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***Using corpus linguistics to investigate agency and benign neglect in organisational language policy and planning: the United Nations as a case study.***

***Abstract***

This article responds to recent calls to investigate the role of agents and the connections between layers of agency in the development and implementation of language policy and planning (LPP). Using a corpus linguistic and discursive approach to language policy, we identify interventions made in plenary sessions by Secretary-Generals (SGs) and Member States (MSs) at the United Nations when discussing language issues over a period of 46 years (1970-2016). The article identifies which SGs and MSs prioritise language issues and the change agents and/or (un)successful brokers in matters of policy and planning. Analysis reveals that language issues were discussed infrequently over the period studied, suggesting benign neglect in matters of multilingualism in general: the silent majority were agentive in largely maintaining the status quo. However, in exploring power *in* discourse and power *over* discourse we were able to determine which interventions resulted in minor changes to policy over time and who were the powerful agents in this respect. The study points to the importance of using corpus-assisted methods in explorations of diachronic (/historical) and synchronic studies of agency in LPP. It is proposed that future research should explore networks of agents (interconnections within and between layers), using CL to investigate longitudinal trajectories of decision-making and policy change over time. Moreover, CL can usefully complement other approaches, e.g. interviews and ethnographic approaches, to further explore the dialectic relationship between agency and structure.

***Keywords***

agency; corpus linguistics; organizational language policy; silence; United Nations

***1. Introduction***

This article seeks to contribute to ongoing investigation and critical analysis of the role of agency in the creation and negotiation of language policy and planning (LPP). It offers a unique approach to the identification of ‘powerful’ (Zhao & Baldauf 2012) policy actors across different levels of an organization in order to address the long-standing difficulty of investigating possible connections across layers of policy actors (Hult 2010) over time. Using corpus linguistics, we map LP actors’ spoken interventions in plenary meetings longitudinally and synchronically in two layers of organizational membership – the Secretariat (/Secretary-Generals) and Member States of the United Nations over a period of 46 years (1970-2016) –

and align these with changes in the language policy of the organisation. In addition to metalanguage which references language issues, we draw attention to the salience of ‘silence’ as a powerful agentic strategy in maintaining the status quo and normalizing inequalities of language status. In line with Zhao & Baldauf (2012), we acknowledge that it is important to identify where agency is absent or silenced; however, we also argue that silence does not automatically index lack of power but may be utilized in the exercise of it. While there is recognition that LPP can ‘be covert and unexpressed in textual forms and such forms of LPP can be very influential’ (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech 2020: 4), we contend that the exercise of agency can be found in the iterative reproduction and maintenance of practices over time (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). We therefore seek to investigate whether (and which) agents with institutional power tend to make policy decisions that sustain and normalize linguistic and institutional hierarchies, potentially supporting the interests of powerful organizational players, as opposed to agents who may seek to challenge or change the status quo (cf. Ball, 2006, cited in Johnson & Johnson 2015: 224).

The paper begins with a review of pertinent research on the issues above, i.e. structure, agency and LPP, metalanguage and silence, before progressing to an overview of the historical and contemporary nature of language policy and planning (LPP) at the UN. The research aims, questions and methodological design are then presented in sections 3 and 4. Section 5 presents the findings and section 6 discusses the implications of this study for understanding the role of and constraints on agents, including the interconnections (if any) between agents operating at different levels in the same organisation.

## ***2. Review of the Literature***

### *2.1 Structure, agency & language policy & planning*

In recent years agency has become central, theoretically and analytically, to LPP scholarship (e.g. Bourchard & Glasgow 2019, also articles in the 2020 special issue of *Current Issues in Language Planning*, edited by Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech). It is this scholarship, along with other post-modern accounts that we draw on here.

A post-modern/post-structural view of languages and language users conceives of them in relation to, and in dialogue with, their socio-historical, political and cultural contexts. Prominent among issues under debate is the structure-agency dualism – a long-standing and

still unresolved debate in the social sciences (e.g. cf. Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1980; Giddens, 1991; Marx, 1971) concerning the extent to which individuals' and groups' freedom to act and think is delimited by structural forces (see Author 2019 and Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech 2020). A post-structural reading of agency conceives of it as 'socioculturally mediated and dialectically enacted' (Lantolf & Thorne 2006: 238), regulated by the strictures (i.e. rules and resource constraints) of environments but also enhanced by their liberatory possibilities. Agency carries with it spatial and temporal dimensions therefore: the influence of past experiences, beliefs and values, present concerns and influences, and an orientation to the future (see Emirbayer & Mische 1998)<sup>i</sup>. Therefore, acts of agency are not just evident in changing practices, but also in their continuity.

Giddens's theory of 'structuration' defines agency as a *process*, as 'something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual' (1991: 52). As such, post-modern investigations involve not only engaging with individual and collective acts and (re-)action but also the influence of different agentive and structural effects across time and contexts. A dialectal relationship is recognised between individuals and the institutional contexts/structures in which they find themselves: individuals and groups shape institutions through their iterative action(s) (see Emirbayer & Mische 1998), while institutions also shape individuals/groups. Institutional and ecological settings are imbued with historical, socio-cultural and political texts, discourses and ideologies, which can be invoked by agents and/or re-negotiated or challenged. Accordingly, in our analysis of institutional discourse we pay particular attention to any discussions of language issues/policy over time, since we view these as intertextual and interdiscursive links to past and present policy texts/discourses and to (cumulative) agentive acts which belie changes to, or reinforcement of, the language policy in place.

