

## RESEARCH OUTPUTS / RÉSULTATS DE RECHERCHE

**Spolsky, Bernard (2021): Rethinking Language Policy. Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press. 276 p.**

Vierendeels, Ilias

*Published in:*  
Sociolinguistica

*DOI:*  
[10.1515/soci-2022-0022](https://doi.org/10.1515/soci-2022-0022)

*Publication date:*  
2022

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (HARVARD):*  
Vierendeels, I 2022, 'Spolsky, Bernard (2021): Rethinking Language Policy. Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press. 276 p.', *Sociolinguistica*, vol. 36, no. 1-2, pp. 258-262. <https://doi.org/10.1515/soci-2022-0022>

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

**Spolsky, Bernard (2021): *Rethinking Language Policy*. Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press. 276 p.**

Sometime in the mid-16th century, Pieter Bruegel the Elder made an ink drawing that shows an experienced fisherman sitting in a sloop and pointing out a remarkable event to his colleague. On an island in the sea, a few diligent workers are cutting open a gigantic fish. From its mouth and stomach, a whole heap of other fish oozes out, from which, in turn, even more fish tumble. In the background, one sees the contours of a city and a harbour, spaces where people live their individual, family and social lives governed by politics, religion and trade. The Bruegel allegory adorns the cover of Spolsky's latest monograph *Rethinking Language Policy*, published by Edinburgh University Press in 2021. Not by slicing the onion (e. g. Ricento and Hornberger 1996) but by filleting the policy fish, Spolsky takes on the very challenging endeavour of serving up a "rethought" and "updated" theory of language policy that models its fundamentally chaotic and complex nature.

The complexity of language policy, after all, is already highlighted at the very beginning of the first chapter. Spolsky opens with an objection to what he calls 'linguicentrism' in language policy (i. e. the idea that language issues are pivotal in society, independent of their social and physical environments), a consideration that seems quite reminiscent of the ideas of language ecology (see e. g. Haugen 1972; Mackey 1980). The introductory chapter contains a non-exhaustive, yet detailed enumeration of non-linguistic features that condition human life, culture, language contact and, thus, language policy activities. The importance of some of the factors that are mentioned (technology, demography, modernisation, etc.) is quite evident. Other factors – the author mentions the effect of alluvial soils, road systems, birth order, etc. – may appear to be a bit far-fetched, yet Spolsky manages to illustrate and capture the possible relevance of the features he chooses to highlight: dealing with the complexity of language policy implies considering the very fine fabric of its contextual structures and dynamics. Hence, the introduction accentuates what will remain the leitmotif in the following fourteen chapters, namely that "language policy does not exist in a vacuum, but in the complex array of environmental conditions that encompass human life" (p. 1).

Mostly similar to those discussed in previous work (see e. g. Spolsky 2004), the topics of the chapters are selected based on the author's view of their general significance in terms of language shift or maintenance. In each chapter, Spolsky cuts open a fish and sketches an illustrative picture of the myriad linguistic and non-linguistic interferences that may influence the language policy level discussed. The explicit, or in some cases more implicit, structure thereof is the influential tripartite model (practice – beliefs – management) elaborated by Spolsky and Shohamy in 1999. Most chapters end with a short synthesis, which obviously benefits the readability and accessibility for a relatively wide audience.

Chapters 1 and 2 respectively deal with the individual and the family. By working bottom up, starting his “updated language policy theory” with the individual and the home, Spolsky explicitly seeks “to rethink the normal order of presentation, with its historical focus on state language policy” (p. 10). He argues, for instance, that “the home is probably the most important domain for language maintenance” (p. 11), that “the fate of a language policy depends on the ability and willingness of individual members of the speech community to accept it” (p. 14) and that “whatever other influences there may be, it is the language policy of the family and home that sets the basis for an individual’s linguistic repertoire” (p. 24). Nourished by, among other things, attitudes, motivation, ideologies and home language choices, individuals constantly accommodate or self-manage their linguistic repertoires, correct their self-perceived linguistic deficiencies and negotiate language policies (see Foucault’s “government of oneself”, 1991). In doing so, they strongly contribute to the outcomes of more general (e. g. community, educational or national level) language management. Spolsky makes the significance of the individual and the family tangible with a wealth of examples from different language situations all over the world. This encyclopaedic mix of literature-based, autobiographical and anecdotal illustrations is a reader-friendly constant in each chapter a constant that, at the same time, helps to reinforce the theoretical emphasis on the complexity of language policy. Given the limited scope of a book, however, the logical and inevitable drawback of such an approach is that readers may notice some lack of precision in the description of certain cases with which they are (well) familiar.

