



Language management

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Book Review

Language management, by Bernard Spolsky, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 320, £60.00 (hardback), ISBN 13: 978-0-5215-1609-9

Use of the expression ‘language management’ has increased in recent years in the sociolinguistic literature. The expression’s apparent meaning is attractive and (regrettably) tickles our profession’s imagination by its promise of referring to intellectual advance. Perhaps such an advance has been achieved, and the question then is, what advance. ‘The future will tell’ offers me, as reviewer and an interested party with a position that differs from the author’s on the purport of ‘language management’, a convenient way out. Yet, the divergent usages of this potential term by the author and others (the reviewer included) must be addressed. I shall do so by respecting conceptual differences.

Regrettable, however, is the fact that the author does not make this an easy task since he provides his ‘language management’ with contradictory attributes in what appear to be committing definitions, e.g. ‘*management*, reflecting conscious and explicit efforts by language managers’ (1) and ‘*management*, the explicit and observable effort by someone or some group’ (4), vs. ‘[P]roiciency in a language [...] provides a strong instrument for implicit language management’ (6) and even ‘[A]s with other kinds of language management, the processes involved may be stated explicitly as rules about language choice and use, or may be implicit in practice’ (32).

He variously refers to language management as planning and/or policy: ‘[I] use the term “management” rather than “planning” because I think it more precisely captures the nature of the phenomenon’ (4), ‘for a language management decision *is* a policy’ (5), ‘[T]his approach implies a modification in the theory of language policy as it is being developed’ (48), ‘[I]t is also important to recall the distinction between management and the other two components of language policy: practices and beliefs. Management decisions are intended to modify practices and beliefs in the workplace, solving what appear to the participants to be communication problems’ (53), ‘the inevitable bridge between the two kinds of language management: managing speakers, that Kloss (1969) labeled *status planning* and managing a language, that Kloss called *corpus planning*, but perhaps better labeled with the Prague School term cultivation’ (103), ‘[L]anguage management or planning, then [...]’ (183), and ‘[I]n the organization of this chapter (on language managers, language management agencies and academies), it seems reasonable to follow the classic division of language policy into status planning, language cultivation, and language acquisition policy’ (226). I am confused. However, I move on to interpret the book’s substance.

Croft (2001) writes in the final chapter of his presentation of *Radical construction grammar* how his grammar model is ‘disarmingly simple’ (362); and how ‘the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign is superimposed on a structure that is largely universal, that is, the conceptual space that linguistic signs are mapped onto. This conceptual space is the

geography of the human mind, which can be read in the facts of the world's languages... (364). Thus, 'syntactic theory is a theory of the representation of grammatical knowledge in the mind' and '[L]anguage is... a fundamentally interactional phenomenon. Language is the totality of the events of language use...' (364). Croft then briefly outlines an evolutionary theory of language, a key claim of which is that 'Whenever an utterance is produced by a speaker, the linguistic structure of the utterance is REPLICATED from prior utterances that the speaker has experienced, which possessed those structures or variants of those structures' (365). Croft suggests that 'social interaction' and 'the course of language use' drive language evolution (368). The reviewer wholeheartedly agrees with this conceptualization and links, possibly identifies (although he should like Bill Croft's sanction to make this latter claim), the attempt to develop a model of language management to this programmatic exclamation by Croft so as to encompass and explore all behaviors that drive language evolution. As readily accessible references to this conceptualization of *language management* can be mentioned in Nekvapil's prologue (Nekvapil, 2009, 1–11) and the reviewer's epilogue (Jernudd, 2009, 245–252) in the recently published book edited by Nekvapil and Sherman (2009). Although Spolsky refers to Nekvapil's and some others' perspectives on *language management* (5, 11–13, 61–62, 64, 181, 225, 250, 255), his conceptualization of language management is distinctly different. Furthermore, quite apart from its triviality, whether the claim in the blurb that this is 'the first book to present a specific theory of language management' is true or not is therefore moot, constrained as the claim is by what constitutes precisely that, namely, a specific theory of language management. Spolsky's *language management* is his own, and I will review the book *sui generis* even though this means that the review will bypass the author's own sideways, comparative comments.

There is an introductory chapter on 'a theory of language management' (1–9), a penultimate chapter on 'language managers, language management agencies and academies, and their work' (225–248) and a concluding chapter on the theory, as both 'postscript and prolegomena' (249–261). There is a rich list of references and the reader can follow up sources on an abundance of cases that are presented in the book (262–290).