Agency has been identified as a critical variable in the development of LPP theory and in the implementation of policy. Indeed Ricento asserts that agency is "the key variable which separates the older, positivistic/technicist approaches from the newer critical/postmodern ones" (2000: 206). While it is recognised that official policies forged by powerful actors can promote, shape, enforce and in some cases, suppress or restrict the use and status of some languages in certain domains (Badwan 2020, online; Tollefson, 1991, 2013; Tollefson & Tsui, 2004), it is also recognised that they can be debated and challenged by actors 'on the ground'/at meso and micro-levels (e.g. teachers, citizens, institutional members). As such

agents have the power to enact, (re)interpret, negotiate or challenge policy (e.g. Menken & García 2010). Indeed, we have witnessed a shift of focus, away from the study of official policies and ideologies, to a concentrated study of localised discourses and practices by agents across different layers or levels.

Whilst levels and layers of agents have been differently conceptualised, Ricento & Hornberger (1996) and Hornberger & Johnson (2007) have long called for researchers to slice through the ubiquitous metaphorical ‘onion’ to identify and examine the connections between layers of policy creation, interpretation, implementation or resistance. This focus on levels or layers ‘has also led to a rethinking of agency’ (Baldauf, 2006, p.147) and a realisation that in order to understand how policy and planning works, it is important to consider the actions of actors and their interconnections. At the same time, there is a dearth of research on the exercise of agency by ‘people with power’ (Zhao & Baldauf 2015)<sup>ii</sup> and research which focusses on longitudinal trajectories of decision-making and policy change over time across different layers of an organisation, something that this study seeks to address.

## *2.2 Agency as discursive power: Metalanguage, silence and benign neglect in language policy*

In this paper, we therefore study agency in LPP from a post-modern, post-structural perspective. We see language policy as largely enacted in and through discourse and (tacit) practice and agency as a form of discursive power (Barakos and Unger, 2016; Bonacina-Pugh 2012; Lo Bianco, 2005; Pennycook 2006). As Fairclough (2015: 3) explains, discourse is a form of social action and the power of discourse lies not only in how people with power shape the ‘order of discourse’ but also how people with power control what happens in specific interactions. In other words, a discursive approach means examining texts in their social context (i.e. who produces and consumes texts and what structures of power allow for these texts to be produced and consumed), thereby providing insight into power *in* discourse (i.e. how discursive meaning is interpreted) and power *over* discourse (i.e. ‘access to the stage’ or inclusion and exclusion) (Wodak, 2013: xxviii). In the language policy and planning context, this means understanding the power dynamics involved in the ways in which language policies emerge and evolve and which texts produced by which individuals result in these developments. Thus, in order to account for power *in* discourse, a discursive approach

to language policy agency should address the ways in which talk about language policy and planning (i.e. *metalanguage*, or ‘language about language’) enacts change. At the same time, to account for power *over* discourse, a discursive approach to language policy should address the ways in which the *absence* of metalanguage (i.e. silence, avoidance or inaction) might result from, among other things, social exclusion and/or unwillingness to discuss language issues; these factors, too, can be agentive and lead to the maintenance of the status quo. The effect of silence can be that the subject of language is not made relevant where it might have been and this can be a way of exercising control over a language situation.<sup>iii</sup>

Indeed, previous research has suggested that silence (and/or inaction) can have real impacts on language policy. For example, Ricento and Hornberger (1996: 422) indicate that silence can lead to the ratification of existing policies. Also, researchers have indicated that the privileging of some individuals and communities in policy documents can effectively render others invisible and/or silent. For example, Lo Bianco (2001) notes that statements of policy are concerned with “setting out administrative action” but they also carry a rhetorical function, “validating some and silencing other interpretations”. Liddicoat (2015: 118), too, has discussed absences in policy texts, which can obscure the mechanics necessary to effect language change. However, concerns over silence are not unique to language policy; they are also of concern to policymakers more generally. Yanow (1992: 417) suggests that silence in policymaking may betray “publicly unmentionable goals”, i.e. *verboden* goals emerging from a lack of public consensus. In these cases, silence may be the preferred option to avoid entering into contentious discussions about contradictory and incommensurable values in contemporary life. This brings us back to the notion of power *over* discourse, where some goals may be proscribed because of the influence of powerful individuals who shape discourse and determine what remains unsaid (Schroeter and Taylor, 2018: 9).

In this paper, we contend that silence and absence in policy and planning relate to wider issues of ‘benign neglect’, i.e. inaction or inattention that ultimately benefit some parties and negatively impact upon others. In language policy research, benign neglect is a term that has been used in national contexts to refer to ‘minimal government’, or the belief that the state should not intervene to encourage or discourage particular linguistic choices by its citizens (Kymlicka and Patten, 2003: 32). The impact of a benign neglect approach is invariably negative for linguistic minorities (Wright, 2016: 231). We consider benign neglect here in an international organizational perspective because we propose that it primarily manifests as

silence (and/or absence of discussion) and also because it is agentive in that it produces change, or maintains the status quo, in a language policy context. Thus, while we adopt a discursive approach wherein agency is identifiable (at least in part) through metalinguistic discourse (i.e. metalanguage represents both having a voice and actively using that voice to lobby for language causes), we also propose that benign neglect is a form of agency and it is possible to study through silence. More specifically, we argue that the success of agency can be assessed (i.e. in terms of its role in effecting change) according to the extent to which metalanguage aligns with (changes to) explicitly stated policy or language initiatives over the course of an organisation's history. Once alignments between metadiscourse and policy change are made transparent, we can identify non-alignments: (1) where members lobby for policy change but are unsuccessful and/or (2) where policy changes are made that are not met with the endorsement of relevant parties. In the former case, we consider that the metalanguage indicates that those parties are non-agentive (i.e. unable to exercise their power to effect change); in the latter case, we consider that the lack of metalanguage or lack of endorsement indicates the parties are also non-agentive. The final possible outcome is where there are no policy changes and no parties calling for policy change: in these periods where the status quo reigns, we consider the possibility of benign neglect.

