

## Metaphors of Language: Talking about Language in Policy Studies

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Noting the importance of metaphor as a guide to scientific thinking, this paper attempts to illustrate the potential range of language policy study by presenting four metaphors for language: Language as Tool, Language as Artifact, Language as Medium, and Language as Choice. In discussing each metaphor, some examples of their use in analysis are offered. Beyond claiming that these metaphors may be particularly useful for formulating language policy, the utility of these metaphors for thinking about linguistic issues in general policy studies is also suggested.

**Key Words** : language policy, metaphor, theory of language

### Introduction

Metaphorical thinking is one of the great modes of human cognition, and its use in the natural and social sciences has a respectable tradition. Analogy, of one form or another, has played a role in the systematic thought of humans since antiquity, and reasoning via resemblance has never been restricted to the arts. A century ago, the great empiricist and logician Charles Peirce, recognizing the importance of resemblance in scientific reasoning, carefully described its role in inductive sampling and in abductive hypothesis generation. A generation ago, the linguist Benjamin Whorf described how the metaphors implicit in our language can influence our behavior. More recently, the observations of semanticist George Lakoff have suggested that metaphor is perhaps the single most important process of human cognition.

Every discipline depends on certain metaphors to characterize its subject matter, and policy studies is no exception. Especially in an emerging department comprised of scholars from diverse backgrounds, a core of common metaphors can aid the development and maintenance of academic integration and cooperation. Of course, because the human mind is capable of devising an infinitude of metaphors, we must inevitably ask: What should be the guiding metaphors of our discipline? Indeed, this is a difficult question which demands a collective answer, for it may be beyond the ken of any one scholar. Therefore, merely as a step in

a collective march toward a comprehensive answer, I should like to offer a reasonable answer to a less ambitious question, namely: What metaphors of language can help us in our analysis, formulation, and articulation of language policy? and what metaphors of language may thus be useful for policy studies in general?

### Metaphors of language

The word "language" is so commonly used that we often talk and otherwise behave as if this word precisely delimits a meaning which is clear and distinct; whereas the concept of language is in fact vague, and the word "language" is necessarily polysemous and thus unsurprisingly ambiguous. Because of this difficulty, and because language is so characteristic of and important for human activity, scholars have proposed many metaphors to help us understand language and human activity. These proposals range from the idea of language as a game (Wittgenstein) to the comparison of language ("the Word") with God (St. John the Evangelist). There are behaviorist characterizations of language as habits, and there are neurological models of language as controls. Because of the importance of language for transmitting information, conduit metaphors of language have long been popular (cf. Sacks, R. Harris). Archaeologists, epigraphers, and classicists have extended the conduit metaphor to the notion of language as a cipher or encryption

(Chadwick), and this metaphor has been reinforced in telecommunications research with concepts from thermodynamics (cf. Cherry, Shannon). An influential school of semiotics has also characterized language as a code (Eco). Despite the existence of deaf and nondeaf sign, language has been commonly likened to the tongue; and despite the commonly perceived differences of literary and mathematical skills, logicians have often characterized language as a calculus. Neuropsychology informs conceptions of language as a cognitive map (cf. O'Keefe). Some linguists have described language as a strictly formal system (Z. Harris), others have emphasized its tool-like functions (Austin) or its money-like meanings (de Saussure), and still others have forsaken the simplistic form-function dichotomy to cast language as a complex of semiotic relationships (Halliday). Indeed, though the precise ontological status of language may be uncertain, all of these metaphorical characterizations of language have been proposed seriously, and all have aided the advance of particular academic disciplines. Moreover, each of these metaphors has helped us to improve our understanding of what language is.

