

THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE PLANNING

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Abstract

Language is ambivalently viewed as an autonomous organism that should not be manipulated, but also as a means to human ends which can be and always has been subjected to deliberate intervention. Modern social and technological developments have made language planning an important field of applied research and action. Language planning affects the roles languages play and the internal characteristics of languages, such as their terminologies. It deals with natural and artificial human languages and with machine languages as well. Its limits are set by such things as man's learning capacity and innate psychological universals reflected in uniformities of all languages. Language planning can help achieve collective unity, distinctiveness, communicational power and efficiency, aesthetic goals, and various non-linguistic results, although the different goals of language planning are not all compatible. By-products of language policy often include social or historical isolation, discrimination, and conflict. Language is an object of policymaking that is less subject to compromise than most others and is prone to exacerbation because of the coincidence between communication-group and interest-group boundaries. Linguists have either not wanted or not managed to professionalize and depoliticize language planning either in competitive or in one-party states. The nature of language makes certain techniques likely to aid the success of language policies. Language policymakers should take into account natural linguistic change and the social and attitudinal forces affecting this change. They should balance material and symbolic benefits to provide incentives for widespread cooperation and should organize the decision-making units so that their boundaries cross-cut linguistic ones. They should also take advantage of linguistic uniformities by doing predictive experiments prior to adopting policies. Questions remain as to whether language planning is more successful when it allows options, and whether different language problems should be solved in combination or in sequence.

1. The Field of Language Planning

Language, like politics, is an object of ambivalence. One side of language is its widely recognized autonomy. We think of it as a living organism, something that should not be interfered or meddled with, and something that should also not be violated or abused. George Orwell, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and others express this side of the consensus in their complaints about the "corruption" and "decay" of public language.[1] Language is more often than not treated as a given; if it is closely associated with other phenomena, such as nationality, then language is seen as the determiner rather than the follower. The autonomy of language has been reaffirmed by two recent schools of linguistic scholarship which are otherwise hostile to each other. The school of linguistic relativity, represented most forcefully by Whorf, holds that languages of different families bring about fundamentally different world-views in their speakers.[2] The school of structural linguistics, which dominates the study of language today in the United States and many other countries, while denying this power of language to shape thought or culture, still agrees that language is fairly immune to influences by them, and even resistant to deliberate manipulation by public authorities.[3]

Yet language is also an instrument for achieving human purposes. As such, languages have always been created, revived, destroyed, changed, adapted, and manipulated. Throughout history, most people have been normatively oriented toward language: they have wanted to be told (or to tell others) what forms are correct, incorrect, or taboo, and which languages are better than which other languages. People have rebelled at the idea that one might equally well say either this or that. There has been a general tendency to standardize. The notion of language as instrument is nowhere better exemplified than in the age-old drive to invent languages for special purposes. According to the most complete bibliography to date, from the second century to 1973 a total of 912 artificial languages for international communication were devised and published; no-one knows how many others never reached the printing press.[4]

Political intervention in the process of linguistic change has been traced back as far as the fifth century B.C.,[5] but the importance of deliberate language planning has undoubtedly risen in recent years. The need for such planning can be explained by the expansion of mass education, the mobilization and integration of diverse ethnic groups in industrial economies, the expansion of political participation to all adults, the extension of norms of equality and non-discrimination to ever more kinds of social categories, and the ongoing revolution in communications technology that will soon give

everyone a technical opportunity to communicate cheaply with everyone else in the world, leaving language, together with politics, as the main obstacle.[6] The possibility of language planning, on the other hand, has grown with our improving understanding of language and language behavior. We now know much more about language varieties, linguistic stratification, language learning, language attitudes, language universals, and the organization of successful language policy than we did only a decade ago. We also know more about the methods for filling in the gaps in our knowledge: advances in sociolinguistic questionnaire design and innovative experimental methods like the matched guise technique have made intelligent language planning considerably more feasible and monitorable.

