

# Language Management

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## Key Points

- Language management is any type of metalinguistic activity, i.e., behavior aimed at reflecting on or intervening in language use.
- Though commonly understood as a school of language policy, the language management approach is a general sociolinguistic framework centered around the examination of language problems.
- The basic phases of the language management process include noting, evaluation, adjustment design and implementation.
- The language management approach emphasizes the dialectical relationships between the metalinguistic behavior of actors from various levels of societal organization.

## Abstract

This contribution explains the language management (LM) approach in its historical-disciplinary context, clarifies it in terms of terminology and outlines its basic aspects, including its focus on language problems, its process-oriented and cyclical character, and its emphasis on the connections between linguistic and extralinguistic issues. It points to several aspects of the LM approach that are worthy of further theoretical development, particularly in regard to the various phases of the LM process and the relationship between simple and organized management. It concludes by suggesting the types of research aims that are appropriate for selecting the LM approach as a framework for both methods and analysis.

## Introduction

Language management (LM) can be understood as behavior-toward-language that consists in actions aimed at reflecting upon or changing any aspects of language or communication. LM works in tandem with language generation (production and perception), which is the object of analysis of many mainstream linguistics theories (cf. Fishman, 1971; Nekvapil, 2016). Though it is often categorized as a school within the field of Language Policy and Planning (cf. Baldauf & Hamid, 2018, Nekvapil, this volume) the LM theory (also referred to as the LM framework or approach) is a problem-focused approach to the analysis of sociolinguistic phenomena. Managing language involves performing any metalinguistic activity related to language use, such as commenting on aspects of an utterance (e.g., spelling, pronunciation or lexical choice), evaluating, correcting or reformulating them, but also participating in the development of language policies in companies, schools, organizations or at the state level, promoting changes in language use in the media and in everyday life. The phenomena which can be the object of LM thus range greatly, from an aspect of a specific utterance or a generalized linguistic feature to any other sort of linguistic practice or management itself.

## LM in Its Disciplinary Context

While the origins of the language management framework can be traced to the field of Language Planning and Policy (LPP) (Jernudd & Neustupný, 1987), and in fact, it continues to fall into this area (see e.g., Baldauf and Hamid (2018), Nekvapil, this volume), it is important to consider other influences and classifications. For instance, J. V. Neustupný, in his role as a researcher of the acquisition of Japanese, displays a strong influence from the development of the field of second language acquisition. Also, in the initial descriptions of simple or discourse-based management (e.g., Jernudd, 1991), there is significant reliance on

the concept of repair in the field of conversation analysis. Given both the range of these influences and the prototypical objects of analysis in LM, we understand it as a general sociolinguistic theory, departing from the fact that the complex relationships between language and society are most appropriately analyzed based on situations in which problems occur. It is thus fully compatible with multiple theories and methods from a number of disciplines (see [Sherman \(2016\)](#) for a set of examples).

The truly sociolinguistic character of the LM approach is apparent in its focus on the links between the purely linguistic sphere and others, specifically the area of communication in a broader sense, and the sociocultural and socioeconomic realms. In other words, language problems are viewed as never being exclusively about language, but rather, serve as indices of problems elsewhere. For example, the language acquisition by immigrants in a given country is often dependent on the degree to which they actually need the language in various communication situations, which is, in turn, dependent on their economic activity.

In both scholarly circles and outside of them, some confusion may arise surrounding the term “language management”, stemming at least partly from the contexts in which it is encountered in the first place. In addition to the theory explored in this article, it is possible to observe the approach widely applied in the past 20 years promoted by Bernard Spolsky (see [Spolsky \(2004, 2009\)](#)) as well as the more general lay concept of language management as a service or group of services in the business world, which may include language courses, translating, interpreting, and the like. The differences between these three understandings of the term have been examined by [Sanden \(2016\)](#), see also [Sloboda \(2010\)](#)). Further terminological confusion may be influenced by the fact that some sources refer to “language management theory,” others to the language management “framework” or “approach” (which we prefer in this article). The use of these terms is more or less interchangeable. It is also necessary to distinguish between research which is specifically driven by the LM approach, posing the questions of what sorts of language problems are experienced in a specific context and how they are managed, and research which tends more toward using LM or some aspects of it as an analytical tool.

