Problems in methodology: analytical frameworks and the uses of metaphor

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The problem of methodology:
quantitative vs. qualitative approaches,
internal vs. external evaluation
This paper examines the analytical framework used by the author in researching multiculturalism in Belgium and the United Kingdom. A central concern is the use of metaphor. To what extent is a researcher guided by a preexisting image (hypothesis) -- in this case a centripetal/centrifugal metaphor to describe the polar extremes of education for bilingualism and separatism in a linguistically divided society. Does the preexistence of such a frame of reference impact on the collection of data, the ethical use of data, and the identification of informants? Does it intersect with the politicolinguistics of a particular locale? Does it impact on issues such as the comparability of data and the determination of causal relationships? Examples will be drawn from analysis of documents collected, discussions with government and school officials -- as well as from on-site visits to schools in Flanders, Brussels, London, and Bradford.

Pluralism in Epistemology

That the analytical framework under examination represents an idiosyncratic approach to epistemology in a pluralist research world is the theme of this exercise. I should therefore state at
the onset that it is not my purpose to participate in the paradigm wars of the past decade. If N.L. Gage (1989) is correct that different research methodologies reflect the ethos of competing scholarly communities, most recently those in psychology and anthropology, and thus reflect differences in human temperament and values, there should be room for multiculturalism in research paradigms as well as in society. If, as Favriel Salomon (1991) concludes, the qualitative-quantitative debate is actually a conflict over methodologies which can be employed complementarily, the challenge is in reconciling different answers to the same questions, not in the choice of one epistemology over another. As Kenneth Howe and Margaret Eisenhart (1990) have so aptly noted, the positivist-qualitative paradigm split need not become a procrustean bed. Standards in educational research are essential, but debate over alternative epistemologies is not.

As Philip Altbach has pointed out, comparative education is a multifaceted field, not a discipline, a field without a "clearly defined center" (Altbach 1991, p. 491). In the last three decades its practitioners have engaged in internecine warfare over quantitative versus qualitative methodologies, and over research paradigms such as structural functionalism, critical realism, neo-Marxism, gender studies, and ethnography. But in the not too distant past comparativists drew on the older processes of history and philosophy (Brickman 1973, Kandel 1933, Ulrich 1961). The prehistory of comparative education is rooted in classical humanism (Brickman 1960, 1966); and its future,
according to recent presidents of the Comparative and International Education Society, may include ways of knowing heretofore neglected by comparativists: traditional aesthetics (Hackett 1988), postmodernism (Rust 1991), or the "old knowledge forms" of developing countries (Masemann 1990). Individual researchers in such a field should be free to draw on the truths of many epistemologies.

I should nevertheless make clear that by background, training, and disposition I am inclined to utilize what are now referred to as qualitative methodologies, research paradigms which, despite their "discovery" as a byproduct of the so-called paradigm wars, are far from new (Rizo 1991). I respect the scientific positivism espoused in 1969 with such optimistic confidence by Harold Noah and Max Eckstein as the "best hope for the progress of comparative education" (Noah and Epstein 1969, 191) but feel uncomfortable with this mode of abstracting truth. I respect the empiricist underpinnings in George Psacharopoulos' recent attack on qualitative paradigms (Psacharopoulos 1990) but question the unchanging reality of the thirteen comparative lessons derived from this methodology.

My own epistemology reflects three strands: one, a mindset formed by undergraduate and master's level studies in literary analysis; two, doctoral studies with William W. Brickman that stressed historical methods in educational research; three, adaptation of the tools of ethnography. From the study of literature I developed the habit of close analysis of text: likelihood of connotations far different from literal meanings;
expectation that characters act from mixed and often unrecognized motivation; probability that choice means exclusion of an alternative good; the necessity that analysis capture nuance through undercutting concepts, ideas, and figurative language; recognition of covert messages embedded in symbol, metaphor, and irony -- all tools of value even when the text has no greater literary merit than most government documents. It is no accident that like Don Adams I see "subjectivist characteristics" in much of educational planning (Adams 1988, 424) and with Vandra Maseman share the belief that there are many ways of knowing, not all of which embrace "linear fragmentary forms" (Masemann 1990, 473).