Language planning has several kinds, objects, and stages. The main kinds have been called "language status planning" and "language corpus planning".[7] Language status planning deals with the statuses, roles, and functions of languages in society. Choices among several languages made by speakers or writers may be affected by this kind of planning. It includes policies selecting an official or working language or a language of instruction, policies toward speakers of a minority language or dialect, and policies establishing linguistic prerequisites for admission to schools, professions, or the franchise. Language corpus planning deals not with choices among several languages, but with the corpus, i.e. the content and structure, of one or more languages themselves. Corpus planning affects the vocabularies, sound systems, word structures, sentence structures, writing systems, and stylistic repertoires of languages. It is aimed not at which language a person uses, but at how he uses the one he uses. Most comprehensive language policies involve both kinds of planning. In India, for example, government policy is not only to make Hindi gradually replace English as the domestic lingua franca, but also to use Sanskrit as the principal source of lexical enrichment for Hindi, rather than importing new vocabulary from English, Russian, other Indian languages, etc.

Three different types of languages may be the objects of language planning. The type that has received the most attention is natural languages. This term refers to languages spoken by human beings and perpetuated by being acquired as native languages by children, but it is also (and here will be) extended to include languages without many or any native speakers that have come into existence in a spontaneous fashion. This term, then, includes what Stewart has called standard, classical, vernacular, dialect, creole, and pidgin languages.[8] The second type is artificial languages; these are invented either a priori or a posteriori (i.e. not based or based on any natural languages, respectively) by an individual or a committee, but can subsequently be, and sometimes are, used as

media of communication in the same ways that natural languages are. The third type is what Cherry calls "sign systems".[9] These, like artificial languages, are devised by individuals or committees, but they are unlike either of the two other types because sign systems are limited to particular semantic domains and are, within those domains, unambiguous. Typically, sign systems are also used only in written form.[10]

Language planning also has more than one stage. As Haugen says, "In any movement for change one may distinguish initiation from implementation"[11] In the field of language planning, it would be appropriate to strengthen this statement by changing "may" to "must". Some kinds of language behavior are exceedingly difficult to influence--so difficult that even those who push for or push through an in-principle decision may find themselves failing to conform to it at the same time as they are trying to bring the whole society into compliance. Thus we find some Turkish opponents of puristic vocabulary using that vocabulary in their attacks on it,[12] some advocates of genderless third-person singular pronouns in English continuing to use "he" and "she", and some persons asserting that Esperanto is easy to learn who have not managed to learn it. It is not that language is difficult to change, since it changes all the time, but rather that slowing, speeding, or changing the changes in language is not necessarily easy, even when there is a consensus on goals.

2. The Limits of Language Planning

This raises the question, how far can language planning go? To answer this question fully, we need more knowledge than we have, but at least some kinds of limits can be described. One limit is imposed by the rate at which people can learn. Language planning always involves learning and unlearning. Status planning means that people must learn entirely different languages, and corpus planning means that they must learn different words or forms within a language that they already know. Assimilating such changes takes time and imposes an opportunity cost, since linguistic learning takes place at the expense of other kinds of learning. One observer has argued that the attempt to teach both substance and language at the same time results, in practice, in the learning of the language without the learning of the substance.[13] If the public authorities attempt to push language learning faster than the natural limit, existing information in the minds of the targets may be unnecessarily destroyed, with harmful consequences for them.[14] The speed of language learning has been surprisingly resistant to improvement, although much applied research has gone into the attempt. In fact, the conclusions of such research continue to point to natural immersion rather than any

particular teaching methodology as the most effective language teacher.

Language planning is probably limited not only in the speed of the changes it can accomplish, but also in the nature of these changes. Linguists have been collecting information on "language universals", i.e. characteristics that all or nearly all languages share. They have argued that the existence of such universals is a *prima facie* case for innate orientations in the human mind predisposing us to accept only certain linguistic forms. Universals have been discovered in semantics, syntax, morphology, and phonology, i.e. in all basic aspects of language. If this assumption is correct, then language corpus planning is effectively constrained to obey these universal characteristics of language. A planner wanting to infuse his language with technical terms consisting of ternary compounds, for example, would be expected to find his proposals resisted, since compounding at each level is almost always binary in the languages of the world.[15] In language reform activity, the tendency to apply analogies probably keeps proposed changes within the bounds established by language universals. But an examination of all the proposed artificial international languages would certainly reveal many that violate these norms.