### ***3. LPP and the United Nations***

As an international organization concerned with fostering and supporting human rights, peace and security, and development, and with a membership spanning the globe, the United Nations is an institution in which language and, specifically, multilingualism plays a central role. To strike a balance between the symbolic and practical roles required of language, a multilingual language policy has been in force since the inception of the organisation. The construction and implementation of the UN's language policy have always fallen on two main layers of policy actors: Member States who have the power to negotiate, decide upon and implement the language policy and who ultimately pay for its operation; and the Secretariat who support the work of the Member States administratively and who also implement the policy in their day-to-day work. The Secretariat is headed by the Secretary-General (SG), who also has the power to make LP and language issues a strategic priority throughout his term of office. The extent to which Member States and SGs have come to have an impact on the language policy of the UN is a question of agency, potentially related

to the status of Member States and SGs within the organization. The question of language policy agency at the UN is of growing importance as the preponderance of English and lack of parity amongst the official languages has become increasingly evident in recent years (e.g. United Nations, 2015, 2019a; UN DESA 2013, Author 2015, 2020).

Although the language policy of the United Nations aims to achieve parity across its six official languages, the imbalance between them is a longstanding issue. Prior to the establishment of the UN, the League of Nations favoured English and French by consensus; however, as the UN became established, attempts were made to become more inclusive, recognising both the languages of the victors of the second world war and the large proportion of speakers of Spanish amongst its constituents. Therefore, Article 111 of the 1945 UN Charter states that “the Chinese, French, Russian, English, and Spanish texts are equally authentic.” Whilst recognising their authenticity, this did not translate into full support of the languages administratively; rather, only French and English became the working languages of the Secretariat, and although the other three were recognised as ‘official’, this meant that Member States were only supported by translation (not interpretation) of the other three languages in the General Assembly (GA)<sup>iv</sup>. The Organisation’s language policy developed and evolved incrementally over subsequent years (see Table 1) to support more languages and functions in the different organs of the organisation<sup>v</sup>.

**Table 1: Evolving Language Policy & Language Initiatives at the United Nations**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Language(s)/Initiatives</b>	<b>Domain &amp; status (official/working language)</b>
1948	Spanish	General Assembly (working language)
1968	Spanish	Security Council (working language)
	Russian	General Assembly (working language)



1969	Russian	Security Council (working language)
1973	Arabic  Chinese	General Assembly (working & official)  General Assembly (working language)
1974	Chinese	Security Council (working language)
1999	Introduction of International Mother Language Day (introduced by UNESCO; initiated by Bangladesh)	Observed annually February 21 <sup>st</sup>

While slight changes have been made over the years, including technological innovations which have increased multilingual capacity, e.g. remote translation services; websites and internet resources, (see consecutive SG Reports on Multilingualism. [www.un.org/sg/en/multilingualism/index.shtml](http://www.un.org/sg/en/multilingualism/index.shtml)), fundamentally the decisions documented in Table 1 have defined the UN's language policy, if not its language practices. Six official languages and two working languages are supported at UN Headquarters in New York, whilst other languages are supported in the UN's outreach and field work<sup>vi</sup>.

In recent years, great efforts have been made to review and promote multilingualism, in particular following an internal review of multilingualism in 2011 (Joint Inspection Unit Report JIU/REP/2011/4) and the appointment of a Coordinator of Multilingualism (the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management) (Author 2015). The current Secretary-General, António Guterres, has made multilingualism one of his five strategic areas of importance and in his most recent report on multilingualism set out the most extensive and intensified work programme to date (see United Nations 2019b; Author, forthcoming), despite recognising the limitations imposed by resource constraints. Still, these efforts exist in the face of continuing concern about the hegemony of English in all UN activities, and in particular, a lack of parity in use and support for the official and working languages on and offline<sup>vii</sup>. It is here that we situate the present study, reflecting on what the

well-documented history of the organization might tell us about who has the power to effect language policy change.

### *Aims & Research Questions*

In this paper we examine the influence of agency on organizational LPP, focusing on speeches made within plenary meetings by two ‘layers’ of the UN’s personnel: Secretary Generals (SGs) and Permanent Representatives of member states at Headquarters of the UN in New York. As mentioned, these are two key sites wherein the language policy of the organization is formally discussed and negotiated. These data sites were selected since they hold discursive traces of the processes of language policymaking within the organisation. Using a corpus linguistics-based discursive approach, we aim to account for evidence of synchronic and diachronic LP agency by examining speeches made in plenary meetings over a 46-year period. We examine how speakers exercise agency when discussing language issues at different historical moments of the organisation’s history. In so doing we witness both the dynamic and stable nature of organizational language policy over time and we are in a better position to question the issues that have historically militated against full implementation of the UN’s language policy and assess the extent to which language issues have actually been of central concern to agents within the UN Secretariat (represented by consecutive SGs) and/or representatives of Member States.

