

Language Policy

Mekonnen Alemu Gebre Yohannes

# Language Policy in Ethiopia

The Interplay Between Policy and  
Practice in Tigray Regional State


*Contributions by*  
Joseph Lo Bianco and  
Joy Kreeft Peyton

 Springer

# Language Policy

Volume 24

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The last half century has witnessed an explosive shift in language diversity not unlike the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, but involving now a rapid spread of global languages and an associated threat to small languages. The diffusion of global languages, the stampede towards English, the counter-pressures in the form of ethnic efforts to reverse or slow the process, the continued determination of nation-states to assert national identity through language, and, in an opposite direction, the greater tolerance shown to multilingualism and the increasing concern for language rights, all these are working to make the study of the nature and possibilities of language policy and planning a field of swift growth.

The series will publish empirical studies of general language policy or of language education policy, or monographs dealing with the theory and general nature of the field. We welcome detailed accounts of language policy-making—who is involved, what is done, how it develops, why it is attempted. We will publish research dealing with the development of policy under different conditions and the effect of implementation. We will be interested in accounts of policy development by governments and governmental agencies, by large international companies, foundations, and organizations, as well as the efforts of groups attempting to resist or modify governmental policies. We will also consider empirical studies that are relevant to policy of a general nature, e.g. the local effects of the developing European policy of starting language teaching earlier, the numbers of hours of instruction needed to achieve competence, selection and training of language teachers, the language effects of the Internet. Other possible topics include the legal basis for language policy, the role of social identity in policy development, the influence of political ideology on language policy, the role of economic factors, policy as a reflection of social change.

The series is intended for scholars in the field of language policy and others interested in the topic, including sociolinguists, educational and applied linguists, language planners, language educators, sociologists, political scientists, and comparative educationalists.

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Mekonnen Alemu Gebre Yohannes

# Language Policy in Ethiopia

The Interplay Between Policy and Practice  
in Tigray Regional State

Contributions by Joseph Lo Bianco  
and Joy Kreeft Peyton

 Springer

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ISSN 1571-5361

ISSN 2452-1027 (electronic)

Language Policy

ISBN 978-3-030-63903-7

ISBN 978-3-030-63904-4 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-63904-4>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

# Series Editor Foreword

## Language Policy Book Series: Our Aims and Approach

Recent decades have witnessed a rapid expansion of interest in language policy studies as transcultural connections deepen and expand all across the globe. Whether it is to facilitate more democratic forms of participation, or to respond to demands for increased educational opportunity from marginalised communities, or to better understand the technologisation of communication, language policy and planning has come to the fore as a practice and a field of study. In all parts of the world, the push for language policy is a reflection of such rapid and deep globalisation, undertaken by governments to facilitate or diversify trade, to design and deliver multilingual public services, to teach less-commonly taught languages and to revitalise endangered languages. There is also interest in forms of language policy to bolster new and more inclusive kinds of language based and literate citizenship.

Real-world language developments have pushed scholars to generate new theory on language policy and to explore new empirical accounts of language policy processes. At the heart of these endeavours is the search for the resolution of communication problems between ethnic groups, nations, individuals, authorities and citizens as well as educators and learners. Key research concerns have been the rapid spread of global languages, especially English and more recently Chinese, and the economic, social and identity repercussions that follow, linked to concerns about the accelerating threat to the vitality of small languages across the world. Other topics that have attracted research attention have been persisting communication inequalities, the changing language situation in different parts of the world, and how language and literacy abilities affect social opportunity, employment and identity.

In the very recent past, language diversity itself has been a popular field of study, to explore particular ways to classify and understand multilingualism, the fate of particular groups of languages or individual languages, and questions of literacy, script and orthography. In this complex landscape of language change efforts of national and sub-national groups to reverse or slow language shift have dominated

concerns of policy makers as well as scholars. While there is a discernible trend towards greater openness to multilingualism and increasing concern for language rights, we can also note the continued determination of nation-states to assert a singular identity through language, sometimes through repressive measures.

For all these reasons, systematic, careful and critical study of the nature and possibilities of language policy and planning is a topic of growing global significance.

