

Translation: Obscured Site of
Language Policy Implementation

ACADEMIC FORUM
Language(s) and the cultural politics-
policies for scholarly translation

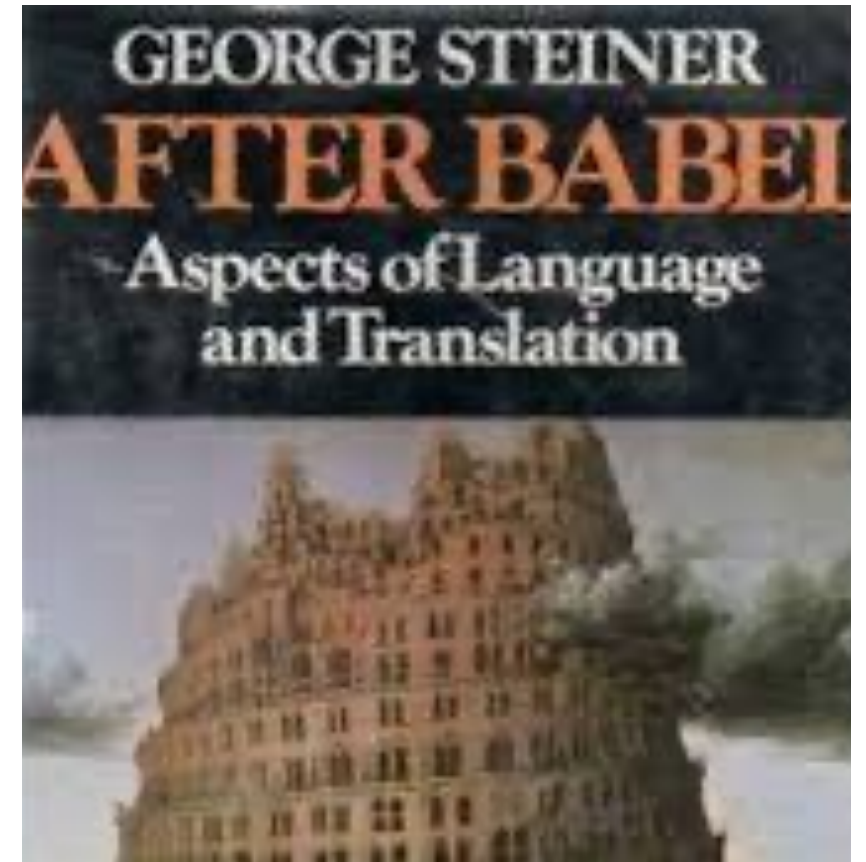
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All understanding is translation

- Polymath scholar George Steiner claims translation is the very condition of meaning and he makes an even more radical claim that **all understanding is translation**, not just between languages (French ↔ English, Indonesian ↔ Greek), but also within a language (speaker ↔ hearer, past text ↔ present reader).
- From this premise flows his claim that the Babel story is not a fall but a *permanent human condition*: plurality, distance, interpretation. In this way all language is negotiated and constitutively plural, with no perfection possible and no final or stable equivalence.
- If we are to understand things therefore, we must experience loss but also gain and transformation in how we negotiate meaning. Steiner insists language is never reducible to a neutral code mapping onto reality, instead languages are world-making systems, rather than world describing tools.
- This therefore produces a pragmatic need for translation, and therefore the inevitable need for a theory of translation.
- Today, I am concerned with language policy and planning, my field of specialisation, and will propose some ways forward in keeping with Steiner's ideas.



From Steiner to real world language policy

- My work is at the intersection of language policy, conflict, and identity, rather than university based scholarly environments, such as those that interest Steiner, but his argument has a profound importance for me, since language policy is, implicitly, decisional control over possible futures, and the suppression of language (and translation) reduces the range of imaginable worlds.
- Sustaining multilingualism therefore multiplies the repertoire of possible futures.
- Of course policy makers and bureaucrats might dismiss this as a small problem in a world of war and tension but here I would offer the distinction between slow-acting harms (erosion of linguistic worlds) which steadily make possible and even inevitable fast-acting harms (exclusionary discourse) that leads directly, as shown by history of hate and conflict, to the tortured world we all inhabit.
- Possibilism: what is it?

Who needs to be a language planner?