A second objective in our research is methodological. Although there is a growing, if still small, body of work on language and the UN, and although corpus linguistics has been used in investigations of large datasets of policy-related texts (e.g. Diaz & Hall, 2020; Fitzsimmons-Doolan, 2014, 2018, Authors 2020), to our knowledge these methods have not yet been used in research on agency in LPP. We explore the ways in which corpus linguistics enables researchers to identify agents (in our case, specific Member States and Secretary-Generals) drawing on two corpora: the United Nations General Debates Corpus (Mikhaylov, Baturo and Dasandi, 2017) and a corpus of SG Annual Statements to the General Assembly.

Our specific research question is: Which member states and SGs prioritise language issues and who are the change agents and/or (un)successful brokers? In order to answer this question, we determine (1) which language issues appear within the member states’ debates within the UNGDC and SG statements between 1970 and 2016 and (2) how these issues align topically and chronologically with policy initiatives or changes over time.

#### 4. Data & methods

We draw on two datasets and align the metalanguage/silence therein with the language policy developments and initiatives outlined in Section 3. The first dataset is the UN General Debates Corpus (henceforth UNGDC), which consists of short speeches made by senior representatives of member states within the annual UN General Debates sessions (forums of the UN General Assembly) over the course of 46 years (1970-2016). The UNGDC contains 7701 statements (22,070,872 words) and is organised according to year, session and country (Mikhaylov, Baturo and Dasandi, 2017). Although speeches were delivered in a range of languages, the corpus contains only the official English versions. This corpus was analysed extensively in a previous publication in which we investigated the language ideologies of organisational members (AUTHORS, 2020). We build on the findings of that work here.

Our second dataset consists of a corpus of annual statements made by consecutive Secretary Generals over the same time period (1970-2016) (henceforth SG corpus). Over this period of time there were six Secretary-Generals from different countries, each of whom served one or two terms: U Thant (Burma, now Myanmar), 1961-1971 (two terms); Kurt Waldheim (Austria), 1972-1981 (two terms); Javier Perez de Cuellar (Peru), 1982-1991 (two terms); Boutros Boutros-Ghali (Egypt), 1992-1996 (one term); Kofi A. Annan (Ghana), 1997-2006 (two terms); and Ban Ki-Moon (Republic of Korea), 2007-2016 (two terms). Their statements were downloaded from the UN website (<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/secretary-generals-speeches>) and in total constitute a corpus of 74 files and 2,212,297 words.

Our primary methodological approach to the study of metalanguage and silence in the data (and its implications for agency) is corpus linguistics: the study of large, naturally-occurring, computer-readable sets of language data (i.e. *corpora*). One of the primary objectives in corpus research is to identify ‘non-obvious meaning’ (Partington 2010: 88) in language data, and this is generally achieved using a few core tools to distort intuitive reading in order to identify textual patterns. Partington (2014) notes that while these (and other) corpus tools have primarily been used to identify *explicit* (manifested) linguistic features (and, in our case, are useful for identifying metalanguage), corpus methods also provide a useful arsenal of tools for the examination of phenomena relating to silence and absence. Partington (2014: 142) explains that corpus techniques can *identify* absence (i.e. “ascertain whether a certain item or structure is or is not absent from a certain dataset”), *locate* absence (i.e. “detect from

precisely where an item or structure is missing”) and *quantify* absence (i.e. give precise figures of frequency with respect to absolute corpus size or relative to the size of subsections of a corpus). Moreover, he highlights that corpus approaches can “track with precision the appearance and disappearance of items and phraseologies from a certain discourse, a necessary precursor to linking the discourse with its historical perspective” (Partington, 2014: 142). The ability to track discourse over time is highly relevant to our study. Thus, in this paper we use corpus methods to explore (explicit) metalanguage as well as the typology of corpus-identifiable absences outlined by Partington (2014: 123):<sup>viii</sup>

1. Known – or suspected, or ‘searchable’ – absence
2. Unknown absence
3. Relative absence and absolute absence
4. Absence from a sizeable corpus
5. Absence from a limited set of texts, including from a specific portion of a corpus
6. Absence from a position in a single text, including from a location in a phrase
7. Absence defined as ‘hidden from open view’, that is, hidden meaning<sup>ix</sup>

Using the corpus programme WordSmith (Version 7.0), we used the WordList Tool to create and examine frequency lists of the UNGDC and SG corpora: these lists allowed us to gain an overview of the general content of the corpora, with the rank order of words understood to be indicative of the relative salience of topics and issues (see e.g. Section 5.1 ‘Language issues’).

We then examined individual words relating to our topic, which were selected based on previous research (e.g. see AUTHORS, 2020; AUTHOR 2016): *language, languages, multilingual, multilinguals, multilingualism, English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Arabic, translation, interpretation*. We paid particular attention to the rank order of words, i.e. their frequency in relation to one another in the corpus. In order to address items (1), (3) and (4) from Partington’s (2014) typology, we determined which of our search terms were present and which were absent, considering both absolute absence (i.e. complete absence from a corpus) and relative absence (i.e. absence over a particular time period, SG tenure period, and/or within country-specific data). The comparative aspect of our approach gave this step another dimension, since the presence of language issues in one dataset made the

absence (/silence) in another meaningful (cf. Schroeter and Taylor, 2018: 14). We used both raw and normalized frequency to compare the occurrences across the two corpora but also across subsections of individual corpora (Baker, 2006); this helped to establish which individual member states and SGs raised language issues the most.<sup>x</sup>

To address unknown absences (i.e. item (2) from the typology), we also began to compile additional lists of words that addressed language policy issues that extended beyond the original set of search terms listed above, recursively checking the findings based on our initial set of search terms against the growing constellation of terms. We were also able to trace absence by comparing rank orders of words across and within the two corpora (i.e. within subsets of data from different member states and Secretary Generals) and the salience of these words at different points over the 46-year time period (i.e. item (5) from the typology). To address the more unwieldy item (7) from the typology (i.e. hidden meaning), we examined individual words in their original co-text using the Concord tool to investigate collocates and concordance lines. We identified which instances related to substantive discussions of language issues in the UN and the preliminary conclusions drawn at this stage were corroborated through close text reading of the relevant texts/ sections.

