Language planning

Unit 10

Unit 10. Language planning

1. The topic of this unit:

This last unit discusses language planning, that is, the ways in which people are influenced in their language choices by legislative decisions, conventions (e.g. of orthography), and other decisions made for them by other people. Sometimes these subtle or not subtle influences are not even noticed in everyday life, other times they create conflicts.

Language planning usually happens on three levels: status planning, acquisition planning, and corpus planning.

2. Status planning

Status planning is basically language policy, the type of language planning where the status of a language or a dialect is defined in a society in relation to (an)other language(s) or dialect(s). This could be the selection of an official language in a country, the regulation of the use of minority languages, or a selection of a dialect for the standard. Status planning changes the functions of languages and dialects in the given society as well as affecting the rights of their speakers. Because language is not just a communicative tool but an important symbol of people's identity, language policy decisions (especially ones that limit people's rights) can affect speakers deeply and cause societal conflicts easily.

2.1. Official language(s)

The choice of an official language is a very basic decision, which is usually spelled out in the constitution of a country (although not always: for instance, the United States does not have an official language on the federal level). In many countries there is one official language: the majority language of the country. Thus, Hungarian is the official language of Hungary, Slovak is the official language of Slovakia, Russian is the official language of Russia, etc.

Sometimes countries have more than one official language: for instance, Finnish and Swedish are official in Finland, English and French are official in Canada, French, Dutch, and German are official in Belgium, etc. Even though having two or more official languages does not mean that the they are used to the same extent in the country (e.g. in Finland, Swedish is spoken as a native language by only about 6% of the population), the status of official language guarantees rights for its speakers which they would not otherwise have, in using their language in administrative contexts, in education, in signage, etc. The choice of additional languages to be official can be based on historical status, as is the case with Swedish in Finland, since the place now called Finland was for several centuries part of the Swedish empire; or as is the case with most African countries that have the former colonial language, French or English, as official even since achieving independence.

The choice of official language is motivated by some kind of ideology (that is, people's ideas and ideals regarding languages and society). The most prevailing ideology is nationalism, the idea of "one nation, one language", which originated in early 19th century Europe and was the driving force behind many important independence movements on this continent (e.g. in Hungary, Finland etc.). Pluralism is the driving force behind making more than one language official (e.g. in Belgium, Switzerland, Singapore, or India). Assimilation is often the ideology that prompts countries even with demographically large minority languages to have just one official language (cf. the English-Only movement in the US, as a result of which most states have only one official language now, English). Vernacularization is the ideology behind making important local languages official (e.g. Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea). Internationalization is the reason why former colonies keep the colonial language as official (e.g. English in India, French in many African countries), since these internationally important languages provide an important international lingua franca for these countries.

2.2. Minority languages

The use of minority languages is occasionally regulated explicitly by laws but, more often than not, it is unregulated (neither promoted, nor restricted). In general, such regulation tends to be societally beneficial if it increases the rights of minorities rather than limits them. The absence of regulation is typical of immigrant languages (and that of Native American languages in the US, for instance).

3. Acquisition planning

Acquisition planning is the type of language planning where the acquisition and use of specific languages are influenced via the educational system. What languages schools can use as languages of instruction, and what languages can be learned as second or foreign languages are issues of acquisition planning. The issue of languages that can be used as languages of instruction is usually tied into the larger societal question of official language(s) and the status of minority languages in a particular country and is usually regulated by law.

The issue of what languages can be learned in schools as second or foreign languages is also usually regulated by law but is also driven by various ideologies. For instance, the global presence of English as the most widely taught foreign language today is clearly affected by internationalization. The standing of German as the second most widely taught foreign language in Hungary today is driven by people's belief that it is an important lingua franca in Central Europe. The compulsory teaching of Russian in most Eastern European countries during the decades of communist rule (between the late 1940s and late 1980s) was put into place by the influence of the Soviet Union in these countries. The spread of interest in learning Chinese as a foreign language in Hungary today is fueled by the belief that it is an increasingly important language in world economy.