From Brickman's historiography I learned the importance of ranking primary materials; of weighing evidence to determine authorship, primacy, institutional origins, influence and causality; of questioning the comparability of similar data, events, and situations (Brickman 1973). In this epistemological domain materials such as government records, school records, textbooks (for their underlying premises), newspapers and journals (provided their reports can be verified), and statistics are of particular importance. But similar importance may be attached to on-site school visits and to interviews with government officials and bureaucrats (I have found occasional officials willing to share interoffice memos), community leaders, academics, scholars, school administrators, teachers, students, parents. These face to face encounters, however, require adoption of a third set of research strategies, the strategies of a participant-observer.
I approach the role of participant-observer, however, a role derived from the ethnographic methodologies of anthropology (Masemann 1983), as I would approach the reading of a novel, a mental reflex which illustrates the persistence of habits retained from my earlier literary studies. There are covert messages in interviews granted by officials, administrators, academics, teachers, students, and parents; covert messages in the setting of these interviews; covert messages in the texture of student-teacher, teacher-student relationships in a classroom; covert messages in topics discussed in a teacher lounge, in school architecture, in the way time is parcelled out during a school day, in the subjects selected as basic to a curriculum. There are also covert messages in the chatter of clerks in hotels, the posture and diction of waiters in restaurants, the gossip of hair dressers, salespeople, taxi drivers; in the demographic mix of people in the streets of a city, of passengers on trains and buses, of audiences in theaters and concert halls -- covert messages waiting to be incorporated into the research of comparative educators like me. As Michael Sadler pointed out almost a century ago, "... things outside the school matter even more than the things inside of schools, and govern and interpret the things inside" (Sadler [1990] 1964, p. 310).

**Metaphors and Analytical Frameworks**

Given the plethora of information to be gleaned from textual analysis, historical evidence, and the perceptions of a participant-observer, a researcher working within one particular
society is likely to begin by trying to build an encompassing hypothesis inductively. Since my earliest exploration of the language controversy in Belgium, I have framed my thinking in terms of a metaphor borrowed from physics and used by Schermerhorn in his analysis of ethnic power relationships: a centripetal/centrifugal matrix (Schermerhorn 1978). Selection of this centripetal/centrifugal metaphor, which took place before my reading of Comparative Ethnic Relations, was initially an attempt to describe the polarities of bilingualism and separatism within linguistically divided Belgium. Bilingualism in Belgium had in the past connoted (centripetal) accommodation to a status quo. The emergence in the 20th century of linguistically separatist (centrifugal) institutions connotes the reverse.

There are nevertheless limits to inductive hypothesis building, particularly for the researcher investigating education in more than one country. Centripetal/centrifugal polarities seem appropriate for Belgium. But are they appropriate elsewhere? And will they be appropriate for Belgium in the future? That I have used this centripetal/centrifugal metaphor for the exploration of other linguistically divided societies has led me to wonder what impact such a frame of reference might have on the shape of the data it contains? The problem, as in all reasoning from analogy, is whether reality lies in the phenomena described by the metaphor or whether the metaphor has taken on a life of its own.

As Max Eckstein has pointed out, metaphors abound in educational literature. It is a commonplace to speak of the
development of national systems of education in terms of a
growing human being, or to use terms like "imperialism,"
"reproduction," and "dependency" as metaphors for the external
imposition of power within schools (Eckstein 1983). An earlier
generation of comparativists spoke of "factors," "forces,"
"national character" (Hans 1964, Kandel 1933) -- metaphors
borrowed from mathematics, physics, and moral philosophy. A
present-day practitioner of scientific positivism like George
Psacharopoulos borrows metaphors from his own field, economics,
when he refers to "investment in primary literacy programs,"
"cost recovery," "a cap on admissions," "ruralization of the
curriculum" (Psacharopoulos 1990).

There is no doubt that a centripetal/centrifugal metaphor
provides ironic commentary on the role of bilingual education in
Belgium's past. A century ago Brussels was widely perceived to
be the bilingual capital of the world: a city whose dual medium,
French-Dutch schools were emulated by language maintenance groups
throughout Europe (Dawes 1902). In part these schools were a
direct response to a challenge posed by Flemish Nationalists, for
whom they represented the nearest equivalent possible to
education for language maintenance. In actuality, however, dual
medium schools offered at best transitional bilingual education.
That those Flemish students who stayed in school joined the
French language mainstream by the third or fourth year (Verheyen
1929) was to be expected in a society in which French was the
language of secondary schools and higher education. What was not
expected at first, but soon became apparent, was that dual medium
schools did not educate for a stable bilingualism, dual-medium schools were not a centrifugal force.

