

Paper delivered at the International Seminar on Changing Patterns in University Management, Tsinghua University, Beijing, April 12-14, 2000

Managing language at universities.

Relationships between universities and their language environment

Björn H. Jernudd
Hong Kong Baptist University¹

I will discuss how language management theory can diagnose and suggest solutions to language problems that arise in a university setting.

THEORY

Some fundamental concepts about language problems

Language problems arise in discourse, and outside of discourse, e.g., in discourse as it is daily conducted in universities.

Language problems that arise in discourse can be conceptualized as deviations from the norm that governs that discourse. The norm provides the behavioral standard against which the speaker (writer) notes, maybe evaluates, maybe adjusts deviations, and maybe implements in speaking these adjustments when he or she talks (or writes).

Implemented discourse adjustments normally occur within a few turns of noting while speaking. Listeners and readers also note, evaluate, and adjust deviations. The listener may communicate these reactions to the communicating other. This is according to language management theory (see, e.g., Neustupný 1994ⁱⁱ).

People may discuss notings, evaluations and adjustments, i.e., people make "on-line" management a topic of deliberation "off-line". This is

discourse about discourse (meta-discourse) and may lead to problem-solving. To distinguish this overt, "off-line" reflection and discourse *about* language from on-line discourse management, we can call this off-line mode the directed language management. Negative evaluations of inadequacies in the flow of discourse which receive this kind of overt attention can be called *language problems*. Problems may have solutions.ⁱⁱⁱ

Off-line, people may refer their concern with language to specialist managers. I do not know of any speech community without language specialists. In directed language management, participants draw on theory and may organize more or less systematic inquiry. Theory, too, may be more or less rigorous.

Regrettably, much decision-making about language in education is made without benefit of consultation with language management specialists. This can be explained by the fact that all people practice language management on-line, and possess a rudimentary concept of how language works. People therefore feel they can solve language problems. Specialists are curiously confined to only a few areas, *for example*, to language teaching, or to roles as arbiters of grammatical "correctness". This is a sad state of affairs. This paper need perhaps not have been formulated if specialists who possess a good deal of theoretical knowledge with regard to language management were readily incorporated in university management.

I have already mentioned how language problems may arise because people note deviations from norms in actual discourse and bring these up for discussion. Language problems also arise in other ways. People

may, *for example*, project language problems onto discourse on the basis of social, economic or political interests.^{iv} Some people may also rely on mistaken lay theories about language and, *for example*, opine that shorter words are better than longer words, or that spellings should be "regular", and so on.

People may feel very strongly about aspects of language use that can be related to a particular interest even when communication is otherwise unproblematical. Examples are degendering of language, use of titles and "address terms", or the uttering or not of taboo words and topics. Some seemingly innocent little words in a language, *for example* in English 'man' and 'he', served before to refer to male and female alike under particular conditions of speaking. Now they have had their gender-marking restored to them and therefore (in my opinion quite rightly in the interest of signalling gender equality) have to be replaced or supplemented^v. Elaborate editing procedures can be put in place to control language use. Degendering of language illustrates such editing very well. This editing is directed language management.

When people learn a new language they solve the problem that they are not able to communicate at all because they do not know the language. Of course, an individual will have to be either captive to someone else's will, *e.g.*, obliged to compulsorily attend school, or pretty convinced that there will be occasion for use of that language to go to so much trouble.

People may also adopt a solution in principle but not implement it in their own discourse. For example, adults may endorse a standard variety of a language, but not practice it themselves. They do not

accept the standard norm as valid for them. They continue to speak in their own dialect. Yet at the very same time they implement it for the upcoming generation through their control of schools. Pupils may be pliant enough to replace a home dialect norm with the school's standard norm -- if the learning environment is conducive enough to enable them to do precisely that.

People are likely to adopt a solution without immediate discourse motivation if it makes good sense to them. It may make good sense to some, *for example*, that Chinese nationals should know Putonghua in order to participate in national affairs.

People who do not share a prediction of own future communicative failure, equivalent to evaluating an actual inadequacy in the relevant communicative context, are unlikely to take the time to learn new language. People who do not note a deviation from norm in their own use of language are not likely respond to suggestions that there is something the matter with their language.

The principle 'don't fix it if it ain't broke' governs directed language management.

