Language policy mistakes in Singapore: Governance, expertise and the deliberation of language ideologies

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An admission of a language policy mistake from the Singapore government is a rare occurrence. In recent years, there have been two such admissions. This paper discusses these policy mistakes, and focuses on the contributions that language experts might be able to make to the process of policy construction. It is argued that language experts should not be restricted in their ability to contribute to the process of policy formulation, particularly if deeply entrenched ideologies about language are to be subjected to careful scrutiny. The paper concludes by considering deliberative polls, which provide one practical design where experts and non-experts can engage in an informed discussion about specific policy recommendations.

Keywords: expertise, ideology, language policy, deliberative democracy, deliberative poll

Introduction

In Singapore, the government has in recent years issued a number of statements admitting to mistakes in its language policy, specifically in its attempts to encourage bilingual proficiency in English and Mandarin among Chinese Singaporeans. Such admissions raise questions about the ways in
which governing authorities go about formulating and implementing language policy, and the contributions that language experts might be able to make to the process of policy construction. Clearly, the ability of language experts to contribute to policy construction depends significantly on the governing authority’s willingness to involve such experts in the first place, as well as on the specifics of how any such involvement is envisaged to take place.

Given these considerations, Singapore presents a particularly interesting case study of policy-making because the government prides itself on its competence in governing the country. For example, its ability to consistently deliver a high standard of living and sustained economic growth, to anticipate and respond to crisis scenarios, have long been taken as license to adopt an authoritarian style of governance, to the point where Singapore has even been described as a ‘nanny state’ (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 35). And in fact Lee Kuan Yew (Singapore’s first Prime Minister and currently Minister Mentor[MM]) has been quoted as saying (cited in Mauzy and Milne, 2002: 35, italics added):

We wouldn’t be here, would not have made the economic progress, if we had not intervened on very personal matters – who your neighbor is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit or where you spit, or what language you use... It was fundamental social and cultural changes that brought us here.

Against this backdrop of confidence in knowing what is best for the country, admissions of policy mistakes are rare. When they do occur, questions such as the following may be asked:

• Could such mistakes in Singapore’s language policy have been avoided or mitigated?
• Are there other aspects of Singapore’s language policy that might prove problematic or challenging, regardless of whether we want to label these ‘mistakes’?
• What contribution might language experts make to the process of policy formulation?

The first two questions specifically concern the situation in Singapore, while the third involves a broader theorization and conceptualization of the relationship between expertise in language and governance. Accordingly, the first two questions will constitute the initial focus of the paper, with a discussion of the third undertaken in the latter half of the paper, where comparisons are drawn with the United Nations. This comparison is useful because a detailed account of the policy-making processes within the United Nations is available (Duchêne 2008). While it might be argued that these are rather different kinds of institutions, it needs to be borne in mind that states and multilateral institutions often work together, particularly in formulating...
policies involving language and cultural identity (DeHart 2010). This policy convergence across different types of institutions is facilitated by the fact that unexamined assumptions about the nature of language, community and identity are often shared (DeHart: 2010: 72; Duchêne 2008: 171). And this in turn arises because the hierarchical structure of institutions can lead to expertise being partitioned off from the level at which power is exercised. Consequently, it is important to explore ways of allowing experts and policymakers to engage each other more directly (below).

The approach taken in this paper follows Spolsky (2004), who observes that language policy consists of three interrelated components: the language practices that speakers actually engage in; the language ideologies that guide the evaluation of the practices as desirable, proper, standard, etc.; and the language management efforts of individuals or groups to modify the practices of targeted speakers. The first two components are necessarily present – since the linguistic behavior of speakers constitutes their practices and all speakers, whether they are consciously aware of these or not, hold some beliefs or ideologies about their language practices as well as that of others. The third component is optionally present, since there may not be any actual efforts made to influence language practices. Under such circumstances, ‘ideology operates as “default” policy’ (Lo Bianco 2004: 750).

Singapore’s language policy constitutes a situation where all three components are present. As we will see, there are varying degrees of ideological entrenchment and the more deeply entrenched a particular ideology, the more difficult it becomes to challenge or critique that ideology.