3. The Benefits and Costs of Language Planning

Even if language planning is possible, within limits, what makes people want to engage in it? The practitioners and proponents of this activity aim at various benefits. One is unity: bringing a linguistically diverse collectivity into communicational or emotional, and often hence into political and economic, togetherness. We see the force of this purpose especially in new states whose leaders perceive a need to build a nation to correspond with political boundaries. In the planning of scientific language the unity of language is also a principal goal.

The converse goal is distinctiveness: a linguistic difference between one collectivity and another. National and ethnic leaders often use language planning to reduce their citizens' loyalties to another place (e.g. Moldavia vis-à-vis Rumania, Wales vis-à-vis the United Kingdom, Québec vis-à-vis Canada), another group (e.g. Urdu vs. Hindi, Croatian vs. Serbian, Sephardi vs. Ashkenazi), or another time (e.g. the Republic of Turkey vis-à-vis the Ottoman Empire; the USSR vis-à-vis the Russian Empire, Oceania vis-à-vis Britain). This common type of linguistic differentiation attests to the perception that a nation requires not just a common language, but also a distinct one. Yet language planners also seek at times to create distinctions within their countries on

linguistic bases, such as elite-mass distinctions.

A third goal of language planning is communicational power. A language can be empowered to serve in a wider domain than before, by the development of its technical vocabulary. It can be reformed to make it more precise, i.e. less ambiguous (an example is the replacement of "inflammable" with "flammable"). And it can be enriched with expressions that convey much meaning without much effort. Thus the introduction of the phrase "Achilles' heel" from Russian into Azerbaijani is described as enrichment by one scholar, presumably because it allows the easy expression of a complex concept; [16] whereas George Orwell in 1945 attacked this same phrase in English as a "lump of verbal refuse [belonging in] the dustbin . . ." [17] on the ground that it had lost its (once great) power to communicate information. The same notion applies to sign systems, of course: among computer languages APL is commonly described as an especially "powerful" language, because it has a large number of primitive operators (terms) standing for relatively complex procedures.

Related to communicational power as a language-planning goal is efficiency. It is more efficient for the commonest words to be shortest, for example. Chinese writing efficiency has been increased by the simplification of characters. The efficiency with which a language can be learned depends on its regularity. Thus spelling reform or the elimination of irregular verbs might increase the efficiency of a language. [18] Efficiency can also be changed by increasing or decreasing the amount of redundancy in a language, since there is a trade-off between the increased cost of communicating and the increased reliability of the communicated message that both come with heightened redundancy.

Beauty and other aesthetic qualities (elegance, symmetry, etc.) are also goals in language planning. Aesthetic standards are often related to the typical distinctive qualities of the language in question, so that the pursuit of beauty results in emphasizing what is unique in the language, but there may be universally valued aesthetic qualities as well, such as brevity, rhythmicness, and variety. [19]

Naturally, each of these goals, if achieved, can lead to other effects. These by-products of language planning are often in fact among its chief motivations. Linguistic unity and distinctiveness can strengthen a country. Elite-mass linguistic stratification can protect an elite against competition from upwardly mobile citizens. The development of an indigenous language in technical vocabulary can make mass education possible for the first time. Reforms in the writing system of a language can have effects on the level of literacy. Thus

language planning is undertaken for various purposes, only some of which are linguistic.

But these goals can be reached through language planning only at a price. The price sometimes takes the form of incompatibilities among the goals themselves. Linguistic protection of the elite from the masses is incompatible with national linguistic homogeneity. Aesthetic variety conflicts with efficient uniformity.[20] National distinctiveness requires added efforts to find substitutes for foreign terms that contribute to communicative power.

Some kind of isolation is a price of most language planning. Policies that connect a country to the world by adopting a foreign language for official purposes tend to isolate the educated minority of the country from the rest of its population. Conversely, policies that link elites and masses tend to parochialize the elites. A policy of orthographic preservation maintains ties with the literature of the past but isolates the written from the contemporary spoken tongue; a policy of adapting the written language does the opposite.