Before World War I the number of Dutch-French bilinguals in Brussels did increase, testimony perhaps to the efficacy of the dual medium curriculum in easing the transition to French (Sweng 1988, p. 72). Thereafter, however, the bilingual segment of the Brussels population began slowly to decline: from 50% in 1910 to 41% in 1930. This decline, moreover, was accompanied by a sharp rise in the number of unilingual Francophones: 18% in 1880 to 43% in 1930; and a decrease in the number of unilingual Flemings: 59% in 1880, 16% in 1930. Were bilingual Flemings rearing unilingual Francophone children? It is impossible to account for this language shift from any other segment of the population. An increase in bilingualism (among Flemings) preceded a clearly articulated language shift.

Given this reality, it is not difficult to see why Flemish Nationalists came to view the curriculum of the schools of Brussels as a one-way road to unilingualism, and the city itself as the site of unique temptations where metamorphosis from bilingual Fleming to unilingual Francophone could take place in two or three generations. Flemish Nationalists had many complaints about the schools their children attended: the stigma attached to assignment to a Flemish regime (Cneudt 1918: 30); the shortage of trained Flemish teachers (Segers 1907: 37); the reluctance of communal authorities to create Flemish classes (Toussaint 1935: 40). These schools not only transmitted a
negative message about the Dutch language and culture; in accelerating a language shift, they alienated children from their parents, "denationalizing" them -- to use a word that appeared over and over in the polemics of the language controversy (Wezemaal 1937). Acceleration of the language shift in Brussels was a major reason for rejection of bilingualism in education in Belgium -- and for the emergence of separatist schools within a separatist (centrifugal) communal structure.

For the Belgium of the past, therefore, a centripetal/centrifugal metaphor has clearly delineated referents. Bilingualism leading to assimilation by a Francophone status quo represents centripetal trends; separate schools for Francophones and Flemings within discrete cultural communities, centrifugal trends. In a Belgium of the future, however, the referents in such a metaphor are less clear. Consider, for example, what is now happening in certain Flemish schools in Brussels which attract increasing numbers of children of Belgian Francophone children -- drawn there in part because their parents now recognize that knowledge of Dutch is necessary for economic advancement, in part because of favorable student-teacher ratios in Dutch-language schools, in part because some parents hesitate to place their children in schools overcrowded with "foreigners."

In the not too distant past such a choice of school regime would have challenged language laws (Swing 1980, chapters 7 & 8). But today this immersion model, unplanned by Flemish authorities and in most cases unwanted by them, is so well established that
in some Brussels Dutch-language schools non-native speakers of Dutch, whether they be children of Francophones or children of "foreigners," are the majority. In 1988 only 53.9% of the children in Dutch-language elementary schools in Brussels (lageronderwijs) were native speakers of Dutch; in communes such as Elsene and Sint Gillis, the percent falls to 24.2 and 21.7 respectively. In pre-schools (kleuteronderwijs), a mere 37.2% come from Dutch-language homes, a percentage that falls to 19.9% and 16.4% in Elsene and Sint-Gillis (Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest 1990). The impact of this pattern of parental choice has yet to be fully assessed, but already there are rumors of parent meetings conducted in French in some Dutch-language schools. Do such incongruities represent centripetal trends? Or are they centrifugal? At what point does social reality overwhelm an all-embracing metaphor?

Metaphorical Congruence

Let us now turn to a differently structured linguistic landscape. England like Belgium has its share of minority language "foreigners" (close to 4.5 in England, close to 8% in Belgium). The central language conflict in Belgium, however, is between dominant language communities: Francophones and Flemings. In England linguistic differences are fragmented. Convergence toward English, the only dominant language, is a centripetal trend not likely to be abated, a trend reinforced by school practices as well as by custom. Nevertheless, separatist trends do exist. The Ismailia School in Brent, London, for example, has applied to the Department of Education and Science for voluntary
aided status (Rose, et al. 1989). A new generation of young Muslims find it necessary to assert their Islamic identity, to damn Salmon Rushdie, and to reject Western traditions of process and questioning (Husen 1989). The question under advisement is whether such centrifugal trends represent a serious challenge to the established linguistic power structure.

