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Towards a Theory of Language Policy

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This paper, developed as a result of that given at the 2006 Nessa Wolfson Memorial colloquium, presents the beginning of a theory of language policy and management. Essential features are the division into domains (standing for the speech communities to which the policy is relevant); recognition of language policy as involving practices, beliefs and management; and a consideration of internal and external influence on policy in the domain. The paper looks briefly at some domains and concludes with an analysis of school and the complexity of understanding language education policy.

Introduction

Anyone using language is regularly faced with choices. A bilingual must choose which language to use. Many speakers have a choice of dialects. At a finer level of analysis, a speaker or writer is regularly faced with a choice of features – sounds or spellings, lexical items, grammatical patterns – which are significant markers of languages, dialects, styles, or other varieties of language and which bundled together define varieties of language.² The goal of a theory of language policy is to account for the regular choices made by individual speakers on the basis of patterns established in the speech community or communities of which they are members. One such policy is to maintain the existing status of a recognized variety, or more realistically, to resist a tendency of

¹ This is very much a working paper, originally a draft of the first chapter of a book I am writing setting out the theory of language policy and management. It has a second claim to be included in this University of Pennsylvania collection: It was written immediately after I gave the 2006 Wolfson Memorial colloquium. In that paper, I remarked on the growing relationship between educational linguistics and language policy, and suggested that the former constituted essentially the instruments available to the latter in the educational domain. Thinking about this after the lecture, I wondered why there is not a theory of language policy, and why some scholars argue that it is just too complicated. I recalled that Fishman, whose GIDS model is the closest we have to such a model, argues that complexity should not be an excuse. In the new book, I intend to apply the proposed theoretical model to a number of levels or domains, starting with the family, and to modify it in accordance with the empirical evidence. The final model will, I hope, be a refined version of this first sketch, but it may also have been destroyed by the evidence. In the meantime, I welcome criticism.

² I agree with (Blommaert 2001) that it is a mistake to deal only with labeled languages in a discussion of language policy.

speakers of the variety to shift to the use of another.³ In this essay, a first sketch will be given of a theoretical model of language policy.

Language Policy as a Social Phenomenon: The Domain as Defining Unit

Application of the model to additional cases and data will lead to modification and fine tuning of the model. The theory starts with a number of assumptions, which themselves must be open to testing and adaptation in the course of the exploration. The first assumption is that while it is intended to account for individual choices, language policy like other aspects of language (as Saussure 1931 pointed out), is essentially a social phenomenon, dependent on the consensual behaviors and beliefs of individual members of a speech community.

What is a speech community? From its beginnings, sociolinguistics has avoided a precise answer to this fundamental question. It made a clear distinction between a language community – all those who speak a specific variety of language – and a speech community – those who share a communication network, united by agreeing more or less on the appropriateness of the use of the multiple varieties used in that community. A language community as Hockett (1958), for instance, used the term might be the English-speaking world, the complexity of which we realize since Kachru (1986) drew our attention to the many varieties which constitute World English, or the Francophone world (although francophonie is more a political than a linguistic concept) or at the other extreme, the last remaining speakers of a dying language. A speech community, on the other hand, may be a family or a group of people who regularly use the same coffee shop or work in an office or live in a village or a city (Labov 1966) or a region or even a nation (Gumperz 1968).

Given this vagueness, although I will regularly talk about speech communities, it will be necessary to find a more defined unit. I will start with the notion of domain, as introduced to sociolinguistics by Joshua Fishman in his classic study of the New Jersey barrio (Fishman 1972). Although he argued that domains must be empirically defined for any specific community, Fishman laid down useful generalizations that I will adapt. First, a domain is usually named for a social space, such as home or family, school, neighborhood, church (or synagogue or mosque or other religious institution), workplace, public media, or government. In building a theory of language policy, I will argue that each of these domains has its own policy, with some features controlled internally and others under the influence or control of external forces. As defined by

³ This desire to maintain the status of a variety (the pattern of those who use it and the functions for which it is used) is commonly matched by a desire to maintain its form, viz. to avoid changes in lexicon, grammar and pronunciation. Fishman (2006) refers to this as the purity dimension (as opposed to “vernacularity”).

