

Book Review

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Language Policy, by Bernard Spolsky. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 250 pp. Hb. \$70.00; pb. \$27.99

Considering the current state of minority languages in the United States and around the world, this book is a must have for anyone interested in the field of language policy. Besides providing a concrete depiction of what the field of language-policy studies includes, Spolsky concisely outlines the main theoretical issues and supports his discussion with multiple examples from across the globe. By sifting through some of the more problematic concepts commonly used in language policy discussions, he provides a useful guide for understanding the nature of language boundaries and how they are determined. Overall, his approach clearly demonstrates the complex intersection between social interaction, politics, and language use.

In chapter 1, Spolsky recognizes that the individuals and organizations with the means to influence others determine the prevalent ideology within society. These ideas echo Woolard's (1998) claim that language ideologies "underpin not only linguistic form and use but also the very notion of the person and the social group, as well as such fundamental social institutions as religious ritual, child socialization, gender relations, the nation-state, schooling, and law" (p. 3). While political governing bodies immediately come to mind, multiple other social groups that influence language use also exist. Spolsky applies notion of "language management" to illustrate the "direct efforts to manipulate the language situation" (p. 8). The process of language management can be accomplished by multiple groups on many different social levels. Specific language "managers" may include a legislative assembly writing a national constitution, a national legislature making an official language law, a state/local governing body determining the language of street signs, a special interest group promoting new or different language legislation, a court determining the interpretation of language use, a business or institution deciding which languages to use for administrative purposes, a language academy that depicts "correct" language application, or it can be family

members deciding which languages to expose their children to (p. 8). These specific instances of language management and managers display the breadth of the social context of language policy.

This overarching application of language ideologies is useful when concentrating on specific examples of language use and control. Spolsky discusses “a consensual ideology, assigning values and prestige to various aspects of the language varieties used in it” (p. 14). Chapters 2 and 3 are dedicated to the “ideology of purity” to differentiate between “good” and “bad” language. Good and bad language is discussed in terms of blasphemy, profanity, as well as racist and sexist language. Furthermore, Spolsky outlines the formation and perpetuation of socially esteemed varieties of language by discussing dialectal variation and literacy practices. In this case, ideologies of purity are motivated by

a moral or religious rejection of violence and overt sexual behavior, a religious concern for conformity and against blasphemy, a liberal objection or racism and sexism, a conservative objection to innovation, an ethnocentric fear of foreignisms, a state-supported movement for national identity. (p. 25)

Due to an intricate web of historical and political influences, many languages and/or dialects are socially discredited as inferior and inherently uneducated (Baugh, 2000). These views are promulgated in the media and perpetuate negative stereotypes (Johnson, 2005; Santa Ana, 2002). To unearth these types of viewpoints, Spolsky applies Fishman’s (2001a) concept of the Great Tradition to explain the various perceptions of language that develop and are perpetuated within society. As “a set of beliefs about the relation of a language to the history of the people,” the Great Tradition is usually associated with a national language in order to support its symbolic status (p. 26). From this standpoint, it might seem rational to equate a specific language to economic and political success. In the mind of the community, the Great Tradition naturally justifies the prevalence and/or dominance of one language over others, thus, creating an ideologically based standard dialect. Spolsky affirms that “standard language is what educators deem as appropriate; the standard is more acceptable because it is more widely spoken; all languages are equally valuable; superiority is established by the elite to maintain power” (p. 27). Linguistic solidarity among elites maintains access to power structures for certain groups while simultaneously limiting access for others; this is the foundation of ideology. Essentially, language planning can be reduced to “an extension of social policy aimed at behavior modification” (Williams, 2003, p. 1). In line with this modification thesis, Spolsky contends that “the beliefs that some variety of language is better than others and that it is possible to influence speakers to select the better variety are fundamental to language management” (p. 217).

In chapter 4, Spolsky offers a broad theory of language policy that enables us to look at the more specific details of language and how it is manipulated. His theory is divided into four main features: (a) language policy is divided into language practices, language beliefs and ideologies, and policies resulting from language management/planning movements; (b) language policy is concerned with all varieties and elements of language at all levels; (c) language policy operates within a given speech community; and (d) language policy functions within a complex ecological relationship among a wide range of linguistic and nonlinguistic elements, variables, and factors (pp. 39–41). Spolsky mentions the influence of education, family, workplace, government, and religion as some major (overlapping) social contexts that contribute to the linguistic practices of a community. Such influences are also seen in “supra-national groupings” (e.g., the European Community and the United Nations) that maintain languages within and across state borders (p. 53).