APPLICATION

Relationships between language problems and the university

Universities in Europe or the Americas operate in very different communicative environments. These differences have to be recognized in discussions about university management. For example, universities in the United States operate in an environment that foregrounds language

problems associated with minorities issues and issues of social justice, especially equal opportunity issues. Universities in Canada and especially in Quebec manage language problems that arise because of political action by an assertively mobilizing French-speaking majority in Quebec and Francophone communities elsewhere in Canada. Minority issues, ethnic issues, and regional integration issues do not now concern the universities in Hong Kong. There are however some signs that minority-ethnic issues are coming to the fore in public life in Hong Kong as well, including language selection as a problem. Issues of discourse and power and of gender equity in educational organizations also stand out in a global search of literature on the nexus between language and universities -- in addition to the obvious concerns with foreign language offerings.

There is a huge international literature that deals with the post-colonial development of language policies of newly independent states but very few papers that deal specifically with the university's post-colonial transition. An exception is Douglas 1986^{vi}. There are some papers on rather more specialized concerns as well, e.g., on admissions policies and objectives for English departments in post-colonial societies^{vii}.

What language problems actually arise in the communicative acts that comprise each category of situations at universities in Hong Kong is an empirical matter.^{viii} I do not have data. To gather such data seems to me a new endeavor in university language management and therefore in university management. The data should be gathered as an exploratory fact-finding exercise. Data can be obtained in quite a

straightforward manner. Here follow the more obvious approaches to collecting such vital data:

- by observing and recording communications
- by playing back video-recordings of communicative acts to participants and conducting so called follow-up interviews
- by discussing texts (of any which kind) with their writers and readers
- by using think-aloud and protocol methods.

Communicative acts in university settings and with participants who have roles in university management can be classified into the broad and admittedly *ad hoc* categories of

- TEACHING acts between students and teachers,
- STUDY acts by students,
- ADMINISTRATIVE acts between students, members of faculties and administrator representatives of university departments and administrative offices,
- RESEARCH acts,
- WRITING and other PRESENTATION acts, and
- SERVICE acts by members of faculties in communication with many different audiences, and
- GOVERNANCE acts between representatives of the university and representatives of government offices and the public.

In the following I shall discuss language management in the first three categories of acts.

Teaching acts and language management

I advocate systematic attention in university management to participants' noting of deviations in any and all communicative acts that define student and teacher roles. Hardly any attention has been paid, for example, to the process of use of English as a medium of instruction in Hong Kong universities. Research will likely reveal that participants experience a variety of inadequacies in teaching acts. They would derive from

- ⇒ any instructor's (lack of) skills of using language for particular purposes of enabling learning,
- ⇒ a student's (in)ability to comprehend and to seek clarification,
- ⇒ a student's (lack of) background knowledge to enable meaningful communication in the time periods available,
- ⇒ discontinuities of language use in the classroom with language use outside it, not the least
 - ✓ the use of English by instructors, and
 - ✓ subject instructors' inability to help students to manage English.

Equivalently, research will likely reveal a series of practices that by declared interests of language policy would have to be regarded as deviations but that serve the communicating parties well in teaching acts, *including*

- ⇒ continuities of language use in the classroom with language use outside it, not the least
 - ✓ dominant use of Cantonese
 - ✓ use in discourse of a Hong Kong English set of norms
- ⇒ a variety of actual adjustment strategies, including, *for example*,
 - ✓ in-class student-to-student consultations in Cantonese, and
 - ✓ instructors' management of vocabulary by efficient incorporation in discourse of technical-scientific terms, and generally
 - ✓ many instructors' skilled management of English to achieve student comprehension and participation.

I claim that regrettably many teachers supply "corrections" that fall short of what students themselves plausibly perceive to be deviations. Those corrections are red-penned prescriptions that have little impact because they are applied to language that students themselves evaluate positively. My claim appears logically unassailable. Nevertheless, merely assume that my claim is valid. If it is, teachers would have to engage the student in an interactive process of a very different kind than a "corrective" one. The students would have to be enabled to manage the generation of discourse according to norms that they value as valid and they would have to be enabled to themselves make these norms their own. After all, in the red-penning exchange I describe, the teacher's and the student's norms are in conflict. The student has no basis on which to prefer the teacher's correction other than the latter's authority. Teaching by sanction of authority produces compliant aping; teaching by demonstrating the existence and validity of another norm through directed language management techniques that aim at self-adjustment by the student produces active learning.