Discrimination is a likely by-product of language planning, even when not wanted. Those doing the planning often make decisions that advantage themselves as political leaders or the members of the ethnic groups they come from. If their planning is populistically motivated, it will still give preference to some groups over others, in general. One dialect will be selected over others as the base of a standard language; one language will be selected as the official one. Attempts to represent everyone equally in substantive language policy are not likely to succeed, because languages cannot be divided and recombined as some resources can.

A final price paid for language planning is often conflict. People disagree vehemently not only about how language planning ought to proceed, but also about whether language planning of any kind is legitimate. The willingness to compromise on language is not widespread: persons totally opposed to any kind of linguistic engineering are often ranged against radical perfectionists who will settle for nothing less than the ideal (for them) language. The conflict between groups like these, and between ethnic and socioeconomic groups differentially affected by specific language policies, will be reduced to the extent that language planning is professionalized and hence removed from the political arena. The existence of language planning as a scholarly field with experts may help to reduce such conflict, but so far these experts have shown little inclination to explore the impact of language planning on justice. The notion of language rights appears rarely in the

language planning literature.

4. The Characteristics of Language-Planning Politics

Every policy arena involves goals, benefits, and costs. So what is fundamentally different about the way decisions about language are made from decisions on other questions? One thesis is that language policies are subject to intense conflict, because they are peculiarly unamenable to compromise. As Rustow says,

On matters of economic policy and social expenditures you can always split the difference. . . . But there is no middle position between Flemish and French as official languages, or between Calvinism, Catholicism, and secularism as principles of education. The best you can get here is a . . . log-rolling deal whereby some government offices speak French and some Flemish Such a solution may partly depoliticize the question. Yet it also entrenches the differences instead of removing them, and accordingly it may convert political conflict into a form of trench warfare.[21]

Although it might seem that one way out of this dilemma is to have no policy at all, that option too is probably foreclosed. Besides the necessity of having one or a few official languages, *de facto* if not *de jure*, "It is possible to administer an educational program without regard to race, religion, or sex, but it is not possible to do so without regard to language. In multilingual situations, differentiation as to language is unavoidable." [22]

According to this view, language is a naturally divisive issue, which would fall into an extreme subcategory of Lowi's "redistributive" policy arena, [23] in which the outcome is all or nothing as well as zero-sum. Where it has not been a major issue in the past, the reason might be that the country in question was (a) united against a common enemy, such as the metropolitan power in the case of a colony, or (b) so non-participant that language was not a problem, or (c) preoccupied temporarily with an even more emotional issue, such as clericalism/secularism.

To these may be added an additional reason for expecting language politics to be acrimonious. In language politics, interest groups are also communication groups, if one makes the plausible assumption that interests are determined largely by the existing language repertoires of the people involved. Those on one side of a language issue are able to communicate only with each other; they are isolated from those on the other side. Since coalitions rarely form across communication barriers, [24]

this pattern reinforces the language conflict. This is compounded by the fact that mass media communicators have a particular interest in the outcome of language issues, since any change in the linguistic status quo can affect their careers and business interests immensely. So those on one side of a language conflict not only are exposed just to communications from their own side, but also are particularly likely to receive anti-compromise messages in this communication network. By contrast, on economic issues the antagonists can and often do communicate; workers, for example, often read newspapers published by businessmen. Of course, this model of language conflict is an ideal type; in reality the boundaries are somewhat permeable, and the combination of language issues with other issues can lead to interest group constellations that moderate and settle conflicts.[25] And even if linguistic equality is impossible, the disadvantages imposed by language policy can be compensated for by advantages in some other policy realm. Still, language politics, for the reasons mentioned, seems to be less compromisable, more bitter, and less reducible to principles of justice than the politics of most other issues.