Of the various metaphors for language which scholars have suggested, there are perhaps four which prove to be especially useful as an aid to language policy study, and to policy studies generally. The utility of these metaphors lies in the four especially insightful perspectives from which they encourage us to think about language. One might characterize these four perspectives in a number of ways, and I will try to explicate them in this paper. First, however, let us identify these metaphors which, I believe, are best representative of the four linguistically insightful policy perspectives: (1) Language as Tool, (2) Language as Artifact, (3) Language as Medium, and (4) Language as Choice. In the remainder of this paper, following a brief description of each of these metaphors, I present some examples of language policy issues for which these analytic metaphors seem appropriate.

### **Language as Tool**

It is no secret that we use language to do things, and the cognitive affinity of language and tool usage is reflected in human neurology. Wernicke's area, one of the brain loci of language, extends into the inferior parietal area, a prime locus of tool usage. Moreover, parietal lobe phylogeny and prehistoric stone tools provide important clues about the origin of human language (Gibson). On the other hand, if language is a tool, what is it exactly that we do with it? How is language wielded?

One answer is that we use language to build things. As sentient beings of higher intelligence, we are the

architects of our reality, and we use language to construct our reality. Important memories are couched in language (Chafe), our perceptions are routinely mediated by language (Whorf; Tucker et al.), we model others in linguistic terms, and we use language to build bridges to these other minds. By describing our world, we are at once creating our reality and fashioning its truths. As a cognitive architect, language is our tool for description and reasoning. As a social contractor, language is our tool for informing, questioning, affirming, denying, hedging, encouraging, convincing, dissuading, making agreements, and renegotiating agreements. As a policy maker, one must appreciate the role of language as a tool for formulating, articulating, setting, and implementing various policies.

### **Language as Artifact**

In Canada, boxes of foodstuff bear French on one side and English on the other, underscoring the notion of language as something which humans make. Like the koto or the Irish harp, languages such as Japanese or Gaelic are artifacts associated with certain groups of people. Of course, there is nothing magical about the association; it is the result of historical accident and tradition. An Irishman can learn to build a koto as easily as an Irish harp, and a Japanese newborn can easily learn to speak Gaelic in the proper sociolinguistic context. Cultural traditions of oracy and literacy reinforce the metaphor of language as a cultural artifact. Writing, engraving, carving, and printing have all helped to establish the association of languages and texts. More recently, the use of audio recorders, video recorders, and electronic computers has widened the scope of linguistic artifacts. The rate of document creation now far exceeds the rate of information dissemination, and knowledge engineers are now talking about data "mining" rather than data "collection". As a policy maker, one should understand the nature of the many texts which we produce and upon which we rely; not only the formal properties of these texts, but also their creation, dissemination, duplication, verification, as well as their collection, preservation, categorization, and interpretation.

The texts which we create, be they lengthy documents, speeches, song lyrics, catchy phrases, or single words, are judged both for their intrinsic value (as information, entertainment, beauty, or whatnot) and for their authorship. The value of a text often depends on the use to which it is put, underscoring the relationship between artifacts and tools. A knife is a human artifact, perhaps beautifully shaped and carefully honed; it may be used as a tool for paring apples or as an instrument of murder. Determining the value of a text may generate questions of accuracy, veracity, originality, tastefulness,

and deprecation. On the other hand, authorship determination may be linked to questions of fraud, perjury, copyright, assault, and slander.

### Language as Medium

Sometimes language is best thought of as a medium in which we work or accomplish other tasks. For example, locomotion is a common human objective which is accomplished in different ways, depending on the medium through which one wishes to travel. The patterns of coordinated muscle movement which are essential for walking are not the same as those which we use when swimming or skiing or skydiving. Vehicles designed for travel over dry roads are typically unsuitable for driving through deep rivers. The plastic arts also underscore media effects in artistic expression. Sculpting, for example, demands techniques for working in glass which differ from those used for aluminum. Of course, depending on one's experience and skill, unfamiliar media may pose obstacles. For instance, playing a game of waterpolo requires the locomotive skills of swimming. Similarly, artistic expression in any new medium requires training and practice. Moreover, the various media of interaction can promote either segregation or unification. Olympic speed skaters and triple jumpers rarely share the same training space, for they are effectively segregated by the media of their sport. On the other hand, the common medium of the world's surfers is an element of solidarity which often transcends their ethnic, linguistic, and national identities. Language too, in these and other ways, can unify or segregate people; and our mastery of linguistic media may require a concerted effort.

