

LANGUAGE POLICIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH BERNARD SPOLSKY

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REVEL – Could you explain to our readers what Language Policy is? How is it related to Linguistics and to public (or private) policies?

Spolsky – Although efforts at language management can be dated back to the development of writing systems and the work of standardization undertaken by scribes in the ancient world and printers and schoolteachers starting in the renaissance, the modern field of language policy was initiated by linguists working on assisting newly independent states after the Second World War. Encouraged by the success of physicists who built major instruments of destruction, and by the optimism of economists who hoped to be able to rebuild societies destroyed by war, these linguists propose various plans to solve the language problems of developing nations. As time went on, it became clear that neither economic plans nor top-down language plans were likely to succeed: for instance, most African countries continue to use the colonial languages that were to be replaced by the development of indigenous African languages. In more recent rethinking of the nature of the field, it has been suggested that language policy has three interrelated but independent components: the actual language practices of members of the speech community, the beliefs of those members about language, and the efforts of some members to change the practices and beliefs. It has also been proposed that in each domain and in each sub-community (government, business, education, religious group, family), one can

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find a complex but ordered set of practices and beliefs and some individuals (managers) who wish to modify the language behavior and beliefs of others. The field of language policy is considered to be a kind of applied sociolinguistics, with much of its activities directed to education.

REVEL – Could you tell us about your career as a professor of Linguistics, with experiences in different countries and continents? How did you start studying Language Policy?

Spolsky – I started as a high school teacher and taught in New Zealand, Australia, and England before I moved to Israel and became a university teacher of English as a foreign language. After a few years, I moved to Canada for doctoral studies and taught in Montréal where I became aware of one of the major areas where language policy and language management were becoming of political significance. When I completed my doctorate, I started to teach in the linguistics department at Indiana University where one part of my duties involved a graduate program for foreign teachers of English. This experience started to raise my concern about political influences on language education, and so I was happy to accept an appointment at the University of New Mexico where I soon became involved in a project to study the effect of teaching Navajo children to read in their own language first. Here I first began to study the forces affecting language education policy and the values of bilingual education. When I returned to Israel, a rich example of language diversity, I continued these interests, and during a leave in Washington, started to realize that I was working on language policy. The next year, a colleague and I propose to the Minister of education in Israel a language education policy, based on a study we conducted of the current practices in the field. Over the years, I had been paying occasional visits to New Zealand where I observed the beginnings of the language revival movement for Māori. Combining these experiences, with research in Navajo, Māori, and Hebrew language revival, I wrote two monographs, one on language policy and one on language management.

REVEL – What were some major achievements in the field of Language Policies in the 20th century?

Spolsky - During the 20th century, most language management was influenced by the monolingual ideology of old and new national states. The attempts to develop policies which recognized the multilingualism and diversity of most communities were generally unsuccessful, so that the various plans of activists seeking to reverse language shift and to assert the language rights of ethnic minorities foundered on the pressures of nationalism on the one hand and of English as a global language on the other. There were a few success stories: Hebrew was revernacularized and revitalized and established as the dominant language of the new state of Israel; Indonesia managed to establish the usefulness of a standard language; the People's Republic of China was successful in spreading Putonghua as a national language; the Soviet Union established Russian as the dominant language and was successful in stamping out many minority languages including Yiddish; and in several parts of the world, human rights activists have encouraged activities to preserve indigenous languages. In sum, while understanding of the nature of the field and of the problems of managing language has increased, the most successful activities have been those that encourage the hegemony of national languages and the auxiliary role of English as a global language.

REVEL – And what's beginning in the 21st century? What other achievements in the area can we expect for this century?

Spolsky – I imagine the struggle will continue. Multilingualism will also continue, but a large proportion of the 6000 or so languages being spoken will rapidly disappear under the pressure of national and international languages. The big fish will continue to eat the little fish. At the same time, there is hope that in the diversity developing especially in urban areas, many minorities will persist to speak their heritage languages and new hybrid varieties will begin to emerge. There are signs that language management efforts based on recognition of the many communities involved will start to have effect: for example, Wales seems to be making advances in Welsh language management; Maori has been recognized as an official language and is now supported by major educational activities; many South American countries

now recognize the existence of indigenous languages and support activism; China has acknowledged the role of the many topolects and recognizes some of its minority languages; the European Union has a policy supporting indigenous but not migrant languages; there continue to be efforts to use African languages in some states; and there continues to be pressure from supporters of language as a human right.

REVEL – Could you suggest a list of influential works (seminal and recent ones) in Language Policies for our readers?

Spolsky – The list below starts with some classic works and then moves to more recent books on language policy.

Haugen, Einar. (1966). *Language conflict and language planning: the case of Modern Norwegian*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.

Fishman, Joshua A., Ferguson, Charles A., & Das Gupta, Jyotirinda. (1968). *Language problems of developing nations*. New York: Wiley.

Rubin, Joan, & Jernudd, Björn (Eds.). (1971). *Can language be planned?* Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii.

Fishman, Joshua A. (Ed.). (1974). *Advances in Language Planning*. The Hague: Mouton. Cooper, Robert L. (1989). *Language planning and social change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cobarrubias, Juan, & Fishman, Joshua A. (Eds.). (1983). *Progress in language planning: international perspectives*. The Hague: Mouton.

Kaplan, Robert B., & Baldauf, Richard B. (1997). *Language planning from practice to theory*. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

May, Stephen. (2001). *Language and minority rights : ethnicity, nationalism, and the politics of language*. Harlow, Essex, England & New York: Longman.

Spolsky, Bernard. (2004). *Language Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ricento, Thomas (Ed.). (2006). *An introduction to language policy: Theory and method*. Malden MA and Oxford UK: Blackwell publishing.

Shohamy, Elana. (2006). *Language policy: Hidden agendas and new approaches*. New York: Routledge.

Hornberger, Nancy H., & May, Stephen (Eds.). (2008). *Language policy and political issues in education* (Second ed. Vol. 1). New York: Springer Science.

Spolsky, Bernard. (2009). *Language management*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge

University Press.

Spolsky, Bernard (Ed.). (2012). *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy*.
Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.