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Review of 'Language Policy and Language Conflict in Afghanistan and Its Neighbors: The Changing Politics of Language Choice' edited by Harold F. Schiffman

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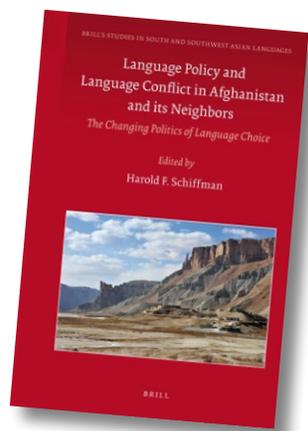
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Language Policy and Language Conflict in Afghanistan and Its Neighbors: The Changing Politics of Language Choice.

Harold F. Schiffman, ed. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012. Xvi, 372 pages. ISBN 9789004201453.

Reviewed by Sami Honkasalo

Language Policy and Language Conflict in Afghanistan and Its Neighbors, edited by Harold Schiffman and co-edited by Brian Spooner, consists of an edited collection of papers that were originally presented at a conference by the South Asia Center of the University of Pennsylvania in 2003. However, many of the papers have been updated to reflect the recent developments in the past ten years and thus provide a point of reference that is relevant to this day. The work primarily concentrates on Afghanistan-centric Central Asia in the broad sense, covering the regional countries from Kazakhstan in the north to Pakistan in the South and Iran in the West. An overarching theme of the volume is how linguistically complicated Central Asia has become as a result of the drastic social and political changes that have taken place in recent decades. However, even amidst these changes, multilingualism, a feature that has characterized the region for a long time, will continue to be one of its defining features in the foreseeable future. The book aims to provide readers with an updated

picture of languages and language policy in the region, to inform potential language learners about existing resources and to point out what is still needed (p. 354). These goals are well met by the volume, which is one of the few existing resources of its kind currently available. In fact, one of the primary merits of the book lies in bringing together material that has previously been scattered around in conference papers and journals with limited circulation.

In terms of primary audience, the volume presents an overview of the region for scholars who can use it to gain a clear picture of existing scholarly work and current views on the relevant language policy questions. It provides, for example, an invaluable resource for language policy in Afghanistan and Central Asia where the linguistic situation is still far from settled. Advanced students of linguistics will therefore also benefit from the volume, which can be used as an introductory text to language policy in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Finally, the book will be helpful for non-linguist scholars of the region with an interest on the role of language in conflict and policy-planning. However, it should be noted that even though many concepts, such as Charles Ferguson's theory of diglossia ("Diglossia." *Word* 15: 325-340, 1959), are remarkably well illustrated, some previous background knowledge on language policy and the Central Asian region

together with its history are needed to help the reader derive the most benefit from the book.

It goes without saying that a work that operates at the scale of a geographical region has to make decisions regarding the inclusion and exclusion of material. In the Preface and Chapter 1, the editors state that orthographic shift and reform is likely in the region (p. ix, 2). However, even though Birgit Schlyter addresses this question in the context of Uzbekistan (Chapter 6) and it is mentioned in passing in the articles by William Fierman (Chapter 5) and Brian Spooner (Chapter 4), writing systems are unfortunately given only limited attention in the volume. In fact, graphization, namely, the language policy measures that introduce orthographic changes or change the writing system in use, have enormous political meaning. This can be seen from various examples, such as the Latinization of Turkish in the 20th century and the ongoing process of adopting writing systems for previously unwritten languages in the Himalayas. The latter is well exemplified by the often conflictual process of choosing between Devanagari and Tibetan-based scripts for writing minority languages in Nepal. Even though in linguistics, writing is often relegated into a minor side role, in language policy graphization occupies a central place since many language planning measures primarily address the written aspects of language.

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Sami Honkasalo on *Language Policy and Language Conflict in Afghanistan and Its Neighbors*

In the volume, the diglossic model proposed by Ferguson (1959) and later modified by Fishman (“Bilingualism with and without diglossia; diglossia with and without bilingualism.” *Journal of Social Issues* 23 (2): 29–38, 1967) provides the main framework for the existing multilingual situation in Central Asia. However, its application throughout the articles lacks consistency. While diglossia certainly works relatively well in some contexts, Walter Hakala’s dealing with Pashto in Afghanistan in Chapter Three shows that its relevance has its limits. Schiffman openly admits this and in the conclusion expresses his view that the underlying linguistic reality is highly complicated (p. 354). Hence, it can be said that the book presents a classical Procrustean bed problem. By holding to the current diglossic models of multilingualism, we run the risk of forcibly fitting the data into an existing theoretical framework instead of building the theoretical framework to correspond to the existing data. Hence, though not necessarily intentional, one of the contributions of the volume is that along with political change in the world, our models of understanding multilingualism might have to be adjusted as our understanding about the diverse shapes of multilingualism in the world improves.

In Chapters Five and Six, William Fierman and Birgit Schlyter show Central Asia to be taking steps towards reverse language shift from

the superimposed Soviet-era Russian language into more local languages. This, as the editors admit, presents one of the greatest difficulties for determining the appropriate model of multilingualism to be used for describing the region (p. 356). Furthermore, it is shown that even though a full language shift might be appealing to nationalists in the new republics of Central Asia, its prospects for success are relatively limited and the process itself is an uphill battle (p. 122). This view of the linguistic future of Central Asian languages seems overly negative. Examples, such as gradual the rise of Finnish into a prestige language in Finland during and after the Russian rule, clearly show that with careful linguistic planning, results that are desirable from the nationalist viewpoint are in fact attainable. Therefore, the future in Central Asia for the local languages might not be as dim as the volume suggests.

Finally, the book provides a clear warning to multilingual states that are currently undergoing important developments in language policy. By analyzing the situation in Afghanistan and Kazakhstan, the authors show that implementation frequently constitutes the core problem of language policy in the region. Tendency for ‘top-down’ policy aimed at providing quick and simple solutions without consulting the actual speakers at the grass-root level will likely lead into poor outcomes (p. 27). Therefore, the work has relevance

outside its geographical scope and can be also be used to as a roadmap for creating more successful language policy in the Himalayas, which is facing language policy problems that are similar to those in Central and Southwestern Asia.

Sami Honkasalo is a graduate student at Yale University. He holds a M.A. in Linguistics from the University of Tokyo. Sami’s research interests focus on the Sino-Tibetan language family and the study of writing systems.