Fishman, a domain is further distinguished by three characteristics: participants, location, and topic. The participants in a domain are characterized not as individuals but by their social roles and relationships. In the family domain, participants are usually labeled with kinship terms: father, mother, brother, sister, aunt or uncle, grandfather or grandmother, or other appropriate roles such as maid or babysitter. In the school domain, the normal roles are teachers, pupils or students, or principals. In the workplace, they are bosses, employers, workers, employees, foremen, clients, customers. Any individual may fill different roles in different domains, with conflicts sometimes obvious. What variety do I use with my daughter at school if she is also my pupil? How do I speak to my son at work if he is also my employer? Secondly, a domain has a typical location, usually made obvious by its name. Again, lack of congruity between participant and location – a father switching varieties to a visitor when he realized this was his son’s teacher and not his friend⁴ – signal the existence of norms. Fishman’s third component was choice of topic – what is it appropriate to talk about in the domain. Gumperz (1971) has a nice illustration, describing how an employer and employee switch languages when they turn from business to social matters. Essentially, then, I will be arguing that the regular choices made by an individual are determined by his or her understanding of the language choices appropriate to the domain.⁵

Language Policy as Practices, Beliefs and Management

A second assumption, as described in my earlier book (Spolsky 2004), is that language policy has three interrelated but independently describable components: practices, beliefs,⁶ and management.⁷ Language practices are the observable behaviors and choices – what people actually do. They are the linguistic features chosen, the variety of language used. They constitute a policy to the extent that they are regular and predictable, and while studying them is made difficult by the observer’s paradox that Labov (1972) identified – for an observer adds an extra participant and so modifies behavior – describing them is the task of a sociolinguistic study producing what Hymes (1974) called an ethnography of speaking. In one sense, this is the real policy although participants may be reluctant to admit it.⁸ What is critical is that it provides the linguistic context for anyone learning language. Children’s language

⁴ As Abdeen (2003) recorded in his interviews in an Arab village.

⁵ This includes the notion of audience design as proposed by Bell (1984) and of accommodation as explored by Giles, Taylor and Bourhis (1973) and Coupland (1984).

⁶ Or ideology. I prefer “beliefs” to the political associations of “ideologies.”

⁷ Or planning. I prefer “management” as more contemporary than the “planning” so many nations adopted in the optimistic days after the Second World War.

⁸ Try to persuade a literate speaker of French that the /l/ of *il* is only pronounced before a vowel.

acquisition depends in large measure on the language practices to which they are exposed. For example, immigrant parents are often upset to find that their children do not know certain words in their heritage language, not realizing that they themselves regularly replace them with words borrowed from the new language.⁹

The second important component of language policy is made up of beliefs about language. The beliefs that are most significant to our concerns are the values assigned to the varieties and features. For instance, given the role played by language varieties in identification, the variety I associate with my most important membership group – whether it is my nation, my educational class, my region or my ethnic heritage – is likely to have the highest value for me, while certain other varieties will be stigmatized. Of course, beliefs are not practice: It may well be that I myself use stigmatized forms.

The third component is language management, the explicit and observable effort by someone or some group that has or claims to have authority over the participants in the domain to modify their practices or beliefs. The most obvious form of language management is a constitution or a law established by a nation-state determining some aspect of official language use: a requirement to use a specific language as medium of instruction or in business with government agencies, for example. Another example is the decision of the Roman Catholic Church at Vatican II to change the centuries-old policy of requiring Latin for the mass. In the family domain, efforts by immigrant parents to maintain their heritage language or to persuade their children to learn the new language constitute language management.