Finally, the data present in this paper come from news reports of statements issued by the government.2 There is good reason for this, since public discourses provide useful insights into the ideologies behind policy decisions (Blommaert 1999; Hult 2005). In the case of Singapore, The Straits Times constitutes a valuable source of information regarding how the government represents its own policy decisions to the publish (Bokhorst-Heng 1999: 5, italics in original):

(1) One of the most accessible places to the [Singapore government’s] discursive construction of language ideologies is in government leaders’ speeches as published in the main English-language newspaper, The Straits Times (hereafter ST) . . . Leaders are always aware (and ensure through press releases) that their speeches will appear in the mass media. As an English-language paper, the ST is particularly important in this respect; it has the widest circulation and is read by all ethnic communities (unlike the ethnic-specific Tamil, Mandarin and Malay papers). And it is from such speeches that citizens, business and community leaders, and ministries take their cue for subsequent action and thought.

At this point, we are ready to look at Singapore’s language policy and the policy mistakes.
Singapore is a linguistically and ethnically diverse country with a population of about 3.2 million (Department of Statistics 2000). Its ethnic composition is roughly 76.8% Chinese, 13.9% Malay, 7.9% Indian, while the remaining 1.4% are mainly others, a miscellaneous category. Given this diversity, the language policy in Singapore aims at cultivating among its citizens bilingual proficiency in the English language and a mother tongue that has been officially assigned to specific ethnic communities (PuruShotam 1998; Rappa and Wee 2006). Mandarin is the official mother tongue assigned to the Chinese community, Malay to the Malay community, and Tamil to the Indian community. There is no official mother tongue for the others category, given its heterogeneous nature.

The mother tongues are valued for their role as cultural anchors, while English is valued for the kinds of socio-economic advantages it provides to those who speak it (Pakir 1992). Thus, in an early statement, Lee Kuan Yew (The Straits Times 11 November 1972) clarified exactly what the government means by ‘bilingualism’:

(2) Please note that when I speak of bilingualism, I do not mean just the facility of speaking two languages. It is more basic than that, first, we understand ourselves, what we are, where we came from, what life is or should be about, and what we want to do. Then the facility of the English language gives us access to the science and technology of the West.

Thus, while all Singaporeans are expected to be competent in English, it is through their respective mother tongues that Singaporeans of various ethnicities are supposedly able to ‘understand ourselves, what we are, where we came from’ (see also Bokhorst-Heng 1999).

Different languages are thus differently valued and cognitively separated from each other (in the case of individual multilingualism) or spatio-temporally segregated by being tied to different domains or activities (in the case of societal multilingualism) (cf. Heller 1999a, b). This leads to the assumption that the relationship between different languages is that of a zero sum game where increased knowledge or use of one language is seen to be at the expense of some other. Left unexamined, these assumptions come to constitute forms of ‘social action, social facts and can function as agents in the exercise of social and political power’ (Jaffe 1999: 15). And as we now see, they can lead to problems for Singapore’s language policy.

First admission: 2004

The government’s original expectation was for Singaporeans to be equally proficient in both English and the ethnic mother tongue. In the late 1970s,
when Mandarin was first mooted as the official mother tongue of Chinese Singaporeans, the Chinese community was much more linguistically heterogeneous than it is nowadays. It was characterized by the prevalent use of other Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, and Teochew. The government’s main aim then was to persuade the community to shift away from these other dialects towards Mandarin. In this regard, an important target group then (and subsequently), has been the students enrolled in the school system. It was through getting students to study Mandarin in the schools that the government hoped to, over time, produce a community of Chinese Singaporeans who not only speak the language, but also genuinely feel a strong cultural identification with it. The success of this move relied on the co-operation of parents, to ensure that they would not resist the idea of their children being obligated to learn Mandarin in the schools, particularly because passing examinations in the ethnic mother tongue was critical to continued promotion in the education system.

To garner parental support for bilingualism in English and Mandarin, Lee Kuan Yew argued then that children would be unduly burdened if asked to learn more than two languages. Rather, Lee suggested that the human brain was specifically tailored to accommodate exactly two languages, and parents needed to rationally decide which one of the three languages (English, Mandarin and some other Chinese dialect), ought to be jettisoned. The case for valuing English and the officially assigned mother tongue had already been made by the government (see (2) above), and it was therefore clear to parents that it was the non-Mandarin dialect that had to be eliminated from their children’s linguistic repertoire. In making this argument, Lee presented the government’s demand of bilingualism as not only reasonable, but also natural because it conforms to the capacities of the human brain (speech given at the Tanjong Pagar Community Centre Scholarships Presentation 4 March 1978).

(3) But let me reassure all parents: your child has a brain bigger than the biggest computer man has ever built.Whilst the world’s biggest computer cannot handle two languages, most human beings can, especially if they are taught when young...the fact is that your child has a brain which can use two languages, whilst the computer as yet cannot.