In response to this dynamic environment of change and complexity, this series publishes empirical research of general language policy in diverse domains, such as education, or monographs dealing with the theory and general nature of the field. We welcome detailed accounts of language policy-making which explore the key actors, their modes of conceiving their activity, and the perspective of scholars reflecting on the processes and outcomes of policy.

Our series aims to understand how language policy develops, why it is attempted, and how it is critiqued, defended and elaborated or changed. We are interested in publishing research dealing with the development of policy under different conditions and the effect of its implementation.

We are interested in accounts of policy undertaken by governments but also by non-governmental bodies, by international corporations, foundations and the like, as well as the efforts of groups attempting to resist or modify governmental policies.

We will also consider empirical studies that are relevant to policy of a general nature, for example the local effects of transnational policy influence, such as the United Nations, the European Union or regional bodies in Africa, Asia and the Americas. We encourage proposals dealing with practical questions of when to commence language teaching, the numbers of hours of instruction needed to achieve set levels of competence, selection and training of language teachers, the language effects of the Internet, issues of program design and innovation.

Other possible topics include non-education domains such as legal and health interpreting, community- and family-based language planning, language policy from bottom-up advocacy, and language change that arises from traditional forms of power alongside influence and modelling of alternatives to established forms of communication.

Contemporary language policy studies can examine the legal basis for language policy, the role of social identity in policy development, the influence of political ideology on language policy formulation, the role of economic factors in success or failure of language plans or studies of policy as a reflection of social change.

We do not wish to limit or define the limits of what language policy research can encompass, and our primary interest is to solicit serious book-length examinations, whether the format is for a single-authored or multi-authored volume or a coherent edited work with multiple contributors.

The series is intended for scholars in the field of language policy and others interested in the topic, including sociolinguists, educational and applied linguists, language planners, language educators, sociologists, political scientists, and comparative educationalists. We welcome your submissions or an enquiry from you about ideas for work in our series that opens new directions for the field of language policy.

University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Joseph Lo Bianco

Arizona State University, Tempe, USA

Terrence G. Wiley

## Foreword by Berhanu Bogale

In 2006, the Ministry of Education of Ethiopia commissioned a study on medium of instruction in primary schools in Ethiopia. It was during this time that I came to know Mekonnen, as we were both among members of the group that carried out the study. Other members of the group were Dr. Kathleen Heugh and Dr. Carol Benson, both of whom had done extensive research on issues related to literacy, multilingual education, language policy, and language planning. The team had visited almost all of the regions in the country. It was during this time that I witnessed Mekonnen's keenness to understand the situation of students in primary schools in Ethiopia. It was during this time that we also witnessed that students in primary schools in the country were struggling with English, which was used as the medium of instruction, starting from grade five, in some regions. Mekonnen was so sympathetic with these students, who would just look at the teacher trying to explain concepts in English, a foreign language in Ethiopia. It was this situation that later motivated him to carry out an in-depth study into the case of minority group students in the Tigray region.

In the course of the medium of instruction study, we noticed that, in Ethiopia (the second most populous country in Africa, with a population of more than 110 million people) there is a lot to be studied in the area of literacy, mother tongue-based multilingual education, language policy and planning, language in education and development, etc. We wrote a proposal to Addis Ababa University asking for the opening of a field of study that focuses on these areas. A year later, a PhD programme in Applied Linguistics and Development was opened. Mekonnen was the first to apply for the programme and get accepted.

I was Mekonnen's instructor for applied linguistics courses, including research methods in applied linguistics. In our classes, Mekonnen showed a level of understanding, commitment, and critical and analytical thought that is required of a good PhD candidate. Mekonnen's academic strengths are complemented by his research skills. While doing his PhD, he co-authored two chapters in a book published by Routledge: *Multilingual Education and Sustainable Diversity Work: From Periphery to Centre*. He has also co-authored two chapters in another book published by Orient

Black Swan: *Multilingual Education Works*. It's just so sad that we have lost Mekonnen a month after he has successfully defended his PhD thesis.