In the next four chapters, Spolsky zooms in on the role of schools (Chapter 3), social neighbourhoods and the workplace (Chapter 4), other public institutions (Chapter 5) and the military (Chapter 6). At this meso-level language policy, the complex interconnections of different actors, levels and layers become perhaps most visible. In an extensive Chapter 3, Spolsky casts education, after the home, as “probably the second most significant source of language management” (p. 44). He argues that language-in-education policy is primarily state-run, and therefore also strongly subject to more structural socio-political, religious and economic forces. At the same time, he also points to the agentive pressure from all kinds of stakeholders, such as deputies, headmasters, teachers, pupils, parents and their linguistic preferences. In Chapter 4 on neighbourhoods and the workplace, the top-down and bottom-up architecture of linguistic landscapes is discussed in order to indicate once more how complex and layered the linguistic practices of social and physical environments can be. Furthermore, the neighbourhood and the workplace are presented as significant environments that not only shape language practices, but also language beliefs. Facilitating social, cultural and linguistic contact, they are, according to Spolsky, relevant sites for language socialisation that is influenced by and reversely influences linguistic repertoires and practices of speech communities. For the sake of completeness, Chapter 5 lists other public organisations that exert a significant influence on language maintenance or language shift, namely institutions for media, religion, health

care and law. The military, as already mentioned, gets separate attention in Chapter 6 given its general (geo)political importance, the diversity of the troops and the major impact of military activity on language policy in all corners of the world.

As the Brueghel engraving is entitled *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, the book's cover gains in meaning in Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10. These chapters respectively deal with colonialism and imperialism, neoliberal economics, endangerment of minority languages and the tension between individuals with and without decision-making authority over language management. The chapters emphasise the typically wide gap between policy, ideology and practice, and consequently point to the crucial role of language and language policy as prominent structural instruments of power in producing and maintaining social inequalities. However, Spolsky's nuance regarding these sensitive and politicised issues is appropriate and telling. He points out, for instance, that some post-colonial independence regimes, due to elite closure or not, adopted colonial language policies for the sake of national unity and the new political project. He mentions that, in some cases, indigenous languages are threatened by local and regional languages rather than by (colonial) languages of national and international prestige. He stresses that language loss is evident in a changing world and that it is strongly driven by individual choices and self-management, in many cases with a positive focus on self-development, interculturalism, socio-economic emancipation, etc. In sum, these chapters make it clear that social power of the 'strong' over the 'weak' is not unambiguous and binary, but complex and scalar: it is not simply a case of big fish eating the small ones, but rather "bigger fish eating the smaller ones" (p. 110).

Supranational treaties and charters (Chapter 11), just as national level language policies (Chapters 12 & 13) are treated intentionally late, at the very end of the book. Spolsky opens the section on the nation-state as language manager (Chapter 12) with the provocative subtitle 'But who cares'. This way, the author again seeks to distance the book from the period of 'classical language planning', with its narrow focus on macro policy. According to Spolsky, starting with the individual makes it easier to grasp the many language policy levels and to outline the agentive power of individuals *vis-à-vis* (supra)national policies. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Spolsky pushes aside national levels. In these macro policy chapters he does insist and illustrate how nation-states potentially remain major players in the development of language policies.