However, one consequence of emphasizing the value of English alongside the mother tongues is that a significant number of Singaporeans, particularly Chinese Singaporeans, are starting to come from homes where English (rather than Mandarin), is the spoken language. In fact, the number of Chinese students from English-speaking homes rose from about 17% in 1985 to almost 50% in 2004, so that English has now overtaken Mandarin as ‘the primary language used in homes of Primary 1 Chinese pupils’ (Ministry of Education, press release 9 January 2004). This has forced the government to acknowledge that many Chinese Singaporeans actually have great difficulty coping with Mandarin despite the fact that: (i) it is supposed to be their official mother
tongue; and (ii) their brains ‘can use two languages’. Contrary to its earlier expectations, then, the government no longer believes that the majority of Chinese Singaporeans are capable of being highly proficient in Mandarin as well as English. It is only a minority, an elite estimated at about 10% of the student population (*The Straits Times* 26 November 2004), who are expected to be fully bilingual in English and the mother tongue. Thus, compare Lee Kuan Yew’s statement in Extract (3) (made more than 30 years ago), with the more recent statements issued in Extracts (4) and (5). In Extracts (4) and (5), Lee now describes his earlier view as a mistake, and instead takes the view that the average person cannot be expected to master two languages:

(4) But now I believe it’s only possible for the exceptionally able and the very determined . . . If you spend half-and-half of your capacity on two languages, it’s likely you won’t master either.

(Lee Kuan Yew, *The Straits Times* 24 June 2004)

(5) I used to believe that you can learn two languages at the same time, whatever your IQ. I was wrong. You have to master one language enough to read and to absorb knowledge for all the other subjects.

(Lee Kuan Yew, *The Straits Times* 26 November 2004)

At this point, we can make the following three observations. First, the general policy of English-mother tongue bilingualism itself remains unchanged, as is, by implication, the kinds of roles that these languages are supposed to serve. That is, English is still intended to serve the mainly instrumental function of providing access to scientific and technological knowledge, and the mother tongues are still envisaged as providing Singaporeans with a sense of identity. This is because the mistake that is being admitted here concerns only the specific expectation that Singaporeans can and should be equally proficient in English and the mother tongue. In short, it is the level of proficiency that needs to be adjusted, not the sociolinguistic division of functions allocated to the languages.

Second, it is also worth taking note of the kinds of conditions that led the government to its ‘epiphany’. It was not the testimony of language experts or the results from some research study on language learning, but the accumulated data concerning language home use and language examination performances that forced the government to reconsider its proficiency expectations (*Was Chinese wrongly taught for 30 years? The Straits Times* 27 November 2009). As Wee (2006: 356) points out, ‘it is the sheer number of students who face difficulties with Mandarin that has led the state to concede the existence of a “real learning problem” [leading] the state to abandon its earlier position concerning the mastery of two languages’.

Third, having realized its mistake, the government’s response has been to modify its mother tongue syllabus so that the proficiency expectations in the schools were more realistically matched to the learning capabilities of students coming from different language backgrounds. Consequently, in early
2004, the Ministry of Education (press release 9 January 2004), announced a number of changes to the mother tongue policy, including the introduction of a ‘B’ syllabus for the Chinese language, to cater to students with learning difficulties (Wee 2006: 345–55). The goal, as then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong explained (speech delivered at the Chinese High School’s 85th anniversary, 21 March 2004), now is to ‘try and help those with this learning problem to at least have some proficiency in Chinese [and to] sustain their interest in the language’. That is, if the brain can only accommodate one language, priority should be given to English as the inter-ethnic lingua franca and language of global competitiveness. Though some knowledge of the mother tongue should still be aimed for, it is not expected to reach the same level as English.

Second admission: 2009

The second admission occurred about five years after the first. As with the events in 2004, the admission in 2009 also has to do with what might be considered a realistic level of bilingual proficiency, though in this case, the focus has shifted to the specific kinds of language teaching methods being employed.

Towards the end of 2009, Lee acknowledged that generations have ‘paid a heavy price because of my ignorance’ and admitted that the policy is ‘not completely right’ (see Extract 6). Of particular interest to the present paper is his explanation that he had initially based the language policy on the assumption that general intelligence and language ability were strongly correlated. It was only recently that he came to appreciate that the two pointed to different kinds of capacities. This was a difference that the earlier policy expectations did not take into consideration. As seen in Extract (7), Lee attributed this recent appreciation to input from his daughter, a neurologist.