Questions to think about:
1. Think about what second/foreign languages are offered in the educational system of your native country and what are not (e.g. some minority languages spoken in the country or languages spoken in neighboring countries). What do you think are the ideologies that motivate the teaching of the former group, and the ideologies that bar the latter?
2. The compulsory teaching of Russian in Eastern Europe was not very successful in the communist era: even though everybody had to learn Russian, hardly anybody actually spoke it, even after many years in the classroom. What do you think could have been the reasons? Think in terms of prestige and people's beliefs.

4. Corpus planning

Corpus planning is the type of language planning that is aimed at the internal state or condition of a language (or a dialect). It includes issues like orthography (ranging from choice of the writing system to spelling), style and correctness, and the acceptance (or not) of loanwords.

4.1. Orthography

Probably the most basic issue of corpus planning concerns the choice of writing system for a language. We tend to take the writing systems languages employ for granted – we do not usually think twice about the use of the Latin script for English or German, that of the Cyrillic script for Russian or Serbian, that of the Greek alphabet for Greek, or the use of the syllabic writing systems, hiragana and katakana, for Japanese, even though the adoption of these writing systems for these language also depended on some people making that choice. In some cases we know who these people were: for instance, in the case of Russian it was Cyril and Methodius, Byzantine theologians and missionaries of the 9th century, who adapted the Greek alphabet to produce the Glagolitic alphabet, to be used for Slavic languages. Missionaries to this day are sometimes in the position to make the choice of writing system if they are working with indigenous language speakers with unwritten languages.

Changes in the choice of writing systems can be significant displays of power: in the Soviet Union, all languages that had writing systems other than Cyrillic were switched over to Cyrillic in the 1930s: Tajik from the Persian script, Khanty, Udmurt, and Mari from the Latin script, Buryat from the Mongolian script, etc. (The Baltic languages Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian were not switched because their countries were annexed by the Soviet Union later.)

In the case of Turkey, the adoption of the Latin script (to replace the Ottoman Turkish alphabet, related to Arabic and going from right to left) in 1928 was part of the modernization of the country led by Atatürk, with both very symbolic and practical consequences: the Latin script signaled the Europe-focused orientation of the country as well as made Turkish a language where the orthography is closely suited to the sounds of the language.

Orthographic reforms can also carry great symbolic weight: a few months after the Soviet Revolution of 1917, in February 1918 an orthographic reform was instituted in the Soviet Union, eliminating four letters (i, ѳ, ѣ, ѵ) completely, and abolishing the "hard sign" (ъ) from the ends of words that ended in a non-palatalized consonant but, due to language change over the centuries, stood for no sound at all (much like the silent *e* at the ends of words in English). Interestingly, just with the elimination of the hard sign from the ends of words, Tolstoy's grand novel *War and Peace* became 50 pages shorter! The reform was practical in that the eliminated letters were archaic and stood for sounds that were also spelled with other letters, and the hard sign did not stand for any sound at all. However, it was also greatly symbolic: the Russian émigré communities in Germany, France, and elsewhere never adopted it, continuing to publish books and newspapers using the old orthography in symbolic defiance to the Soviets. Because orthographies are traditional systems often tied in with centuries of conventions, it is

usually difficult to carry out reforms concerning them (the Soviet reform of Russian orthography was in many ways exceptional): after years of debate and discussion, the German orthography reform of 1996 failed to institute the simplification of the system it was intended to do.

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Video task:

Watch the following videos about spelling reforms:

- the Russian spelling reform of 1917:

Part 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6w687R5wwAA

Part 2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8sX6Bald8w

- the German spelling reform of 1996: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkfOmemBFRk

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Questions to think about:
1. If your native language is Hungarian, consider the following question. What kind of reactions would you expect if somebody suggested that Hungarian spelling should be modernized and the *ly* replaced by *j* in words? What would be arguments for and against such a move? Could a reform like this go through successfully, in your opinion?
2. If your native language is not Hungarian, consider a spelling issue in your native language where two orthographic symbols stand for the same sound. Would it be possible to reform the spelling so there is only one symbol in use? What would be arguments for and against such a move?