Internal and External Influences on Language Policy of a Domain

The theory I am exploring will hold that each of these three components within (and, as we shall see, others outside) the domain produces forces that account for language choices by participants. Strongest of all is language practice, for in its absence there is no available model of language to learn. As no one in my home ever spoke Yiddish, I missed the early opportunity to learn it. The child brought up in a monolingual environment is denied the possibilities open to a bilingual. Migrants who no longer speak or hear their language suffer from attrition (Feldman 1997). Proficiency in a language, whether spoken or written, sets a necessary limit for language choice, and provides a strong instrument for implicit language management. The other two components also account for significant forces. My beliefs about the varieties of language from which I may choose, based on my perceptions of their use inside and outside the family domain, help account not just for language choices but also for

⁹ This point I take from Kopeliovich (2006).

management decisions: The different values assigned to standard languages and to heritage languages regularly explain decisions of parents as to what language to speak and encourage in the home, just as they explain government decisions on national language policy. Management accounts also for some language choices, but it is not automatically successful.¹⁰ Management, I will also argue, presupposes a manager: The pressures produced by language practices and beliefs are different in that they may be authorless.¹¹

So far, this theory accounts for language choices within a domain on the basis only of internal forces, derived from language practices, language beliefs, and language management within the domain itself. But it quickly becomes clear that there are forces outside the domain. First is the fact that any individual is a participant in several levels of his or her community, that is to say, any individual has different roles in different domains. The fact that I am at once a parent, a neighbor, a congregant, an employer, and a citizen means that I am familiar with the language practices and beliefs of a number of different domains, and so I may well have reason to favor the values of one domain when I am in another. The men from the Papua-New Guinea village who came home from a year or more in the plantation and chose to speak Tok Pisin provide an example (Kulick 1992).¹² Second, language management provides many examples of efforts to impose language practices on what we might call a lower domain, as when an ethnic language revival movement or a school language policy tries to influence home as well as public behavior. This multilevel analysis helps explain some of the problems of centralized language management, which has to overcome practices, beliefs, and sometimes management at the lower levels. In an exploration of the significant domains, it is appropriate to start with internal forces affecting the domain but also necessary to note probable external pressures.

Exploring the Domains

The model I am exploring entails a number of defined speech communities, social levels, or domains, ranging from the family through various social structures and institutions up to and including the nation-state and supranational groupings, each of which has pressure for language choice engendered by internal and external language practices,

¹⁰ Just as King Cnut demonstrated that his kingship did not give him control over the waves, so putative language managers find similar powerlessness over language use patterns (Spolsky 2006b).

¹¹ Consider, for example, the argument as to whether the spread of English is the result of demographic and economic pressures or the planned activity of an identifiable imperialist conspirator. As a rule, I will take the position that it is management only when we can identify the manager. A number of scholars cite rhetorical statements in favor of a language as though they proved the existence of language managers.

¹² Weinreich (Weinreich 1980) offers this as an explanation of how German was introduced into medieval Jewish communities by men with external contacts.

language belief systems and ideologies, and language management efforts. Exploring the domain of the home first, the practice of the participants, their language beliefs, and their attempts to influence the practices and beliefs of other members of the home speech community are critical. Immigrant parents who maintain heritage languages are obviously more likely to have children who know them, while those who abandon them are encouraging shift (Kopeliovich 2006). To add proficiency in another language, one of the most effective methods is to hire a nanny who speaks that language.¹³ But the home language ecology is quickly influenced by external domains – the Papua-New Guinea men who brought Tok Pisin back to the village and the Palestinian fathers whose working in Hebrew-speaking environments modified their Arabic (Spolsky & Amara 1986) are examples. Once the children are exposed to the language practices and beliefs of their peers in the neighborhood or in school, a new conflict is established. Thus, even the family, the presumably simplest and most basic domain for its effect on natural intergenerational language transmission, turns out to be open to the influence of other domains.