- Language policy skills are needed by translators, by academics, by communities, by all of us, because we are all implicated in the possibilities of shared life more than at any time in history.
- We should not be naïve and imagine that “possibilism” which might appeal in our settings is universal. Writing and implementing language policy, is universal, it is usually found in unstated hierarchies and small choices of institutions.
- Mostly, language policy aims to shut down possibilities, aims to restrict minorities and serve the interests of the powerful by consolidating their understandings of how the world, the material as well as the epistemic world, are ordered and what is taken to be the natural state of affairs.
- Also, we all know how language (eg political rhetoric) creates false worlds, ideologies, totalitarian discourses. Not all imagined futures are emancipatory. The language (and translation) power to create worlds includes the power to distort, dominate, and destroy.

Professors of
linguistics
have no power
(professors of
linguistics
have too
much power)

“It is absurd to think that professors of linguistics ... can do the work of statesmen and soldiers. ... academic enquiries are used by conflicting interests to bolster up their claims, and their results prevail only to the extent that somebody has the power to make them prevail.... Academic research does not add a jot or a tittle to the capacity for ruling. (Elie Kedourie, 1961: p. 125)

The critical onslaught on language policy theory during the 1990s to around 2017: invoking post-colonial and post-structural theorising, alleged that LP was complicit with socially repressive national projects in the interests of ethnic, state or class domination



MICHAEL E. BROWN AND
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We need to engage directly with theoreticians of public interest and decision making to build robust collaborative LP formulations.

Assimilationist policies often are a threat to minoritized or non-dominant groups, their very existence and flourishing as distinct entities.

Accommodationist policies are perceived to weaken national unity and are contested by national elites.

Language policy processes themselves can provoke tension and dispute, and even violence.

Criticisms of LP from 'radicals' had the effect of setting back the development of effective processes of expert-informed LP. This is a desperately needed objective.

Conflict, peacebuilding and language policy

Subset of global conflicts in which language issues are implicated in fostering tension and even communal violence, usually because of states' repudiation of community demands for 'mother tongue' status and education. I will report on the process of multilogue facilitated deliberations implemented there to mitigate conflict (Lo Bianco, 2016), build shared understanding of language problems and allow voice to marginalised populations' demands for recognition (Lo Bianco, 2019; 2023).

- Lo Bianco, J., (2023), Debating Linguistic Human Rights in Militarised Myanmar: Political Agitation and Policy Deliberation, pp 127-142 in *The Handbook of Linguistic Human Rights*, edited by Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Lo Bianco, J. (2019). Uncompromising talk, linguistic grievance, and language policy: Thailand's Deep South conflict zone. In M. Kelly, H. Footitt & M. Salama-Carr (Eds.), *Handbook on Languages at War* (pp295-331). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lo Bianco, J. (2016). *Conflict, Language Rights, and Education: Building Peace by Solving Language Problems in Southeast Asia*. Language Policy Research Network, Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, DC. USA. Reprinted 2021 in Brazil, pp 157-174 in *Linguas Extranteras*.

Translation theory in a war zone?

Translation and hope

- I mentioned Steiner because I am not a literary or translation specialist, however, at a critical time in my own work in mediation and peacebuilding in Southeast Asia I derived benefit by a close study of his writing.
- I found that Steiner is often read as backward-looking, concerned with tradition and philology but for me, working at the time in a civil war zone in Sri Lanka, I derived from his work ideas that were future-generating. I built these into the method facilitated dialogue (or, rather, metalogue) that formed the basis of nearly 65 UN commissioned formal peace promoting dialogues in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the war zone in South Thailand and in some conflict or tension areas of Malaysia. It gave me confidence in language's imaginative reach, a valuable outcome to, original emphasis.
- It focuses on the challenges of adapting scientific knowledge and research methodologies across borders while addressing linguistic inequalities, biases, and the role of translation in internationalizing higher education.

Resolving ethnolinguistic conflict in multi-ethnic societies

Joseph Lo Bianco

Language is a common underlying cause of conflict in multi-ethnic societies. Facilitated dialogue — a method of conflict mediation — is being used in countries such as Myanmar to mitigate language-based conflict, acknowledge language rights, and encourage societies to adopt a culture of dialogue.

Language is deeply significant in our personal and collective lives; it not only influences our educational and economic opportunities, civic participation, legal rights and mental health, but also transports tradition and history from the past to the present. Alongside this formative importance of language, multilingualism is sometimes associated with disagreements, problems and conflicts in contemporary life. To redress conflict, tension and violence related to language, and to build new ways to manage multilingualism, facilitated dialogues are being used in countries with a history of language-based conflicts. The facilitated dialogue method has been designed to exploit the deep social importance and universal functions of language^{1,2}. Through exercises in narrative, structured conversation, dialogue-based reflection and intense discussion, participants jointly mitigate tension, build partnerships, and collectively author new language policies to support multilingualism and ease social tensions.

