

### Language Policy

Language policy is an issue of critical importance in the world today. In this up-to-date introduction, Bernard Spolsky explores many debates at the forefront of language policy: ideas of correctness and bad language; bilingualism and multilingualism; language death and efforts to preserve endangered languages; language choice as a human and civil right; and language education policy. Through looking at the language practices, beliefs and management of social groups from families to supra-national organizations, he develops a theory of modern national language policy and the major forces controlling it, such as the demands for efficient communication, the pressure for national identity, the attractions of (and resistance to) English as a global language and the growing concern for human and civil rights as they impinge on language. Two central questions asked in this wide-ranging survey are how to recognize language policies, and whether or not language can be managed at all.

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BERNARD SPOLSKY



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For Elisheva, Yonatan, Eliahu (the language manager), David and  
Yair as they negotiate their own family language policy

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## Preface

There is a special challenge in writing about a comparatively new field. Language policy has been studied for at least fifty years, with growing interest and publication over the last two decades, but no consensus has emerged about the scope and nature of the field, its theories or its terminology. I will therefore venture definitions, present first efforts at a theory, attempt to do justice to other opinions and develop, where it seems needed, my own terminology.

There are two matters that I want to mention at the outset. At least since Thomas Kuhn raised the matter, the problem of a scientist's personal point of view has been widely recognized. Especially in the social sciences, it is hard to conceive of a scholar who is strictly neutral. Can one write about economics without an opinion about the morality of the division of resources and the growing gap between rich and poor? Can one write about political structures without taking a stand on the value of democracy and the danger of totalitarianism? Can one write about language policy without a personal view about the desirability of linguistic diversity? In an introduction to the field, however, my assignment is not to advocate but to attempt to understand and explain. As a pragmatic liberal, I acknowledge the need to distinguish between advocacy and neutrality and believe that the knowledge developed in this way will contribute to the social purposes I, too, share (see the essay on "The Social Science Project: Then, Now and Next," by Kenneth Prewitt in *Items*, vol. 3, no. 1–2, spring 2002).

One critical limitation of the field is our tendency to what I call linguicentrism, a term I coin to mean "language-centered" because "linguacentric" has taken on the meaning of "looked at from the point of view of one language only." This is a book about language policy, so that it is proper that its attention be focused on language and languages. At the same time, language policy exists within a complex set of social, political, economic, religious, demographic, educational and cultural factors that make up the full ecology of human life. While many scholars are now beginning to recognize the interaction of

economic and political and other factors with language, it is easy and tempting to ignore them when we concentrate on language matters. Looking for basic data about the nations whose policies I was trying to study, I was suddenly shocked into reality by a note that kept turning up. The *CIA World Factbook* (updated annually, it can be found on the web at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>) gives the latest population figures, but in a frighteningly large number of cases, a note explains that the estimate takes into account “Excess mortality due to AIDS.” Should we be wondering about the official use of French and the role of the vernaculars in a country with excess mortality? Or about the prospects for Bosnian when so many of its speakers were recently massacred? But my expertise is in language policy – not syntax or semantics or AIDS or ethnic cleansing. Reminding myself of this serves, I hope, to keep a sense of proportion, a realization of the limitation of our understanding of human society.

My position, then, is that language is important and that any studies of societies that exclude (as they too often do) language are limited, but that language and language policy need to be looked at in the widest context and not treated as a closed universe. Language is a central factor, but linguicism (like ethnocentrism and linguacentrism in its regular sense) imposes limited vision.

The second matter is the question of debt to my predecessors and colleagues. Because the field is so new and I am writing this book close to the end of my own career, I am acquainted with and account as friends a large number of the colleagues whom I am quoting (or arguing with – my disagreements with Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson should not disguise my admiration for their work and the fundamental questions they raise). The citations and the list of references should make my debt clear, but there may be many cases where I have unconsciously absorbed points of view, terms, phrases even, that I no longer recognize as originating with others. Should this happen, I apologize in advance.

While this is my first attempt to describe the field of language policy as a whole, I met regularly with Robert Cooper during the time he was writing his by now classic *Language Planning and Social Change* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) and I owe a special debt to him.

My academic and personal contacts with Joshua and Gella Fishman over the years have taught me more than I can say about the relation between the academic and the personal in this field. Among the other scholars who have regularly stimulated and corrected me, I want to list Richard Lambert (whose invitation to the National Foreign Language Center introduced me to the notion of language policy), Elana

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Shohamy (who worked with me to design an Israeli language policy), Richard Brecht and the late Ronald Walton (for exciting discussions especially about US policy), Christina Bratt Paulston (who keeps raising fundamental questions), John Trim (who has already thought through most of the issues I mention) and Ellen Spolsky (whose pioneering work on cognition, skepticism and literary theory challenged me to make similar sense of my own interdisciplinary field, and who has provided the fundamental support needed to continue my work). I want also to thank my students, whose enthusiasm for the topic when I taught my first course on language policy encouraged me to continue to study it.

I am grateful to Andrew Winnard for the suggestion that I write this book, to Helen Barton for her help in preparing it for publication and to the anonymous reader for the press who pointed out a number of errors and infelicities.

Jerusalem  
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