OBITUARY

Bernard Dov Spolsky (1932–2022)

An appreciation

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A volume titled The Essential Writings of Bernard Spolsky would fill a great need. The editors, however, would need to be vigilant. Spolsky’s essential contributions cover so many fields, and have had such an impact for researchers and practitioners in so many disciplines and parts of the world, that conveying both the diversity and the coherence of his work would be a challenge, albeit an enjoyable one. Spolsky’s work in educational linguistics and literacy, language testing, language policy and management, and other aspects of language in society enriched these fields at crucial times in their development. In the breakthrough volume Educational Linguistics, for example, Spolsky (1978) drew together principles in linguistics, language teaching, and society to articulate the urgency of overcoming ‘the language barrier to education’ (p. 6) which arises in many societies because ‘it is the exception rather than the rule that a child comes to school speaking the language or variety that the educational system uses or aims at’ (p. 14). Decades later, Spolsky was engaged in fresh debates in this field, exploring the possibility of a ‘critical educational linguistics’ in the newly-launched Educational Linguistics journal. In a characteristically thoughtful and erudite paper, Spolsky (2022a: 17) maintained his concern with real-world problems, expressing his alarm at current ‘pressures for monolingualism’. Among these he included ‘the return to the imperial policy in Russia,’ ‘the anti-bilingual education movement in the USA,’ and ‘the change of Arabic from official to special in Israel’.

As if this work were not enough, Spolsky had early established a further stream of research in Jewish languages. This work included historical and ethno-graphic approaches, and culminated in Spolsky’s The Languages of the Jews (2014). His unique ability to bring history, the sociology of language, and an understanding of community practice together in a single treatment made for a comprehensive and masterful volume. Spolsky further demonstrated his extensive knowledge, collegiality, and discerning judgment as a frequent and enthusiastic reviewer of books across a wide range of subjects.
Many of us, however, owe a specific debt to Spolsky’s gift for innovation and continuing involvement in Linguistic Landscape (henceforth LL) research. Building on observations of signage and language use in the Old City of Jerusalem dating to the 1970s, Spolsky’s work with Robert Cooper appeared in an unpublished 1983 report, and subsequently as Spolsky and Cooper’s (1991) *The Languages of Jerusalem*. This volume covered many topics, but three chapters in particular treated the empirical observation of *language in signage*, *code choices in spoken language*, and the *impact of official language policy* in a way that had not been done before. Not content with simply photographing and classifying signs, Spolsky and Cooper were fundamentally concerned with what they called ‘the form and nature of a theory of language choice’ (p. 74). The choice model – expressed as rules or maxims such as the ‘symbolic value’ principle, ‘prefer to write signs in your own language or in a language with which you wish to be identified’ (p. 84) – still calls us to understand the LL as human communicative activity, and not simply as an aggregate of inscribed pieces of wood, plastic, or metal attached to walls and shopfronts.

Though the Spolsky and Cooper (1991) volume was widely and favourably reviewed, the three chapters which focus on what would today be seen as LL research did not directly generate a new research programme. Perhaps the lack of a memorable phrase like ‘linguistic landscape’ meant that most readers did not see the dynamic new field that was in the making. As the field has developed, however, it has become clear that Spolsky’s work – including the relationship between educational linguistics and the LL of learning environments – raises many questions which remain to be investigated. Spolsky’s (2020: 9) later warning that ‘when papers are purely descriptive and simply list and interpret signs without authorship, reference to the full sociolinguistic situation, and acknowledgment of the theoretical background, Linguistic Landscape becomes a game like insect-collecting or Pokémon’ extends the humanistic perspective which he developed in language testing and its ethical dimension, the analysis of language policy and management, and a host of other areas.

Cooper, Shohamy, and Walters (2001: 3) portray Spolsky well in referring to ‘Spolsky the educational linguist, Spolsky the writer, Spolsky the policy analyst, and Spolsky the social actionist’. I conclude, though, with a few words on Spolsky the man. Illustrated and informative accounts of Spolsky’s biographical details – from his early life in New Zealand to a professional and family life which spanned North America, Israel, and other points between – are provided in McCarty’s (2016) interview and in Spolsky’s (2022b) autobiographical essay. Online tributes to Spolsky as mentor, colleague, advisor, and friend have poured in since his death, and I could hardly do them justice in this space. Instead, I turn to Spolsky’s frequent use of Biblical references and quotations from the Talmud to illustrate or
emphasise sociolinguistic points. His major work on language testing, for example, begins heuristically with the Talmudic observation that ‘There is no blessing to be found [...] in something that has been weighed, or in something that has been measured, or in something that has been counted’ (Spolsky 1995:1). In this spirit, I conclude with the *Union Prayerbook’s* Talmudic paraphrase regarding Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai:

> Once he said to his disciples: Go and consider what it is that makes for a good life. Rabbi Eliezer said: A good eye. Rabbi Joshua said: A good friend. Rabbi Yosé said: A good neighbor. Rabbi Simeon said: Foresight. Rabbi Eleazar said: A good heart. Then he said to them: I prefer the answer of Rabbi Eleazar ben Arach, for his answer includes all of yours.

Bernard Dov Spolsky embodied one such good heart. May his memory be for a blessing.

References


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