(6) Reflecting on some 40 years of bilingual education in an off-the-cuff speech at the official opening of a Chinese language center, he [Lee Kuan Yew] said Singapore’s policy on the learning of Chinese started on the wrong footing because he believed in the past that it was possible to master two languages equally well. As a result, Chinese lessons in the old days were pitched at too difficult a level and ‘successive generations of students paid a heavy price because of my ignorance’, he said.

The policy, he acknowledged with a laugh, is still ‘not completely right but I will get it right if I live long enough’ (MM Lee wants learning of Chinese to be fun. The Straits Times 18 November 2009).
Earlier this month...he cited bilingualism as the most difficult policy he had to implement, and one which should have been done differently from the start (MM Lee wants learning of Chinese to be fun. The Straits Times 18 November 2009).

This was because he did not realize that a child’s intelligence and language ability were two different things, something which his daughter, confirmed late in his life.

As with the events in 2004, the admission of a policy error was quickly accompanied by initiatives aimed at redressing the issue. In this case, if language ability is distinct from general intelligence, then cultivating the former requires a different pedagogical approach from, say, the teaching of mathematics or geography. The government’s emphasis on the need to rethink Chinese language teaching was driven home in Lee’s recollection of how it used to be taught initially (see Extract 8). There had been, in his view, too much of a focus on rote learning and a lack of sufficient interactivity; there had also been little or no regard at all for the fact that an increasing number of students were coming from English-speaking homes. The result was that a significant number of Chinese students who were supposed to embrace Mandarin as their official mother tongue came to dislike the language intensely.

During a speech made at the official opening of the Singapore Centre for Chinese Learning, MM Lee said: ‘We started the wrong way. We insisted on ting xie (listening), mo xie (dictation) – madness! We had teachers who were teaching in completely-Chinese schools. And they did not want to use any English to teach English-speaking children Chinese and that turned them off completely’ (MM Lee admits ‘mistake’ made in his education policy. The Temasek Review, 18 November 2009, italics in original).

To address this dislike that the English-speaking Chinese students had for Mandarin, Lee called for language lessons to be made more ‘fun’, for the adoption of innovative teaching methods, and the recognition of the constraints resulting from the child’s home language background, including the willingness to use English to teach Chinese. There might also be greater use of IT and drama: anything should be considered as long as it helped to increase interest in the language.

Yesterday, he urged parents and educators not just to expose children to the Chinese language from a young age, but also to stimulate the child’s interest in the language, beyond just ‘passing exams’.

‘I want to get this message into the heads of the younger generation of teachers: Use IT, use drama, use every method to capture the interest of children,’ he said (MM Lee wants learning of Chinese to be fun. The Straits Times 18 November 2009).
Having acquainted ourselves with the government’s admissions of policy mistakes, we can move on to address the questions raised at the beginning of the paper.

**Could such mistakes have been avoided or mitigated?**

Singapore’s language policy actually consists of a number of more specific policies. At its most general level, the policy concerns the division between English, on the one hand, as a non-Asian language and hence a culturally inappropriate mother tongue, and the ethnic mother tongues, on the other hand, as officially sanctioned heritage identity markers. At more specific levels, there are policies pertaining to how particular languages (such as English and the mother tongues), are supposed to be taught in the schools, as well as what levels of proficiency might be expected of learners.

We observed earlier that the mistakes that the government refers to concern the more specific policy levels and not the most general one. And in fact, as regards the most general level, the government appears determined to stick to its position concerning what it sees as the appropriate allocation of roles between English and the mother tongues (Wee and Bokhorst-Heng 2005).

These observations highlight the fact that, in any discussion of language policy, it is important to recognize different degrees of ideological entrenchment, since different policy levels are often informed by different ideologies. The more deeply entrenched the ideologies (and by implication, the policies that they inform), the less open both the ideologies and policies are to critical scrutiny. Thus, we see that the most general policy level is informed by essentialist assumptions concerning the character of Singapore as a fundamentally Asian society, and English as a fundamentally Western language. That is, the government takes it as a natural and unassailable fact that official mother tongues have to be Asian. Consequently, the government is extremely reluctant to countenance the possibility of English being recognized as an official mother tongue, even as it acknowledges that it is a home language for many Singaporeans.