As a medium, one's language is a mode of expression, a means of communication, a determinant of social identity, a model of social reality, perhaps even a vehicle for thought. Improving our command of languages seems to enhance our expressive, communicative, interactive, and general cognitive abilities. Alternatively, to neglect one's language education may needlessly restrict one's communicative and cognitive abilities.

Above all, perhaps, policy makers must be especially aware of the subtle ways in which the medium of policy discussions and policy statements can affect the ultimate success of these policies. Although it would be imprudent to advocate linguistic determinism, there can be no doubt that different languages package and convey reality differently (Sapir, Whorf), and a policy maker should understand the range and nature of these differences. Of course, we cannot expect policymakers to become masters of all the languages which may fall within their domain; however, because translation is an imprecise and problematic enterprise, policy analysts

must cultivate an appreciation of the effects of medium selection on policy articulation and communication.

### Language as Choice

Whether viewing language as a tool, an artifact, or a medium, linguistic concerns will be necessarily secondary to other determinants of policy; whereas the notion of language as a choice to be made by language users brings language into the center stage of policy studies. Language may be characterized as a social fact (Durkheim) which is used for social ends, especially for communication and other types of social interaction. This is the Language as Tool metaphor mentioned above. However, just as a craftsman chooses from an assortment of items in a toolbox a tool which is appropriate for the task at hand, so too does the skilled communicator in the multilingual contexts of today's global village face issues of language choice. Language choice in the context of education is well known, but there are important issues in jurisprudence, publishing, broadcasting, and general commerce as well. Should we conduct negotiations in a common language? or should we rely heavily on translation? In what language should our contracts, treaties, and other policy documents be written? Even when a common language can be agreed upon, there are often other linguistic choices to be made. Are written documents to take precedence over electronic recordings of oral negotiations? In what script should our texts be written? In today's world, language choices are myriad, and an important task of policy studies is to identify linguistic options and to clarify the ramifications of linguistically divergent policies.

### Tool examples

Survey questionnaires, airport signs, corporate image advertizing, and product claim labels are all examples of language used as a tool to gather information, direct pedestrian traffic, change public opinion, and influence consumer purchasing.

In formulating policies, one often relies on linguistically sensitive sociometric methods of data collection, and occasionally these methods are biased by the researcher's command of languages. Translation strategies, for example, are a troublesome source of bias. It is difficult to gather certain kinds of information without using a common language, and a researcher who requires interview and survey data may resort to translators who are socially partisan or translations which are culturally biased. Translation theorists have long worked to establish safeguards against harmful translational biases (Nida), but the protocols of much social science data collection do not reflect these safeguards. Of course, most researchers are aware that

translations are necessarily imperfect, and common sense can be relied on to avoid a great many difficulties. However, notwithstanding the fact that common sense may be uncommon, additional pitfalls await researchers who have not been trained to recognize the often insidious nature of translational bias.

Within the context of a centralized organization with a monolingual policy committee, few difficulties emerge in the setting of policies; however, the implementation of such policies throughout a diverse multilingual state, company, or other organization can demand a careful wielding of the language sword. One world leader in heavy machinery manufacture and sales, Caterpillar, has created an entire department which is devoted to the linguistic implementation of company policies for machinery operation and maintenance, and the linguists who staff this department may be as important as the machinists who tool its diesel engines. In order to best serve its vast multilingual customer and user base, Caterpillar closely scrutinizes the language used to explain machinery operation and maintenance. In litigious societies, such as the United States, this policy provides an amount of legal protection; worldwide, however, Caterpillar's use of clear and efficient language in both spoken and written communication has been justified by a healthy rate of repeat sales.

