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## **Language Policy and Language Practice at the International Level: Toward a Research Agenda**

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It is hard to separate language policy from language planning, and in practice many writers on the topic conflate the two. One cannot have planning without policy, and language planning precedes policy implementation. So the two are tightly related. Furthermore, implementation tends to generate policy modification and further planning, in a potentially endless loop. So perhaps we should think of policy and planning as a single entity or activity with two aspects, the one involving codification (policy) and the other implementation (planning). In his *Dictionary of Language Planning Terms* (1993), Cluver defines language policy as “official decisions on the status of various languages spoken in heterogeneous communities ... A language policy is usually formulated by a government or by an agency appointed for this purpose and it therefore tends to support the political goals of the government.” While this definition perhaps provides a useful starting-point, our thinking about language policy has moved of late to a rather broader definition, embracing not only governments and government agencies but also other institutional settings. In his 2004 book on language policy, Spolsky begins where Cluver begins, by examining a range of national policies, but almost immediately moves beyond this examination to look at far less structured and far more complicated instances such as attempts to control unacceptable language and the promotion of language purism. Thus, although we have traditionally tended to think of language policy as above all a national and local affair, focused particularly on governments but embracing also other kinds of institutions – including schools – Spolsky has reminded us that even relatively informal situations have their policy dimensions – and he and others have pointed out that lack of policy may in fact constitute a policy: in a situation in which particular language practices predominate or one language is stronger than others, even *laissez-faire* is a form of language policy.

At the same time, we should note that language policy may be merely the rationalization of language practice. Language practices and language policies are near-related. One might argue that language policies are sometimes abstracted from language practices as well as generating such practices.

Most studies of language policy have focused on national and local use in part because linguists tend to be more interested in first language or native language use and less interested in those spheres where languages are used as second languages. Most language policy is concerned with enabling or excluding language use by this or that group of native speakers. It is also easier to define agents when one is working with clearly defined institutions at the national or local level. But if national language policies trickle down to policies at the local level, they also extend upwards and outwards: national language policy is reflected in the relationships among states,

and institutions and entities that function at the local and national level often have their international extensions or parallels. Language policy and its ramifications spread far beyond national boundaries in numerous ways.

Linguists have grown accustomed to the fact that political scientists and specialists in related fields often ignore linguistic factors in their analysis of polities and communities. What is true of the work of political scientists and historians at the national level is even more true at the international level. My colleague Timothy Reagan has pointed out that curricula in world history seldom give any attention to language at all. Peter Burke's book on *Language and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (2004) strikes one as more original than, by rights, it ought to be. How can one understand the growth and interaction of European nations without understanding their language policies and practices?

Language policy manifests itself at the international level in numerous ways. I have grouped them in three categories: first, the interaction of national language policies in the international dealings of states; second, the language policies of international entities and communities; third, what I have described as "soft" language policies – emergent legal concepts relating to language, the international exchange of texts, and the like.

### **Ramifications of national language policies at the international level**

- Language policies in one country influence language policies in another. Thus we can study the interaction of language policies across a region – for example in the evolution of Malay into Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Malaysia in Southeast Asia; or the moves in certain Latin American countries to accord limited recognition to indigenous languages – thereby encouraging or legitimizing similar efforts in other countries; or the English-language policies of the Philippines that facilitate the export of labor to North America and elsewhere. The adoption of particular language policies in one country may affect language practices or policies on the other side of the border.
- Governments or their local surrogates make decisions about language use in schools that have an effect on the well-being of immigrants or migrant workers, particularly when those decisions affect the medium of instruction. Decisions on which foreign languages to teach affect the countries where those languages are spoken and potentially have an effect on workforce readiness to engage in international trade.
- Particular countries adopt international language acquisition policies. Thus the British Council promotes English internationally, the Alliance Française promotes French, the Goethe-Institut German – and the Chinese government puts increasing resources into the teaching and learning of Chinese in other countries. In some cases, particularly regarding English, other governments are obliged to develop policy in order to maintain or strengthen their economic or political position in the face of English-language dominance.