The objective throughout was to establish if, how and when language was being discussed by the member states and the Secretary Generals, respectively, and if these issues overlapped across the two layers of the organisation. If language was *not* being discussed (and we admit that our expectation for language issues to be raised at all stems from our own subjective role as linguistic researchers, cf. Duguid and Partington, 2018: 40), we did not draw any immediate conclusions: we do not suggest that language should be made relevant in every single intervention in United Nations activity. However, conscious that language issues *could be* raised in many interventions, particularly in response to others' initiations, we propose that *perpetual non-occurrence of metalanguage* (i.e. persistent silence) is significant and agentive. It is on this basis that we draw the conclusions from our data, which we discuss in Section 6.

## **5. Findings**

In this section we synthesize the findings derived from the aforementioned procedure in order to determine which language issues emerged from the UNGDC and SG corpora, respectively (Section 5.1), which actors (i.e. individual member states and SGs) raise language issues

(Section 5.2), and the extent to which these actors and the issues they raise align with the shifts in language policy over the course of the 46-year time period covered by the data (Section 5.3).

### *Section 5.1: Language issues*

#### 5.1.1 UNGDC

As reported in AUTHORS 2020, metalanguage is remarkably infrequent in the UNGDC and most search terms relating to official languages (i.e. *English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Arabic*) tend not to refer to language but rather politics, geography, and populations (e.g. *Russian Federation* occurs 420 times whereas *Russian language* occurs only twice; *Chinese people* occurs 237 times but *Chinese language* only once). Despite relatively infrequent examples, our analysis shows three predominant language issues emerging from the data. First, there are repeated discussions of the importance of *sharing a common language*. This emerged in various ways, including reference to in-group (national and geopolitical) identities and foregrounded as the premise for associations between countries, such as Portuguese-speaking Brazil and East Timor (see Brazil, UNGD Session 53, 1998) and French-speaking Mauritius and Romania (see Mauritius, UNGD Session 48, 1993 and Romania, UNGD Session 61, 2006). The notion of a common language is further used as a rhetorical device indexing dominant UN discourses relating to multilateralism, as invoked by Israel (UNGD Session 54, 1999) in Example 1.

#### *Example 1 (emphasis added)*

Discussion is the way to resolve conflict. It is also the way of tomorrow. Dialogue and **common language** are the tools of diplomacy, the raw material for the creation of a new reality and the foundation for a stable and safer society.

The English language, in particular, is marked as an important lingua franca noted to unite groups internationally.

The second language issue raised in the UNGDC consists of *positive representations of multilingualism*. Although the term ‘multilingualism’ itself is rarely mentioned (occurring only 7 times over the course of the 46 years), references to (the plural form) *languages* (148 occurrences) and discussions of multiple languages (e.g. “English, French and Spanish”)

occur in discussions wherein multilingualism is associated with democracy and human rights in national and regional contexts, often invoked (in)directly in reference to the founding principles of the UN. For example, the delegation of Saint Kitts and Nevis (UNGD Session 40, 1985) discusses multilingualism alongside peace and development:

*Example 2 (emphasis added)*

The Organization of American States proudly represents the interests of the United States of America, the countries of Central and South America and the **French-, Spanish-, Dutch- and English-speaking** Caribbean nations. It is highly undesirable that such an invaluable organization, critical to the maintenance and **upkeep of development through peace**, should be at present languishing on the sick-bed of financial constraints imposed by the unwillingness of the more affluent member States to live up to hitherto agreed contributions.

Finally, a third issue, most closely related to UN LPP in the UNGDC pertains to the official and working languages of the organisation. References to these are infrequent and equal treatment is not given to each language. There are, for example, far more substantive discussions of English (213 occurrences) than Chinese (1 occurrence) (AUTHORS 2020). Indeed, texts in the UNGDC frequently reference content produced in English, a pattern which occurs much less frequently for other languages (see Table 1). The fact that our dataset consists of exclusively English versions of documents (i.e. documents that might have been originally produced in another language prior to translation) means that we do not have access to information about which languages are in *use* in the General Assembly. Nevertheless, a preponderance of metalinguistic commentary concerning English indicates a lack of parity among the official languages.

*Table 1: Frequency of phrase “spoke in” language*

Phrase “spoke in...”	Frequency
English	128
French	100

Arabic	10
Spanish	9
Portuguese	5
Russian	2
Hebrew	2
Montenegrin	1
Moldovan	1
Kyrgyz	1
Haitian Creole	1
Creole	1

Finally, UN official languages were often referenced when delegates were calling for additional languages to be given official/working status at the UN. For example, in twelve separate instances since 1976, member states requested Portuguese to be made an official language; also, since 2009, there have been increasing calls by Bangladesh for Bengali/Bangla to be made an official language.