The author deals almost exclusively with language selection behavior in a variety of contexts and illustrates this behavior by offering a profusion of cases from around the world, some presented very briefly, some in more detail (and among the more elaborated are cases concerning the Māori and their language in New Zealand, Hebrew in Israel and elsewhere, and the Navaho and their language in the USA, based on the author's own experience and particular interest). The contexts are labeled 'domains' and encompass (each of chapter length beginning with Chapter 2) the family (10–30), religion (31–49), the workplace (53–63), public linguistic space (65–88), schools (90–114), legal and health institutions (115–128), the military (129–143), local, regional and national governments (144–175), language activist groups (181–204) and the supranational level (206–224).

The 'domains' are not to be understood as empirical constructs validated for a particular speech community (as per Fishman's sociolinguistic model) but as universal descriptors that allow the author to look into decisions about (mainly) language selection anywhere in the world in what he considers equivalent contexts, such as the family, religion, etc. Each context receives a generalizing comment, on the kind and extent of language management therein.

The author's language management concept emerges as his presentation of cases in context progresses, and evidential matters of fact are compatible with and can be recognized in the author's own exposition of his theory.

The first 'domain' is the family. 'Organized language management in the family domain begins' when one member of the family 'decides to correct the unsatisfactory

language performance or proficiency of another' and 'to persuade them to modify their language practices' (30). A sense of responsibility, values and beliefs inform the corrective practices, and what's happening in the family is 'challenged by external pressures' (30).

A second 'domain' is religion. As for religions, some expect believers to learn and/or support a particular language (49), and this may require organizing its acquisition (51). Spolsky apparently does not include 'the divinity' among participants in communication when he accounts for the relationship of participants' roles to language selection because he suggests that 'not just participants but audiences need to be taken into account' to account for a minister using 'one language when addressing the divinity and another when addressing the congregation' (51). He also notes in one brief sentence how 'belief and purity are closely related' (50), and how language selection in religious practices can be informed by 'the existence of forces external to the religious domain' (51).

The chapter on language management in the workplace is rather diverse in content. One highlighted conclusion refers to the 'value of starting at the individual level' (64) and must refer to the section in the chapter that includes Spolsky's account of a study by Nekvapil and Marek (2006) of a Czech subsidiary of a multinational company (61). He endorses the importance of locating the sources in actual communication between particular individuals of language problems, and 'their wishes to correct them' (62) and how others may assist in finding appropriate solutions – as expected in general to achieve continuing communication and, as the author recognizes in his chapter summary, in particular in cases of organized productive activities, normally to remove obstacles to profitability (64). Spolsky brings up an anomaly, namely, that 'knowing English discourages learning other languages', against businesses' presumably better interest of accommodating to customers' use of other languages. He suggests that what is at play is 'the perceived value of a language (part of the belief system of the business domain)' (64).

The chapter on managing public linguistic space divides into two sections: one on signage, broadly management arising in relation to shaping the linguistic landscape, and the other on the media. The author sums up his discussion of signage that, I infer, the choice of, mandated use of or defacing of a 'language of public signs can reveal something about the changing power structure' (76). Discussion of the media overwhelmingly deals also with language selection, with one brief mention of obscene language (87). The author's lesson from the chapter is to assert that '[C]alling public linguistic space a single domain may be theoretically interesting, but in practice [...] we need to look at much smaller sub-domains' (88). This is so due to 'the number of different participants, whether managers or potential audiences' (88). I am puzzled by this assertion because 'public linguistic space' as all other chapter headings was introduced as a mere organizing device in the book to begin with, by the author's own admission, and none of them was to be understood as an empirically valid 'single domain'.

The author throughout the book takes an *a priori* normative position by naming some management actions 'marked', others (obviously) unmarked. For the chapter on language policy (!) in schools, he names 'monolingual education in the national official language' the unmarked case, continuing that '[A] first level of conflict is persuading the educational establishment to consider the possible value of multilingualism' (91). This claim, however, does not organize the chapter that ranges across a wide range of policy options of language selection. This selection focus is broken only by a brief mention of language development issues (availability of a writing system and vocabulary) in a section titled 'developed languages', presumably *in spe*, because in fact, the chapter deals with languages such as Navajo and Māori.

