Top-down prescription or participatory culture: Official terminology in the internet age

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Résumé

In recent years, the ever-increasing presence and ease of accessing online resources has allowed official organisations to communicate with the public in innovative ways, and has equally allowed members of the public to contribute visibly to discourse, leading to an emergent "participatory culture" (Fuchs 2014:52). This paper investigates language planning bodies in French-speaking contexts in the light of these developments, considering the extent to which the online platforms developed and used by such bodies as a means of communicating prescribed terminology seek the participation of ordinary speakers. I draw on the concept of mediatisation, the "saturation of everyday life by media" (Hepp 2020:4), and on Ayres-Bennett's (2020) framework for measuring prescriptivism, which highlights the need to take into account the extent to which prescriptive practices are informed by usage. The paper investigates the role of contributions from the general public on the websites of three language planning bodies dealing with French (in France and Quebec) and Breton, comparing how they solicit and integrate suggestions for new official terminology through their online platforms. Three main mechanisms are discussed: in France, a suggestion box for new terms to be added to French; in Quebec, a neologism competition for school pupils; and in Brittany, a regular polling and discussion exercise. Differences among the three contexts emerge in how the bodies account for usage and position themselves as authorities, which can be related to the different status and history of the languages in the regions considered. In longer established cases of language standardisation, the integration of this public participation appears to place greater emphasis on tradition and expertise. Overall, the inclusion of these participatory mechanisms allows language planning bodies to monitor usage and integrate public opinion into their prescriptions, while continuing to assert their authority over speaker communities.

References

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