### 5.1.2 SG corpus

The most prominent language issues in the SG corpus pertained to *language provision, human resources, and language status* and these relate most closely to language use and provision within the UN itself. The category of *provision* includes issues such as the hosting of multilingual events (e.g. seminars, tours), language services (e.g. interpretation and translation) and the dissemination of materials in different languages (e.g. websites, lists, issues, editions, platforms, films, pamphlets, posters, publications, series). SG U Thant made



the most references to language provision: in the two short years of his tenure covered by the SG corpus he referenced linguistic provision 114 times, as in Example 3.

*Example 3: Report Of The Secretary-General On The Work Of The Organization 16 June 1969 —15 June 1970*

The policy of *apartheid* pursued by the Government of South Africa was also reviewed in a question-and answer pamphlet, *Segregation in South Africa*. Another pamphlet, *Action against Apartheid*, presented an account of debates and discussions in the United Nations on that subject. Both of these publications were published in about eleven languages each. A special leaflet, *International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*, was issued in more than twenty-five languages. Two other publications on *apartheid* have been issued in a number of languages...

While most frequently U Thant discussed ‘languages’ generically, when he mentioned specific languages these tended to include English, French and Spanish (see Example 4).

*Example 4: Report Of The Secretary-General On The Work Of The Organization 16 June 1969 —15 June 1970*

The *UN Monthly Chronicle*, which is published in English, French and Spanish editions, continued to provide coverage of the proceedings and decisions of the major organs of the United Nations ...

While in Example 4 U Thant could have discussed the pamphlets or Chronicle without mentioning the languages of publication, his explicit choice to make language relevant in these instances is arguably a form of linguistic activism. In contrast, in 2000 Kofi Annan discusses the same publication (the *UN Chronicle*) but does not cite the number of languages in which it is published: “Both print and web site editions of the *UN Chronicle* have been revitalized — while continuing to draw eminent contributors...”. However, later in 2002 he *does* opt to reference the language(s) of the Chronicle (“...publication of the *UN Chronicle* in Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish”). The inconsistency here is not the issue; rather, we highlight that SGs have choices as to what to include in their reports and, further, what level of detail to include. While all SGs refer to publications and documents in their annual reports, their choice to highlight the language of these differs to quite a degree, as we will discuss in more detail in the subsequent section.

The second most prominent language issue in the data relates to *human resources*, and in particular the language specifications relevant to recruitment and the expansion and

improvement of language training (and incentives) for professional staff. Kurt Waldheim made most references (43) to this issue particularly since Arabic was made an official language of the UN during his term of office (see Example 4).

*Example 5: Report Of The Secretary-General On The Work Of The Organization 16 June 1973-15 June 1974*

Finally, as a result of the General Assembly's decision in resolution 3190 (XXVIII) of 18 December 1973 to include Arabic among the official and the working languages of the General Assembly and its Main Committees, the language incentives provided for in Assembly resolution 2480 B (XXIII) of 21 December 1968 have now been extended to staff in the Professional and higher categories ...

Waldheim attributes the growing interest in language learning among staff to the language policy shift of the organisation: “The linguistic requirements for the recruitment and promotion of staff as well as the language incentive provisions contained in Assembly resolution 2480 B (XXIII) of in 21 December 1968 have increased staff interest attending language courses.” This suggests awareness of the effect that language policies have on the multilingualism of the organisation, and perhaps also an awareness of the agentive role of the SG in language policy.

The third most prominent language issue in the data relates to *language status*, which is a label we use to encompass the range of issues relating to the official and working languages of the United Nations. U Thant, Kurt Waldheim and Kofi Annan are the SGs who raise this most frequently, with Waldheim raising it the most (42 instances) due to Arabic being accorded status during his period of tenure.

Kofi Annan raises language status 26 times, normally with reference to the “six” or “all official languages” of the United Nations – a semi-fixed phrase he repeats 21 times over the course of his tenure period. Most of these cases consist of examples where inclusion of detail about language could have been omitted; the passage referring to language tends to occur in seemingly parenthetical prepositional phrases, often tagged on to the end of sentences, as in Example 5.

*Example 6: General Assembly Official Records Fifty-ninth Session Supplement No. 1 (A/59/1) (2004)*

The Dag Hammarskjöld Library employed technology to upgrade its products, with its UNBISnet catalogue now linked to the full text of all documents on the Official Document System, in all six official languages.

The discussion of language seems to be explicitly marked by the SG to make language relevant in contexts where it otherwise might have been excluded.

## *Section 5.2: Actors*

### 5.2.1 UNGDC actors

As noted, our previous research (AUTHORS, 2020) showed that language issues arose infrequently in the General Debates of the General Assembly (i.e. the UNGDC). Over the 46-year time period covered by the corpus, only 81 member states made reference to language and only 17 member states mentioned language three or more times. Therefore, less than half of the 198 member states mentioned language at all over the course of 46 years, and no single member state mentioned language(s) on an annual basis. Only 20 member states made reference to language use/policy within the organisation and, with only one exception, concerns were not uniform or evenly dispersed over the time period. The exception relates to Portugal, the member state which raised language issues the most (13 times): all of Portugal's interventions relate to requests for Portuguese to be made an official/working language of the United Nations – a request which to date has not been granted. Other member states that persistently raised language issues include Guatemala (8 instances), Austria, Bangladesh, Mauritius (6 instances each) and Spain (5 instances).

Bangladesh also called for Bangla to be given status within the UN. While this call proved ineffectual, Bangladesh nonetheless proposed the creation of an International Mother Language Day, a proposal supported by UNESCO and incorporated in Resolution 56/262 (formally adopted by the General Assembly in 2002) (see Example 6).