It is the ideologies informing the more specific levels of the language policy, then, that are more amenable to consideration. This may be because the more specific policy levels concern the ways in which the government’s expectations of bilingual proficiency are to be realized or implemented. In short, these have to with how to teach and assess students’ language proficiencies, and do not impinge upon or undermine the more general rationale for the adoption of an English-mother tongue policy in the first place. But even here, it is important to note that it took the government close to three decades (from the late 1970s to the new millennium), before deciding that it held unrealistic expectations about language proficiency levels and employed unsuitable language teaching methods.
Perhaps more significantly, as mentioned above, the factors that led the government to reconsider its more specific policies were the accumulating data from examinations that showed students facing considerable difficulties, and Lee’s conversations with his own daughter. Absent such interventions, it is quite likely that the government would have continued with the assumption that equal mastery of two languages is the norm, and language ability is correlative with general intelligence. This counterfactual scenario gains plausibility from two further comments made by Lee. The first is his insistence that ‘my experience should guide the policy’, and the second is his assertion that ‘I wasn’t helped by Ministry of Education (MOE) officials. They were basically two groups of people, one English-speaking, the other Chinese-teaching’ (MM Lee wants learning of Chinese to be fun. The Straits Times 18 November 2009).

As regards the first comment, basing a policy that affects the general population on the particularities on his personal experience indicates a general skepticism on Lee’s part about the relevance of the experiences of others as input to policy formulation. It suggests that unless the information being provided concurs with his personal experience, it will carry relatively little weight in the process of policy formulation. In the case of the second comment, Lee appears (rather ironically), to be laying some of the blame for the policy mistakes at the feet of MOE officials, on the basis that they were unable to rise above their own language experiences. For example, Lee has expressed elsewhere his concern that language issues were being used as ‘political football’ among various interest groups (Was Chinese wrongly taught for 30 years? The Straits Times 27 November 2009). The Mandarin-speaking Chinese were concerned that non-traditional teaching methods might lead to a decline in language standards while their English-speaking counterparts were worried that more needed to be done to help students learn a language that had ‘been forced on them’ (Was Chinese wrongly taught for 30 years? The Straits Times 27 November 2009). Thus, Lee was concerned that advocates of specific language teaching policies were unable able to rise above narrow communal interests.

Taken together, these comments do not augur well for the role that language experts might possibly play in policy formulation, since any such involvement is likely to be limited to providing advice on policy implementation rather than providing critical feedback on fundamental ideological assumptions. But the ability to provide feedback on the ideological assumptions is important, especially since the government’s understanding of what ‘bilingualism’ entails is already problematic. For one, the government’s construal of bilingualism is grounded on the assumption that languages are fully developed delimitable systems. Delimitable linguistic systems are assumed to each have their own internal integrity, and the maintenance of this integrity is therefore dependent on each system being kept separate from the others. The names we give to different varieties (‘English’, ‘Spanish’, ‘Tamil’), and even sub-varieties (‘standard
English’, ‘American English’, ‘Australian English’), all reflect this assumption.

Wee (2007) refers to this as an ideology of monolingualism, for the simple reason that individuals are expected to maintain cognitive separation of the systems. This creates the belief that ‘properly’ bilingual individuals are those in complete control of compartmentalized sets of monolingual proficiencies, such as English and Mandarin. However, the fact is that individuals are seldom equally fluent in two or more varieties (Baetens Beardsmore 1986). This is because societies are organized in such a way that different varieties are typically used in different contexts and for different purposes (Romaine 2001). Consequently, knowledge of language is always ‘partial’ since it is a function of the kinds of social interactions that the individual participates in, and no individual ever fully participates in all existing social practices. There will always be social practices that some individuals are excluded from by virtue of their age, gender, education level, or some other social factor. The idea of a fully developed delimitable linguistic system is therefore a myth (Hopper 1998).

An individual’s social experience of language, then, plays a significant role in the kind of competence that she or he acquires (Norton 2000; Gee 2001). But if Lee’s remarks are anything to go by, there is a tendency to underplay the significance of the social dimension of language learning, and to treat language proficiency primarily in neurological or cognitive terms. Thus, Lee’s original assumption about language learning was stated in terms of brain capacity (see Extract 3), and even his revised assumption remains couched in neurological terms (Extracts 4, 5 and 7).

To answer the question that heads this sub-section, it appears unlikely that the policy mistakes could have been avoided. This is because the policy itself seems to have been formulated independent of expert input, relying primarily instead on Lee’s own experience. Moreover, the kind of expertise considered relevant to language policy formulation then (and it would appear now as well) is mainly neurological or cognitive, rather than social. However, attention to the social dimensions of language is crucial because the kind of language-related challenges that the government is facing in present-day Singapore concern conflicting assumptions about the connections between language, community and identity (see below). These are social and political challenges, not neurological ones.