- Speakers of the same language make common cause across national boundaries. Thus the francophone countries work together to maintain and promote French. The relative success of French in Quebec, for example, would be inconceivable without the moral and cultural presence of France just across the Atlantic.
- Governments operate across national borders – in diplomacy, in various forms of international cooperation, including military cooperation – and adopt language policies in order to do so. Thus the U.S. Foreign Service has its rules regarding language knowledge and acquisition, and all other governments have their requirements and expectations.

### **The language policies of international entities and communities**

- Corporations interact across national boundaries and sometimes constitute international entities all their own. They often face language policy decisions – both in establishing communication patterns within the corporation and in managing relations with their client base. Their policies affect hiring practices, employee compensation, advertising and marketing, and a host of other issues.
- Academic cooperation and research cooperation cross national boundaries. Increasingly such cooperation is conducted in English, but English-only policies serve to exclude or disadvantage scholars and researchers whose first language is not English. Policies established by publishers of books and scholarly journals, by organizers of conferences, by abstracting services, and by the funders of research all have an effect on the conduct of research, its participants, and, very possibly, its outcomes. One effect of the widespread use of English in scientific cooperation is to create the illusion that data becomes knowledge only when it is articulated in English. A second unintended effect is that the teaching of science in schools must either be conducted in a language foreign to the students or in terminology foreign to the teachers who have received their advanced scientific training through the medium of English.
- Professional organizations promote common standards and practices across national boundaries, for example the Bologna process for the development of degree equivalency in universities, or the Erasmus program for student exchanges. Both of these processes have caused universities and governments to change their practices and hence their policies regarding the delivery of higher education in languages other than their own, resulting particularly in the proliferation of English-language-medium programs. We might note in this regard that the *owners* of English (with all the advantages that ownership conveys) are gradually losing their hold on the use of English as more and more non-anglophone countries make use of English. David Graddol has pointed out that there are now more L2 speakers of English than there are L1 speakers and that there is every reason to expect that British revenue from the teaching of English will decline as the international use of English expands.
- As individuals cross national boundaries, their needs are met through the development of language policies by government tourism offices, hotels, and all the other bodies

concerned with travel and tourism. Language policies affect the airline industry in everything from the language used by air traffic controllers to the language competence of aircraft personnel interacting with the public.

- The operations of international intergovernmental organizations require the development of formal language policies. Such formal policies, for example at the United Nations or in the European Union, tend to reflect the relative power of individual member-states. Where such policies can be construed as relatively inclusive – as for example in the EU – language practices often undermine this inclusiveness. Thus in the United Nations, where the Secretariat operates in two working languages – English and French – French has largely lost its position to English; and this is equally so in the context of the General Assembly, where English dominates all of the other five working languages in all but the most formal and rule-bound interactions. The more unwieldy the language policies, the more likely they are to result in efforts to circumvent them in favor of the strongest languages. An additional major factor is the role of language services in international organizations – their finances, their personnel practices, their modes of delivery of services.
- Nongovernmental organizations also operate across national boundaries, and must formulate language policies. Financial constraints and the realities of working outside the organization often have the practical result of fostering the dominance of English.
- What is true of nongovernmental organizations is also true of religious organizations. The language policies of the Vatican, especially the increased use of the vernacular since Vatican 2, have led to the greater involvement of congregations but have tended to increase their segmentation by language and ethnicity – a process that is perhaps in some measure now being reversed. The use of classical Arabic as the language of worship in Islam has tended to reinforce the unity of Muslim regions and has helped in the development of the modern standard Arabic used, for example, by the regional media.

### **“Soft” interactions**

- Texts cross national boundaries, as do cultural products of various kinds. Not only are such products – in the form of publications, software, films, and a host of other cultural goods – propelled by language, but they also generate considerable controversy as the speakers of the languages in which the products are conveyed argue for fair trade in this as in other areas, while the speakers of other languages claim the right to defend their cultures against external intrusions.
- Software development and internet use are particularly important in this regard, because the practices of software companies (such as efforts at localization unevenly applied) favor some languages over others and have their important language policy dimensions, especially as regards localization. Similar issues arise in the application of universal character sets, such as Unicode; or in the writing systems permissible for internet addresses, and so on.

