

**Language Policy** by Bernard Spolsky. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 262 pp. ISBN 0-521-80461-2.

According to the 2000 United States Census, nearly one in five residents in the U.S. speak a language other than English (Shin & Bruno, 2003). Yet in recent years, formal acceptance of linguistic diversity has become an increasingly divisive issue within the U.S. (Huntington, 2004; Schiffman, 1996). Nowhere is this more apparent than in recent policymaking around issues of language. Arguably, language policy is a product of linguistic ideology shaped by the interests of entities ranging from peer groups to nation-states. From a critical stance, language policy can be construed as a form of political, ethnic and cultural domination (Wright, 2004). In essence language is power, and maintaining control over a population's language practices serves as a significant expression of cultural and political hegemony.

In his book, *Language Policy*, Bernard Spolsky offers scholars and practitioners a provocative introduction to the controversies surrounding language politics and policymaking. So firmly entrenched are the biases expressed through language, that Spolsky himself must question whether his own treatment of these issues is not merely a reflection of his particular subjectivities. He asks, "Can one write about language policy without a personal view about the desirability of linguistic diversity?" (p. ix). The author acknowledges the benefits of foregrounding positions of advocacy versus neutrality when engaging in these important debates. Yet despite these concerns, Spolsky does not conceal his own support for linguistic diversity, rather using his own positionality as the leitmotif for the book's 13 chapters. It is through this lens that Spolsky responds to the two most contentious questions which lay at the heart of his book: 1) *How can language policy be recognized?*; and 2) *How can language be managed?*

In Chapter 1, Spolsky argues that language policies are inevitably political in nature. Although language conflicts alone may not be so contentious as to cause all out war, language has played a role in igniting highly controversial and in many cases violent events in a number of countries. For instance, in 2000, China officially banned the use of foreign words, as well as the "misuse of Chinese (p. 2)". In the United States, voters passed Proposition 227 in California and Proposition 203 in Arizona, eliminating bilingual education programs. What these examples seem to demonstrate is a confounding of language, identity, and definitions of social membership. The legislative action taken in both California and Arizona suggest a coalescing around pronounced anti-immigration sentiments in those states (Crawford, 1999). In presenting these examples, Spolsky demonstrates that language is not just a means of communication, but also a form of political and cultural ideology.

The subsequent two chapters lend themselves to a provocative discussion around the notion of *good* and *bad* language. The author argues that the changing times have led to the emergence of acceptable and politically correct language. America has evolved in its acceptance of certain language practices, such as the eradication of racist and sexist language. Spolsky points to American society's altered stance against verbalized racial intolerance as evidence of this evolution. For example, he cites Mississippi Senator Trent Lott's fall from power after his public use of racially insensitive language. Spolsky also points to the United States Federal Communications Commission's noticeable expansion of its regulatory scope, justified by its perceived need to ensure that only language and behavior deemed "decent" is publicly broadcasted. Families and schools play an even more significant role as the first line of defense in purging offensive language through repetitive correction. Thus, individual behavior and governmental authority are charged with the tasks of managing *bad* language. While this discussion would have been strengthened by an elaboration on the impact that dominant ideologies (e.g., racism, classism, heterosexism) have on defining what is considered *good* or *bad* language, these chapters offer opportunities for rich dialogue around how society views, encourages or discourages various language practices.

Chapter 7 entitled '*Does the U.S. have a language policy or just civil rights?*' should be of particular interest to scholars of language education and United States policy. Here, Spolsky addresses the limitations of the United States Constitution insofar as language and language diversity are concerned. The Constitution's 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, in principle, offers protections to linguistic minorities. Nevertheless, debate continues over what those protections are since no clear explanation exists as to how to express America's linguistic diversity via formal legislation, policy, or legal mandate. Court rulings suggest that civil rights policies offer protection to speakers of minority languages. However, these protections are particularly vulnerable to the ongoing threats by reactionary organizations such as *U.S. English Inc.* and *English First*, who have sought to make English the country's sole official language. For example, in 1998, *English for the Children*, an organization formed to work against bilingual instruction, successfully promoted passage of Proposition 227 in California, effectively ending the era of bilingual education in the state. Other research has indicated that the emergence of these English-only organizations reflects a general suspicion of immigrant language minorities within the United States as well as a belief that in order to be "American", one must relinquish their original language, thus abandoning a significant part of one's identity (Crawford, 1999). Consequently, within the U.S., bilingualism is viewed as representative of an individual's divided loyalties. This perspective, however myopic and unsoundly

reasoned, does enjoy popular voter support, as most recently evidenced by the legislative successes of English-only organizations<sup>1</sup>.

In Chapters 9 and 10, Spolsky recounts the historical connections between language politics, language policy, and colonialism set within the context of globalization. In so doing, he adopts Joshua Fishman's pioneering views of language policy to frame this discussion in order to explain why some decolonized nations maintain their colonial language while others do not. From Fishman's perspective, a former colony lacking a "consensual single Great Tradition" (p. 133) at the time of independence will continue to use the colonial language as the national language while a former colony with more defined traditions will seek to utilize the associated indigenous language. For instance, former French colonies in North Africa and Southeast Asia have promoted anti-colonial language policies since their independence. The former underwent 'Arabization' in the 1960s, while most of the populations in Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos promote Khmer, Vietnamese and Lao as their national languages, respectively. Finally, globalization links these former colonized nations in yet another way; each must confront the growth of the English language as the world's common language. Globalization encourages the spread of English as the *lingua franca* of the world economy, creating a zero-sum language gain for many nations.

In the closing sections, Chapters 11 and 12, Spolsky's most significant points involve Fishman's work in saving threatened languages, while leaving the reader with the "question of responsibility" (p.216) for the loss of the world's languages. Nation-states have yet to be persuaded that it is the government's role to support and protect linguistic diversity. States Spolsky,

Whatever blame may be reasonably attached to language policies and social, economic, religious and political forces, it seems that the loss of linguistic diversity results less from linguistic genocide than from linguistic suicide (p. 216).

Unfortunately, the book appears to over-attribute language loss as a likely failing of native speakers. Too little consideration is given to the social, economic, technological, political, and neo-colonial forces that contribute to language loss. Hence, a limitation of this book is that it lacks an adequate, nuanced analysis of the linguistic hegemony of the English language. Other research has argued that the rapid growth of English, particularly in developing nations, is motivated largely by powerful English speaking nations seeking new avenues towards capital accumulation (Phillipson, 1992; Wright 2004). The omnipresence of English-based, consumer-driven popular culture and aggressive marketing campaigns in industrialized and developing countries is indicative of language's power in fueling western hegemony within the global economy. Many nations

have acquiesced by including English instruction in their school systems; a decision that assures English hegemony for generations to come (Wright, 2004). Moreover, within many developing nations the push towards English language acquisition has had the residual effect of creating greater polarization between the rich and poor as reflected in the growing divide between linguistic have and have-nots. Therefore, while many nations have choice in their language policies, how much genuine agency exists within the context of globalization?

While *Language Policy* may lack some argumentative nuance, it serves as a useful resource for understanding the core issues within current language diversity debates. The arguments put forth in this book, substantiated by the author's 30-plus years of experience in language policy research, serves as a provocative read for emerging, as well as established, scholars in this field.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> As of October 2006, Arizona, Delaware, Michigan, and Pennsylvania introduced legislation intended to make English the only officially recognized language within those states. At the national level, Senate bill #S38.28, the "National Language Act introduced by James Inhofe (R,OK), currently sits as a referral to the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. See <http://www.englishfirst.org/> for additional information on the latest English-only initiatives.

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