#### *Example 7: Bangladesh, session 68, 2013*

The measures we have taken so far in that regard include the establishment of the International Mother Language Institute in Dhaka and asking the United Nations to declare Bangla as one of its official languages.

Finally, noteworthy statements were made by Libya, Tunisia and the Syrian Arabic Republic in the early 1970s relating to Arabic. Their discourse aligned with and rhetorically pushed for the shift in the UN language policy with regard to the status of Arabic in the organisation.

### 5.2.2 SG actors

Three SGs raise (substantive) language issues most frequently: Kofi Annan (33 instances per 100,000 words), U Thant (28 instances per 100,000 words) and Kurt Waldheim (26 instances per 100,000 words). As noted in Section 5.1, U Thant was concerned with linguistic provision – and especially translation – as well as the education and training of staff; similar issues were raised by Waldheim. The language issues emerging from Kofi Annan’s tenure include references to provision, especially the enhancement of online multilingual resources for internal use within the organisation and external use by key stakeholders, and a strategic plan for remote translation services to support in-house translation work. He was also particularly concerned with language status (i.e. a lack of parity in the use and availability of material in the organisation’s official languages) and the need to increase provision, where needed, in local languages.

### 5.3 *Alignment with policy initiatives*

Finally, in this section we consider the alignment of metalanguage with the shifts in language policy over time. As we saw, the vast majority of member states were silent on the issue of language and this silence is consistent across the 46 years covered in the data. The issues raised (usually sporadically) by the more active member states tend not to result in any shift in language policy (with the exception of Arabic): the Portuguese language has not been added to the list of the organisation’s official languages and repeated calls from Bangladesh to have the Bangla language obtain status have also not resulted in success.

In turn, we also saw that SGs mention language issues rather infrequently, with Ban Ki Moon mentioning language only eleven times over the eight years of his tenure and Boutros Boutros Ghali’s reports containing only two substantive discussions of language over the four years of his tenure. Notably, the tenure periods of the SGs who mention language most do tend to align with greater shifts in the language policy of the UN. For example, the early 1970s when both U Thant and Kurt Waldheim served as SGs, Arabic obtained official status (General Assembly Resolution 3190; see Table 1) and this is reflected in the amount of discussion of

language-related issues by both individuals. The tenure period of Kofi Annan (1997-2006), who discussed language the most (in terms of normalised frequency), is also when the UN focussed on attempts to discuss and increase parity among its official languages, and, due to technological innovations, attempted to increase its multilingual capacity via the recruitment of remote translation services and the development of websites and other internet resources (see SG reports on multilingualism during this period: A/54/478; A/56/656; A/58/363; A/61/317).

## **6. Discussion & Conclusion**

Findings show that while the discursive interventions of U Thant, Kurt Waldheim and Kofi Annan aligned most closely with shifts in the organizational language policy of the United Nations, the issues raised by Member States (i.e. the virtues of sharing a common language, the benefits of multilingualism, and the importance of language status within the organization, including calls by some Member States for the recognition of their language) did *not* result in shifts in policy, with the exception of calls for Arabic to be introduced as an organisational language and for the introduction of a ‘Mother Language Day’. Returning to our discursive approach to language policy, we interpret this misalignment as the lamination of power *over* discourse and power *in* discourse: while Member States have ‘access to the stage’, their words can lack power due to their differential status within the organization. This leads us to conclude that certain Member States ultimately lack agency and are therefore largely unable to effect change, although further ethnographic investigation would be needed to determine how this plays out in contemporary settings. At the same time, it must be noted that only a small number of Member States raise language issues, whereas the vast majority remain silent. The effect of this silence in maintaining the status quo of the organization seems at the crux of the issues with the UN’s multilingualism policies. In other words, it is arguably silence (identified through absence in large corpora of data covering 46 years) that has more agentive weight within the context of the General Assembly in which the Member States engage, since silence effectively results in no change at all – a language policy outcome of benign neglect and the sedimentation of prior decision-making.

These findings contribute to knowledge about UN LPP specifically but also institutional LPP more generally. In showing the effect of status differentials between different levels of institutional membership, we highlight the ways in which LP agency depends on the situated

nature of individual positions within different settings (see AUTHOR 2019). Findings also confirmed that the enactment of agency is not only discoverable in texts calling for or making reference to changes to policy but also in the repetition and continuity of practices over time (see discussion in section 2.1 above). Moreover, as Ball et al's (2011) discussion of categories of policy actors attests, it is clear that not all social actors are able or willing to exercise power to effect change to LPP; nonetheless, it is still important to consider all who are able to contribute to the process and to investigate why this might be.

To this end, in proposing a corpus linguistics-based discursive approach to language policy, this study contributes to the inventory of tools available for the study of agency in LPP. The methodology facilitates the (synchronic) analysis of many millions of words across (diachronic) time periods and different settings; as such, corpus linguistics can help to identify the location, quantification, and absence of (policy-related) metalanguage. Although the powerful tools of corpus linguistics were in some cases in excess of our needs (i.e., because substantive discussions of language proved to be so infrequent), the findings allowed us to establish the extent to which the metalanguage related to policy issues within the Organization over the course of nearly half a century. Thus, in adopting the corpus linguistics-based discursive approach to language policy, the study responds to calls from scholars (e.g. Hult 2010) to investigate discourses of agents functioning within and across different layers/levels of an organisation and to explore the spatial and temporal dimensions of agency (Emirbayer & Mische 1998).