In free societies, language is the most effective tool for implementing government policy, and many governments could improve their use of language. The international commuter flying from New York to London is merely amused to see exit signs change from "EXIT" to "WAY OUT"; however, simple differences in authoritative labels can often be of consequence. Over the past decade in Japan, the labeling change of one category of trash from "moeru" to "moyasu" does not represent a change in the type of trash being collected; rather, it represents the rectification of an error in language usage. Japanese communities have discovered that they get better compliance with trash sorting ordinances by using the newer label. Although language may not be a loaded gun (cf. Bolinger), it can be every bit as effective in influencing individual and corporate behavior, but it must be used appropriately.

#### **Artifact examples**

As for all artifacts, the meaning of linguistic artifacts is varied. Some newly coined words or phrases are proper names, in particular, brand names which imply proprietary standards. Other words or phrases may become generic names, and their use may imply certain common standards. Occasionally, these standards are important enough to spark legislation which governs the usage of the linguistic artifacts; examples include

"cheese" and "milk chocolate" in the U.S., and "champagne" in Europe. Although food labels often fall under government regulation, the generic naming of other products, especially those of new technologies, is normally regulated by nongovernmental industrial policies. The mechanics of sales and shipping in the electronics industry quickly creates and promulgates new generic names for the many new products it produces (e.g., SIMMs, DIMMs). Competing manufacturers and trademark registration make the use of reliable generic names indispensable, and this is perhaps especially true in the sale and distribution of pharmaceuticals. In Japan, for example, the physicians desk references most commonly found in clinics do not list many of the foreign brands which compete with Japanese brand medicines, even though the brand name may be far better known than the generic name (e.g., Seldane and terfenadine). Whether this situation constitutes a structural impediment to international pharmaceutical sales is unclear; however, it does encourage the use of generic names in pharmacological discussion between Japanese and non-Japanese.

Names are not the only linguistic artifacts. Artifacts tend to conform to professional standards, and longer texts may be controlled by policies designed to instill public confidence. Japanese milk carton labels, for example, conform to strict standards of information, and they are subject to government checks of accuracy. On the other hand, since interviews of Tokyo residents indicate that the average consumer cannot fully comprehend milk carton labels, it would appear that the meaning of these texts differs for dairy industry professionals and for common consumers. This is also the case with ingredient labels in the U.S., where both state and federal agricultural authorities have been trying to balance the need to maintain a professionally accountable standard with the need to inform the general public.

Formal contracts are also examples of linguistic artifacts which conform to professional standards. The writing and evaluation of patent awards and copyright protections also invite artifactual analyses. These texts contain many formulaic phrases which have fairly precise legal interpretations, even though they may be difficult for the average reader to understand. All attestations, especially those which involve formulaic language, names, signatures, or seals, are subject to artifactual analysis.

Verifying the authenticity of artifacts is an activity which can benefit from policy review, and linguistic artifacts are no exception in this regard. The verification of iconic artifacts, such as signatures and seals, is well known. Symbolic artifacts, such as direct quotations, are also subject to verification. Policies for attributing

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paraphrases and translations to original authors are essential in journalism and jurisprudence. Even something as simple as the transcription of spoken discourse into writing requires policies which ensure perspicuity and reliability.

### Medium examples

Language as a medium of communication is one of the better known metaphors of language; however, within policy studies, its use has been restricted to discussions of government education policy. Indeed, many people mistakenly believe that "language policy" means no more than the government selection of languages as media of instruction in schools. To be sure, this is an important policy domain where the consideration of language as medium is essential, but this is not the only area of language policy. In addition to choices of language, sociolinguists have described variants of style and register which are chosen in appropriate circumstances, and the conscious control of such variation is also amenable to policy formulation. Social codes of etiquette, moral advice to teens, business courses on sales techniques or management style: to the extent that these discuss language usage, they beg questions of language policy. The word "policy" means much more than just government guidelines; and, just as it is important to discuss nongovernment policies, it is important to be able to evaluate the various language policies which are promoted by individuals and nongovernment organizations.