- The field of law, when elevated to the international level, raises numerous policy issues – not only in the development of international law and the law of treaties, but in the international interaction of the linguistic aspects of laws governing trade, commerce, contracts, copyright, and the like, at the national level. The development of human rights law intersects with linguistic issues in the emergence of concepts of language rights, the right to communicate, and other aspects of human rights that embody the ability to communicate. Such emergent human rights may, as they develop internationally, affect policy at the national level.
- The relative standing of languages internationally, particularly the spread of English, leads to accusations of linguistic imperialism and language hegemony, with scholars arguing that English is a kind of “killer language,” weakening or eliminating other languages in its path as it appropriates new domains and redefines language choice. Others argue that such choice is essentially non-coercive: we choose to learn and use languages on the basis of our estimate of their relative utility to us. Thus there exists a language market in which we are all free agents. Meanwhile, scholars explore alternative policies for the use of languages within countries and beyond that are based on the relative costs and advantages of particular configurations of languages, or on other “rational” assumptions and approaches.

While the literature concerning international relations is huge, it pays relatively little attention to the linguistic dimension, even though language choice constitutes a huge facilitator of international communication and also a significant constraint. This omission is, in the main, not redressed by language policy specialists, who tend to be concerned with national and local matters. While most studies of language policy that pretend to any kind of comprehensiveness do devote some attention to international aspects of their subjects, such attention may sometimes seem little more than perfunctory. In all of the areas that I have mentioned, there is some body of work, but it is often quite limited in its scope. Perhaps the major exception to that generalization lies in studies of the international reach of English or, to a lesser extent, of the other major languages (French and German, for example).

A meaningful research agenda in language policy at the international level would perhaps have to begin with a definition of the principal actors. While Cluver could easily identify governments as actors in national language policy, and while local government in a sense mimics the actions of national governments, there is no obvious equivalent at the international level. Perhaps, as policies can be said to trickle down from national governments, we would be obliged to argue that language policy at the international level is a reflection *upwards* of national policy stances much as local policy is a reflection *downwards* of those same stances. We have been unable to formulate international language policy on its own terms just as we have been unable to formulate most other global policies on *their* own terms. We have also proved distressingly unable to conceptualize language policy *at any level* on the basis of language repertoires as opposed to native languages: our thinking about policy seems oddly linked to the monolingual speaker, despite the fact that vast numbers of people are in fact at least bilingual and that number is very possibly growing as education levels rise and as English comes to serve more and more

as a second language for international interactions and transactions. And, as I have already suggested, linguists are drawn to study native language use rather than second or third language use, thereby tending to turn downwards to the particular rather than upwards to the realm of the multilingual and the non-native speaker.

Beneath these overarching considerations lies a host of issues in each of the areas on which I have touched. I can point merely to an example or two. Although there are numbers of studies of interactions among scientists and the conduct of scientific and medical research, the study of language constraints on science because of particular policies and practices is little examined. Hence those practices, even if they are highly discriminatory, continue. In a related area, the increased use of English as a language of instruction in higher education is viewed with alarm by some and enthusiasm by others, but we know little about its long-range effects, including its effects on cultural differences. Cultural and linguistic interference in the conduct of surveys, or linguistic constraints on the reading ability of non-native English speakers, or the constraints of language regimes in international conferences are all of them little studied, and their consequences are often ignored or go unrecognized. Grin and others have pointed to the burden placed on small countries by the need for foreign-language instruction, but this is another issue that escapes the attention of many. Formulating a comprehensive research agenda would take more time and more expertise than can be devoted to them in this short paper – but the urgency of the matter is in no sense diminished as a consequence. In a globalized environment, global policies and practices in regard to language require our immediate attention.

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