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Review of *Rethinking Language Policy*



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Review of *Rethinking Language Policy*, by B. Spolsky, Edinburgh University Press, 2021. 272pp., £24.90 (Paperback) £24.90 (eBook). ISBN 9781474485487.

Rethinking Language Policy is Bernard Spolsky's latest, full-length publication dedicated to language policy and planning (LPP). It's an update of Spolsky's *Language Management* (2009) and closely resembles the structure and contents; with nine of the 14 chapters having a direct parallel to a chapter the 2009 publication. Given this, this review will focus more thoroughly on the five new chapters, as well as providing an overall summation and assessment.

This book can be loosely grouped into two main sections. Following a brief introduction (Chapter 1) in which Spolsky makes the case for an ecological perspective on LPP, the first portion of the book (Chapters 2–6) is organised around specific domains, discussing the role language plays in a variety of individual, societal, and institutional spheres, namely: language and the individual, the family, education, workplaces, public institutions, and military. As a sociolinguist who focuses on language policy for education, this reviewer was pleased with the chapter on education (Chapter 3), which offers a useful overview of the key orientations and models of language in education policy, interspersed with illustrative examples from practice. One novel perspective presented in this chapter is the intersection of religion (and religious instruction) with education and language of instruction policies. This chapter covers ground with which the current reviewer is most familiar, and its quality and breadth bode well for the other topical chapter contributions in this section.

The second half (Chapters 7–12) focuses on different topical issues in LPP (for example, imperialism, neoliberalism, language endangerment, and language rights), mostly through case studies from a variety of contexts (spanning Brazil, India, Vanuatu, China, Europe, Nigeria, Peru, Aotearoa, and more). Readers of the *Australian Journal of Applied Linguistics* may be disappointed that this section has not included any in-depth case studies of the Australian context, offering only sporadic references to Australian policies or research findings. With the extensive breadth and scope of this volume, the author inevitably needed to make difficult inclusion decisions, but given Australia's reputation as a "graveyard for languages" (Piller, quoted in Fukui, 2019), more mention of this context may have been anticipated in the chapters on colonialism (Chapter 7) and language endangerment (Chapter 9). Also found in this section are three of the chapters which are new additions since *Language Management*. These sections (Chapters 7–9) deal with colonialism, neoliberalism, and language endangerment.

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ment respectively, reflecting growing awareness within applied linguistics of the immense pressures these phenomena have placed on languages and their users worldwide (see Heller & McElhinny, 2017). The chapter on colonialism (Chapter 7) compares case studies of the language policy efforts of Portuguese, French, Spanish and other European colonial empires. While comprehensive, this chapter mainly focuses on narratively describing colonial language policies across time, and then offering a model of the common stages or patterns of the same (p. 91). In taking a descriptive approach, it mostly avoids questions of “how” or “why” that might have come from the incorporation of post-colonial or decolonial theories, which would have fit well within the book’s aim of “rethinking” LPP. However, taken at face value as an illustrative and comprehensive discussion piece, the chapter is indeed useful. Chapter 8, which discusses neoliberalism and its commodification of languages and linguistics, is similarly descriptive, though shorter than those that it precedes and succeeds. The brief discussion towards the end of this chapter of the influence of cold-war capitalist drivers on the long-term trajectory of linguistics as a discipline (which also cites Heller & McElhinny, 2017) is notable within the “rethinking” theme. Chapter 9 then goes on to first lay out competing perspectives and debates of linguists and LPP scholars on the nature and urgency of language endangerment, before delving into specific case studies. While many would disagree with Spolsky’s statement that the present rate of language shift globally reflects a “normal evolutionary phenomenon” (p. 121), his ultimate point that the underlying concern for those interested in slowing or reversing language shift should be “to solve the socioeconomic problems of the community concerned” (p. 124) is well made, and reflects similar calls made by endangered language scholars and activists.

The penultimate chapter (Chapter 13) digs more deeply into the language policies of selected countries and is also an update from the 2009 publication. This chapter is presented as a springboard to explore what has often been considered one of the perennial questions in LPP: can language be managed? (p. 181). Indonesia receives considerable discussion in this chapter and serves as a fascinating case study for this purpose. The country case studies are mainly employed to illustrate the complexity and context-specificity of language and language policy, as the overarching question is only taken up in the final chapter. It is in this final chapter (Chapter 14) that Spolsky turns the original question on its head, revealing how he proposes to ‘rethink’ these issues by asking new and different questions (p. 199).