Conflict and language

Our planet is divided into 193 discrete political entities into which are squeezed the 7,097 classified human languages³. With few exceptions, states favour only a tiny proportion of the languages their citizens speak, granting them privilege and standardization, and cultivating them as national codes of identity (for example, French in France and Japanese in Japan). But official languages do more than serve a juridical or governmental function; they also carry symbolic weight. As national symbols, official languages offer collective affiliation for citizens who are otherwise strangers to each other, yet many individuals and groups remain excluded.

Research on ethnic violence increasingly acknowledges grievances about language policy and alarm among minority

populations about survival of their distinctive cultures⁴. Of special concern is how education systems typically ignore the mother tongues of children, leading to educational underperformance, poor learning of official languages, and alienation of children from their family and cultural traditions. Compounding these grievances, research has also found concern among minority populations about social exclusion and economic marginalization^{4,5}. Inequality is particularly serious when groups are denied economic and educational agency over their socio-cultural futures and, in extreme cases, are "subjected to prolonged assaults on their identity that contribute to their perceptions of injustice"⁶. Examples include the simmering ethnic conflict in south Thailand, where teachers and schools have been attacked, and decades of violent struggle in Myanmar.

With few exceptions, states favour only a tiny proportion of the languages their citizens speak.

In south Thailand, 80% of people speak a form of Malay, which is different to that used in neighbouring Malaysia, but children are educated in Thai, resulting in the lowest academic achievement rates in the country. Globally, the children of minority populations live in communities who want to preserve their traditional cultures, yet they are educated in languages they do not know, by teachers who are mostly untrained to support bilingualism. Families in these communities are hopeful that their children can gain school credentials, portable skills, and economic mobility, but to achieve these goals they must attain a strong mastery of official languages they do not speak, and world languages, which they struggle

to master. Children are more successful in achieving these goals when education acknowledges the crucial role of the mother tongue in cognitive, social and identity formation. Compounding the pressure on minority languages from official national languages are the global meta-languages, such as English. One outcome of the spread of dominant languages and the pressure from national languages is attrition of the domains in which less powerful indigenous languages are used; of the 7,097 languages currently spoken, over one third are seriously endangered, while one half of the world's population speaks one or more of the 23 'top' languages, the other half speak the remaining 7,074.

Sub-national groups everywhere are engaged in struggles to preserve their unique sense of identity and to integrate into wider political and economic arrangements. In Myanmar, these struggles have been continuous for the past 50 years¹. Many conflicts involve resistance by minorities to deliberate efforts of sovereign states to homogenize their populations. State policy is typically motivated by calculations that diversity is costly, by prejudice or by historical animosity against particular groups. As a result, minority populations live culturally disrupted and precarious lives, whether from slow-acting, intergenerational assimilation or from violently enforced policies of cultural extinction.

A culture of dialogue

Facilitated dialogues aim to mitigate conflict, acknowledge language rights, and encourage societies to adopt a culture of dialogue; they are a peace-building practice designed to build social cohesion in multi-ethnic societies. The method of facilitated dialogue draws on the multifunctional roles of language to build consensus around language rights and opportunities. Whether it is in literature or in our

LP for translation and multilingualism in institutions

- It focuses on the challenges of adapting scientific knowledge and research methodologies across borders while addressing linguistic inequalities, biases, and the role of translation in internationalizing higher education
- So, perhaps I am taking a risk here, but let me proceed as follows
- Academic translation is often treated as a technical afterthought, but operates as a powerful, largely unacknowledged instrument of language policy in global knowledge production. This in turn, if we make the arguments carefully with decision makers, meaning that we must understand their forms of reasoning and the problems they face, of finance, of efficient administration, of governance, and of institutional politics, that we must, I will invent a word here, 'indwell', or imaginatively inhabit their context, and build a case for the central importance of translation as world making possibility.

Scholarly translation and policy literacy

- I've relied on Steiner but in thinking about this read Anthony Pym's Exploring Translation Theories (2023 Routledge, 3rd edition) which offers a useful and compact mapping of main families of ideas in translation theory, the typical concepts each discusses, and their representative names.
- Pym shows how these distinct chronological paradigms can be defined by how they solve core translation problems.
- I think that translation specialists should invest in policy literacy. Some years ago, I was approached by Professors Barbara Siedlhofer of University and Henry Widdowson of University of Vienna, to develop strategies to transfer language planning insights and methods, into English as a Lingua Franca scholarship both in university life and in publishing. I will try to explore this now with you, into scholarly translation, in general terms.