As regards the author's lessons from the schools 'domain' for a theory of language management, the chapter begins with the evaluation that 'language policy adopted by an educational system is without doubt one of the most powerful forces in language management' (90). The chapter ends where it began. In the final section titled '[S]chooling in a theory of language management', Spolsky exclaims that the 'school domain is probably the ultimate test of a theory of language management, because schools are there basically to manage the language of their students, because of the complexity of participants and management methods, and because of the difficulty of evaluating results' (114). I suggest that for Spolsky formulating a theory of language management means listing in the most exhaustive fashion possible what are the specifics, the particulars, of management behaviors in any and all contexts of organized attention to language, especially language selection. That being so, postulating 'marked' and 'unmarked' cases and taking normative positions are understandable.

The author's introductory concerns in the chapter on legal and health institutions that '[D]octors show a tendency to ignore what their patients say' and how '[J]udges and police use their greater power to ignore the need to communicate' (although recognizing exceptions) (115) flow directly from this particularistic and normative perspective. The selection of language issue and facilitation by translation and interpretation in relation to participants' differential language proficiencies dominate his exposition. Spolsky extracts as a lesson from management in the legal and health domains that 'the theoretical model' acquires a 'major modification', being 'the importance of external influence on management [...] and the changing nature of internal beliefs' (128). He gives 'the influence of the civil rights movement' (128) as an example of this latter factor.

The military 'domain' chapter discusses the differential distribution of language proficiency across the command structure in the Roman army, the French Foreign legion, the Israeli Defense Forces, the British Indian Army and Canada. There follow sections on 'language policy in the US armed forces' (136–140) and 'US defense language policy' (140–143). Spolsky concludes that this chapter 'helps clarify the complications introduced when external forces attempt to influence a domain or a domain attempts to affect others' (143), *a fortiori* exemplified by the Canadian government's edict that its defense forces 'play a leading role in implementing a bilingual policy'. Internally to a hierarchical organization, 'management is potentially easier' (143).

Spolsky posits 'authority' as fundamental in the chapter on levels of government in a state, and the problem as one of managing multilingualism. He posits 'monolingualism' as the 'normal or unmarked pressure in the governmental domain' (147) and proceeds to discuss language selection at a national level as expressed in constitutions (148–152), followed by two pages on the nation-state's 'monolingual hegemony' (153–154), territorialism as an accommodation of multiple languages in a state (154–157), language selection as an issue of 'regional autonomy and devolution' (157–162) and the 'break-up of nation-states' (162–165); and prior to an interlude on 'spelling and language reform' (167–168), a page and a half on national or federal laws and regulations (166–167). Language policies by local governments receive attention (168–175) before the author again turns to national policy ('Why is national policy so difficult?') (173–175) and '[P]ressures for national monolingualism and multilingualism' (175–180) presenting mainly the cases of Iceland, France, Indonesia, Japan and Thailand. The author ends the chapter by referring to the following chapter on 'internal activists and the external supranational organizations' 'to better understand language management at the level of the nation-state' (180).

The chapter on activism begins, however, with a summary of the 'theoretical model so far'. This summary is critically important for us to understand where Spolsky is coming

from: ‘I see organized language management as an attempt by some person or body with or claiming authority to modify the language practices or beliefs of a group of speakers. It is a political act, arising out of the belief that the present practices or beliefs are inadequate or undesirable and need modification. It assumes the existence of choice, whether of language, variety, or variable, and depends on the existence or perception of a significant conflict between two or more languages, varieties, or salient variables, such that a different choice can be expected to remedy the conflict’ (181). I find the criterion of existence of ‘a significant conflict’ puzzling in view of many cases of imposition of language (e.g. of English in so many contexts, by mere arrogance or similar behavior); however, ‘significant’ is vague enough and perhaps Spolsky feels that conflict or the perception thereof can belong to the one party only. Further, words may differ in their precise arrangement, but I can not but read the summary as anything other than a paraphrase of early descriptions of ‘language planning’.

Spolsky adds to this first point of summary that language management occurs in just about any communicative context (referring to Nekvapil, 2006, 100 as a recent reference to this otherwise well known point) and goes on to ‘argue’ as his third point that ‘language management is a marked case, motivated either by communication breakdown or by non-linguistic concerns ...’ (181). I do not understand the use of ‘marked’ here, but the substantive claim of motivation in linguistic or non-linguistic concerns is clear (and connects to elaboration of such motivations in the existing language planning and language management literature, as also referenced by Spolsky).