Are there other aspects of the policy that might prove problematic?5

We noted above that a lynchpin of Singapore’s language policy is that English is not an acceptable mother tongue (Bokhorst-Heng 1999). We also observed that this is a deeply entrenched ideological position and therefore one that appears unlikely to be revisited, mainly because the government is concerned
that acknowledging English as an official mother tongue undermines Singapore’s claim to being an Asian society.

However, there are good reasons why English might need to be acknowledged as an official mother tongue. First, we already noted that for many Singaporeans today, the language of the home is English rather than one of the official mother tongues (Saravanan 1994; Li Wei, Saravanan and Ng 1997; Pakir 2000: 262). While the government has responded to this by recognizing that students are facing difficulties learning the official mother tongue and by introducing a modified ‘B’ syllabus, it refuses to entertain the possibility that the very idea of what can count as a mother tongue ought to itself be reconsidered.

Second, the Asian character of Singapore society is already likely to change because the government has recently decided to reposition itself as ‘a cosmopolitan, global city’ in order to attract talented foreigners as potential new citizens, replacing those Singaporeans who may decide to emigrate permanently. The government is aware that one result of the foreign talent policy is that Singapore’s national identity may need to be reconstructed into one less dependent on an Asian ‘us’ versus Western ‘them’ dichotomy (Goh 1999). However, despite this acknowledgement, there appears to be a reluctance to countenance the possibility that the foreign talent policy could require accepting English as a mother tongue (Wee and Bokhorst-Heng 2005). So, even as the government accepts, on the one hand, that the admission and eventual integration of foreigners as new members of the citizenry could significantly change the demographic profile of Singapore, it continues to resist the need to re-examine essentialist ideologies about the link between language and identity.

Finally, the government has been especially concerned that the growing popularity of a colloquial variety of English, known as Singlish, will adversely affect the ability of Singaporeans to learn ‘good’ English and thus jeopardize their ability to compete effectively in the global economy (Rubdy 2001; Chng 2003). Because Singlish is viewed as an economic threat, whatever merits it may have as a marker of a Singaporean identity must be jettisoned in favor of the global economic value associated with the standard variety. This is despite the fact that many Singaporeans are keen to claim Singlish as a linguistic marker of the Singaporean identity.

In all these cases, the government’s policies towards English and Singlish are grounded in assumptions about the ‘inherent’ social and cultural values of languages, as well as the ways in which a colloquial variety may or may not impede the learning of the standard variety. Clearly, these are issues that cannot be addressed by relying (solely or even primarily), on neurological evidence or personal experiences. This is because socio-cultural experiences with language vary across individuals and also over time. It is also because the values and interpretations accorded to such experiences can be quite controversial, as individuals who adopt a less conservative stance towards traditionally received attitudes about language and identity risk being
accused of abandoning their ‘heritage’ (Blackledge and Creese 2008). There is a fundamental indeterminacy in the ways that speakers apprehend the social values of language practices, often resulting in tensions with language policy expectations (Jaffe 2009). This is especially so when policy expectations are based on essentialist assumptions (Jaffe 2007). Heller (2008) makes a similar point when she observes that language, community and identity are concepts that tend to be treated as autonomous, stable and bounded. These concepts figure influentially in language policy, and they need to be viewed more dynamically.

Addressing such issues requires that government authorities, representatives of specific communities and interested individuals all willingly confront and deliberate their (often unquestioned) assumptions about the nature of language, and its connections with community and identity. This is where language experts can hope to make a contribution.

What contribution might language experts make?

Before discussing in more detail the contribution of language experts, it is first instructive to consider some of the difficulties faced by such experts when working on policy construction. The following example from the United Nations is instructive in this regard.

Duchêne (2008) provides valuable insights into the processes by which the United Nations engages in policy formulation, specifically, in its handling of linguistic minorities. Duchêne shows how the kinds of documentation produced in the course of policy debates and formulation are a function of the available ‘discursive spaces’, namely, spaces that assign particular relations of power and expertise. The relationship between these different discursive spaces is critical for appreciating how the priorities and concerns expressed at one level may (or may not) be retained as the discussion moves on to some other level.