Traction seeking

- The first point is to understand that policy, however we might critique it, sees itself as a response to problems, and that these problems are seen to be the outcome of a process of deliberative construction.
- Usually we call that process ‘politics’, and while the wild world of politics may seem to be very far from ‘deliberative construction’ and more like naked power plays, we can usefully construct it as traction seeking.
- What does this mean? It means inserting the interests of translation into policy conversations, seek grip and traction there, in institutions, among publishers, and with public authorities.
- This requires education of them by you, and self-learning.
- Policy making is a process in which influence counts a great deal, and influence involves rhetorical participation, shaping how problems are construed and making the case for how expertise can count. I am aware in saying this now that we live in a time of fake news, mistrust of experts and, even worse, mistrust of expertise, and I am aware that the ancients thought carefully about these same issues, so we are not unique in wondering how to shape policy, but we do know some useful things about making knowledge count in practical ways.

What is traction?

A useful way to make expertise “count” is to treat traction as something that can be purposefully designed for, step by step, across both institutional and publishing arenas. The core and key concepts:

Traction:

the degree to which a piece of knowledge actually shapes agendas, decisions, routines, and resource allocations in policy settings, rather than merely circulating as citation or rhetoric.

Traction potential of knowledge:

the latent capacity of a given body of expertise (a study, corpus, narrative, or framework) to gain such traction, given particular alignments (or misalignments) with institutions, actors, and publishing circuits.

Bacchi and Majone

- Two people whose work may be interesting here are Carol Bacchi and Giandomenico Majone. Bacchi evolved the **WPR (What's the Problem Represented to be?)** a prominent public policy framework. **Bacchi is** a Professor Emerita of Politics at the University of Adelaide, in Australia, and her many works focus on post structural policy analysis and critique. For Bacchi, instead of treating policies as neutral "solutions" to fixed societal issues, the WPR posits that governments define and *produce* problems through their own proposed policies. Understanding policy requires questioning the implicit assumptions about who or what is identified as the cause of the problem and WPR is a policy deconstruction framework for this task.
- While I find this analytically useful and have cited it frequently, what I propose below is not critical policy analysis but participatory policy, how we, you, as individuals and in your ECSPM networks, understand what is given as the problem, its genesis, assumptions, representation, history of the representation, and how it can be contested or disrupted.
- An earlier and equally powerful approach was on the discursive policy analysis by Giandomenico Majone in his signature 1990 book *Evidence, Argument, & Persuasion in the Policy Process* which similarly places discourse and rhetorical construction of problems at the centre of analysis.

Taking a few steps

- My focus has been to theorise practice in pro-active construction or forward-pushing, agenda setting language policy, how to shape public judgment, by using metalogues, first principles dialogues to build democratic language policies.
- The process involves systematic mapping of decision venues and their participants and interests, mapping knowledge venues, whether in university administrations or in publishing companies, and then developing and characterisation of policy relevant knowledge.
- I am currently doing this with Vietnamese, Greek and Persian language advocates in Australia, and with Indigenous translation and early education rights groups in Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, and through the Multilingual Network in Bangkok into Southeast Asia more broadly.
- A predictable part is data gathering, both straightforward data and attitudinal data, and in relation to today's topic, this would focus on how scholarly translation is treated in different countries in Europe, in individual institutions, how its practice is governed, and its practitioners treated.
- Here we want to know where knowledge currently resides, where knowledge dies (meaning where knowledge or expertise is ignored, tokenised, or delayed) and where it moves effectively into agendas and instruments.

A test of influence: who listens to us?

- Then I believe ECSPM and others would specify the kind of traction that you or we seek, as specifically as possible, and relevant time horizons. In my experience helping to shape university language policies at my own institution this seems very important because the desired level and time horizon of traction prevents the common mismatch where scholars seek deep instrumental change while institutions are only ready for symbolic or procedural adjustment.
- The next step is to analyse the traction potential of your knowledge, asking, basically, how high up into institutions does the knowledge you have reach. I mean how high among the 'higher ups' can you and the ECSPM, including us as presenters and the participants in this forum, expect to get a hearing.
- Can we have a conversation with administration and policy makers in the upper reaches of our universities about scholarly translation? Will they give us an audience? Is there likely to be a diagnostic fit between what we might ask for and how they understand what the university should do?
- A useful test for this is to do our own translation, between the internal characterisation of translation, academic or scholarly translation, and whether it is a legible and understandable field to those who make decisions about money allocations, research projects, personnel deployment.