In the final months before its demise, the Inner London Education Authority counted no less than 184 different home languages among students in its schools (ILEA 1989). That 70 percent of these bilinguals were not yet fluent in English, a figure that rises to 87 percent in the Tower Hamlets section of the East End of London, gives testimony to the social reality behind these figures. The Education Reform Act of 1988 mandates a National Curriculum to replace heretofore uncoordinated local educational planning, and in the National Curriculum acquisition of Standard English, "the language of wider, non-regional, public communication" (DES 1989, 4.35) has become a central priority. The National Curriculum does mandate acquisition of a modern foreign language, but has excluded the languages of most "foreigners," the Asian languages, from this mandate. In the meanwhile, Section 11 funds may no longer provide for mother tongue teaching. Can such a national policy be explained in terms of centripetal/centrifugal metaphor?

In Bradford, a large midlands industrial city whose Metropolitan Council has adopted an Equal Opportunities Policy (November 1981) stating that every section of the community has equal right to maintain its own identity, culture, language,
religion and customs, leaders of the Bengladeshi community blame these national policy shifts for continuing under-achievement among Bangladeshi pupils. "Access to the curriculum through the sole medium of English creates serious problems, especially for recent arrivals. We are extremely concerned with the situation facing older children" (Porishad 1989). From the standpoint of these ethnic leaders, whose current priority is tax support for Asian languages in middle schools or even primary schools, loss of Section 11 funding is a serious matter (Sayyad 1989). Do such these criticisms indicate a convergence of centripetal/centrifugal trends?

A corollary concern in Bradford is the chronic shortage of ethnic language teachers. Use of Bengali-speaking bilingual students as interpreters when no bilingual adults are available is "extremely frustrating for all parties concerned, including the monolingual teacher and . . . a clear indication that a big section of Bangladeshi pupils are being deprived of equal access to the curriculum" (Porishad 1989). Nevertheless, in 1990 there were 34 instructors for four community languages -- Urdu, Panjabi, Gujarati, and Bengali -- in 15 upper schools; and 3000 children learning these languages, 2533 of them learning Urdu (Sayyad 1989). These instructors, however, represent pedagogical traditions stemming from third world-learned Victorian models of didactic teaching that are at considerable variance to the interactive models favored by indigenous teachers (Husen, 12/7/89). With Asian languages not included among foundation subjects in the National Curriculum and only rarely
offered as GCSE level and A level subjects, the supply of new teachers of Asian languages has already begun to dry up. Can this phenomenon be viewed as a centripetal event?

Even where an ethnic language is taught in secondary schools, there is concern over its status. As the Burnage Report points out, European languages are taught from the first year in secondary schools, but a language like Urdu only from the fourth year, and in a class frequently populated by disruptive students (Burnage 1989, p. 167). The Department of Education and Science, furthermore, provides little support for differences between native speakers and total beginners in the pilot projects it funds (E.C. Pilot 1987, p. 12). Another problem arises when ethnic language classes include rank beginners alongside those who speak the language at home. Is this evidence of lack of good will on the part of the funders?

A continuing concern is the impact testing the National Curriculum will have on bilingual students. From the standpoint of the Department of Education and Science, the task-oriented procedures now under scrutiny represent the fairest, most sophisticated testing program in the world (Rose, et al. 1989). Ethnic leaders are less convinced. Will bilingual students reach sufficient proficiency in Standard English to pass the new tests? What will happen to them if they do not? Will passing the test provide proof of centripetal trends? Under these circumstances could failure be a centrifugal goal?
Afterword

That a centripetal/centrifugal matrix can only partially interpret the complex interaction between linguistic diversity, ethnic goals, and majority consensus in England should be self-evident by now. It is not that the centripetal/centrifugal image lacks utility. The National Curriculum has unambiguous centripetal intent: acquisition of the English language by all children, including those many urban children who speak different language at home. At the same time, at least some ethnic leaders in England have their own agenda: language and cultural maintenance, if possible at government expense. As long as such intent is clearly articulated, the centripetal/centrifugal metaphor continues to have potency. But the question arises: How long will such an analytical framework provide a satisfactory point of reference in a multicultural world? We have already noted that this analytical frame fits better in Belgium, the country which gave rise to the metaphor which it contains, than in England to which it was transported. How far can such an analytical frame be abstracted? At what point does comparison of similar data cease to have utility?
References Cited


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