Adding new domains – religious institutions, workplaces, the legal domain, the health and medical domain, schools, the military, local and regional government, national or federal government, and supranational organizations – the relevance of external forces adds to the complexity of the model. The test to be applied is how well it appears to account for the forces that should predict language choices within the domain.

The domains that I am currently exploring provide the evidence. Religious institutions have their own language policies, especially influenced by an established belief about the importance of maintaining the original language of the sacred texts – Islam and pre-Vatican II Roman Catholicism resisted use of the vernacular; Judaism allowed and Protestant Christianity favored translation (Spolsky 2003). In the workplace, the languages of managers and of customers turn out to acquire extra value, and globalization buttresses international languages and especially English (Coleman 1985; Dicker 1998). In the legal domain, there has been growing pressure to permit the increasing numbers of immigrants to understand the process of their trials, adding a new participant (the legal interpreter) to the domain. In the health domain, where there are pragmatic reasons for professional participants (doctors and nurses) to be able to communicate with their patients, the provision of qualified interpreters (as opposed to the common use of patient's bilingual children) has depended on civil rights pressures in Europe and the US. In the military, the complexities of multilingual armies

(such as the Roman Army, the French Foreign Legion, the British controlled Indian Army, or the post-independence Israeli army) have encouraged an assortment of management policies, and the desire to communicate with the enemy or with the inhabitants of occupied territory has led to elaborate military language policies.¹⁴

The School Domain

Of all domains, school proves to be one of the most complex. Its participants bring with them the practices and beliefs of a complex and increasingly multilingual society. Schooling is by its very nature a domain committed to language management. The two main categories of participants are students whose language practices and beliefs are to be modified and teachers charged with the process of modification. Students¹⁵ vary of course on a number of critical dimensions: age, gender, ability level, and motivation, for example. They vary also in the variety or varieties of language that they know and in their level of proficiency. The younger they are, the more likely their language pattern is to reflect the language pattern of their home. Their experience in the home domain, in the neighborhood, and elsewhere will have introduced them to various language practices, have developed in them beliefs about language and values that they assign to language varieties, and exposed them to various attempts to modify their language practices and beliefs. Thus, we are by no means dealing with a *tabula rasa*, for children come to school with established language abilities, behaviors, and values.

The second group of participants in the school domain is made up of the teachers. Again, there is variation on such criteria as age, gender, training, experience, social status and, of course, language proficiency. Here too, there may be relative homogeneity or diversity. An additional factor to be considered is the social, economic, and linguistic similarity or dissimilarity between teachers and students. When I first visited schools on the Navajo Reservation in the late 1960s, 100% of the students were Navajo-speakers with limited if any exposure to English before they came to school, while over 90% of the teachers were English speakers with virtually no knowledge of Navajo (Spolsky 1970). This situation, not uncommon in developing societies or in communities with large numbers of immigrants, reflects the fact that teachers are commonly hired only from among those who have successfully completed many more years of schooling than minority students can yet

¹⁴ The Canadian effort to establish a bilingual defense force is an exception, driven completely by a government language policy on bilingualism and finally unsuccessful. In the US, the ASTP was an effort in the Second World War to make up for the failures of language teaching in US schools (Iglehart 1997; Spolsky 1995). The National Security Language Initiative (Spolsky 2006a) is the latest manifestation of this.

¹⁵ I use this term generally for the learners, whether they are in pre-school, elementary or high school, university, or adult education programs.

¹³ US newspapers reported on high wages paid to Mandarin-speaking nannies by families with expectations of growing trade relations with China.

hope to attain. It is the basis for what I have called the home-school language gap (Spolsky 1974), the fact that teachers use a language which their students do not understand. The first problem in such situations is (or should be) establishing communication between students and teachers.

