

**Ideology and Image; Britain and Language, Dennis Ager, Multilingual Matters, 2003, ISBN: 1-85359-659-0**

Dennis Ager is Emeritus Professor of Modern Languages at Aston University and has published several previous books on language planning and policy. This latest addition to his work is a welcome and timely exploration of the social and political motivations that underpin language planning in the UK and provides a deep and extensive analysis starting with possibly the first act of language planning in our history, King Alfred's decision in 880 to translate education materials into Anglo-Saxon and continuing right up to government states on the national curriculum in the present day. This is an important historical perspective for us to have because, as he quotes, 'to plan language is to plan society'. And it is perhaps particularly important to understand how this happens in a country where, as George Bernard Shaw put it in *Pygmalion*, 'It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman despise him'.

He provides some interesting statistics on the way taken from surveys of 'the identity issue' in Great Britain. He cites a MORI poll in the Economist from September 1999 which asked people, 'Which two or three of these, if any, would you say you most identify with?' and got the following replies:

	<u>GB</u>	<u>Eng</u>	<u>Scot</u>	<u>Wales</u>
This local community	41%	42%	39%	32%
This region	50%	49%	62%	50%
England/Scotland/Wales	45%	41%	72%	81%
Britain	40%	43%	18%	27%.

Fewer than 10% of respondents identified with the Commonwealth or regarded themselves as world citizens and some 16% identified with Europe. It is interesting to note the high scores for Scotland and Wales as compared with that of England. He also has some fascinating statistics on minority communities, for example, 40% of Edinburgh's ethnic minority groups say they do not use local shops because of English language difficulties, the proportion of Chinese with first degrees is double that of the white population, 25% of the British

population of Bangladeshis live in Tower Hamlets, and, according to one estimate in 2000, there are approximately half a million people 'with little command of the English language', 86% of parents in the Western Isles wish their children to grow up bilingual, with 71% supporting Gaelic-medium education and 84% of Welsh people believe Welsh is important for Welsh culture but only 49% believe Welsh is relevant to modern life in Wales. What one misses are similar surveys of minority ethnic communities on the position of, say, Black British English or Urdu. What would they say?

In an extremely rich chapter 3 he romps through the history of English and how it became imposed throughout the British Isles (e.g. the Statutes of Kilkenny in Ireland in 1336, which threatened landowners with the forfeiture of their lands if they did not teach English to their young; the Scottish Acts of 1616 required the children of clan chiefs to be 'trained in virtue, learning and the English tongue', with the 1707 Act of Union imposing English as the one language of the state; and Henry VIII's Act of Union in 1536 made English formally official in Wales and ensured that access to the law was possible only through English. This colonization of/by English continued into the Empire, not only abroad but at home as industrialization brought about shifts of population into the towns, heralding destruction of local dialects and languages and the advent of mass education and social-climbing, evidenced by such texts as *Vulgarities of Speech Corrected* (1826) or *Society Small Talk or What to Say and When to Say it* (1879).

In chapter 4 he surveys non-political language planning and the effects of 'xenophobes', amongst whom he cites Prince Charles who is reported to have said that Americanisms were, 'corrupting and should be avoided at all costs'; 'archaism', which seems to yearn for the halcyon days of whoever is complaining's youth; 'elitists' with their preference for Standard English above all other varieties and the clear division between U and non-U speech (NB, remember it's sick and not ill, pudding not sweet, and napkin not serviette!); 'reformers', did you know that between 1880 and 1907 there were some fifty-three proposals for new languages that would free us from the misunderstandings of English – and you thought there was only Esperanto! Perhaps one of the most noble of these was Mont Follick, an MP who had managed a successful language school and wrote a book proposing that we do away with plurals, articles, cases

and genders of pronouns, the imperfect and the future tense. He thought this would produce a truly international language and so end wars. He also comments on the role played by societies and associations, such as the Society for Pure English, founded in 1913 by Poet Laureate Lord Bridges and whose 1925 manifesto set out its concern about 'communities of other-speaking races who ... learn enough of our language to mutilate it'; the publishing industry, with its copy-editor 'rules' that have led to what Deborah Cameron has described as 'hyperstandardization: the mania for imposing a rule on any ordinary understanding of what is needed to ensure efficient communication' and don't you just hate it when your computer takes it upon itself to underline your finely chosen neologisms and witty use of ellipsis in red and green?; 'the media' – newspapers and magazines with their style guides and the BBC with its Pronunciation Unit (just so you know, that fashionable new word that is covering the floors of Islington is pronounced *wen-gay* not *wenge*); and, finally, dictionaries, grammars and style manuals. Who says there's no language planning in the UK?

In chapter 5 he talks about language rights. He makes valuable points about the ideological nature of the Swann Report (1985) that promoted bilingual support only as means of transition from the home language to English, and its successors the Cox Report (1989) on the teaching of English and the Harris Report (1991) on the teaching of MFL, both of which include a chapter on bilingual children but neither of which recommended a specific programme of support for non-indigenous languages in mainstream education.

In chapters 6 and 7 he writes about language as a resource for citizens and the state. He describes the role of organizations such as The British Council and CILT and the role of Modern Foreign Language Teaching. He also makes some interesting comments on the future of 'global' English and its relationship to the British variety. He cites David Graddol's report for the British Council which estimates the number of native speakers of the major languages there will be in 2050 (figures in millions) and sees English slipping from its current second place to third with Arabic also catching up rapidly:

Chinese	1384
Hindi/Urdu	556
English	508
Spanish	486
Arabic	482

In the final chapters he talks about a variety of language 'problems' both in this country and in the wider English-speaking world. He is phlegmatic about the way in which policy in this country attempts to straddle both right and left wings with the espousal of cultural diversity going hand in hand with an insistence on standard English as the norm (as in David Blunkett's proposals for tests in English for new migrants to this country).

In the course of the book, Ager makes some contentious claims for example, reducing Sign Language to a 'communication system', arguing that 'Top-down management of language behaviour has also resulted, through the National Curriculum, in improved test results in English' – maybe but there is little evidence that attainment in literacy standards has risen – and even more remarkably 'Anti-discrimination language planning has been accepted; racist and sexist language have generally disappeared'. One can only assume that emeritus professors don't spend much time in playgrounds where such language (especially of the homophobic variety) is rampant. He does however make a sound and detailed case for his view that, 'More and more, political ideologies and authorities are openly shaping a formal, declared, symbolic as well as practical UK language policy'. We'll have to look elsewhere for our arguments against the policy that appears to be emerging from Downing Street but this book is a very useful source on where we might need to look and why we really, really should.

Frank Monaghan