For example, the space allocated to expert consultants, comprising the Sub-Commission, is institutionally subordinate to the political space occupied by the Commission on Human Rights. Consequently, the Sub-Commission is ‘a space of expertise, consisting of experts, at the service of a political space . . . [and functions] primarily as an organ that proposes, while the superior echelons dispose’ (Duchêne 2008: 73–4). As Duchêne (2008: 77) further explains:

We can therefore see that the structure of the institution is determined by a form of top-down hierarchy . . . the advocate for the Sub-Commission is always the Commission, the latter having the power to
either convey concerns to the level above or to refuse to become involved.

This indicates then that the work of the Sub-Commission may be ignored since there is no institutional obligation for the Commission to actually convey any of the Sub-Commission’s findings or proposals to a higher level where political power is actually being exercised.

Consider, for example, the problems faced by the Working Group on minorities, a creation of the Sub-Commission, which is intended to delve into the various problems, issues and perspectives concerning the rights and claims of minorities. But this Working Group ‘finds itself totally dependent on the limitation of its mandate and its mode of functioning . . . where the accumulation of knowledge is phenomenal, but where the possibility of action is extremely restricted’ (Duchène 2008: 84). Of particular interest from a language policy perspective is Duchène’s description of how the notion of a linguistic minority was arrived at. The Sub-Commission was under pressure to propose a resolution that would not ‘interfere too much with the different ideological positions within the Commission’. This led to the introduction of language as a significant characteristic for identifying minority groups because it was felt to be relatively unproblematic when compared to other cultural criteria (2008: 171):

The emphasis on the language element allowed discussion on national, religious and ethnic minorities to be avoided, these being too nebulous or even politically sensitive . . . language issues were seen as easily defined and somehow a-problematic.

This indicates that the ideologies informing much of policymaking in the United Nations underestimate the complex nature of language (Wee 2009a).

Taken together, the Singapore and United Nations examples highlight the pitfalls for policy-making when the contributions of experts are unnecessarily curtailed by the imposition of a strict institutional hierarchy. Such a hierarchical structure limits the direction and content of communication, since experts are consulted only if they are felt to have something to say about more specific levels of policy-making, which usually means being consulted about the implementation of a policy rather than its more foundational assumptions. Deeply entrenched language ideological assumptions then tend not to be seriously examined.

What is needed is a forum for deliberation that put experts in direct communication with policy-makers, but one that also removes the institutional hierarchies so that discussions are conducted on an equal footing. In this regard, the political model known as deliberative democracy (Bonham 1996; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; see also Wee 2010b), provides a useful guide as to how such deliberations can be realized, particularly in the form of a deliberative poll.
The deliberative poll

Deliberative democracy emphasizes the importance of public reason, where there is ‘a premium on refined and reflective preferences’ (Offe and Preuss 1991: 170). Participants are encouraged to compromise and co-operate – recognizing that trade-offs and balancing of interests are necessary when conflicts are deep – and to do so while engaged in informed dialogue with one another (Bonham 1995: 268–9).

One institutional design that has been proposed as a way of facilitating informed public deliberation is that of a deliberative poll (Goodin 2008: 17):

Deliberative Polls gather a random sample of between 250 and 500 citizens. They hear evidence from experts, break up into smaller groups (around 15 people each), to frame questions to put to the experts, and then reassemble in plenary session to pose these questions to panels of experts. Before-and-after surveys of participants are taken to measure both information acquisition and opinion change over the course of the event.

As Held (2006: 247) points out:

Typically, the process of deliberation is expected to shift opinions because views have become informed by a careful consideration of the evidence, and those involved have taken account of the opinions and arguments of others.

Apart from the immediate impact of a deliberative poll on its participants, it is hoped that, if the results are well publicized . . . the general public would be stimulated to consider their own views more carefully.

Deliberative polls are therefore useful because they encourage citizens to interact with experts as well as one another under conditions that encourage mutual engagement and accommodation. In issues involving language policy, the main question is how to promote the critical confrontation of ideological assumptions about the nature of language. The use of deliberative polls provides one answer to this question by creating a forum where social and applied linguists can, in concert with other experts, be asked to participate in discussing the various questions that participants might put to them. And of especial relevance to the theme of the present paper, participants in deliberative polls should also include senior and influential members of the government, particular government ministers. There is no point if government representatives to deliberative polls are limited to civil servants who, however enlightened they may be, are usually not in a position to persuade the ministers to examine their (i.e. the ministers’), own ideological assumptions about language. The deliberative poll can therefore be modified to include key policy-makers among the participants, and not just ordinary
citizens. This would mean that policy-makers, such as influential government ministers, participate alongside their fellow citizens in listening to experts and posing questions to them as well.