Although we contend that a corpus linguistics-based discursive approach to language policy offers many advantages to the study of agency, we acknowledge that there are limitations. First, not all agency is discursively enacted, with UN voting rights and records on language policy-related issues being a potentially productive site for future research. Second, the corpus linguistics approach we used could be usefully supplemented by a more fine-grained (critical) discourse analysis, which could offer further insights into the specific ways in which language is/has been metadiscursively represented by Member States and Secretary Generals. Third, while the United Nations is an organization with a rich and detailed discursive and textual history, we found that not all evidence of engagement with organizational language policy is manifested in our data, making it difficult to chart particular discourses over time. Moreover, with monolingual English corpora we found we were missing insights into the actual languages in use, i.e. the 'practiced language policy' (Bonacina-Pugh 2012), which

might have shown us how the predominance of English manifests in organizational interaction – or not – at the United Nations. Although simultaneous translation and interpretation can mask such level of detail, an ethnographic approach with greater attention to this level of detail could have enhanced our findings, not just through an empirical analysis of plenary debates but also through the analysis of interaction in corridors, working and correspondence groups, where arguably, an important layer of negotiation takes place prior to plenary debate. If we contend that the constraints and possibilities afforded by ‘structure’ include ‘the relationships that exist between individuals and groups within a [community], persistent patterns of behavior and institutional norms, ideologies and cognitive frameworks’ (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech 2020: 8), access to such settings would prove invaluable and enable us to examine conversations/debates, relationships and patterns of behavior, thereby providing access to agentive and socio-political power dynamics. We acknowledge that other empirical methods (e.g. ethnography) would assist in tracking trajectories of discourse in the negotiations between specific Member States and the influence of the latter over the work priorities/agenda of Secretary-Generals and vice versa also. Indeed, interviews and ethnography would further facilitate a close examination of the structure-agency dialectic: diplomats do not act in isolation but align/dis-align with other member states in complex and fluid networks and groupings in order to achieve their goals. These networks have the potential to mediate, suppress and support agency and also have the potential to challenge established structures or sedimented policies or behaviours. Arguably the success of the Arabic-speaking Member States in attaining recognition for Arabic (in comparison to Portuguese and Bangla) was achieved via their successful lobbying of member states. Studies which examine the processes, mediation and exercise of such agency have the potential to explore the limits and opportunities for actors within established institutional structures. This has the potential to be a rich area for future investigation.

The latter notwithstanding, we conclude that a methodological approach that permitted a diachronic and comparative approach to discursive data afforded a powerful tool in the study of the dynamic and contingent nature of language policy agency as exercised within a multilingual international organization over time. Furthermore, we found that although organizational membership accords ‘power over discourse’, the *status* of individuals (particularly Member States) within layers of organizational membership determines, to some extent, ‘power in discourse’, i.e. the extent to which their words can create and effectively

negotiate language policymaking. We propose that greater attention should be paid to power dynamics within institutions and the constraints imposed by their hierarchies and networks of influence. Agents are subject to the processes of collective actions and priorities and will of the most powerful, which may lead to the maintenance and sedimentation of policies and practices formerly determined. As such, we contend that future research (particularly on institutional LPP) would further usefully benefit from the application of CL and/or combining mixed methods i.e. a corpus linguistic approach with an ethnographic discursive approach, to explore historical as well as contemporary networks of influence across layers of agents within different sites of engagement.

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<sup>i</sup> See Emirbayer & Mische (1998) for their discussion of three (overlapping) features of agency: iteration; projectivity and practical evaluation.

<sup>ii</sup> There are a few exceptions e.g. Johnson & Johnson (2015).

<sup>iii</sup> Research in related fields has also indicated the agentive power of silence. For example, research in second language learning has shown that language learners' resistance through silence and subversion can be agentive in that these strategies do not lead to participation or positive learning outcomes (see review in Wright Fogle, 2012: 4).

<sup>iv</sup> The General Assembly is the main representative, deliberative and policy making organ of the organisation.

<sup>v</sup> The Security Council is responsible for international peace and security but also recommends the addition of new members to the General Assembly and approves any alterations to the UN Charter.

<sup>vi</sup> The UN's 63 regional Information Centres (ICs) function in five of the six official languages (excluding Chinese) in addition to 97 local languages when necessary. Within countries, UN missions 'may' provide information and support in local languages (see Author 2017).

<sup>vii</sup> A concern similarly identified in other supra-/international organisations, e.g. see Mooko (2009) and studies of the EU (extensive references in Author, forthcoming).

<sup>viii</sup> From this typology, we investigate all but item (6), which is not relevant to our particular focus or data.

<sup>ix</sup> Schroeter and Taylor (2018) also address a range of other ways in which silence can be manifested through hidden meaning in discourse.

<sup>x</sup> The comparison of different SGs raised slightly different methodological issues from the comparison of member states, for three reasons. First, not all SGs had the same tenure period (e.g. Boutros Boutros Ghali held office for only one term and only two years of U Thant's 1961-1971 tenure period is covered by the corpus); (2) not all SGs produced the same length of annual report (e.g. Ghali's reports averaged only 11,480 words, whereas Waldheim's were nearly ten times this figure (108,953)); and (3) search terms were present in the reports for different reasons (e.g. the search terms occurring in Ghali's reports refer almost exclusively to the report's language of publication). Accordingly, we used normalised frequency to correct for comparisons across each SG's data of different sizes and disregarded superficial references to language (e.g. in Ghali's reports).