

# Language Policies: Towards a Multidisciplinary Approach

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My background is involvement in teaching and research into the role of English worldwide, linguistic human rights, and European language policy. The route taking me to an Esperanto conference is a roundabout one, but with personal encounters in recent years with Claude Piron, Probal Dasgupta, Mark Fettes and Humphrey Tonkin as decisive signposts. One conviction that has marked itself indelibly in my professional consciousness is that any scholar interested in the scientific study of language policy and linguistic hierarchisation ought to take the planned language option seriously, which is why I am glad to be here.

Related to the need for fresh thinking in this area is a conviction that much educational language policy has been wrongly conceived. Thus in postcolonial settings there has been a false imitation of Western education and a focus on European languages to the detriment of others. This policy has served the goal of elite formation rather than facilitating grassroots democratic participation in “development”, so that even within its own terms, those of “modernisation”, it has failed to deliver the goods.

There is a straight choice in language ecology between either allowing market forces a free run or attempting to manage our linguistic resources along agreed, more democratic lines. Those languages which have succeeded in being established as “national” languages (e.g. English and French in Europe and North America) and which have also succeeded “internationally” (e.g. the few that are official languages at the UN) have earned this position through establishing dominance, first nationally, and later internationally to a greater or lesser extent (and currently English most of all). In practice there is a clear picture of linguistic hierarchisation within each nation-state (*vis-a-vis* minority languages and marginalized dialects) and supranationally (there is a pecking order in institutions, in preferred languages for scientific publications and media products etc.).

The learning of foreign languages overwhelmingly means the learning of dominant, high-prestige languages. In “smaller” countries such as the Netherlands or the Scandinavian countries, such languages are learned more successfully than in “big” countries such as France and the United Kingdom, where language policy is under the scourge of the illusion of monolingual linguistic self-sufficiency.

## **Conclusion 1**

In the light of the above it is fair to conclude that language policies pursued in formal education have little to do with tolerance or equality of languages, and little to do with the democratic allocation of funds to all languages within a policy.

Language rights can be granted and agreed on in many ways:

- at conferences for practical functional purposes, e.g. French, English and Esperanto at this symposium, on the assumption that there is interpretation, and that all contributors have a good command of at least one of these three languages;
- by convention in restricted domains, e.g. English in air traffic control;
- through political negotiation and legislation, e.g. the position of French and English in Quebec and the rest of Canada, or the implementation of 11 official languages in the new South Africa;
- through inter-statal negotiation and codification of universal human rights in the UN system, in the sense of the fundamental rights to language use that the UN covenants and

conventions seek to guarantee and that no government should ignore.

Global or regional human-rights instruments are important in setting standards and attempting to provide a forum for their monitoring. The ILO has pioneered the area of indigenous peoples' rights, and UNESCO has recently agreed to promote a proposed Universal Declaration of Language Rights (a draft text of which was approved at a conference in Barcelona in May 1996), though much work still needs to be done to improve this text.

It is important to note that there is a mismatch between the concepts and ideals of UN human-rights documents on the one hand and the realities of linguistic hierarchisation, of asymmetrical communication, of linguistic violence, and of globalization increasingly through the dominance of English on the other.

### **Conclusion 2**

Standard-setting in the human rights field has been hypocritical, from the pioneer French and United States declarations, from which slaves, women and those without property were not considered "human" enough to benefit, right through to the present-day.

This grim realization does not imply that standard-setting and declarations have no value. It means that we need both more analysis of what the real problems are, and the elaboration of potential solutions (including the contribution of planned languages), and we need to multiply our efforts to produce better policy and practice.

For instance, one might, after careful study of the practice and discourses of a supranational body such as the UN or the European Union, hypothetically conclude that there is no specific, well-articulated, over-arching language policy. This does not mean that no language policies are in operation. On the contrary, it probably means there are a range of language policies competing for dominance, some overt, some covert, and many of them intricately linked to national interests that complicate and blur supranational agendas and interests.

To come to grips with such questions and to explore language policies adequately at supra-national, national and sub-national levels, it is necessary to develop language policy as a multi-disciplinary concern (involving political science, the sociology and economics of language, language and power, the social psychology of language etc.), linking this to the evidence of language policy intervening to resolve or manage crises and build democratic bridges in Canada, Australia and elsewhere. Analyses need to lead to imaginative confidence-building measures where academics, activists and policy-makers pool their resources.

### **Conclusion 3**

Language policies are often so vague (e.g. the Maastricht Treaty's support for the maintenance of cultural diversity) and abstract that they seem to be divorced both from scientific analysis of what is at stake and from the harsher realities of linguistic hierarchisation.

**Overall conclusion:** There is major need for inspired language policy to bring together all and any who can contribute to more democratic communication, to language diversity, to greater language learning, and to improvements in language rights.

### **Further reading**

Phillipson, Robert. 1992. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Phillipson, Robert and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas. 1995. "Linguistic rights and wrongs." *Applied Linguistics* 16/4: 483-504.

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