This book – on the interplay and tension between language policy and language practices in the Tigray region, Ethiopia – is an important addition to the debate on language policy and planning and mother tongue-based education. One of the major findings of the study is the attribution of language policy to two major factors: ideological and empirical. This has been explained by taking three different regimes: the Imperial regime, whose language policy was ideologically motivated; the Post-1974 socialist Derg; and the post-1991 federal governments that used both empirical and ideological motives to put in place multilingual policies. The book takes one of the regional states, Tigray, and shows how the Tigray liberation and nationalist movement has used language as an ideological tool to achieve its political aims. Related to this is the finding that official language policy could be an explicit manifestation of the ideology that a country follows while it could have implicit manifestations as well. According to the education and training policy and the constitution of Ethiopia, which have promulgated multilingual policy, regional states are mandated to adopt and implement their own language policies. Most of the regional states are multilingual, with less developed languages that may not even have an orthography. It is, thus, the responsibility of regional states to determine the choice of languages of education. The study shows how governments explicitly proclaim linguistic rights of all nationalities of a country and yet, covertly, practice a monolingual policy – ending up having conflicting language policies. Mekonnen explains this by describing the case of the Tigray regional state, which has an explicit multilingual policy and yet implemented a *de facto* monolingual policy by forcing the Irob people, whose mother tongue is the Saho language, to use Tigrigna as a medium of instruction.

The study also explicates why language policy and planning is created, manifested, contested, and mediated through explicit and implicit policy mechanisms. I have no doubt that the book will interest readers, not only because it captures how a small local community like Irob is impacted by all this and the strategies they use to respond but also because it seeks to gain deeper understanding of the explicit and implicit voices, motivations, ideologies, instances, and intended or unintended consequences of language policy and planning in the sociopolitical and historical contexts of a country. I am grateful to Joseph Lo Bianco and Joy Kreeft Peyton who have edited the volume following the reviews and made other needed contributions to bring Mekonnen's research to fruition.

Department of Foreign Languages and  
Literature, Addis Ababa University  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Berhanu Bogale

# Testimonial by Wendi Ralaingita

I want to thank the editors for allowing me to share some words about Mekonnen. It is an honor to do so.

I met Mekonnen in November of 2012, when I moved to Addis Ababa to work on the READ TA program. He was one of very few people on our team at the beginning, and I am immensely grateful to have been able to work with him. When we started, I was interested in expanding my understanding of Ethiopian languages and culture, and he was expanding his knowledge of early-grade reading. We learned so much from each other, as well as from the other talented people who became part of the READ TA team.

Mekonnen was balancing work on his PhD with the full-time job of training, and then supporting, writing teams representing seven different languages across Ethiopia to develop the teaching/learning materials for reading, grades 1–8. The work was intense, but I could tell from countless conversations over buna (coffee) that the work on his PhD was helping to inform our work on the reading program, and vice-versa. Those conversations also helped me to understand Ethiopian history, culture, and politics – all of which intertwine closely with language issues – in a way that I never could have otherwise.

After I left Ethiopia in 2015, I stayed in touch with Mekonnen and was thrilled when he emailed to let me know that his dissertation was complete and he had successfully defended it, to complete his PhD. He sent me a draft, and I was fascinated to learn even far more than what he was able to share in the time we had worked together. Only a month later, I was devastated to hear that he had passed away.

I was so happy when Joy let me know that his dissertation was going to be published. His work on READ TA was a valuable contribution to his country and the many children who have benefitted from the materials he helped to develop. Now, this book will help many others learn more about language, history, and culture in Ethiopia, as well as to understand more about the intersection of these more broadly.

I am grateful to the editors and to all involved in the process of preparing this book for publication. I will always be grateful that I was able to get to know and work with Mekonnen.

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RTI International, International Development Group  
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Wendi Ralaingita (PhD)

## Comments by Joseph Lo Bianco and Joy Kreeft Peyton

The title page of this book has the name of its author, Mekonnen Alemu Gebre Yohannes, and our names as contributors. In these comments we explain how this unusual situation arose and how the doctoral dissertation that Mekonnen submitted to Addis Ababa University has been converted into a book issued by an academic publishing house. We, Joy and Joe, have known each other for many years, from when Joe studied, lived, and worked in the United States, and we have had the pleasure of writing and publishing together in the past. However, working to bring to fruition Mekonnen's PhD research has been a highly original and occasionally challenging task.