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4.2. Correctness

What constitutes a part of the standard in terms of grammar and vocabulary is an issue defined by academic grammars and dictionaries of languages, that is, by the authors of the grammars and lexicographers. In some countries these tend to be more prescriptive than in others: for instance, the French Academy is the leading guardian of the French language, while in the English speaking world there is less control instituted over such matters. In the Hungarian tradition, "language cultivation" (*nyelvművelés*) is an enterprise with quite some traditional influence: a two-volume dictionary, *Nyelvművelő kézikönyv* (The handbook of language cultivation), details all those forms and usages that the

authors deem to be "incorrect", suggesting "correct" equivalents instead – in reality, cataloguing many instances of variation and even more of alternative forms which in today's Hungarian are equally accepted by speakers, even in educated, formal speech and writing.

Research task:

Find an academic grammar of your native language (or, if your native language is Hungarian, find a copy of *Nyelvművelő kézikönyv, "*The handbook of language cultivation"), and find forms that are deemed "incorrect" while in your intuition they are perfectly acceptable. What do you think the reason is for the discrepancy?

Questions to think about:
1. If your native language is Hungarian, how would you rewrite the formulations of *Nyelvművelő kézikönyv, "*The handbook of language cultivation" that you saw while working on the research task above so they would be sociolinguistically accurate?
2. The phenomena discussed in prescriptivist works are obviously discussed due to the fact that many native speakers use them. If many native speakers indeed use them, can they be really incorrect?
3. What effect can the prescriptivist approach of talking about "incorrect" language use have on language users of various backgrounds? Could it possibly be harmful in any way?

Attitudes to borrowed forms (lexical items and grammatical constructions) also vary in different countries. In France and in Israel the respective academies of these countries place a great emphasis on monitoring lexical borrowings. In France a few years ago the English loanword *weekend* was outlawed in an attempt to curb the proliferation of English words in the language. In Israel the Hebrew Academy has a special department that creates new vocabulary out of native elements for things that need to be named (new technological inventions or notions) in order to completely bar lexical borrowings from modern Hebrew. In Hungary many grammatical constructions that are structural borrowings from German (a language that Hungarian was in close contact with in the Habsburg Empire) are labeled "un-Hungarian" (*magyartalan*) by Hungarian language cultivators.

5. Language planners

Language planning is done by a variety of societal bodies or even persons. The most notable language planners are governments that pass the laws that regulate language use one way or another. Academies are also important language planning agencies, as the examples in the section above demonstrate. Churches make important decisions regarding language use that constitute language planning: the decision of Orthodox churches and Protestant churches to use the vernacular languages of their people was very important in promoting the use of these languages, as well as literacy and standardization, at various points in the past centuries. Companies can also serve as language planners: the Hungarian translation of Microsoft's operating system and main applications like Word and Excel greatly shaped the vocabulary of personal computer use in Hungarian.

Individuals can also sometimes be influential language planners: Luther's translation of the Bible into German (in the 1520s and 30s), and Gáspár Károli's into Hungarian (in the 1580s) influenced the development of the German and Hungarian languages, respectively. Hungarian writers and poets of the early 19th century created many new Hungarian words as part of the Hungarian language renewal movement. Journalists and newspaper editors also play an important role in language planning, especially in choosing to use (or not use) in their writing loanwords which they judge the average person to know.

Review questions:
1. What is language planning? In what ways can influence be exerted on the language choices of speakers?
2. What is status planning? What kind of languages can it concern?
3. What is acquisition planning?
4. What is corpus planning? What aspects of language can it touch on?
5. What kind of organizations can be language planners? Can you think of cases when individuals were language planners?

Glossary of terms:

Acquisition planning: the type of language planning directed at influencing the learning and use of languages via the educational system.
Corpus planning: the type of language planning directed at the internal condition (choice of writing system, orthography, style, word choice etc.) of a language.
Language planning: the exertion of conscious influence on the language choices of users, either on what language or dialect to use, or how to use it in writing or in speech.
Status planning: the type of language planning directed at defining the status of a language or variety with regard to some other language or variety.

Further reading:

Deumert, Andrea. 2000. Language planning and language policy. In: Mesthrie, Rajend, Joan Swann, Andrea Deumert, and William L. Leap. *Introducing sociolinguistics.* Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 384–418.
Wardhaugh, Ronald. 1998. Language planning. In: Wardhaugh, Ronald. *Introducing sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 346–370.