Another variable that can differentiate issues is the degree to which they are treated as questions of popular preference vs. of expert judgment. Like many issues, language policy is of direct concern to large numbers of people, who think they know how the issue should be resolved, but it is also in the domain of a recognized profession (linguists) who may claim or be offered an opportunity to apply expertise. The peculiar fact about language is that with the development of knowledge its leading experts have, in large part, adopted a laissez-faire, anti-planning ideology. Those supporting language planning tend to be split into opposing camps, so that expert opinion does not clearly weigh in a particular direction. Consequently, the united, interventionist, aggressive class of experts that would be required to professionalize language planning has not yet emerged.

A partial exception to this generalization concerns dictatorships and one-party states. It might be hypothesized that in such regimes pro-planning linguists would assert themselves, encouraged by the activistic regime ideology. This hypothesis is supported by Laitin's description of language politics in Somalia, where in 19 years of competitive parliamentary government the Somali language was never adopted as the official language, even though it was universally preferred and spoken by 95% of the population, because no agreement could be reached on which of 13 or more competing scripts to use. Only after a military coup was the script issue settled, by decreeing the solution that most experts had favored, and the national language made official.[26] Experts perceived as enjoying the political leader's favor can

exert enormous influence over language policy in autocratic regimes (e.g. Marr under Stalin until 1950). But sometimes the political leader himself decides to act as the supreme expert on language: Stalin and Atatürk are examples. In the contemporary Soviet Union, the partial decentralization of language planning and the emphasis on a scientific approach to the solution of complex social problems would lead us to expect professionals to play a major role in language planning. Indeed, in corpus planning they clearly do. Yet if one examines the discussions of language planning professionals there one finds that the same scholar invokes contradictory principles to support opposing policies within the same piece of writing.[27] It appears that Soviet language planning experts are not giving policy guidance to political leaders, but rather providing them with texts from which passages can be selected to support any policy the leaders might favor. This suggests that these experts are not having an impact on language planning, or that their impact is not being recorded in their publications and must be sought elsewhere.

5. Political Techniques for Language Planning Success

Since language planning differs in some ways from other issue areas, there may be methods particularly conducive to success in this area, beyond the techniques of successful politics in general. These may be catalogued, with the proviso that none of them has been tested well enough to be considered foolproof.

a. Join the march of history. There appear to be strong and sometimes universal tendencies in linguistic change, such as the tendency toward greater analyticity (less inflection of words). Within a political community, there are tendencies for people to learn certain languages more than other languages. Policies supporting these existing developments are probably more likely to succeed than policies opposing them, especially if one takes the view that policies weigh only lightly in the balance of forces.

b. To change the reflection, change the original. Language is believed by many experts to reflect society more than shape it. Those wanting to plan language should therefore plan whatever changes in society are prerequisites. Sexist language may not be changeable until sexism is eliminated;[28] a unified terminology may be impossible without a unified set of concepts;[29] a country may fail to adopt a common language until it becomes a single communication network; and so on.

c. Prepare public opinion first. Language behavior appears to depend on attitudes to a substantial extent.[30] Therefore

altering the distribution of legitimacy or prestige across languages, language varieties, or forms within a language may be essential to an efficient program of language planning. This is especially so because people are inclined to believe that one language is better than another, yet languages have few characteristics making them objectively superior and inferior. Thus policymakers can hope to redirect people's linguistic preferences. Since language attitudes can generally be changed faster than language behavior,[31] it makes sense to begin a language-planning program by trying to instil appropriate attitudes.

d. Provide incentives. Perhaps because many people identify language with the symbolic realm of public policy, they often neglect material incentives as a component of language planning. But precisely because of the fact that language policies tend to confer symbolic rewards and deprivations, it is important for the success of all but highly coercive language policies that they be set up to provide material rewards and deprivations that will counter-balance, rather than reinforce, the symbolic ones. Otherwise the two types of rewards are likely to go to the same groups, causing alienation and resistance among the doubly deprived, especially since the material demands of speakers of different languages are likely to be incompatible.[32] If, in addition, the symbolic and material rewards can be dispensed to those different kinds of groups that care more about symbolic and material rewards, respectively, so much the better. According to Edelman, this would mean rewarding organized interest groups materially and unorganized groups symbolically,[33] but in a multilingual situation some language groups are likely to be more symbolically motivated than others, in addition to the elite-mass differences within each language community.

