In Rethinking Language Policy, Bernard Spolsky resumes the task of proposing a theoretical model for the study and analysis of language policy. In this regard, the book can be seen as a continuation of previous volumes by the author (Spolsky, 2004, 2009) that have been highly influential in the development of language policy as a field of inquiry in the recent past. As a matter of fact, the current volume closely mirrors its 2009 predecessor, both in terms of structure and line of the argument. With that in mind, and since many readers will already be familiar with Spolsky’s two previous landmark publications, in what follows I will summarise what seem to be the newly added elements and will then focus on the aspects that I find most valuable as well as those that I assess as needing further development.

Broadly speaking, the book starts with the same core premise as the author’s previous volumes: that institutional, formal language policies designed to impact and modify the language uses of a given sociolinguistic constellation, are up against a very complex challenge, which frequently means that they are bound to fail in achieving their goals. That is why, as in the previous books, Spolsky begins his analytical task starting not with the nation-state as the first level of analysis, but with the individual level, zooming in on the very micro scale of language policy making. In that regard, Spolsky goes one step further, compared to the 2009 predecessor of the current book, and places the individual
speaker, rather than the family, as the first layer that language policy scholars should consider in their analyses. In making this move, the author acknowledges the influence of Czech colleagues who have written about speaker self-management in processes of language learning (Nekvapil and Nekula, 2006). A speaker-centred orientation is also in line with recent theoretical developments in sociolinguistics (O’Rourke, Pujolar, and Ramallo, 2015), which have drawn heavily on concepts and frameworks from other fields in the social sciences to underscore the key role played by subjectivity in understanding sociolinguistic dynamics (Busch, 2017; Pujolar, 2020). Even though Spolsky does not refer to this literature, a focus on the speaker in any language policy processes is one of the first significant (and valuable) additions in his revised model.

Placing emphasis on the individual brings Spolsky to favour the notion of linguistic repertoires, rather than named languages, which seems to be another additional new element of the present volume. Indeed, on page 12, we read:

Looking at the actual practices, whether of an individual or a larger community, it is useful to describe linguistic repertoires in place of named languages […] the communicative proficiency of a speaker is better studied as a repertoire. Named languages occur not in practices, but in beliefs: their existence is a first belief of speakers and linguists; they are also the focus of management, which depends on values assigned to identified named language varieties.

I shall return below to the analytical and practical consequences of viewing named languages as purely ideological constructions, lacking ontological reality, for language policy research. Suffice it to say for now that the focus on actual language practices and on the centrality of the language ideological component is in line with Spolsky’s well-known tripartite model of language policy analysis, which consists of the practices, beliefs, and management strategies that are present in a given sociolinguistic context. This three-legged model remains essentially untouched in this renewed edition, as the author explains early on (page 9).

From the centrality of the individual (Chapter 1), the author works his way up towards other higher-order scales and actors/institutions that can play a crucial influence on the configuration of speakers’ linguistic repertoires: the family (Chapter 2), education (Chapter 3), the neighbourhood and workplace (Chapter 4), media, cultural, religious, health, and legal institutions (Chapter 5), the military (Chapter 6), management agencies and advocates (Chapter 10), and the nation state (Chapter 12). In other chapters, Spolsky covers issues of historical and socioeconomic nature, such as imperialism and colonialism (Chapter 7), and economic pressure and neoliberalism (Chapter 8) (the latter seems to be a newly added feature in the present volume). An overview of cases of language
endangerment and shift is provided in Chapter 9, international treaties and charters at the supranational level in Chapter 11, and an account of some national language policies in Chapter 13. Chapter 14 concludes the volume with further reflections on a revised model for language policy.

Moving on to the most valuable aspects of the volume, and in line with Cameron’s (2010) review of the book’s predecessor (Spolsky, 2009), it is worth highlighting in the first place the breadth and scope of the domains covered by the author in the book, as seen simply from the brief summary of the book’s content provided in the paragraph above. This allows the author to highlight the multilevel complexity of factors that play a role in the development of any sociolinguistic context. Indeed, anyone wishing to cover the same amount of territory, both in terms of topics and cases analysed, will be faced with a very difficult task. The meticulous and detailed treatment of a rich variety of cases and contexts from all around the world is testimony of the author’s high level of expertise in the field, which very few others can demonstrate. More generally, and still similarly to Cameron’s (2010) appraisal of Spolsky (2009), the current volume continues to be a powerful reminder that attempts to manage and modify language practices that are at the core of speakers’ daily lived realities and, as such, they deserve to be placed centre stage in the work of linguists.

Another positive feature of the book is the central role that Spolsky’s model now attributes to the individual speaker, as already introduced above. Putting the focus on the speaker may allow language policy researchers to unpeel and better account for the processes (historical and socioeconomic, discursive, ideological, and interactional) that play a role in the decisions of acquiring, speaking, or abandoning a given language or linguistic variety. However, for analysts to be able to investigate and show in a detailed way how these processes work, we certainly need sharp theoretical and methodological tools to allow us to cut deeper into the empirical material that we collect and study. This leads me comment on some of the aspects in the volume that might need further development.