## LM as a Process

A key component of the LM approach is the description of the LM process consisting of four main phases. The actor who “behaves toward language” can first note a specific linguistic or communicative phenomenon. This tends to be, in the most typical sense, a deviation from a norm or expectation, but in principle it can be any communicative phenomenon. The participant in the communicative event can evaluate the noted phenomenon negatively, positively, or neutrally. In the case of negative evaluation, the phenomenon can be considered an “inadequacy,” leading to the emergence of a language problem which must somehow be managed. Even though the LM approach also includes cases in which the noted phenomenon is evaluated positively (a so-called gratification), it is situations in which the participants deal with language problems that are at the center of attention (cf. e.g., [Kimura & Fairbrother, 2020](#); [Neustupný, 2002](#)). Further phases of LM involve the planning of potential ways to adjust the problematized phenomenon, i.e., to eliminate or fix the problem, and the realization of these plans.

The “classic” string of phases in LM is thus:

1. noting
2. evaluation
3. adjustment design
4. implementation

Though a prototypically “complete” LM process includes all of these phases, most instances of management involve only some of them. In other words, the management can and most likely will end at any point. However, the LM approach allows analysts to focus on the circumstances, particularly socioeconomic conditions, power relations, or the multiplicity of interests, which prevent the process from being completed. For example, it may be noted by multiple actors that immigrants in a given country do not possess sufficient local language competence to handle their daily affairs autonomously, there may emerge the proposed adjustment design that all employers be required to provide language courses. However, the employers may not have the financial resources to do so (or may not wish to invest them in this way), and there may be a lack of political will to enforce such a requirement legislatively.

On the other hand, even if all of these phases take place, this does not necessarily mean that the management of the given phenomena ends overall. Actors may further note, evaluate, or otherwise manage it. The LM process thus can and often does have a cyclical character. In connection with this, [Kimura \(2014\)](#) proposed the concept of a post-implementation evaluation phase, based on process models from other disciplines, in order to provide a way to examine the common instance in which management processes are repeated.

The process described above is not a petrified and exhaustive set of elements which would define any sort of language management. Rather, it is an attempt to establish basic, repeated moments of the typical course of metalinguistic activities and draw analytical attention to them. At the same time, there are further potential elements of specific cases of managing language which should not be overlooked. It is also necessary to remember that LM can take on a significantly more complicated course than the given process model indicates. For example, the individual phases can repeat themselves in various alterations, they can be carried out by various actors and complemented by other relevant types of activities such as communication between actors about language and its management (see [Kopecký \(2014\)](#)). Furthermore, multiple parties in a single interaction can simultaneously manage linguistic phenomena, and their processes may diverge or intersect at different stages (see [Fairbrother \(2020\)](#)). Some phases

may have a complicated structure in themselves and can be divided into further parts (see, e.g., the varying forms of adjustment design in the management processes concerning language law described by [Dovailil \(2015\)](#)).

Given the fact that this model is maximally general, some of the phases described above have a significantly varying form at different levels of social complexity. For example, noting in simple, utterance-level management can consist in becoming aware of a deviation from a norm of the speaker in the ongoing utterance. On the other hand, in organized management, “noting” can take the form of long-term research on the use of language or a language situation in a certain environment, undertaken by numerous research teams. The findings of this research can then lead to the realization of further phases of language management such as a change in the language policy of an institution.