Alternatively, policy-makers need not actually participate in such a poll, but can instead make a prior commitment to implementing whatever recommendations might emerge as a result of the polls. The latter situation has been exemplified in the People’s Republic of China (Goodin 2008: 19, italics added):

Perhaps the most surprising success story along these lines is the 2005 Chinese Deliberative Poll in Zeguo. Participants were asked how the township should allocate funds across some thirty proposed public infrastructure projects, and the government committed in advance to implementing recommendations of the Deliberative Poll. The results of their deliberation surprised the leadership, but their recommendations were indeed faithfully implemented.

Finally, it is worth bearing in mind that the democratic legitimacy given to the outcome of a deliberative poll relies in no small part on the nature of the participants. The ‘participants “are a scientifically chosen random sample and their views therefore represent what the…people would think if they became similarly more knowledgeable about…policy”’. They thus “represent what the public would think about the issue if it were motivated to become more informed and to consider competing arguments”’ (Goodin 2008: 21, quoting Fishkin, Luskin and Brady 2003: 19).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen some examples of language policy mistakes in Singapore. We observed that the potentially sensitive nature of issues involving language, community and identity requires that deliberations be conducted in an informed atmosphere that also emphasizes the need for compromise and negotiation. But given the hierarchical structure of most political institutions, it is also crucial that language experts be able to discuss and explain the complexity of these issues directly (as far as is possible), to those who are in positions of greatest power and influence. Otherwise, there is always the possibility that the level at which expertise is allowed to congregate remains partitioned off from the level at which power is exercised.

We then discussed and considered the possibility of using deliberative polls. Such polls provide one practical design where experts and non-experts can engage in an informed discussion about specific recommendations that might be considered relevant to the formulation of a given policy. As Wee (2010a) observes:
there is an inevitable lag between the scholarly critique of concepts and the ways in which these are apprehended by the broader community. And if policy-makers and members of the public are still operating with less nuanced understandings of such concepts, these could make them less receptive to LPP [language policy and planning] initiatives that are grounded in more critical orientations.

It is also clear that the complex nature of language policy means that language experts themselves should not adopt the stance that they are the ‘final arbiters’ of what should be considered appropriate policy initiatives (Wee 2010a). The fact that language policy is inevitably influenced by existing language ideologies as well as intertwined with non-linguistic considerations (Spolsky 2004), should give language experts pause before they attempt to present themselves as having a monopoly on what counts as ‘good’ policy.

There is another reason why language experts should not assume some privileged perspective on the issues involved in developing a particular policy. Language experts are also social actors who are necessarily members of specific speech communities and consequently may have some vested interest in which language resources are to be valued or mobilized (as are policy-makers themselves). Language experts therefore need to acknowledge that ‘we can no longer sustain the position of neutral and objective expert which has usually been ours, and that rather the kind of knowledge we generate in this alternative way can be understood as a distinctive contribution to a conversation among stakeholders’ (Heller 2008: 519).

Accordingly, the perspective adopted needs to be one of ‘joint problematization’ (Roberts and Sarangi 1999: 474), where the practical imperatives of policy formulation are informed but not overridden by scholarly understandings. As Roberts and Sarangi (1999: 498) point out:

practical solutions are not in a one-to-one relationship with research-based knowledge. In other words, knowledge generated through research needs to be recontextualized in a reflexive way by the practitioners.

Notes

1. While the term ‘mistake’ is sometimes contentious, especially if used by an external observer who has had the benefit of hindsight, it is not inappropriate here because the government itself is describing its language policy decisions as ‘wrong’ and based on ‘ignorance’ (see main text).
2. In what follows, government statements relating to the language policy will, as far as possible, be drawn from the remarks issued by Lee Kuan Yew. This is because Lee was and remains the main architect of the language policy.
3. An anonymous reviewer raised the important question of what might count as ‘realistic bilingual proficiency’. This is in fact the very issue that the Singapore government is most recently attempting to grapple with. It is exploring ways of making the mother tongue evaluation system ‘more proficiency-based, namely, geared to recognize and reward students when they attain specific proficiency levels’ (Ministry of Education, speech by Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Education, at the press conference on Teaching of Mother Tongue Languages, 11 May 2010).

4. Of course, this essentialist assumption between language and identity is not unique to Singapore. See Park (2009), for example, for a discussion of language ideologies in South Korea.

5. The discussion in this section is based on Wee (2009b).

References


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