One example which touches the lives of many people in the industrialized world is bilingual television. Available throughout Japan and in some parts of East Asia, Europe, and North America, this technology permits two audio channels to be broadcast. Receivers which lack bilingual capability will play only the "main" channel, while bilingual receivers give the listener a choice of "main" or "sub" channel. In any bilingual broadcast area, the important question of policy will be how to determine which languages to transmit via which channel. One policy is to use the main channel for the original soundtrack, whatever may be its language, and to use the sub channel to carry a translation which can best aid those viewers who may not understand the original language. For example, a French film cablecast in Bruxelles might carry the original French-language soundtrack on the main channel with perhaps Flemish on the sub channel; alternatively, a Dutch-language program might be cablecast with the original Dutch on the main channel and a French translation on the sub channel. Certainly, in Belgium, this would be a reasonable policy for a television station to adopt. On the other hand, where linguistic differences are highly politicized, such as Sarajevo or Kigali, this may or may

not be the best policy. In areas with either a numerically or politically dominant language, it may be advisable to keep the dominant language on the main channel, whether it be original or dubbed, and to use the sub channel for those original soundtracks which use languages other than the dominant language; this is the policy which Japanese broadcasters follow.

Languages may be classified according to the domains for which they serve as a medium, and governments sometimes give the force of law to such classifications. Although countries such as the U.S. and the U.K. refrain from declaring official languages of government, some countries, such as Tanzania and Switzerland, have declared official and national languages, for example Swahili or French, for use in tax offices, courts, public announcements, and elsewhere. Canada has legislated perhaps the most comprehensive classification, which includes various types of "heritage" languages in addition to its two constitutionally sanctioned national languages. Nongovernment organizations often take the lead in setting language policies for domains outside of the immediate purview of government. A local church may conduct worship services in the various languages of its community. A hospital may provide questionnaires written in the common languages of its patients. Such organizations often turn to universities for sociolinguistic expertise and advice. The identification of usage domains and the evaluation of languages as potential media for those domains is an important aspect of language policy study.

### Choice examples

Examples of language as choice fall into two primary categories, one being those of individual choices, and the other being those of institutional choices. As an individual in a multilingual world, I make choices daily about the language I will use when speaking or writing to the various people in my life; however, it is the institutional choices which are most relevant for policy studies. The Universal Postal Union (Union postale universelle) is an institution which chooses to use French on the many documents it distributes. Linguistic choices can be made with respect to almost any aspect of language, such as dialectal pronunciation, script selection, calligraphic style, and spelling. Japan's Ministry of Education, for example, has made the choice to teach children hiragana before katakana. NHK, the Japanese national broadcasting organization, has decided how to pronounce the G in words such as "kagami". The Republic of Guatemala has changed the way it writes Mayan languages using a roman script. The Linguistic Data Consortium has selected computer encodings for various exotic

language scripts. The Chicago Tribune changed its English spelling policy, twice.

### **Mixing metaphors**

The foregoing examples are intended to show how language may be construed in different ways, but they are not meant to suggest that the four analytical perspectives which I have identified with these metaphors are mutually exclusive. In policy studies, we must often think of a particular situation in different ways, and this is also true of language policy study. It is quite common for an institution to select a language in which to compose a text (an artifact) which is to be used (as a tool) for some purpose. The choice of medium and the form and usage of the artifact should all be reviewed by the policy analyst.

There is no proper way to think about language and language issues. Effective problem solving often demands that we maintain a broad perspective. The four metaphors I have singled out for discussion here may provide a good starting point for language policy discussions, but they do not represent any particularly complete truths about the essence of language and the nature of language policy. That journey of discovery is far from its end.

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