While it has been a long time since the early days of LPP, when scholars focused on developing technocratic frameworks, typologies, and methods to “solve” perceived language “problems” in newly independent nations in the Global South, there remains a tendency in the field to look for neatly define-able or empirically provable explanations or “best practices” for language policy. In this context, Spolsky’s appeal to rethink conventional understandings of the underlying purpose of LPP is noteworthy. It is also timely, as this rethinking reflects, and is likely influenced by, the recent multilingual turn (May, 2013); though this influence is not explicitly noted by the author. The multilingual turn in applied linguistics has gained prominence in the intervening years between Spolsky’s *Language Management* (2009) and *Rethinking Language Policy* (2021). This movement has profoundly challenged conventional understandings, frameworks, and models for LPP, by viewing languages not as separate, bounded, manageable entities, but rather by adopting flexible, heteroglossic understandings that recognise multilingualism as the norm, which has obvious implications for both the feasibility and desirability of the conventional LPP tasks of planning, controlling, and counting languages in modern society. Spolsky reflects on this tension in his own journey as a language policy scholar.

And this is perhaps the volume’s most important contribution: the insight readers gain into Spolsky’s own thinking and development. At various points throughout, and most deeply in the final chapter, Spolsky, an eminent scholar in LPP for over forty years, reflects on his own personal and professional journeys in language policy, seemingly as a way of charting his own trajectory through the issues discussed, and showing how this has led to the questions he is posing now. These personal insights into the author’s mindset are appreciated, and in themselves offer a kind of “rethinking” of the ways academic publications are traditionally set out.

Nevertheless, as the explicit rethinking element comes quite late (this reviewer would have welcomed some more direct “rethinking” in each section throughout), the majority of this volume reflects a

classic but effective LPP textbook structure, with chapters organised both topically and geographically. As such, it will be of great use to students and early career researchers looking for a thorough introduction to LPP, as well as other scholars seeking an overview of new topical or geographical areas. The final chapter, however, is essential reading to a broader range of LPP scholars, as this chapter prompts scholars new and established to reflect on the nature and purpose of our field, particularly against the backdrop of increasingly diverse and multilingual understandings of language. Indeed, Spolsky's closing remarks to the entire volume surmise the reasons all LPP scholars should reflect and re-examine taken for granted understandings of our field. Because we are "dealing with a dynamic and indefinite phenomenon," Spolsky calls us to think and rethink our understanding of language policy, "rather than counting and measuring and calculating and deciding" (p. 203), as has traditionally been practised.

Overall, as Spolsky's first full-length LPP publication in over a decade, *Rethinking Language Policy* faced the unenviable challenge of having extensive ground to cover. Within the dynamic and expanding field of LPP, omissions are unavoidable. While many of the major trends in LPP from the last decade are included (for example, the occurrence of the multilingual turn, and the related uptake of translanguaging theories and practices, are both reasonably represented), others, such as the growing awareness of the intersections between language policy, race, and coloniality (see, for example, Alim *et al.*, 2020), receive less attention. The absence of these topics is particularly felt given that, in titling this book a *Rethinking Language Policy*, Spolsky would appear to position this publication among the growing calls from applied linguistics, LPP, and language education scholars to radically reimagine and rethink our fields. Yet, while Spolsky's provocations may not go as far as some other authors, by virtue of coming from a foundational theorist in LPP, Spolsky's calls for rethinking the purpose, aims and intentions of LPP are unquestionably an important contribution to the field.

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In Memoriam

The Editorial Board of the *Australian Journal of Applied Linguistics* are saddened to report on the death of Bernard Spolsky, Professor Emeritus in the Department of English Literature and Linguistics at Bar-Ilan University. Born in New Zealand, he spent some time working in Australia as a high school teacher before earning his PhD in linguistics from the Université de Montréal. He taught at McGill, Indiana University, and the University of New Mexico before taking his appointment at Bar-Ilan. He was a renowned scholar with profound knowledge in educational linguistics, language assessment, Māori and Jewish languages, linguistic landscapes, and language policy. There is no doubt that his work will continue to inspire for many years to come.