Indeed, in making progress through the book, chapter by chapter, the main preoccupation of the author seems to be to show that each and every layer or domain plays a relevant role in shaping the linguistic repertoire of individuals and groups of speakers. At the end of almost every chapter, the final concluding lines sum up the key idea that X domain is crucial for any language management effort to be successful, affecting its development and implementation. On page 14, at the end of Chapter 1, we read ‘Ultimately, the fate of a language policy depends on the ability and willingness of individual members of the speech community to accept it’; on page 24, at the end of Chapter 2, we read ‘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’. And so on. There is little effort to delve deeper and move beyond the observation that language policy and management depend on the interplay of a myriad of factors resulting from the complex combination of the actual practices, the ideologies, and the management efforts of an individual or a community at multiple levels. As noted by Cameron (2010: 566) in connection with Spolsky (2009), when commenting on the salience of human-rights discourses for language policy, a ‘good theoretical account’ of such discourses ‘should surely ask questions about the nature and limits of [the] significance’ of these discourses: ‘who has benefited, who has not, and what that tells us about the language (and other) ideologies that Spolsky rightly identifies as an important influence on language management’. It seems that the current volume has not fully addressed this shortcoming present in the 2009. In fact, aside from a few paragraphs at the start of Chapter 4 (p. 46), there is little treatment of any methodological questions that should guide scholars interested in the study of language policy (see Hult and Johnson, 2015, for a guide on research methods in language policy research).

One way of potentially going deeper in the analysis and addressing the questions posed by Cameron could have been to refer to the growing body of scholarship that has adopted an ethnographic and discourse approach to researching language policy issues (e.g., Hornberger and Johnson, 2007; Johnson, 2009; Barakos and Unger, 2016). The omission of this literature is particularly striking given Spolsky’s awarding of more centrality to the individual speaker as the core level of analysis in accounting for how language repertoires are formed and developed across one’s lifespan. Albeit not without analytical problems (see Pérez-Milans, 2018), approaches like the ethnography of language policy allow the circulation of policy discourses to be traced across multiple layers, thus helping explain how language policies are constructed (Källkvist and Hult, 2016), debated (Savski, 2021), and implemented, appropriated, or resisted (Johnson, 2010). These approaches draw on tried-and-tested discourse analytical tools and frameworks, such as the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1974) and nexus analysis (Scollon and Scollon, 2004), which allow researchers to conceive of language policy as a social action, influenced by the speakers’ biographical past and social capital, the dominant discourses available in a given context, and the communicative interactions that speakers engage in. In my view, this seems like a missed opportunity for Spolsky not to have taken advantage of the space and length of the monograph to engage explicitly with this literature and argue for or against the benefits of addressing language policy issues from an ethnographic and discourse perspective.
As noted above, another new feature of the present volume is the author’s choice to refer to linguistic repertoires rather than named languages, the latter existing as ideological constructs of speakers and linguists, according to him. In presenting this argument, Spolsky seems to wish to incorporate some key tenets of recent work in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics that has underscored the fluid character of speakers’ language practices, particularly in complex multilingual contexts (e.g., García and Li, 2014; Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015; Li, 2018). From the point of view of language policy scholarship, I would argue that this is a rather risky operation, for methodological and theoretical reasons on the one hand and for practical ones on the other. Certainly, it is very possible to highlight the ideological load that named languages carry associated with them, particularly in connection with management efforts (i.e., efforts to modify speakers’ communicative repertoires); and we can then contrast that with the fluid nature of multilinguals’ daily practices, which are difficult to compartmentalise in strict, boxed categories. It is one thing, however, to conceptualise language(s) as a multifaceted range of resources (of accents, styles, genres, registers, and so on), to which speakers have different degrees of access, competence in, and capacity to use depending on their life trajectories, the spaces they transit, and the social networks that they belong to. It is quite another and very different thing to argue that named language categories do not have ontological reality and are simply ideological constructs. In short, I would argue that it is possible to maintain that speakers in real life are in possession of complex, heterogeneous linguistic and communicative repertoires, that plenty of ideological work is involved in establishing what a named language is, but that all this does not necessarily imply denying ontological reality to ‘named languages’.