Chapter 5 is dedicated to the historical role of the state and the use of nationalism in the development of language policy. Spolsky argues that “choosing an appropriate national language and purifying it of foreign influences was a major activity” (p. 57). Tracing out the language practices of Iceland and France helps demonstrate the great variance in the role of government in the formation of policy. While Iceland’s constitution is void of any mention of language, 100 % of Icelanders speak (or use) Icelandic as their dominant language (p. 61). Spolsky mentions that even though there are many “presumably monolingual countries,” cases like Iceland are very rare (p. 60). Instead, most countries contain multiple languages and/or dialects which governments struggle to control in order to preserve the dominance of the standard dialect (e.g., France). In a similar vein, Spolsky describes that “the monolingual nation exists ideologically if rarely in observable language practice” (p. 161). Plurilingual proficiencies need to be understood as covering a wide range of language competencies in various spaces.

Highlighting the global prevalence of English, Spolsky outlines the spread and maintenance of politically dominant languages in chapter 6. Historically, there are multiple accounts of politically dominant languages being imposed on minority communities (p. 78). Such languages are eroded through a process of “linguicism” (i.e., the intentional destruction of a powerless language by a dominant one) (p. 79). Looking at this process in terms of globalization, Spolsky describes that when English becomes an accepted semiotic of the business community, language proficiency “is associated with remarkably high and statistically robust wage premiums” (p. 166). Stemming from this global influence, clerical work involved in international businesses is often relegated to other countries that possess English skills, thereby maintaining a low wage class of laborers in foreign countries (e.g., factory outsourcing and technology support in India). Considering that benefits of this system are passed on to

those who learn English in the classroom instead of in contact situations (Wright, 2004, p. 147), it is obvious why access to English is quickly accepted in industrially developing countries.

In chapter 7, Spolsky focuses on the condition of English in the United States. Spolsky attributes the negative view of other languages to xenophobic sentiments felt towards foreign-born minorities, especially Latinos. According to the 2000 census, there are approximately 35 million Latinos (over the age of 5) living in the United States, constituting approximately 10% of the total population. Though, with a combined 8 million people (approximately 3% of the total U.S. population) admitting to speaking English “not well” or “not at all,” it seems absurd to imagine that many consider Spanish as the main threat to English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In addition, Spolsky reminds us that, contrary to popular beliefs, the concentrations of Hispanics from different countries do not make up a single ethnocultural entity. From a diachronic perspective, the current situation with the Hispanics in the United States can be applied to the plight of the German population in the 19th and 20th centuries (Wiley, 1998). Being proportionally very similar, Latinos in the United States are being subjected to similar bias-oriented language policies that eventually diluted the prevalence of the German language in American society.

Furthermore, while there has been a “traditional opposition to the notion of establishing a language academy or any other administrative body charged with its development and implementation” (p. 92), there is no direct mention of an official language in the U.S. Constitution. Legally, the First Amendment guarantees an individual’s freedom of speech and the Fourteenth Amendment affirms the principle of equal protection under the law and includes the due process clause concerning the protection of life, liberty, and property (Crawford, 2000). Yet, like many other concepts in the Constitution, different interpretations of these Amendments have caused a great deal of tension concerning the constitutionality of an official language (Miner, 1998; Weinstein, 1990). Socially, learning English has been accepted as contributing to a two-part process, “de-ethnization and Americanization” (p. 94).

The assimilationist attitudes of those who view other languages as counterproductive in the maintenance of a unified nation are a product of complex historical tensions concerning multiculturalism. At the extreme end of the assimilationist spectrum is the ideology of the English-only movement. In the early decades of the 20th century, though, these sentiments eventually waxed to the point of a “draconian law establishing immigration quotas” (p. 105). By the latter decades of the 20th century, supporters of these ideals had galvanized their views and officially formed political groups to “defend” the English language. Spolsky illustrates the origins of the English-only orientation to a sense of insecurity based on dealing with conquered peoples (e.g., Native Americans, Spanish speakers in California and Puerto Rico, and Hawaiians) and the omnipresent threat of dominant immigrant groups (e.g., Germans in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin). Bluntly stated, that “the United

States is in the throes of debating the nature of its identity, veiled under the thin guise of deciding the necessity for an official language” (Marshall & González, 1999, p. 49).