Interestingly, face to face communication or follow up with little delay for purposes of noting and evaluating discourse characterize good management of language acquisition. For this process to work, students' communications have to be discussed not 'next term' but within memory of their formulation, and even then paradoxically not with a focus on noting deviations from language norms but with a focus on expression of content.^{ix} The focus in teaching acts on expression of content implies attending to three types of deviations. There are deviations from rules of grammatical competence, from rules of sociolinguistic competence, and from conventions of the sociocultural context of communication.* Far too little explicit attention is given to the latter two. An example of attention to sociolinguistic competence when it is given is teaching the in-house 'research paper'. There is obviously ample scope for radical rethinking of directed management of communication teaching at universities, in the simplest extensions by including attention to context and convention that also govern generation of kinds of discourse.

The language management approach goes far beyond the conventional grammatical proficiency thinking that dominates management of the use of English at universities. The implications are as profound as they are obvious:

- ✓ involve many more participants in university communication in language management than at present,
- ✓ enable them,
- ✓ harmonize university teaching acts with realities of participants' norms of communication.

The university has been under continuous pressure from outside interests to train students to know (more) English. As far as the university is concerned, this is an interest-based request for university action in favor of English. One of the effects of this pressure is to uphold the policy of English-medium instruction in universities.^{xi}

Teaching acts: managing the medium of instruction

From the point of view of language management, the difficulty with implementing English at the university is that the existing and valid norm of interaction between students is Cantonese and its associated written variety of Chinese^{xii}. Students do not perceive a deviation from their norm of language selection and use when they use Cantonese. They do perceive a deviation from their norm of language selection and use when they use English among themselves. The only acts for which they accept English as a norm are acts in which foreigners participate. This simple fact renders the English medium policy an imposition on students. Students reasonably require ample justification for them to consider adopting English to replace Cantonese in interaction for which Cantonese is the norm. The English-medium policy is and remains a hegemonic prescriptive norm unto students.

Not that students do not use English in some communications: they have no choice in many subjects in which they have to read assigned English texts (which they return in English in the written examinations).^{xiii}

The English-medium policy upholds a prescriptive norm because as a matter of fact at the university students do not practice English other than when no other language is available. This is when textbooks are assigned in English, when lectures are delivered in English, when examinations are set in English on materials that require reproduction in whole or in part of knowledge that was studied in English, and so on. These prescriptions do not invalidate the fact that an English selection norm is not valid for them. Were a student to select English, that selection act would itself be a sociocultural and sociolinguistic deviation which would oblige evaluations by other participants. This is obviously a burden on communication.

The prescriptive norm is not given the push into a possibly existing one for the students because it is even the case that as a matter of fact most instructors readily speak Cantonese, some others Putonghua if they do not have Cantonese, when so addressed by students. It is well-known among members of the faculty that many lecturers offer students a choice of language of lectures and students invariably select Cantonese.

An additional and perhaps paradoxical complication is that although students do not practice English they endorse the prescriptive norm in principle -- although they practice Cantonese. Individuals react to this contradiction in different ways. Some may feel inadequate and devalue their Chinese even though that is the language they practice. (Cf. the reference to Bartsch above.)

Although more people know more English than ever before in Hong Kong^{xiv}, the 1997 transition sidelined English in public communication.

Privately the mass of the mobilized and mobilizing population of Hong Kong speak Chinese; for foreign-marked communications they recognize the value of English and many practice it, in and out of the university.^{xv}

Government policy unambiguously favors Chinese while recognizing the value of English. For universities to limit the use of Chinese under these circumstances would be strange indeed, yet, that is what universities continue to do, contrary to participants' norms.^{xvi} A policy of bilingualism (lately with the addition "triliterate") negotiates the seeming impasse between use of English and Chinese in universities. In my opinion, the ambiguity has to be resolved and it can only be resolved by putting English in place, in the right places. There is every reason to think that participants would readily welcome specification and learn and use English in those specific contexts.

One might object that being a student means to comply with prescription. I counter that such pedagogy is costly indeed. Justifying a suggested norm to motivate its acceptance requires an investment cost but in the total analysis is less costly than prescription. Students signing up to seek expert help with adjustment of the inadequacy that they themselves have noted that they do not know enough English is the criterion of efficient management here.

This means that English would be taught as a foreign language in specially arranged acquisition classes to those who require grammatical competence beyond their secondary school achievement. Such teaching would be supplemented by the use of English in specially designated subject matter classes to enable acquisition of

sociolinguistic rules and subject specific language and to enhance fluency by the select number of students specializing in the subjects for which English is motivated.