There are other potentially significant participants in the school domain. The first among these are the professional administrators – principals and department heads in schools, provosts and deans and chairs in universities – who may be selected from the same group as the teachers and who may be responsible to authorities outside the school for management of its educational and language policies. A second significant group may be the non-academic support staff – the bus drivers, secretaries, cleaners and cooks. In the Navajo schools in the 1960s, these were some of the only people on the staff who could speak Navajo and so communicate with the students and with their parents.

Each of these categories of participant brings significant language practices and beliefs to the school domain, but our critical question is what determines the language instructional policy of the school. Here, the variation is once again enormous. There are schools where management is essentially internal, with the school staff (principal, teachers, and other relevant professionals) determining their own educational and linguistic goals and choosing their own appropriate method of achieving them. More commonly, there is some individual or group external to the school domain with the authority to establish goals and methods. In some cases, this may be the parents of the students, working as members of an elected school board or through their financial power to influence school policy. In other cases, the school will be under the authority of a religious leader or religious organization. In others, there may be a democratically elected school board with authority over several schools in the region. Sometimes, this authority is assigned to a local body such as a city council.¹⁶ In other cases, the authority is centralized and under the control of the central government or, in a federal system, of state or provincial governments. In colonial systems, authority was commonly placed on the metropolitan home government.¹⁷ In normal practice, authority over the school programs is divided among these various levels. Each arrangement is likely to have different effects on the establishment and implementation of school language programs.

Conflicts among the levels are common. Parents may favor one language and teachers another; the principal may attempt to implement a policy that varies from the desires of higher and lower levels; national

governments may select policies considered unsuitable in certain regions; State and Federal governments may vary; religious groups may disagree with government policy. One of the special features of school is that the teaching takes place in a closed room, difficult for outsiders to observe. This, of course, increases the power of teachers, so that complex systems of control (classroom visits, centrally controlled microphones and video cameras, or most commonly, externally administered tests and examinations) are needed.

All of these are participants whose beliefs need to be taken into account and who might function as managers of language education policy. Add to this the existence of activist groups – groups of parents or community members – attempting to influence the school or school authorities at any level, and one readily realizes the underlying structural explanation of the multiplicity of language education patterns that we find in practice.

Language Education Policy

The complexity of possible patterns was captured by Mackey (1970) in his pioneering typology of bilingual education.¹⁸ The crucial dimensions of this typology were named varieties of language, year or level of instruction, amount of time allocated in the weekly schedule, medium, topic or subject. The broadest categories were transitional programs (starting in one language and gradually moving to another) or maintenance programs (starting in one and moving to two). The varieties of language in competition are commonly the various home varieties (vernaculars or dialects) and the official national language.

There are a number of possible points in the system for transition from the home or local variety to the national school variety. One model, adopted in the British Empire after failures of the English-only program in 19th century India (Evans 2002), was to provide initial education in the vernacular with gradual transition to English no later than the beginning of high school. The number of years of vernacular instruction has varied, although a consensus from recent research in Africa and elsewhere suggests that six years is needed to achieve good educational results (Heugh 2005; Walter 2003). There are systems which follow the French and Portuguese colonial models and that assert that education must be in the standard metropolitan language from the very beginning.

This controversy over the educational value of instruction in the home language remains one of the most basic issues in language education policy. It depends ultimately on contrasting beliefs about the ability of children to learn language. One position holds that it is just as easy for

¹⁶ Recently, the Washington City Council has been studying how the New York City Council managed to take over control of schools from the education board.

¹⁷ Phillipson (1992) explores this phenomenon as an explanation for the spread of English. The influence of French colonial policy (Bokamba 1991) and of Spanish (Mar-Molinero 2000) are perhaps even clearer examples.

¹⁸ Because of the great variation in the meaning and application of this term, and because of the great deal of political emotion that it engenders, I shall do my best to avoid using it without careful definition.

pre-adolescent children to pick up a new language as it is assumed to be for babies to acquire their first language. For some children, this appears to be true, but on average, the evidence of published research suggests strongly that the majority suffers educationally in such situations (Walter 2003).

