

Language policy and planning: general constraints and pressures

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Language policy and planning are among the many instruments available for helping to shape the character and direction of a society. It is very important that their general scope, origins, potential and limitations are properly understood in order to make them effective in a particular society, in this case, South Africa.

Language planning and language policy express particular efforts at official social intervention and control in the sphere of language. Normally the direction and ambitions of language policy and planning embody an economic and social vision. In accord with this vision, certain aspects of current language practice in society are officially challenged or curbed, others are sustained and affirmed. In general, the aim of language policy is to move language practice in directions deemed desirable by those in power. Usually such attempts are applied through legislative measures ('policy') and allied material provision ('planning') to different social and political entities, such as geo-political regions, organized economic alliances, nations, provinces, industries, school systems, government departments, businesses and so forth.

Language policy is the formal, often legally entrenched, expression of language planning. Substantive language planning should precede the formulation of policy in order to ensure that policy is realistic.

Definitions and origins

The general idea of language planning is easily expressed. A relatively early definition was given by the Estonian scholar Valter Tauli as “the activity of regulating and improving existing languages or creating new common regional, national or international languages” (1964: 607-8). Christopher Brumfit describes language planning as “the attempt to control the use, status, and structure of a language through a language policy developed by a government or other authority” (1992: 580). The *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* concurs, but adds some significant detail. Language planning is “the development of policies or programmes designed to direct or change language use, as through the establishment of an official language, the standardization or modernization of a language, or the development or alteration of a writing system” (1081). Such definitions are easily multiplied, their content differing only slightly in nuance and depth.

Historically speaking, the notion of language planning is a relatively late response to the mid-nineteenth century doctrine of the malleability of ‘man’ – part of a gradual realization that social and political institutions, and many human behaviours, are neither organic, supernaturally determined, culturally set, nor ‘given’, in any easy sense. Towards the end of the century, cumulative evidence from comparative philology supported by the emerging insights of anthropology brought home the fact of universal linguistic differentiation and change.

It is readily understandable that a gradual shift from the view of language as an organic but evolving human behaviour towards wider acceptance of language as socially constructed under pressure from socio-economic need would lead inevitably to the notion that sociolinguistic behaviour may be open to conscious intervention. This understanding came to the fore in academic discussion in the mid-twentieth century, and conscious efforts to apply the emerging body of thinking took off in the late 1960s.

Types of language planning

Commentators usually distinguish between **natural** and **interventionist** language planning. Natural language planning is not the equivalent of *laissez-faire* language

planning, or no language planning. **Natural language planning** actively supports the evolving language needs of a society as they emerge in response to other-than-linguistic pressures. In other words, if language shift towards an international language is occurring because of the demands of the central economy and the impact of globalization, there will normally be social pressure to ensure that requisite human and material resources are readily available for members of the society to learn that language well. Attempting to meet this demand accords with the outlook of natural language planning. But natural language planning supports no major effort to encourage language shift or change which runs counter to the emerging language dispensation induced by other-than-linguistic changes in society. In serving the needs of minority or endangered languages, natural language planning will supply material support only in proportion to public demand. **Interventionist language planning**, in contrast, is prepared to challenge the impact on the language dispensation of current sociolinguistic forces. It sets itself the task to revitalize moribund languages, preserve dialects, maintain languages that are under threat, modernize traditional languages for use in different domains, defend language rights, and nurture an ethically satisfying linguistic ecology. Many actually existing language policies reflect different combinations of these two approaches, the emphasis on one or the other mainly reflecting economic constraints.

Perspectives on sociolinguistic complexity

The shape language policy and planning takes in any given society depends to a considerable extent on the level of sociolinguistic expertise and awareness among those charged with devising it. In this regard, Ruiz (1988) distinguishes three perspectives on language in society that may influence the direction of language planning interventions: language as a 'problem', language as a 'right', and language as a 'resource'. Careless commentators often make the unsupported assumption that the three attitudes in question represent stages in a progressive paradigm shift. In their view, language as a 'problem' is an ideological mistake we have, or should have, outgrown; language as a 'right' is slightly better, more ethically correct but still too passive and conservative; whereas language as a 'resource' is the truly progressive stance that must sweep all before it. More careful commentators stress that these perspectives are not mutually exclusive, that

all three (together with many other factors) are constantly in play in most language situations. Judgments underpinning language policy need to be carefully justified in relation to their potential for success on the ground.