As for the term *noting* itself, this verb is used in the LM approach in a somewhat broader sense than in everyday, non-terminological use. In addition to the participant’s spontaneous, “independent” noting, defined as a synonym of the verb *notice*, i.e., “to become aware of something,” this includes cases in which a participant’s attention is drawn to a certain linguistic phenomenon by someone else (cf. [Nekvapil, 2012a](#), p. 166; [Kimura, 2014](#), p. 265; [Beneš et al., 2018](#), p. 122).

Here, from the analytical perspective, it is important to distinguish between acts of management conducted by the actors in a given situation and the management done by the analyst. If, for example, the analyst notes what he or she would consider inadequacies in a segment of recorded material (e.g., “errors” made by non-native speakers of a language), but there is no observable, demonstrable noting or evaluation of these inadequacies by the participants themselves, it is not possible to state that management took place during the given interaction.

The description of the different phases of language management suggests that LM approach is not confined to the analysis of language management outcomes, but also includes an examination of the internal mental processes that precede the final implementation. These phases, i.e., noting, evaluation and adjustment design, may be discursively manifested in some cases (e.g., the speaker comments on a particular linguistic feature, explicitly evaluates it, etc.), but often also remain hidden to the observer (cf. [Fairbrother & Kimura, 2020](#), pp. 5, 6). To explore the internal elements of language management, methods have been developed within the LM approach that use participant introspection, particularly the follow-up interview and interaction interview (see [Fairbrother et al. \(2018\)](#); [Neustupný \(1999, 2003\)](#)). The cognitive elements of the management process can also be respecified as discursive categories: according to [Nekvapil \(2012a, p. 164\)](#), “the individual phases of simple language management (particularly, ‘noting’, but also ‘evaluation’ and ‘adjustment design’) can be viewed as categories to which speakers are oriented while reporting their experiences with language, communication or socio-cultural phenomena.”

For this reason, it is appropriate from the analytical perspective to consider whether the noting, evaluation or adjustment design are understood as mental processes which would have to be studied using psycholinguistic methods (cf. [Fairbrother et al., 2018](#), p. 23), or whether they are discursive manifestations of these phases, i.e., observable evidence of the given processes in an utterance (e.g., a surprised reaction to a certain expression in interaction as evidence of noting), or whether these processes are reconstructed introspectively in a research interview or using another method, or in some cases the occurrence of a certain phase is merely deduced from the occurrence of the following phase (e.g., if an adjustment was made, it can be assumed that it was designed at some point).

## Simple and Organized

One of the most important aspects of the LM approach, particularly in its relationship to various schools of LPP, is its integration of the micro level in the form of individual utterances or interactions. This is primarily manifested in the distinction this approach makes between two types of management: simple and organized. The focus of this distinction is to emphasize the range of societal levels on which management can take place and the connections between these levels. This distinction operates in parallel to other dichotomies such as macro versus micro and top-down versus bottom-up, or social structure versus interaction (see [Nekvapil \(2012b\)](#)). One of the basic premises of the LM approach is that the relationship between macro and micro in language planning is most useful analytically when it is seen as a dialectical one. This position is often used as an explanation for the selection of LM as a theoretical-methodological approach to a specific problem. This is the case, for example, of the study by [Nekvapil and Nekula \(2006\)](#). LM is also thus a particularly appropriate approach to phenomena which do not fit neatly into either the macro or the micro category.

Often cited in this regard is the statement by [Jiří Neustupný \(1994, p. 50\)](#) that “any act of language planning should start with the consideration of language problems as they appear in discourse, and the planning process should not be considered complete until the removal of the problems is implemented in discourse.” This statement draws attention to the fact that language management is a cyclical process. However, it is necessary to distinguish between two types of language management cycles: 1. the micro-macro management cycle and 2. the management process cycle, described in the previous section ([Kimura, 2020](#), pp. 239–244). The complete micro-macro cycle can be schematically represented as micro → macro → micro. Yet there are often a number of impediments to the full realization of the cycle. [Nekvapil \(2009, pp. 6–7\)](#) illustrated this by defining a set of very common situations: two types of “partial language management cycles,” which operate in only one direction, from one level to another but not back again, and two types of “fragments of language management cycles,” in which problems remain at only a single level. One type of partial cycle consists of situations in which management, though initiated at the micro level and brought to the attention of experts, somehow cannot be implemented. Another is when top-down management is implemented without consideration of actual problems on the micro level, which is, in fact, the basic critical view presented toward “classic” language planning models. Fragments of