Normative alignment: do they agree with what we want?

Next, I think we, all of us need to do what I call ‘normative alignment’, we need to interrogate how far what we wish to see for scholarly translation, and the wider field of multilingual rights and multilingualism itself, resonate with prevailing political narratives, institutional values, or “common-sense” about responsibility, fairness, and national interest.

If we fall short, we need to pursue and create coalitions of interest, expanding the number and range of actors from civil society, professional associations, peak bodies, bureaucratic champions, who can plausibly carry and defend this knowledge.

This would yield a rough “traction potential profile”, so we could assess whether scholarly translation has a weak, strong, vulnerable to high potential institutionally and in publishing channels. This profile is useful to whatever practical policy work we do.

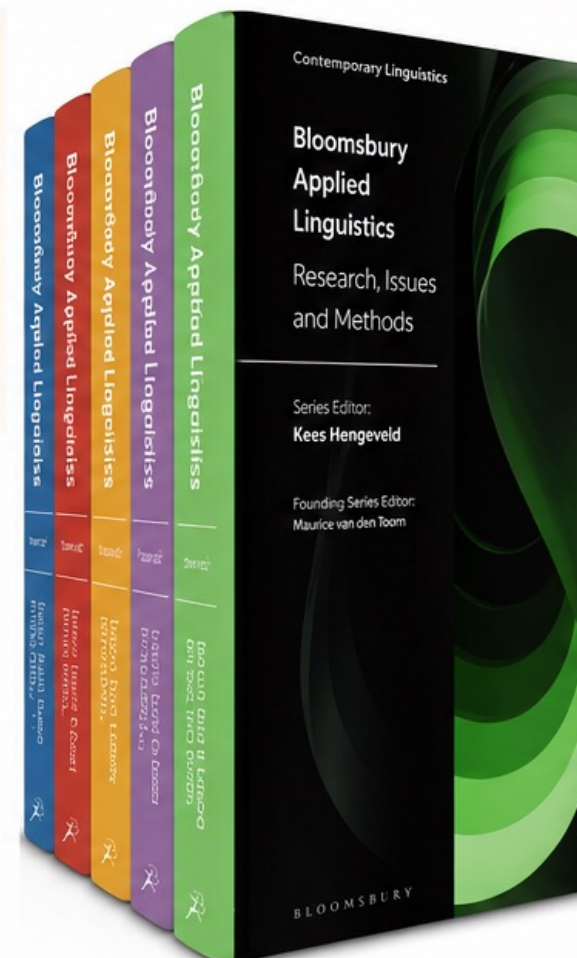
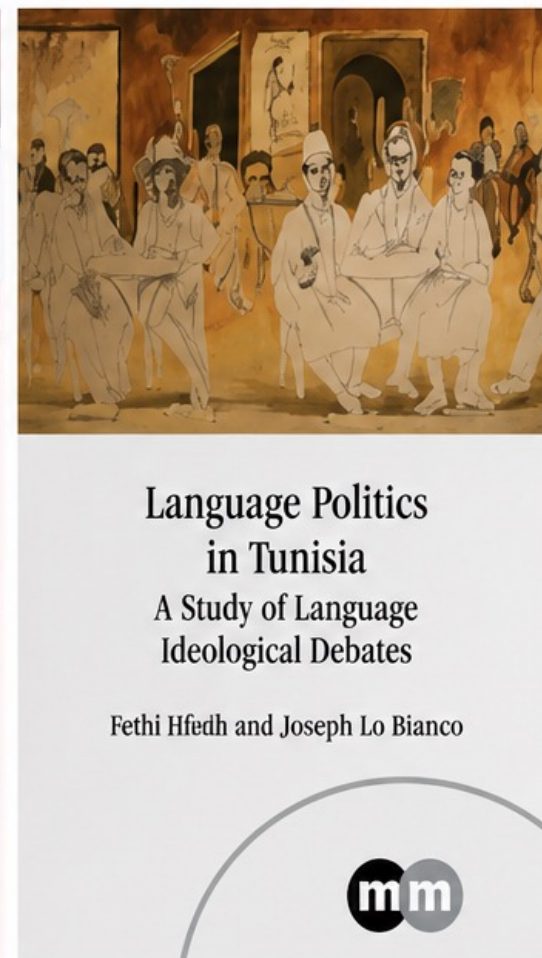
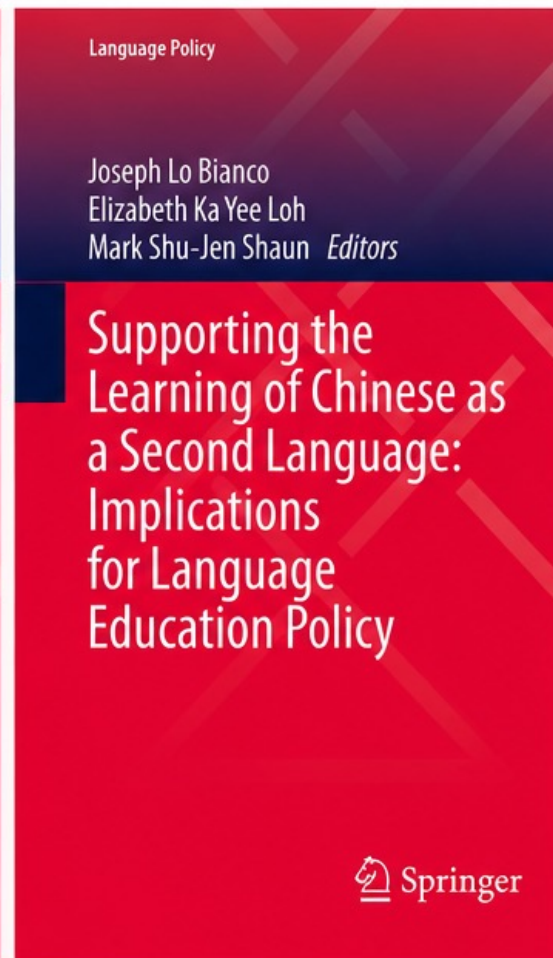
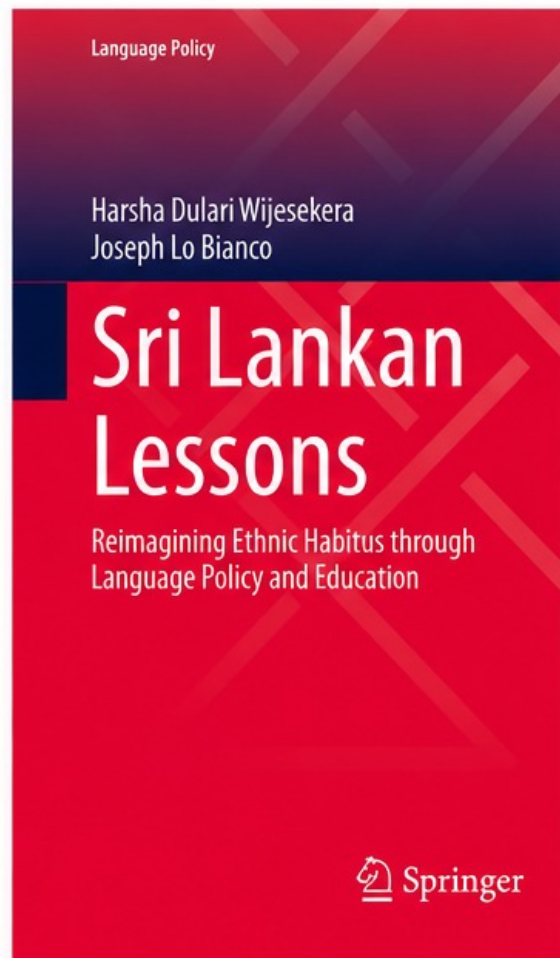
A profile of how much traction we have