Aside from legal rights to language, Spolsky dedicates chapter 8 to language as a fundamental human right. The United Nations has proclaimed respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, equality and absence of discrimination, such that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights included language as one of the criteria that might not be used for discrimination. While fewer than 4% of the world’s languages have any kind of official status in the countries where they are spoken (see Wright, 2004, p. 218), Spolsky lists various countries throughout the world (excluding the United States) that have established a constitutional official language but provide legal protection for the language rights of minority groups (see pp. 144–146 for a complete list). It is important to mention that, as Chevrier (2003) suggests, “a law alone cannot maintain a distinct language and nationality” (p. 160).

Whereas chapter 10 outlines constitutionally monolingual countries that also include recognized and protected minority-language groups, chapter 11 addresses allocating linguistic space in “countries with two or three languages in active competition” (p. 162). The linguistic situations in these dyadic and triadic nation–states are described as a result of either the combination of two or more speech communities into a distinct political unit or as being born out of colonialism (see p. 163 for a complete list). Spolsky continues to elaborate on the linguistic and demographic changes structured through colonialism and postcolonialism (i.e., migration, settlement, and miscegenation). Addressing countries in which there are 12 or more significant languages spoken (see pp. 174–175), some of the pragmatic difficulties that governments face while managing such a variety of language groups are outlined. While acknowledging that “language is often associated with conflict and violence” (e.g., India), he also reminds us that “it may well be that this focusing on language conflict as a cause of violence is exaggerated” (p. 176). Multilingualism might create difficulties for central political control but linguistic heterogeneity alone is not associated with civil unrest (Ricento, 1998, p. 318). Spolsky supports these issues by detailing multiple linguistic situations from around the globe (e.g., Africa, Indonesia, Bhutan, and the Philippines).

Do people adjust their language for religious purposes, economic benefits, love, or due to political mandates? All of these are prime examples of the range of factors behind language shift discussed in chapter 12. Spolsky asserts that changes in demographic and economic systems “lead to changes in the value assigned to language varieties” (p. 186). In some cases, though, language is seen as something that should be guarded and walled off to non-native or non-cultural members. To support this claim, Spolsky draws from Kroskrity’s (1998) discussion of the Arizona Tewa where language is a force that maintains identity by resisting outside pressures for cultural assimilation.

What, then, are the prevailing forces behind language shift within any specific country? In modern independent nations, there are four significant forces affecting language (policy and shift): (a) the language situation (ecology), (b) the prevailing set of beliefs about language choice (ranging from nationalistic mobilization of a titular language for national identity to cultural and linguistic pluralism), (c) the pull of globalization raising the value of English as a world language and finally, and (d) any internal or external pressure for language rights (p. 187). To gauge the approximate vitality that a language has within a specific discourse community, Spolsky points to Fishman's (2001b) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale. This linguistic continuum predicts the life of a given language by looking at the number of speakers, the age of speakers, and the contexts in which the language is spoken. The implementation of misguided policies in some places and the absence of any efforts in others have placed many languages around the world at severe risk. Attending to these characteristics of language policy and use, Spolsky estimates that 1 million speakers is the safety level for language maintenance; consequently, 95% of all languages will be lost this century (p. 209).

In general, this book develops a theory of language policy that can be divided into three components: (a) language practices, (b) language ideology or beliefs, and (c) language management or planning (p. 186). In chapter 13, Spolsky concludes by maintaining that language policy is really about choice (p. 217). This might include choosing a sound, an expression, or using a specific variety of language. Whether made by individuals, communities, or mandated by social institutions, language choices can be recognized in the everyday communicative practices and linguistic behaviors of both individuals and groups. While language choices are realized at both levels (i.e., individual and group), they do not occur in a vacuum. Instead, we must consider the complex and multifarious nature of socially established patterns of interaction, both within and across different cultural groups. Above all, it is crucial to realize that "language practices, beliefs, and management are not necessarily congruent" (p. 217). Linguistic interactions between individuals, groups, and/or nation-states must be analyzed from a sociohistorical perspective. Finally, Spolsky teaches us that without taking into consideration the multiple power relationships that envelop such interactions, it is impossible to understand why languages die out and, conversely, how to revitalize them.

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