are involved in "how to teach", for instance, collaborative methodology. There are also projects concerned with the creation of didactic materials (i.e. multimedia courses or traditional courses for ESP/EAP, young learners, special needs, diagnosis and selection of personalized materials, etc). "Intelligent personalised tutoring environment for business English" (I-PETER II) of the UNED (the Spanish national distance university) is a research project which works in the development of an on-line ICALL (Intelligent Computer Assisted Language Learning) system for professional International English. The system uses Artificial Intelligent strategies and techniques, is functionally and communicatively driven, and is firmly grounded on cognitive and socio-constructivist pedagogical principles. The goal of this research project is to produce a system that overcomes some of the problems and limitations of teaching English to large groups of students, which is something that is commonly encountered.

"Recently there has been a growing interest in and recognition of the value of specialized corpora" (Upton & Connor, 2001, p. 313). In fact, the current proliferation of studies dealing with corpus linguistics is undeniable. Corpus research has become a methodological approach rather than a mere technology (Conrad, 2005, p. 393), and as such its contribution to the field of applied linguistics is remarkable. Many corpus-based analyses have centred on the lexical patterning of texts, while the grammatical, rhetorical, functional or text linguistic aspects have also been regarded. As a sample, the research project "Variation, Linguistic Change and Gramaticalization" of the University of Santiago de Compostela describes its activity as "*corpus based and focusing both on grammatical change in the history of English and on changes going on in present-day English*" (<http://www.usc-vlcg.es/index.html>). In fact, most corpus linguistics studies deal with the description of language from an empirical perspective, even though we have seen that there are also projects exploring the benefits of following such an approach in a L2 teaching context, like the one carried out by a group of researchers at the university of Barcelona, titled "Application of textual corpora to the creation of English grammar teaching materials: experimentation, guiding and evaluation of teaching materials". Within the section of lexicology, lexicography and terminology, we find projects aimed at compiling corpuses or dictionaries of various types, i.e. real language produced by Spanish learners, both oral and written; dictionaries of different areas of study (engineering, agriculture, medicine, economics, etc.) or dictionaries of old English, of different particles, phraseology, multilingual on-line dictionaries, etc.

There is a large group of research projects dedicated to different aspects of discourse analysis. Following Stubbs:

Roughly speaking, [discourse analysis] refers to attempts to study the organisation of language above the sentence or above the clause, and therefore to study larger linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written texts. (...) Discourse analysis is also concerned with language use in social contexts, and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers. (Stubbs 1983, p. 1)

We find projects which have a contrastive approach, analysing different genres, rhetorical or pragmatic aspects, e.g. the analysis of a conversation, or of students' written production, or of political speeches. Just as a sample, *Coherence in Discourse* (CoDis), a recognised Research Group at the University of Salamanca is working on the research project titled "A transdisciplinary study of the concept of discourse coherence in English" in which they are

creating a homogenous digitalized corpus drawn from comment articles in English language newspapers. This corpus will be subject to a qualitative, visual analysis as well as to a quantitative computerized one. There are also projects studying the organization of information, communicative strategies or discourse and new media. For instance, the *Linguistic Variation Research Unit* (UVAL) of the University of Pompeu Fabra has created the ForensicLab which is a Forensic Linguistic Laboratory that develops teaching and research activities in forensic linguistics, and makes use of linguistic evidence for forensic purposes in court.

Translation is another field to which a great number of research projects are devoted. There are groups working or that have worked in the implementation of a methodology for alignment of parallel texts at different levels and in two or more languages. Genre and translation are also two fields that are studied and analysed in connection with didactic applications. Another sub area of interest to researchers is the design of different resources for linguistic support in translation research or for educational purposes, as is the case of the research project carried out in the University of Zaragoza titled "Creation of computer tools for the analysis of texts and of a bilingual corpus of English-Spanish grammar translation to be used by English Philology students."

As we have seen new technologies are part of many research projects independently of their central concern, but there are also projects whose main interest is that of developing new technologies like distance learning, media tools, web pages, virtual environment, online resources. For instance, Web-based Maritime English Learning Tool (MarEng) is a transnational project based in the university of La Laguna that aims at promoting the use of the English language in the maritime environment of those working in various maritime professions in Europe, and whose objective is to produce an innovative maritime English learning tool, which will be available on the Internet. Another example of this type of projects is the Euro-Asia Localisation Technology Training Initiative (TEchLink), a joint research project of the universities of Rovira I Virgili, Limerick (Ireland) and C-DAC Mumbai (India), carrying out training and research on mediation between cultures, particularly with respect to new technologies.

Conclusion

The government, as policy-makers, are responsible to a great extent for the scientific advances of our society. There is a close relationship between documented information policy and scientific research policy, to the extent that whatever is developed in terms of documented information policy benefits the scientific policy. Also, a documented information policy is necessary since it reflects the government's willingness to satisfy the information rights of every citizen as well as qualifies the interest of a government in scientific issues. The universities, through education, research and development, foster the information society, i.e. the production of knowledge or cultural artifacts, and support and encourage the development of a scientific policy.

We have considered the specific case of the funded research done in English language and linguistics and what the trends and lines of investigation are at present. This small-scale study provides evidence of the various areas of interest of researchers in these fields. We have also verified how researchers tend to broaden the scope of their studies to different sub-fields and from a contrastive and multilingual perspective. This only intends to be a preliminary study and more research should be done in this area.

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