Factors influencing the potential success of language policy

- Successful language policy harnesses prevailing social motivation. Language planning and policy which aligns itself with existing social motivation (i.e. natural language planning) is likely to be cherished and supported because it confirms and facilitates a prevailing social dynamic. This is particularly true for macro-policy, where the broad scale of social language practice is typically at odds with the very modest language planning resources available.
- In consequence, language practice in the upper levels of society tends to follow the axis of power, and specifically to support the needs of the central economy where capitalist wealth is created (see Wright 2002). This is partly a consequence of the socio-economic forces summed up in the term ‘globalization’, and partly a concrete social assessment of the perceived value of language. At lower levels there is typically more scope for localized multilingual practice in a diversity of different domains, but these spheres often lack political and economic influence. It follows that natural language planning tends to meet the needs of the speakers of marginalized languages and dialects only inadequately. Marginal languages and dialects require explicit and successful intervention. The scope of such intervention needs to be assessed in terms of public demand, because intervention is costly.
- The assessment of active public demand for linguistic intervention is complex, and should be distinguished from merely passive public support. Confronted with an offer of intervention from a language development agency, what member of an endangered or marginalized linguistic community will not express support for the notion in principle? But real linguistic demand is something very different. Linguistic demand is fueled by more than soft ideological attachment, and normally comprises elements of

concrete political solidarity, economic ambition and educational need, as well as cultural pride. In other words, real linguistic demand is instrumentally oriented and needs to be assessed in these terms, before scarce developmental resources can be appropriately allocated to linguistic reconstruction. Special care should be taken not to overestimate the views of professional language practitioners. Not only are these sometimes esoteric or professionally conditioned, they can also be an expression of material self-interest, shaped by the need to defend project budgets and personal career trajectories.

- There is mounting evidence that language policy is not, intrinsically, a self-contained cultural issue. Language policy is rarely a matter of merely linguistic ideology or preference, though it is sometimes presented as such. Rather, language policy pressures tend to be surface markers reflecting deep-lying issues of political and ideological contention. In particular, they come to the fore where communities are politically marginalized, or where dominant socio-economic dispensations are seen to be impacting adversely on cherished alternative modes of economic or social organization. In such circumstances, language policy can become a useful ideological ancillary in mobilizing resistance, even if its concrete implementation remains permanently fugitive.
- Issues of language rights and linguistic ecology tend to be marginal within the full suite of policy measures competing for implementation in any given polity. Interventionist measures usually receive only modest fiscal support. Their major strength normally takes the form of constitutional and legal provision, qualified in South Africa by the principle of the equitable (but not equal) treatment of languages. Treating languages equitably, but not equally, diminishes the potential for ethnic and linguistic rivalry, and tilts South African language policy towards the more cost-effective paradigm of natural language planning. Extreme language endangerment, where it exists, should be tackled as a separate cultural and academic issue, rather than as a matter of general language policy. In Southern Africa this applies to certain highly endangered Khoe-San languages.
- Interventionist language policy is most likely to succeed where it addresses a strongly felt social or economic need, rather than when it seeks to introduce a measure

which satisfies a notional, merely ideological prescription unsupported by real demand. The development of terminology and the provision of textbooks and dictionaries in marginalized languages is a necessary but far from sufficient condition for the extension of such languages into new domains. In this respect language behaves as any other economic ‘good’, a factor to be born strongly in mind when attempting to turn a map of linguistic possibility into a concrete language plan. Planners belong on the supply side of the linguistic equation. If language planners correctly identify suppressed or ‘pent-up’ demand for a particular language, perhaps in a specific domain, and then take appropriate action to supply that demand through policy intervention and material provision, their efforts will in all likelihood register a success (see Wright 2003).

- Language planning is more likely to be effective in situations amenable to controlled policy influence than in open or unregulated situations. For instance, language policy and practice within a company, school system or government service can to an extent be monitored and enforced through an extension of existing bureaucracy (see Wright 2004).
- Difficulties arise when linguistic idealism tempts planners to deploy scarce resources attempting feats of linguistic revitalization or modernization unsupported by appropriate public demand – in other words, where the requisite social motivation is lacking. Small sums expended on the recording and preservation of a marginal dialect may be appropriate as a valuable cultural or academic initiative. A full-scale effort to resuscitate a moribund language for use in domains where its small community of speakers has never before participated could be judged fruitless and a waste of money – money which might have been used for other language planning purposes or (budgetary niceties aside) more fundamental social needs in that community, say housing and water supply.
- Because there are few countries anywhere with sufficient human and financial resources to attempt large-scale feats of interventionist language planning, it is wise for developing countries to carefully select sites where interventionist effort is likely to

succeed. Such sites will probably be those where language planning resources cohere in scale and feasibility with existing social motivation.

In South Africa, the ongoing tension between the demand for English and the character of South African multilingualism becomes immensely relevant for issues of language planning and policy, as the next three papers demonstrate.

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