REVIEW


Reviewed by Iair G. Or and Elana Shohamy, Tel Aviv University

Language planning and policy (LPP) was founded as an academic field in the late 1960s and early 1970s by Joshua Fishman and other prominent scholars. In its early years, LPP was perceived as a subfield of applied linguistics and the sociology of language, one most specifically interested in developing nations and the way they cope with language-related problems. Some particular cases of language planning, such as the planned revitalization of Hebrew in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, drew a great deal of attention. Scholars uncovered more and more historical cases in which new scripts were developed, dialects were standardized or granted official status, and language conflicts between elites or other social groups were resolved. In the present book, dedicated to the memory of Fishman, who died in 2015, Coulmas seems to revive and continue the Fishmanian tradition of historical case studies by exploring twenty individuals who variously shaped languages and language policies in multiple spheres of activity through history.

The survey of these language policy makers is chronologically ordered and begins in the eighth century with Alcuin of York, who strove to purify Latin from vernacular influences, followed by Sibawayhi, the great Arabic grammarian who studied the speech of Arabian Bedouins, and Dante Alighieri, who studied and accorded prestige to the Italian vernaculars. Other early figures are King Sejong, who devised a new script for Korean, Elio Antonio de Nebrija, who authored the first grammar of Castilian Spanish, and Cardinal Richelieu, who founded the first language academy, for the French language. All of the other figures surveyed were active in the 1700s or later: Catherine II (Russian), Adamantios Korais (Greek), Noah Webster (American English), Jacob Grimm (German), Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (Hebrew), Ludwik Zamenhof (Esperanto), Ueda Kazutoshi (Japanese), Vladimir Ilich Lenin (Russian and the local languages of the USSR), Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Turkish), Mahatma Gandhi (Hindi), Zhou Enlai (Chinese), Pope Paul VI (Latin and the vernaculars), Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana (Indonesian), and Léopold Sédar Senghor (French).

Each presentation of a language policy leader begins with a biographical sketch of their activities and involvement, followed by a discussion of the language situation in the geographical and historical context in which they were active. Each chapter concludes with an imagined interview with the policy maker, titled ‘The last word’ and carefully crafted from quotations and texts written by the person. While the interviews might seem out of place at first, they are very effective in letting the readers glimpse the language activists’ ways of thinking in modern terms. The book ends with a coda that discusses and synthesizes the twenty cases by analyzing the similarities and dissimilarities among them. Like Fishman (2006), C traces various axes or continua of language policy objectives (modernization vs. conservation, universality vs. uniqueness, unity vs. pluralism, domination vs. liberation, and elitism vs. egalitarianism) on which each of the language policy makers can be positioned. Like Neustupný (2006), he also analyzes the history of language planning, distinguishing between different phases of LPP. For example, he shows that multilingualism and language pluralism only appeared as language policy goals at a very late stage.

Although the theoretical framework of the book is no doubt embedded in the Western tradition, in the selection of the ‘twenty voices’ C manages to avoid the Eurocentric bias by including language activists from Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. However, certain types of cases may be underrepresented. C seems to focus mainly on success stories on a national scale and to overlook the struggles of minority and indigenous languages as well as the losers of these heroic national projects. Thus, languages of groups and nations who never achieved statehood, such as Catalan, Basque, Berber, or any of the indigenous languages in the Americas, are not represented, nor are languages that suffered from national language-planning projects such as Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic, which became almost extinct in the Jewish world because of the rise and spread of
Modern Hebrew (Shohamy 2008). All of these languages, too, had their heroes and champions. Moreover, the only African figure included in the book, Senghor, is a promoter of a colonial language (French); it would be interesting to include in future work activists who promoted local African languages as well.

Through this list of prominent language planners, C convincingly demonstrates that language planning has a very long history that goes back at least into the eighth century ce. One may wonder if there are any earlier examples of language planning and policy that could have been included, and whether language planning might not have been an essential part of the human language experience ever since its very early days, but obviously, as C notes, fully documented cases of LPP are more commonly found in modern history than in earlier times.

The juxtaposition of twenty different cases and the synthesis that follows them may help readers raise a series of critical questions. One of them is among the most commonplace questions of historiography: Is there any place in history for ‘heroes’? Is history shaped by individuals, no matter how resolute and powerful they might be, or is it shaped by faceless, long-term social, economic, and political processes? Should planned language shifts be attributed to having the right person in the right place and time, or should they rather be attributed to more predictable factors? What is common to all of these ‘guardians of language’? Is it a good thing to guard or cultivate a language, or should we perhaps expect policy makers to take care of people, not languages, especially in light of the potential victims of language policies? Who is to be accountable for the fact that it is not just linguistic varieties that are affected by language policies, but also people, who may become marginalized, ridiculed, or outcast?