Another consideration is the state of the varieties of language being looked at. The issue is the state of development of each potential language of instruction. There is a scale (a typology proposed by Stewart 1968), ranging from an unwritten and unstandardized vernacular, dialect, creole, or pidginto a standard or classical language, the upper end implying the availability of a writing system (a critical feature in schooling which assumes literacy as a first goal) and of a dictionary and grammar (also demanded by school teachers) as well as of modern terminology. This quickly becomes apparent when you visit schools beginning to use home languages. When we worked on developing elementary education in Navajo, one of the big gaps that needed to be filled was lexicon for mathematics (Navajo had no simple way to label fractions, for instance). I also have vivid memories of a Maori first grade teacher discussing with her aunt (acting as language assistant), with the school inspector who was my escort, and with the students what Maori word to use for some new concept. It is this that sets the inevitable bridge between two kinds of language management, managing speakers (what Kloss 1969 labeled *status planning*) and modifying a language (what Kloss called *corpus planning*, but perhaps better labeled using the Prague School term *cultivation* [Prague School 1973]). Fishman (2006) has argued that these two processes commonly share the same motivational dimensions, but there is an even earlier connection in that the assignment of a function to a variety regularly entails that it must be modified to fill that function, either by developing a writing system or by modernization.

What this means is that programs that aim to use the local or home variety as language of instruction commonly incur the extra expense and trouble of needing to add a language cultivation component. It has been suggested that one of the problems with implementing the South African constitutional recognition of nine languages alongside English and Afrikaans is the weak provision of resources for language development (Alexander 2004). The 1970s Navajo educational programs were supported by projects concerned with writing or reprinting material in Navajo. Maori education has been similarly hampered by the absence of contemporary writing in the language, apart from material prepared for school use and translated government documents. Earlier European language maintenance and revival programs were fortunate in that their leaders were often literary figures who had begun writing in the language. The absence of (or need for) language cultivation can then serve as a reason or excuse for not using home varieties in school.

Conclusion

Despite these constraints, it will be rare for linguistic or educational considerations to determine school language policy. More commonly, schools reflect the ideological position of those who control them. Normally, their policy will be driven in part at least by the policy of the national government. Thus, recent major changes from Bahasa Melayu to English and from Urdu to English for teaching science and mathematics in Malaysia and Pakistan respectively, or the intention to provide six years initial instruction in the vernacular in South Africa, or the intention to restore English as medium of instruction in the Philippines have all been announced as central government policy; the insistence on instruction in Kannada in Karnataka is a decision of the state government; efforts to establish English-only programs and ban bilingual education have been focused on state governments in the US and in particular on those states with popular referenda. Language instruction in the school then is a key component in national language policy and is recognized as a key stage in Fishman's (1991) GIDS model.

The present language policy model, then, suggests that the school domain is the one most likely to be influenced externally, whether from "below" (home, religion, neighborhood) or "above" (levels of government), and to be most often the target of activist intervention in support of one variety or another. The study of language education policy is thus perhaps the most difficult and challenging field of all, and deserves the thorough attention it receives in this special issue of WPEL.

Born in New Zealand in 1932, Bernard Spolsky was educated at Victoria University and the University of Montreal. He taught at McGill University, Indiana University, the University of New Mexico and Bar-Ilan University, retiring in 2000. He has written and edited two dozen books, including Conditions for Second Language Learning (1989), The Languages of Jerusalem (1991), Measured Words (1995), Sociolinguistics (1998), The Languages of Israel (1999), Concise Encyclopedia of Educational Linguistics (1999) and Language Policy (2004), and about 200 articles and chapters. He was founding editor of three journals: Applied Linguistics, Journal of Asia TEFL, and Language Policy. He lives in the Old City of Jerusalem where he is writing a monograph on fundamentals of language management.

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