e. Make constituencies cut across languages. As suggested above, the farther the decision-making process is allowed to proceed with language groups functioning as separate constituencies, the more difficult it will be in the end to find an acceptable policy. It may be more efficient to carve out linguistically homogeneous constituencies for politics in general, but on language policy a different political map which forces the speakers of different languages to confront each other early will be more likely to prevent the escalation of polemics and the emergence of a stalemate. Naur makes this point with respect both to artificial languages and to sign systems, each of which has its own committee with, he argues, a vested interest in keeping its system different from all others rather than borrowing the best from others and promoting rapprochement.[34]

f. Experiment before promulgating. Language is, luckily,

a policy domain particularly suited to small-scale experimentation prior to the society-wide adoption of programs. This is especially true in language corpus planning (including the creation of new languages) because of the presumed universality of human linguistic abilities, limits, and intuitions. Professional linguists usually use themselves as informants on the basis of this presumption applied to competence in whatever language they are working with, if they are native speakers of it. For language corpus planning, where no-one speaks natively a language with all the features being explored, it would be prudent to progress from self-interrogation to surveys and experiments with statistical samples before projecting conclusions to mass behavior. In Turkey and India language politicians debate whether the puristic form of Turkish and Hindi, respectively, is easier or harder for ordinary citizens to understand on the radio, instead of doing tests to find out. The learning speed of an artificial language compared with a natural one for various groups is also a policy-relevant question that has received only meager experimental attention to date.

The techniques that make language planning successful remain uncertain, however, and are a major item on the agenda of applied sociolinguistic research. Let us consider two questions that have two plausible answers each: How much optionality should language policy provide? Should language planning be simultaneous or sequential?

If language policy provides for many options, it avoids coercion. Citizens may choose freely, for example, which language to speak or which term to use for a particular concept. By leaving options open, policymakers can hope that impersonal tendencies will lead to uniformity, for which no-one can blame them. Whenever agreement is unreachable, leaving the choice optional is an easy way out. On the other hand, options may be euphemisms for what Rustow calls "trench warfare" if different options are selected by mutually isolated language groups. Selecting a particular option can become a code for adherence to a particular side of the cleavage, just as is the case in other policy arenas ("Ms.", "Black", "right to work", "pig", etc.).[35] Because language learning proceeds slowly, people can be expected to take advantage of options, if they exist, to keep doing whatever they are used to, and desired changes may be postponed ad infinitum. Meanwhile, divergent language behaviors may strengthen divergent attitudes. Furthermore, it seems that optionality per se is resented in language; many people would actually rather be told to use a less preferred form than to have a choice between that and their more preferred form.[36] In this respect people seem to classify language choices in the same category as traffic rule choices: they may prefer one to another, but above all they prefer uniform application. But

while the consequences of Sweden temporarily leaving it optional whether to drive on the right or left side of the road would have been obvious, the consequences of periods of optionality in language planning are not so clearly disastrous.

Language planning has to deal with many problems. If it deals with one at a time, it may succeed by not overloading man's limited capacity, mentioned above, for changing habits. An example of this tendency can be seen in terminological reform. Changing a single term or introducing a single new term does not render a text foreign to its former readers, but changing or introducing many terms at once does. This can help explain why more political scientists have adopted Easton's terminology than Lasswell and Kaplan's: the former was introduced with a much lower innovation-per-page ratio than the latter.[37] But some changes cannot be introduced piecemeal. It has been possible to simplify the characters in Chinese gradually, but the Arabic alphabet of Turkish could not have been changed step by step to a Roman one. And if changes are decided on one at a time, logrolling will be hindered, since each change will benefit some and hurt others. The simultaneous adoption of massive but politically balanced changes is sometimes the only feasible strategy.[38]

If, as Naur argues, the politics of language is isomorphic for different kinds of language, ranging from those used by humans to those used by computers, one reason may be that these languages have something in common that constrains how they may be changed. In this case the accumulating histories of language planning efforts in multilingual and developing states, in international organizations, in universal-language movements, and in the computer world should help us plan better as we enter an era of linguistic policymaking on a world scale.

Notes

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