A course for which the use of English would seem motivated is the English language and literature major. The university could issue certificates to any student who demonstrates that s/he knows English (by varied means of assessment). The devolution to departments or even individual teachers of the decision in which language to teach, a "privatization" of language policy, will free members of the university to manage language problems of their own noting. Some learning could also be placed overseas in a community that uses the language of demand, as is already the practice for European Studies' students of German and French and Translation and Chinese Studies' students for Putonghua at HK Baptist University.^{xvii}

It is not necessary to impose English on university students. Students readily respond themselves to cross-community opportunities of foreign travel, study and work. However, a foreign language should not get in the way of the first business of a university which is to develop a spirit of inquiry and an interest in exploring new knowledge. This business is best carried out in a language which is already shared and effortlessly used by students' and most administrators' families, indeed, by most families in Hong Kong. That is Cantonese. The university should be responsible for producing people who can cope with communication in an international society. Hence, (in a formulation suggested by a *personal communication* from Professor J. V. Neustupný) the university should position topics, subtopics, foreign teachers, international students and foreign settings for study by its

own students in a way that obliges students to master communication in English.

Acts of study

A similar approach must be taken to the category of STUDY communications. Within students' ranges of proficiency in various languages and varieties of languages, what do we know about the individual student's process of managing reading and writing for different study purposes?

- ✓ What norms do students by their own choice rely on in self-adjustments, e.g., in writing an essay?
- ✓ Do existing university support systems know about students' own norms?
- ✓ What norm authorities do students refer to for solutions to language problems in either English or Chinese?

Ceteris paribus, I advocate a pedagogy that aims at enabling students to note deviations themselves and therefore to themselves explore evaluations and adjustments.

This pedagogy is a cost-effective one to enable learning. Happily, university leaders advocate change that supports a pedagogy that involves the learner in discovering possibilities and opportunities and that explains choices to the learner and that promotes self-realization and student initiative in the study process. A university STUDY system along these lines would build support systems to enable

learning according to student choice. This is compatible with the language management approach.

Administrative acts

I have few facts about inadequacies in ADMINISTRATIVE acts of communications between administrators and faculty members. Clearly, descriptive research is much needed.

Administrative acts: Terminology

An example of a recurring problem much in need of solution is in-house standardization of vocabulary usage. I continue to stumble over the use of 'subject' and 'course', in English, usually resolved in the discourse situation but always an irritation. I also experience how titles for faculty members differ between universities.

I suspect the terminological problem is even greater for the now escalating use of Chinese in in-house documents and work-related discourses than for English. Chinese term problems may include finding suitable words, prior to reaching agreement on usage of particular words. The term problem is probably shared across Hong Kong, and solutions should be shared within the education sector.

Administrative acts: bilingual information

In regard to administrative communications with students, my university is now adjusting for the absence of subject descriptions in Chinese "for China-related subjects". The Registrar is acting on a

student's suggestion which apparently mobilized widespread shared noting of the absence of Chinese subject descriptions in the *Calendar/Bulletin*. The adjustment furthermore partly aligns a major university document with the university's policy to be bilingual. I predict extension of bilingual descriptions to other subjects. Whether this language problem is motivated by the opinion that Chinese ought to be used more or by a concern to make the descriptions easier to read for some group of readers who would otherwise struggle in English is moot.

Administrative acts: internationalization

Some international students at my university noted "Chinese language usage" in subjects they took to the extent that they had to withdraw. These classes were designated as "English medium" subjects. The problem came to the attention of the Academic Registry and the International Student Office.

The presence on campus of English-speaking international students is a positive new development. They do not know Cantonese. Therefore, they now reveal the complexities of language use associated with the policy and belief that English is used as a "medium of instruction" in classes where teacher and students share Chinese. I suggest that English is never exclusively used. This may not however be commonly understood. Even if administrators realize the reality of language use, they believe that English could be exclusively used. There is obviously room here for description of actual language use in the supposedly "English medium" classes.

In the light of such descriptive findings, and aided by reasoning based in theories of language use, there is room for rethinking how class discourse should be managed. An absolute condition is that in classes with international students, these students feel included in the teacher's communications. The problem now overt, since teacher and student face each other in class, the teacher should be able to manage his/her language to that extent at least. To insist on "English only" (and what kind of English?) would appear to be an unnecessarily restrictive solution.

It is a different matter and an open question whether international students will evaluate their local peers' norm of person-to-person interaction in Cantonese in discussion groups and asides in class negatively and to what extent. Do they feel excluded by such language use by classmates? Will they want to drop those subjects for that reason? I am myself true to the declaration of contents for the subjects I teach as English medium because I don't speak Chinese; yet students nevertheless deprive me of essential background information for achieving optimal communication in teaching by their exclusionary practice.^{xviii} And they miss a chance to practice English.