For a field that is so heavily reliant on interlinguistic borders (particularly in the domains of status and acquisition planning), it seems virtually impossible to do without named languages and to consider them only as ideological constructs, lacking any ontological nature. It does seem highly difficult to account for and describe any set of linguistic repertoires (whether individual or collective) without recurring to named language categories. In fact, even though every now and then Spolsky does keep referring to linguistic repertoires (of individuals, groups, or countries), the book is replete with uses of named languages, which attests to the just noted difficulty. Barely a few paragraphs underneath the passage we have seen quoted above, arguing for the status of named languages as simply ideological, Spolsky summarises an argument by Nekvapil and Nekula (2006) and writes: ‘Czech workers in a German-owned factory who wished to become foremen or managers realised that they should learn German and were willing to take private lessons’ (p. 13, emphasis added). Passages like
this are abundant in the book. In addition, at a practical/applied level, from the point of view of language policy making, the proposition that named languages exist only in the ideological realm of speakers and linguists could have devastating consequences for the long-term sustainability of linguistic diversity. If such an argument were to reach the ears of policymakers and bureaucrats at either national or supranational levels eager to cut down on resources for the promotion and development of minority and endangered languages, they could have an easy card at their disposal to lay down on the table: after all, if any minority (or minoritised) language is anything but an ideological construct and does not exist in actual reality, why then spend more money and resources on teaching it in schools, or promoting its use in other societal contexts? MacSwan (2020) levels a similar argument, challenging the deconstructivist argument of some recent literature on translanguaging from the point of view of a civil rights orientation to language education policy in the United States.

Finally, even if in a perhaps secondary order of importance to the above points, it is worth commenting on the overwhelming reliance on English-medium sources in the book. Indeed, in the 45 pages of references at the end, I counted about a dozen entries from sources in French and three in Portuguese, out of approximately 900 items. Spolsky is certainly not alone in this kind of writing, on the contrary, but for a book that covers such a wide span of countries, sociolinguistic contexts, institutions, and domains, it seems to me that more references in languages other than English could have been granted. In fact, such references could have been introduced in central parts of the development of the argument, not just when dealing with area-specific situations. For example, in the Introduction chapter, Spolsky draws attention to the importance of the non-linguistic environment to account for patterns observed in sociolinguistic developments. Such an argument is intrinsically connected with the writings of authors working in the framework of the ecology of language, an approach that enjoyed strong momentum among some linguists in Europe at the end of the 1990s and early 2000s (e.g., Bastardas, 1996; Calvet, 1999; Hagège, 2001). And in Chapter 9, covering the topic of endangerment and language shift, references could have been made to the work of scholars at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and associated colleagues, who have been working for many years on a model that attempts to explain the pressures leading indigenous language speakers to abandon their languages, a model very much informed by the ecology of language and with resonances with Spolsky’s framework too (see Terborg, 2006; Terborg and García Landa, 2011; Terborg, Velázquez and Trujillo, 2021). Of course, every one of us is in possession of a specific set of multilingual competences, and there is naturally a limit to how many secondary
sources we can include in a diversity of languages when writing for academic purposes. So, I bring forth the argument of a lack of references in languages other than English in Spolsky’s current volume as a call for us sociolinguists and language policy scholars (myself included), particularly those socialized in non-Anglophone academic traditions, to be more self-reflexive of the actual practices we engage in developing and presenting our work and of how this creates boundaries within our discipline, making some work more (or less) visible, and some sources of knowledge more salient (and legitimate) than others. This is a problem that is becoming increasingly present in the agenda of current sociolinguistic work, attested by recent special issues on this topic in the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (Duchêne, Ellece, Tupas, Sabaté-Dalmau, Unamuno and Urla, 2021) and in *Language, Culture and Society* (Del Percio, Baquedano-López, Pérez-Milans and Vigouroux, 2021).

In sum, much like its 2009 predecessor, Spolsky’s present volume offers a powerful reminder of the fact that attempts at meddling with language and trying to influence and change speakers’ language habits and practices will always be part of daily linguistic reality. Because of that, whatever we choose to think about such attempts (whether they are misguided, useless, harmful, or something else), they are real and they are something that linguists should engage with and study (Cameron, 2010: 567). In addition, the breadth and scope of domains, levels, and sociolinguistic contexts covered make this book a (continued) valuable resource for any student of language policy. That said, I have found the book to contain several gaps, as reasoned above. These include a (persistently) too broad definition of language policy (with limited methodological and theoretical punch); the omission of recent relevant literature in the field (particularly to discursive and ethnographic approaches to language policy); a conceptualisation of named languages as pure ideological constructs, lacking ontological reality; and a significant absence of any references from sources in languages other than English. These shortcomings aside, written by such an authoritative figure in the field, the book is surely set to continue informing the scholarly conversations in language policy circles, and it will remain a testimony of Spolsky’s tremendous and incomparable mark in our field.

**Notes**

1. I wrote this book review in June-July 2022, just a few weeks before the sad news of Spolsky’s death was communicated. I never met Spolsky in person and was not lucky to interact with him directly, but, as for anyone in the field of language policy, his work left an indelible mark in thinking about questions
connecting language policy and linguistic ideologies, which have been at the centre of my scholarly preoccupations since my doctoral work. I present this book review as my humble tribute to Spolsky’s landmark contribution to the development of language policy as a field of study.

References


(Received 2nd August 2022; accepted 3rd February 2023)