However, by explicitly contrasting micro and macro levels and presenting them in separate chapters, Spolsky creates oppositions with which he himself seems to struggle: the field of tension between a fundamentally chaotic research object and the intention to rethink and mould that research object into a general and organised theory or model. On the one hand, Spolsky aims to present an updated language policy theory that starts with the individual instead of the nation. Yet, on the other hand, he is confronted with and repeatedly reiterates the interconnectedness of all language policy levels and the dynamic assemblage of forces shaping this. On page 53, Spolsky even explicitly discusses the problems of his approach for adequately

and sufficiently grasping and accentuating this. It is for this very reason that we can ask the question whether, still today and in a book like this, it is necessary and even justified to confront the reader with hierarchical and, following Tollefson (2013), theoretically sometimes too essentialised dichotomies between the individual and the national, the micro and the macro, the top-down and the bottom-up, the structure and the agency of language policy. Moreover, the many divergent illustrations Spolsky provides, precisely reveal that micro and macro levels, agency and structure, are not monolithic but instead display situationally-specific, scaled and dialogical relationships (see Bouchard and Glasgow 2019): the fact that the bigger and smaller fish always emerge together, swarming, mutually constituting each other and varying from context to context, from scale to scale. Generalised theoretical contrasting, in other words, gets somewhat in the way of the book's otherwise convincing illustration of language policy as a complex and chaotic phenomenon.

It is this very complexity, after all, that is at the heart of Spolsky's closing reflections in Chapter 14, 'Rethinking a theory'. Although the book is marketed on its back cover and on the publisher's website as "the definitive guide to language policy", this final chapter underscores the necessity of thinking and rethinking and not hastily jumping to theoretical generalisations or supposedly sound conclusions. This confirms the widely acknowledged importance of in-depth situation-by-situation evaluation, with attention paid to the specific context-dependent role of each language policy layer, the specific forces circulating around them and the versatile ways in which different layers, actors and ecologies interact with each other (see Hult's "perennial challenge of the field", 2010).

To conclude, it is clear that the capriciousness of language policy as research object continues to complicate theoretical generalisations and challenge clean models. The value of this book, then, does not so much reside in innovative rethinking of such language policy theories and models. After all, the topics of the chapters are adopted from previous work, while the author's guiding principle remains the threefold division from 1999. Moreover, the conceptualisation of language policy as agentive and multi-levelled or -layered has been theorised for quite some time. Rather, the value of this book resides in its accessible and lively complication of language policy through its broad scope and rich illustrations. The emphasis on the scaled, dynamic and situation-specific nature of language policy, suggested by these many illustrations, is then by no means linguistic realpolitik (Pennycook 2006). On the contrary, both the strengths and drawbacks of the book's approach demonstrate that the potential for theoretically innovative language policy insights will lie in ever more meticulous data analysis, critical openness on the theoretical level, empirical nuance and situational consciousness by those who want to go out fishing.

## References

- Bouchard, Jeremie & Gregory P. Glasgow (eds.). 2019. *Agency in language policy and planning: Critical inquiries*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel. 1991. Governmentality. In Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon & Peter Miller (eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality*, 87–104. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Haugen, Einar. 1972. The ecology of language. In Anwar S. Dil (ed.), *The ecology of language: Essays by Einar Haugen*, 325–339. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hult, Francis M. 2010. Analysis of language policy discourses across the scales of space and time. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 202. 7–24.
- Mackey, William F. 1980. The ecology of language shift. In Peter H. Nelde (ed.), *Sprachkontakt und Sprachkonflikt*, 35–41. Wiesbaden: Steiner.
- Pennycook, Alastair. 2006. Postmodernism in language policy. In Thomas Ricento (ed.), *An introduction to language policy: Theory and method*, 60–76. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ricento, Thomas & Nancy Hornberger. 1996. Unpeeling the onion: Language planning and policy and the ELT professional. *TESOL Quarterly* 30(3). 401–427.
- Spolsky, Bernard & Elena Shohamy. 1999. *The languages of Israel: Policy, ideology and practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Spolsky, Bernard. 2004. *Language policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tollefson, James W. 2013. Language policy in a time of crisis and transformation. In James W. Tollefson (ed.), *Language policies in education: Critical issues*, 3–15. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

---

**Ilias Vierendeels**, Université de Namur (NaLTT Research Institute), Rue de Bruxelles 61, Namur 5000, Belgium, [ilias.vierendeels@unamur.be](mailto:ilias.vierendeels@unamur.be), <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1057-8415>