In 2014, Joy worked with Mekonnen in Ethiopia. They collaborated on the READ Technical Assistance Project, an education reform initiative to promote literacy and support school attendance. READ was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the lead contractor for the project was RTI International. Mekonnen worked as the Reading/Curriculum Specialist for RTI International, and Joy was engaged in the project with sub-contractor, SIL LEAD.

Joy and Mekonnen collaborated on many aspects of the overall READ activity – designing and planning materials to be developed in the seven main languages spoken in Ethiopia: Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Aff Somali, Hadiya, Sidamu Afoo, Tigrinya, and Wolaita; and providing support for training the personnel who would write and use course materials in these languages. Their collaboration involved meeting instructional leaders, curriculum developers, and writers; and providing continuous support for their work throughout the project.

At one point they travelled from Addis Ababa to Mekelle, Mekonnen's home city, and worked with the teams developing materials in the Tigrinya language to provide refresher workshops and other technical assistance. During this time, Joy had extensive discussions with Mekonnen about issues of language policy and planning in Ethiopia and noted Mekonnen's passion for this topic, which was the focus of his doctoral research. In November 2015, Mekonnen successfully defended his dissertation, entitled *Language Policy in Ethiopia: The Interplay and Tensions*

*Between Language Policy and Practices* at Addis Ababa University. Sadly, just 4 weeks after his successful defence of the dissertation, he died after being admitted to hospital for treatment of a chronic illness from which he suffered.

Joy had met Mekonnen's wife, Sophia Mohamed Nur, and they too became friends. After Mekonnen passed, she asked if Mekonnen's dissertation could be published. Joy contacted Joe because of his academic specialisation in the same field as Mekonnen's research, language policy and its impact on education and links between policy and literacy use and development. As series co-editor with Terence Wiley of the Springer Language Policy books, Joe noted the absence of substantive literature on Ethiopia and the paucity of first-hand accounts of its impressive history with language policy. Joe undertook to explore how publication of the thesis could be arranged and how Springer's issues of copyright, manuscript review processes, author/editorship responsibilities could be addressed so that the regular processes of publication standards would be observed. The aim was to ensure that this important work could be made available to a wider audience.

Together we prepared a book proposal, obtained anonymous expert reviews and then incorporated their comments into the text. We have made these changes to convert a university thesis with its academic conventions into a scholarly book publication for a wider audience. We are, therefore, delighted to bring Mekonnen's significant research work in his dissertation to fruition as an internationally available academic book.

In this process, we sought to make the language policies and processes in Ethiopia, and their impact on education planning and implementation, as clear as possible to what we anticipate will be an international readership. We have combined some of the chapters and added overviews and conclusions to signpost Mekonnen's key arguments and the flow of his data gathering, analysis, and interpretation. We have maintained the central vision, key arguments, source data, and critical innovative concepts that characterise Mekonnen's important work.

In producing this volume we would like to express our deep gratitude to the following people for their valuable contributions:

- Sophia Mohamed Nur, for her idea that this book be published and her support and encouragement throughout the editing process;
- Dr. Berhanu Bogale, Mekonnen's professor and dissertation advisor, for writing the Foreword and supporting us in our work;
- Dr. Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes, of Curtin University in Western Australia, for his assistance with points of interpretation, for helpful comments and content about social, cultural and historical issues, and for assisting with citation conventions of Ethiopian names;
- Four anonymous reviewers, who provided clear direction for how to structure and edit the original dissertation for publication in book format.

We trust that Mekonnen would be pleased with the outcome which we have undertaken with the utmost respect for him and his scholarly achievement. There is little widely available literature on the unique, extended and complex language policymaking in the Irob area of Tigray, Ethiopia. The volume we are proud to

bring to fruition shows the value and deep insight of Mekonnen's study, bringing perspective from how policy is experienced by small communities and how this must influence how we imagine and understand the totality of the language policy enterprise. Macro studies of policy, whether descriptive accounts of their aims and procedures, or critical accounts of their ideology and assumptions, are incomplete without meso and micro level analysis of further interpretation, modification, their eventual implementation and effects. The counter-effects are part of the dynamic process depicted through the critical lens that Mekonnen applies in this rare and valuable contribution to global literature on language policy studies.

