In *Guardians of language: Twenty voices through history*, Florian Coulmas brings twenty historical key figures in LPP (Language Policy and Planning) to life, letting them speak for themselves and present their contribution to what most of them could probably not even dream would become a scientific field of inquiry one day.

The structure of each chapter follows the same pattern: After a presentation of a guardian’s life and the language situation of his or her time, Coulmas introduces their work and the underlying philosophy. ‘The last word’ are sections where Coulmas leads a fictive interview with each of the guardians in question, carefully relying on bibliographic sources and highlighting the cornerstones of their thinking through selected questions. The interview may be situated in a context which was dear to the interviewee, for example, the Tiergarten to Jacob Grimm.

Textbooks on LPP are frequently either topic-centered or focus on the Anglo-American world. Or both. This book is not by itself suitable as a textbook – its goals are clearly set higher – but it can be used as a companion text to more clearly theoretically oriented readings in order to cover distinct linguistic areas and time periods in a supplementary fashion. This is a major desideratum for a student population like mine: (mostly) MA students of Spanish, English, French, German, etc. Through key persons in the making of language policy in these and
many other areas – as well as through time – LPP becomes tangible to us all. A wealth of information which initially may appear isolated, even anecdotal, helps understand the big picture of LPP.

Of course, postdoctoral students and especially scholars are the main target group of this volume which is nevertheless also suitable for the wider public. However, using it for example as a resource for advanced MA students’ oral presentations on individual chapters or written tasks aiming at finding out, for instance, what happened after Lenin (and Stalin) no longer were there to (seemingly) safeguard minority language policy in the Soviet Union (Chapter 14) is an option which might come to mind.

Despite the merits of carefully selecting and bringing together all the data, it is the relatively short (eighteen pages) analytic final chapter, ‘Coda: Lessons learnt’ (pp. 291–308), where all the threads are pulled together, constituting a schema of these guardians or ‘charismatic custodians’ of language. They were ‘divided by time, space, and profession, they [were] very diverse, as were their objectives’ (p. 291). And yet it is possible to schematize what divided and united them. Charisma, but also connections to ‘high places’, exile, diaspora or study abroad, being polyglots – many of them defending as best they could a language that was not their first language – was typical of them. Coulmas divides the guardians on certain scales such as modernization vs. conservation. Modernization was on the agenda of Ueda (Japanese), Alisjahbana (Bahasa Indonesia), Lenin and Zhou Enlai (Soviet and Chinese nationalities’ policies), whereas Alcuin (Latin in the Carolingian Renaissance) and Koraïs (creation of a Greek national language) aimed at the safeguarding of a conservative stance. As Coulmas rightly remarks (p. 300), discourses on the preservation of endangered languages very easily tilt over to conservatism instead of modernism. The other dichotomies (universality vs. uniqueness, unity vs. pluralism, domination vs. liberation, elitism vs. egalitarianism) are as much present in the LPP discourses of our globalized age. If the Herderian Volksgeist assumes every ethnolinguistic group should have political autonomy and Webster turned this idea upside down, arguing that, for instance, the United States should have their own language distinct from the English one (p. 307), the same thinking can be likewise found in distinct present-day contexts. It is this synthesis which most clearly demonstrates the assets of knowing the past of LPP.

Besides the twenty chapters centered on the lives of the chosen guardians and the synthetic chapter, the book contains a preface, an introduction (pp. ix–x, xi–xxii), a list of references (pp. 309–334), and indexes of names (pp. 335–339) and subjects (pp. 341–345).
It is an original, highly and erudite contribution to the field of LPP which constitutes, besides practically mandatory, also highly delightful reading. This is where the perhaps unorthodox idea for using the work as a companion reader stems from: What better way to dive into the world of LPP?

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