Such a profile helps to design institutional moves that increase the likelihood that our knowledge will “bite”, with gatekeepers and brokers: senior officials, advisory bodies, cabinet offices, or internal “evidence units” that interpret and translate knowledge for decision-makers.

A realistic self-appraisal helps build relational infrastructure that is long-term and supports dialogic engagement with political/administrative actors.

The aim is not to write a statement of interest or the creation of a specialist centre so much as embedding respect for and understanding of multilingualism and scholarly translation knowledge in routine work of our institutions, integration into guidelines, templates, key performance frameworks, and reporting requirements, not just high-level strategy texts.

A high-level policy statement is useful but procedural normality is stronger.



Re-framing problems positively.

- I will stop this account of how to gain traction here, even though there is much more to say about it, because while the institutional setting is where traction is ultimately realised for scholarly translation, the publishing setting conditions what knowledge is even allowed onto the table and it would take too long today to describe what I believe language planning and language influence theory offers as a way forward with publishing.
- I will just note that one key aim should be in the short term to co-produce narrative shifting work in policy facing outputs.
- Policy evaluation studies expose how framing problems and recontextualising problems can increase future public policy and funding for areas that perhaps were struggling to be noticed or were new or revised and needed an injection of new effort to become vital or return to a lost vitality.

A Model of Analysis and Reconciliation Between Scholarship and Engagement

LP: deliberate intervention to change language (its use or features), has the paradoxical character of being marginal in academic domains but centrally important in cultural, juridical, administrative, education life of society.

LP = A3 x P4 > G6 model is derived from engagement in LP writing/advising tasks, some described in this presentation. Authority, Participation, Goals

Combines perspective of linguistics (explicit language knowledge) and political action (deliberative or executive power).

The key elements (LP as text, discourse and performance) has been independently validated in a 1.4-million-word corpus examination of LP.

“the findings of this study seem to validate Lo Bianco’s (2008) concept of language policy activities... The strength of the coding results ($\kappa=.905$) suggest that these registers can be reliably identified and that, together, they account for about 78% of the language policy texts in the corpus.” (Fitzsimmons-Doolan 2019 p. 184)

Using the LP Model

LP analysts can interrogate the authority and power from which deliberate language change plans emerge or are legitimated.

Accommodates legitimate criticism of 'early pioneer' LP formulations but repudiates the excessive criticism which would lead to the abandonment of efforts to systematically write LP and for experts to engage in policy change processes as experts and not just as citizens.

Many critics argued that LP 'pretends' to be science when it is really technicism, elitism, Westernisation and diglossic hierarchy posing as 'science', but some of these critics had quite ambiguous positions about what constitutes science.

One of the main targets of the trenchant criticisms of LP, by post-modern, post-colonial and neo-Marxist critics has been that language problems are fictions created by elite interests intent on domination, and not in any sense objective facts or verifiable and tangible objects for policy attention.

The model proposes FD, or metalogue, as a way of collaboratively formulating what 'the problem' to be addressed by a LP will be.

FD is not the same as consultation or collaboration, instead it is the collective formulation of the principles of the LP.

I am not wanting to paint these processes as easy or always successful. In *Debating Linguistic Human Rights in Militarised Myanmar: Political Agitation and Policy Deliberation* in the 2023 Handbook of Linguistic Human Rights I document precisely the opposite, how far from easy and how sometimes unsuccessful and even dangerous they can be.

The LP model and FD method requires direct interaction between 3 crucial stakeholders: *people with power*, *people with knowledge* and *people with interests*, who negotiate across their different stocks of knowledge and interests. A facilitator is critical to this process.

Sites for action for advancing translation in academic settings

- Applying ideas from LP to academic translation requires us to think about institutional, ideological, and governance dimensions and draw on an expanded concept of language policy and planning (Lo Bianco, 2025).
- The practice of scholarly translation mediates between communities of scholars (in their disciplines and across disciplines in academies and networks), and functions as *de facto* language policy in academia. The de facto or non-declared nature of translation serves to obscure how it functions as an instance of language policy.
- The dominance of English in research publication is an enabling condition of this de facto status, and has led to asymmetries in translational practices, such that knowledge flows outward from English but less often inward, establishing what economists and innovation scholars call ‘path dependency’.
- Translation practices reflect this, how initial choices and historical contingencies over time lock us in to trajectories that become difficult to dislodge, even when shown to be inefficient, culturally problematic or unjust.

This is a
problem.
But what
kind of
problem is
it?

The language translation imbalance constitutes an implicit policy of linguistic hierarchy, determining whose ideas circulate globally, what semantic patterns become normalised and how new problems are named and understood.