We hope that future generations of Ethiopian and international scholars will be inspired by Mekonnen's dedication and insights, and benefit from his scholarship and professionalism.

## Book Overview

This book is based on a study presented November 2015, in fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (School of Graduate Studies, Applied Linguistics and Development) at Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The presiding mentor was Dr. Berhanu Bogale.

Given the pre- and post-1991 sociopolitical and historical contexts in Ethiopia, the emergence and promulgation of official multilingual policies and ideologies have led to *de facto* monolingual policies and ideologies in the country. These policies and practices have led to the emergence of counter-hegemonic policies and practices. This book examines the interplay and tensions between language policy and language practices within these contextual processes. The study employed qualitative research methodology with an ethnographic research design and critical discourse methods of analysis, which are crucial to illuminating micro-level processes and constructs vis-à-vis macro-level processes and constructs.

The study revealed that although multilingual policies are officially proclaimed in Ethiopia, restrictive or hegemonic language policies are perpetuated and maintained in practice. It also found out that such residual resistance to pluralism emanated from the dominant group's interests, instructionally rooted practices, ideologies, mechanisms, and agents.

The study also found out that even though the majority or dominant language groups continued to perpetuate language policies and practices to maintain their language-based dominance and ideology, individuals or groups from the minority (e.g., activists and educators) continued to struggle and gain their language spaces and rights by creating micro-level resistance language policies, processes, and mechanisms that influenced or affected the macro-level policies.

The study concluded that language policy and practice, being a dynamic, multi-layered, contextual process, can be difficult to understand, since the official language policy often underpins or is underpinned by overt or covert language policies, practices, ideologies, mechanisms, and agents. These are the key constructs of the proposed theoretical framework, *Ideology as a Locus of Language Policy*.

# Acknowledgments by Mekonnen Alemu Gebre Yohannes

In making my way on this Ph.D. journey, many people and institutions deserve acknowledgement, though it is difficult to name them all. I primarily give my thanks and sincere appreciation to Dr. Berhanu Bogale for his invaluable collegial and academic advice and insights, flexibility, and accessibility.

Haftey (Ak'eza) and my brothers, Ejigu, Goitom, and Yibrah, you were my Saviors! You shouldered all of the life-threatening challenges during my 2012 neurological surgery! Thank you so much for saving my life and for being always with me.

Being away for so long, my family – Sophi, Sophanit, Sweba, and Sea'ni – I made you suffer a lot. But, finally we did it! No more time away! I am always with you! My sister, Demekech, having an unbelievable telepathy, I made you worry from a distance. You are a sister indeed!

My brothers, Gebre and Yosi in the U.S., thank you so much for providing me contemporary books on language policy. Dr. Heidi Biseth and Professor David Castell Johnson, thank you so much for providing me with the necessary reference materials. Professor Kathleen Heugh and Professor Elizabeth Lanza, thank you for critically commenting on my PhD proposal.

My heartfelt thanks also go to my friends, Dr. Abate Kassahun, Dr. Zenawi Zerihun, Dr. Zelealem Taffere (all from Mekelle University), and Dr. Wendi Ralaingita (RTI) for your scholarly and personal supports and ideas. My stay at Akaki Campus would not have been enjoyable and insightful without you, Dr. Ayenew, Ato Tsega-ab Kassa, Dr. Esayas Tajebe, Eisrael, Mohammed, Temesgen, and others. Thank you all!

I am especially grateful for all of the research participants who willingly participated in this study and shared their exciting experiences.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my sister, Akeza or Haftey, who has committed her worthy youth's life for me and particularly to my education, and to the entire family! I am entirely your product! Haftey, keep this Ph.D. alongside my 'Grade 1 Certificate'! This dynamic adventure is a result of your wholehearted and well-rounded endeavors.



Photograph courtesy of Sophia Mehamed Nur

Addis Ababa University  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
November 2015

Mekonnen Alemu Gebre Yohannes

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