After an excursion to discuss Calvet’s notion of war of languages, the chapter then moves on to the topic of activism. Spolsky describes the revitalization of Hebrew ‘as a grassroots movement’ (185–190), devotes a few pages to assorted language movements around the world (190–195), discusses the ‘regeneration of Māori’ (195–196) and touches on activism in Australia (196–197) and the USA (197–198). The author returns to the Māori case under the heading of ‘community language activism’ (198–200) and also describes ‘[S]ome other cases of indigenous schooling’ as ‘recognition of the needs of forgotten minorities’ (200–202), then comments on ‘[S]alvaging indigenous endangered languages’ (202–204) before ending with a conclusion in his comment on theory that ‘[L]anguage activists are significant participants in language management’ (204–205).

Chapter 11 has two parts, one an account of language policies by a variety of supranational organizations (206–214) and the other an account of language rights (214–228). The author concludes in the theoretical chapter-ending paragraph that supranational organizations ‘influence beliefs and ideologies more than practices’, and that they ‘can formulate utopian policies without the responsibility to enforce them’ (224).

As the author himself writes in opening the penultimate chapter on agents and agencies, management – and what Spolsky is in fact writing about: policy implementation – cannot do without them (225). Consequently, and confirming my reviewer’s rewrite of ‘management’ into ‘policy’, he presents the organization of this chapter on the following page as: ‘it seems reasonable to follow the classic division of language policy (*sic!*) into status planning, language cultivation, and language acquisition policy’. (Spolsky equates ‘cultivation’ with ‘corpus planning’, 103.)

In a first section on government agencies that are not primarily language agencies, the author makes the point that any government agency by default implements language policy, whether specifically charged with it or not, and he also discusses the language proficiency tests for immigrants and to control citizenship (229–230). Next, Spolsky offers an overview of specific agencies, including language services such as translating and interpreting. Although his focus remains on language selection (determination), I note

that ‘terminology’ agencies receive mention in one of the meanings of terminology, i.e. to develop vocabulary, because ‘changes in language status force cultivation’ (241). Nomenclature and place names agencies are also briefly reviewed (242–243).

The final chapter aims at summarizing theory, ‘relevant to attempts to control language policy, that is to say, to change other people’s language practices and beliefs,’ under the label ‘language management’ (249). Spolsky refers very briefly to speakers noting communication problems in discourse, correctly referring to Nekvapil (2006) and the distinctly different other language management theory’s *simple language management*, apparently equating simple language management with accommodation as presented in Giles, Taylor, and Bourhis (1973). (I reread this latter reference and although it is similar in motivation and spirit, I cannot agree with the equation.)

The author moves on to organized language management, opening with ‘[T]his process of correction is the basic functioning of organized language management in a nutshell’ (250). Although it is unclear, to what ‘This’ refers, I believe, as the precedent is the first sentence in the immediately preceding paragraph: ‘In some domains, it is considered desirable and appropriate for certain participants to take responsibility to initiate such correction and learning’. The ‘such’ apparently refers to the preceding ‘some individuals set about improving their proficiency in the appropriate variety or language by taking some action to learn it, from a book, a tape, or in a course’ (250). But the process is overly restrictive and contradicts much of the content of the book, the lessons from which are reproduced in the rest of the chapter.

Thus, the author reviews lessons from the book’s exploration of ‘domains’ in the rest of the final chapter. After a contemplative last couple of pages, he leaves the reader with ‘two basic questions: can language be managed? And if it can, should it be managed?’ (261). There would have been no book if the answer to these questions had been ‘no.’ Spolsky’s book abounds with cases of language problems. And it is a fact that people adjust noted inadequacies in discourse or, in the words of another model, engage in repair of a product item. Thus, people take an active role in seeking adequate language expression, a force that Croft suggests drives language evolution (*supra*). I take it, however, that Spolsky meant to call for evaluation. Is language management good or bad?

Enquiry may begin by asking what exactly the problem is. And whose is the problem? Much will be revealed about the affairs of humans on a path of enquiry towards linking the emerging details of a problem under scrutiny to actual acts of communication, to discourse. If a problem’s motivation is to remove an inadequacy in discourse so as to cooperatively allow continued communication between interacting persons, the problem may well be judged a good one. It is unfortunately and indeed trivially true that management of language problems is subject to human shortcomings, as are all behaviors. Inequality, preservation and advancement of advantage, what have you, will influence the management of language problems; existing sociolinguistic and social biases enter the moment of noting of inadequacies in discourse, as it inheres in all communicative situations. Could it be that only ‘the invisible hand’ in ongoing discourse, in social interaction through the course of language use as Croft suggests, allows the good of language evolution to work its way out? Or is asking what is good and what is bad meaningless? Enquiry will tell.

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