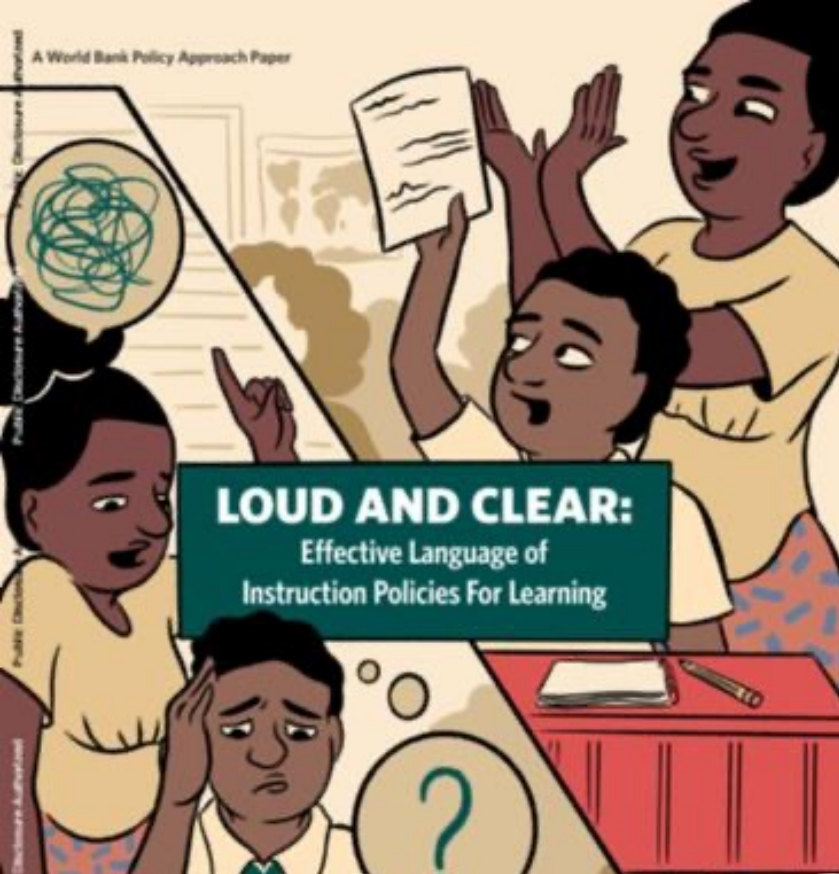
Translation policies impact on epistemic inclusion, especially regarding which scholarly traditions count as legitimate, and which are rendered intelligible or erased.

A normative signal,
but what prospect
of action?

- UNESCO's "Recommendation on Open Science" (2021) calls for multilingualism in scholarly communication, to make science and circulation of knowledge more equitable and inclusive, but implementation is weak.
- National research policies can support plurilingual publication incentives, open translation grants, and multilingual metadata infrastructure, but a robust understanding of language policy processes treating translation as a tool of language rights in knowledge production may rapidly improve practice.

UNESCO's multilingual ambition, weak implementation

- The 2021 Recommendation on Open Science calls for more equitable and inclusive circulation of knowledge through multilingual practices, but implementation remains thin at institutional and national levels.
- It's a positive normative signal, but faces a large infrastructure gap. Metadata systems, repositories, and incentives rarely sustain translation at scale.
- Worse, the policy aspiration is not matched by funding rules, journal criteria, or research assessment practice.
- Yet, some large organizational inertia can change: the World Bank is one.



An Economist, the World Bank and multilingualism

James J. Heckman, economist and Nobel laureate (2000), renowned for his econometric innovations, and for demonstrating the high social and economic returns of investing in early childhood education.

Demonstrated that high-quality early interventions, especially for disadvantaged children, yield annual returns of 7–13% through improved literacy, health, and life outcomes.

The World Bank. After decades of activist pressure and academic research, in 2021 the World Bank issued a resounding endorsement of ‘mother tongue’ education. In its report titled *Loud and Clear: Effective Language of Instruction Policies for Learning* it maintained its strong focus on education for ‘human capital accumulation’ purposes but marked this aim as ‘a language-based endeavour’.



Loud and Clear, a watershed shifting

The Bank's treatment of language of instruction shifted

FROM:

de facto support for dominant and colonial languages in pursuit of human capital growth and efficiency, and conditional loans to this end, for many decades,

TO:

a position where the same human-capital logic remains but is marshalled in favour of mother-tongue-based and familiar-language instruction, and where and where language of instruction policy is inserted as a central plank in Bank advice and its in-country operations.

It represents a possibly surprising and large win for persuasion by academic research activism.

Heckman doesn't himself deal with language directly it provides a powerful general argument that early, high-quality, family-linked interventions reduce inequality, but the small army of language specialists were able to move the large WB institution into a major change.

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education in the Asia-Pacific Region



In many Asia Pacific countries mother tongue (L-1) education is now both a Movement and a movement.

An idea whose time has come? Multilingual Education in Asia Pacific.

(Lo Bianco 2025 in Suwilai and Hirsh, eds, *Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education in the Asia-Pacific Region*, Multilingual Matters)

My conclusion

- When I reflect on language policy change, I can see that despite the widespread scepticism that ideas can change harsh realities, in fact language policy change is possible, and common.
- For academics and practitioners and professional associations, in translation and in multilingual and language rights, what is needed is 'policy literacy', to engage directly with policy makers, and through media to influence and shape institutional, publishing and public policy.
- Translation is an 'obscured site of implementation' what exists is sedimented past policy. With explicit LP methods it can be transformed into productive, active policy enhancing multilingualism. I commend you on these important efforts to this end.