One of the most interesting facts is that many of the guardians of language depicted in C’s book were not even native speakers of the languages they guarded. Sibawayhi, for instance, systematized and promoted the study of Arabic as a Persian studying Arabic as a second language. Even more curiously, some of the guardians seem to have done the exact opposite of guarding their own language. Lenin, for instance, viewed the USSR as a supranational organization that was more important than any national identity, and he was willing to sacrifice the dominance of the Russian language—at least for a while. Pope Paul VI was willing to give up one of the assets of the Roman Catholic Church—the Latin language—in order to democratize and open the church to wider audiences. It is interesting to consider these and other acts of seeming generosity, openness, consideration, liberalization, and harmonization as an expansion of the notion of language guardianship, or practices of what Cameron (2012) terms ‘verbal hygiene’. Although many of the guardians surveyed in the book promoted conservative, monolingual goals, this is definitely not the only avenue of language planning and policy. When asking what the common thread is that binds these twenty very different people together, the answer may be that all of them were aware of the importance of language issues and placed them in the center. Some of them had a far-reaching, utopian vision for the role of language, and some just tried to solve very pressing practical matters, but considering the tendency of many policy makers throughout history to disregard language issues altogether, this common interest in language is by no means trivial.

The scholarship and erudition of the book are outstanding, and the book makes LPP issues accessible to a broader public of expert and nonexpert readers from all fields. Thanks to its organization into twenty brief, independent cases, the book is an easy, enjoyable read and could be recommended to anyone wishing to become familiar with the field as a whole or with specific cases of language planning. Despite being accessible, the book avoids many of the pitfalls that popular science books often face; it does not sacrifice seriousness or depth of discussion for the sake of simplicity. While it helps to popularize and promulgate the accumulated knowledge in LPP, the book also adds its fair share of valuable insight and historical contextualization. What is more, the cases in the book and the discussion that follows can form an excellent basis for negotiating the tenets and foundations of the LPP field, as well as the insights it can help us gain.

REFERENCES


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This treatise unabashedly poses the simple polar question of whether some languages are ‘better’ than others. Dixon, an extraordinarily experienced linguist, is of course wise enough not to answer with a plain ‘yes’ or ‘no’. At the end of the book, he even completely leaves the decision to his readers: ‘It is up to you, the reader, to decide’ (245).

Before this final plea, however, close to 250 pages are devoted to preparing the issue in a careful and detailed way. D first states that it is legitimate and necessary to compare the relative worth of languages. Like every other science, he argues, linguistics has the fundamental task of evaluation. It is now time to fulfill this task and embark on a measured evaluation of the worth of different languages. The book aims to be a first step in this direction.

The fact that many linguists reject comparisons of this kind has its obvious reasons. The first stage in the history of linguistic evaluation was based on the belief in the superiority of European languages and the assumption that languages of other groups were primitive. D is certainly right in describing this as a racist approach, which partly still lives on (18–21). In many cases, however, the reason was sheer ignorance. We all remember the old bizarre statements of missionaries reporting that the exotic languages they were confronted with were so imperfect and difficult that their native speakers preferred not to use them.

The reaction to this stage was a second stage, a stage of redress. Anxious to avoid unfair evaluation, linguists had to emphasize, ‘as loud as was possible’ (20), that no language spoken in the world today is primitive and that all languages are about equal in complexity. According to D, linguists have now devoted about a hundred years to ‘redress of the racist idea’ (20), and thus it is time for a new, scientific assessment of the worth of languages.

A human language has several vital functions, for instance, to assist in ‘the process of belonging’ (2), to enable cooperative endeavor, to reflect social organization, to display emotions, and to convey information. It must be usable as a means for aesthetic expression, as a vehicle for scholarly thought and argumentation, as the conduit for proselytization, and as a means for persuasion and exhortation. These functions are dealt with in detail and properly exemplified.

Several chapters, especially Ch. 2, are devoted to the ways languages work. D explores (i) what is needed, (ii) what is desirable but not universal, and (iii) what is not really needed. All languages distinguish the three main speech acts (statements, commands, and questions), but they do so with different degrees of effectiveness. Many elements may in principle be desirable, but there is scarcely need for irregularities, suppletion, or grammatical and semantic redundancy. It is difficult to determine how many lexemes a language needs and how many words most of the non-major languages actually have. An ‘educated guess’ (172) might be between five and ten thousand. English and other major languages have many more, mainly because of numerous particular fields of activity that require specialized terminologies. In larger societies, every specialist group employs its own technical terms. In smaller language communities, D claims, the vocabulary covers all relevant aspects of the social and physical environment.