Final recommendation

There is much room for clarification of language use in all categories of communicative acts to bring about sound discourse management to meet the university's educational goals. I recommend audits of language use to inform directed language management. Language management specialists would work with university administrators,

faculty members and students with the goal of removing inadequacies in discourse across all communicative acts in the university.

ⁱ I want to thank the following individuals who attended a department seminar in which a draft of this paper was discussed for their helpful comments: Ed Anderson, Gillian Bickley, Stuart Christie, Clayton MacKenzie, K C Lo, Sui Sang Mok, Chew Kheng Suan, Linda Wong, and Suying Yang. I am indebted to Professor J V Neustupný who commented on a draft of this paper in some detail.

ⁱⁱ J. V. Neustupný, Problems of English Contact Discourse and Language Planning, in Thiru Kandiah and John Kwan-Terry, editors, *English and Language Planning: A Southeast Asian Contribution*. Singapore: Times Academic Press 1994, pages 50-69.

ⁱⁱⁱ It follows that solutions to language problems do not exist as adjustments according to anybody's norm until someone uses them to generate on-line discourse. They remain prescriptive until they are implemented in on-line discourse.

^{iv} Cf. B.H. Jernudd and J.V. Neustupný, Language Planning: for whom? In L. Laforge, ed., *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Language Planning*. Pages 69-84. Ottawa: Les Presses de l'Université Laval. 1987.

^v Cf. my usage 's/he'.

^{vi} Dan Douglas, From school to university: language policy and performance at the University of Khartoum. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 61:89-112, 1986.

^{vii} ERIC ED271947 Khalid Omari and Muhammad Raji Zughouli 'Towards formulating an educational admission policy for English majors at Arab universities: a case study' and ED271943 Muhammad Raji Zughouli on 'Formulating objectives for the English departments in Arab universities: rationale and assessment'.

^{viii} Analysis of power hegemony following Gramsci and others, or a discourse ethical approach following Habermas, may arrive at similar results^{viii} as analysis by discourse management. For such alternative approaches, I recommend David Corson, editor, *Discourse and power in educational organizations*. Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, Inc. 1995.

^{ix} I give my views on suitable organization of teaching in a paper titled 'Improving tertiary learners' professional writing skills', *Journal of English and Foreign Languages* 12:34-39, 1994.

^x For elaboration and application of this distinction, see J. V. Neustupný, *Communicating with the Japanese*. Tokyo: The Japan Times. 1987.

^{xi} Some Hong Kong universities have declared themselves as "bilingual". Further, I am not interested here in possible sources in discourse that may have accumulated into a shared concern and given rise to this problem. Obviously, employees of graduates could themselves arrange for remediation, should they be dissatisfied with an individual employee's English.

^{xii} This written variety is classified as locally valid, as in some sense Cantonese, and not classified as Putonghua.

^{xiii} This latter claim that students return English because they 'learnt' in English is hypothetical. I maintain that students would write in Chinese if students were to accept an approach to studies that implies that examinations reflect cognitively creative processing of content, say, as problem-solving. My claim can be tested by investigating particular students' approaches to learning and predicts different preference of selection of language according to learning style.

^{xiv} John Bacon-Shone and Kingsley Bolton, 'Charting Multilingualism: Language Censuses and Language Surveys in Hong Kong', in Martha C. Pennington, editor, *Language in Hong Kong at Century's End*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 1998, pages 43-90.

^{xv} English has been and is used in order for instructors to be able to communicate with pupils/students in Hong Kong: either the teachers learn Chinese or students learn the teachers' languages (Gillian Bickley, *oral communication*, 28 February 2000; see also Gillian Bickley, *The golden needle. The biography of Frederick Stewart (1836-1889)*. Hong Kong: David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies, HK Baptist University. Page 280.)

^{xvi} I opt to deal with these participants as foreigners here, thus incorporating them under the general rule of selection of English for foreign-marked communications in Hong Kong. I see no contradiction between the two statements.

^{xvii} Solutions should not be categorical. If there is no literature in one's own language on a (sub)topic, there may exist literature in another language -- probably English! However, textbooks can be reproduced in the language of the place. Universities can encourage lecturers to produce those textbooks.

^{xviii} An education cost is that I do not know whether discussion groups are on topic.