management cycles include “micro only,” in which everyday users manage problems on their own without turning to experts, and “macro only” in which experts consider language issues on a purely theoretical level, without input from language users.

The study of the connections between LM at different societal levels is somewhat complicated by the fact that there is not complete agreement among scholars on the distinction between simple and organized management. According to Nekvapil (2016, p. 15), organized management can be characterized by the following features:

- (a) Management acts are trans-interactive
- (b) A social network or even an institution (organization) holding the corresponding power is involved
- (c) Communication about management takes place
- (d) Theorizing and ideologies are at play to a greater degree and more explicitly
- (e) In addition to language as discourse, the object of management is language as system.

One issue is that many of these features can also be possessed by simple (individual) management. In everyday interactions, LM can also relate to a range of interactions (e.g., when participants negotiate the form of address they will use in subsequent interactions). Likewise, in simple management, participants can communicate about the management itself, e.g., when discussing a correction made in a given interaction. Elements of the language system can also become objects of simple management—for example, when interactants discuss the elements of gender-neutral language.

On the other hand, institutional management need not be trans-interactive in every case, but can concern a single interaction, e.g., when state authorities penalize a violation of a language law which prescribes the use of the state language in official communication, and that violation (use of a language other than the state language) involves only one interaction (cf. Fiala-Butora, 2022, on this type of LM in Slovakia).

In relation to this matter, Fairbrother and Kimura (2020: p. 17) state that “the elements that have come to be included in *either* simple *or* organized management in reality can intersect” and “the characteristics so far attributed to simple or organized management [...] can no longer be regarded as discrete categories but as, at least theoretically, freely combinable elements” (p. 18). For this reason, they propose replacing the existing dualistic conceptualization of simple and organized management (p. 17) with the concept of micro and macro as a continuum, in which LM can be “more micro-focused” or “more macro-focused” (pp. 18–20; cf. Sherman, 2016, pp. 194–195).

In addition to this, however, there is also the possibility of maintaining a differentiation between simple and organized management in which the main differentiating criterion is the social level on which its actors can be found: everyday management done by ordinary language users versus the management done by institutions and organizations at various levels. This differentiation would be supported by the fact that the forms of “behavior-toward-language” that are typically characteristic for the management of individuals and institutions are essentially different and involve different sorts of power relations and distributions (however, it is not the case that institutions are always and in all respects more powerful than ordinary language users, cf. e.g., Dovalil, 2020, pp. 185–186; Vuković, 2022; Fairbrother & Kimura, 2020, p. 15).

The characteristics of organized management mentioned above (trans-interactionality, communication about management, etc.), though they are typical for institutional management and are more commonly applicable there than in simple management, in principle are not limited to organized management (with the exception of the presence of institutions) and need not even always be present in it.

## Conclusion

In sum, the LM approach provides a comprehensive analytical toolbox for a broad range of sociolinguistic phenomena. It is thus an appropriate choice for the researcher who: (1) selects objects of study based on how linguistic and communicative problems are addressed by social actors and institutions, i.e., which linguistic features, practices or policies are perceived as problems by various actors, (2) places focus not only on the metalinguistic activities of institutions and organizations, but also of ordinary language users, (3) aims to shed light on the dialectical relationships between the behavior of actors from various levels of societal organization, (4) does not consider language and communication as isolated phenomena, but perceives their close interdependence with the socioeconomic dimension.

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