

Language Acts and Worldmaking Debates  
**Debate 2: Modern Languages: A Discipline (still) in Search of an Identity?**  
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Chair: Professor Debra Kelly Language Acts and World-Making, Strand Co-Leader  
'Language Transitions'

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The teaching of modern languages is undoubtedly "still in search of an identity", but I'm not sure disciplinary *identity* is a helpful metaphor as it might suggest an essentialising set of characteristics which are inherent in a field of learning. Rather, I would wish to emphasise the necessarily adaptive potential of language education, and of learning more generally. More unhelpful still, in my view, is the enduring focus on 'crisis' in the learning of modern languages. It is rare to read about modern languages in the UK without an anxious preamble pointing to the shortage of linguists and the drop in take-up at post-compulsory phases of education. The discourse of 'crisis', though, rings hollow when seen within a historical perspective. What could be a more fruitful line of inquiry is to examine what the learning of 'language(s)' means to different demographic groups and then to understand how the school offer of languages corresponds.

If, as educational historians generally agree, our current school system is the legacy of a Victorian ethos of – at best paternalistic – social modelling, then it is useful to consider the current purpose of schooling and to what extent the range of subjects on offer is fit for purpose. Fundamental questions such as the distinction between 'education' and 'training' affect policy decisions across the curriculum, but are, arguably, especially pertinent to rationales advanced in defence of the humanities, as the link between these fields and societal benefits can seem less tangible when the latter is measured in purely economic terms. Contrasting perspectives on the value of education also speak to vested interests of political and social constituencies. A current inquiry by the UK Parliamentary Education Select Committee, entitled *The purpose and quality of education in England*, demonstrates that we are far from reaching a consensus: contributions to the inquiry range in tone from philosophical considerations (Mary Beard, Cambridge Professor of Classics, gave the keynote at the 2016 committee conference) to OFSTED's narrowly focused responses on the importance of effective leadership to increase standards.

The school system is tasked with producing an educated workforce but also a population that coheres within a range of shared civic values. This dual purpose has traditionally manifested in the split between, on the one hand, the will to educate the person in the vein of a broad-based liberal education and, on the other hand, the drive to provide skills-oriented training. This dichotomy, at least in England, has reflected the aims of differentiated schooling corresponding to a particular hierarchy of social class structure. Since the inception of nationalised schooling in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, modern languages has struggled to emerge as a discipline in English schools and universities, needing both to demonstrate the "same educational, moral and intellectual values as Latin" (Kelly, 1969) while at the same time meeting the perceived needs of linguistic competence for commercial purposes. The duality of these aims has never been reconciled and I would suggest that the observation made over 60 years ago still hold true that "language teaching suffers because its aims are ill-defined. We have never decided if we should teach languages for use or merely as a discipline. Wavering between these objectives, we are hampered in both" (Thimann, 1955).

These competing visions of the purposes of language teaching run deep. Kramersch (2018) reports a conversation she had with a colleague many years ago who "was the first to make me aware that what I was talking about with foreign languages was not language *learning* but language *study*; that the first was open to everybody, she said, the second only to an elite".

Kramersch was surprised to hear she was part of an 'elite' because she had *studied* the cultural and literary canon of a foreign language. I consciously decided on the term 'language education' in the title of my new book ('New directions for research in foreign language education') to avoid

having to choose between 'learning' and 'study'. Of course, the dichotomy is not watertight. In order to study the cultural canon of France, Germany etc. students would need language 'skills'. At the same time, language learners whose goals were rooted in the exigencies of vocational instrumentalism, would be unlikely to – arguably unable to – invest seriously in language learning without imbibing cultural knowledge, so the relation between pragmatic and intellectual developmental goals through language learning are complex. Nonetheless, the split in structural provision between language learning and language study has had long term effects on perceptions of ML as a discipline.

A telling example is given by ISMLA (Independent Schools Modern Languages Association) on their website. The association states it was set up because:

- 1. increasingly, independent schools were providing the nation's linguists, and that, unfortunately remains true; over 60% of university single language undergraduates come from "public" schools.*
- 2. these [independent] schools have unashamed cultural and literary interests which state schools cannot always provide.*

The first of these statements raises questions about how we define 'linguists' in our increasingly multilingual classrooms. I presume the reference here is to 'professional' linguists (translators, teachers, workers for multinational organisations) who have 'studied' foreign languages rather than to the increasing numbers of circumstantial bi-/multilingual students in our schools. In that case, maybe we do need to re-examine "current definitions of language competence" (as phrased in the question prompt for this paper). There is clearly a mismatch between the language capital of many school students today and the offer of languages at school but the mismatch is unsurprising given that national education systems are founded on the monolingual principle so highly cherished as a unifying identity marker within the Westphalian model of nation.

Debates around 'which' languages should be taught are not new. In the English context there have been calls to diversify the language offer to counter French dominance for at least a century (many of the commissioners of the 1918 Leathes Report favoured German), and I am often asked 'why still French?'. This question, though, often stems from a narrow, instrumental view of which languages *should* be taught, with lay opinion usually favouring Mandarin or Spanish citing the number of speakers and the economic importance. The sheer number of native-speakers per se has, I think, never really counted in determining choice for language learning, but the question of economic importance certainly does and is closely entwined with symbolic value. All languages are not the same in terms of status and prestige.

The second statement cited here from the ISMLA website speaks to the second question prompt for this paper (What role should the teaching of Culture and Intercultural Communication have in Language Education?). Firstly, I would separate these two elements: the teaching of 'culture' seems to signal a traditional 'study' approach (using the terms as stated) whereas the second aims to develop a critical approach to understanding difference. The former might be described as dealing with canonical, emblematic Culture, and the latter with a more nuanced sociological – even ethnographic – comparative approach. Whether referring to 'learning' or 'study', the potential for foreign language education to engender greater tolerance or empathy is an oft-used argument but much more research is needed to support this claim. In terms of the English national curriculum, a slight shift back to a more 'liberal arts' conception of the languages curriculum can be detected in the re-emphasis in the latest version of the English programme of study for languages:

*Intercultural* appeared in 2008 National Curriculum for the first time as one of four key concepts, to mean:

*a Appreciating the richness and diversity of other cultures.*

*b Recognising that there are different ways of seeing the world, and developing an international outlook.*

In the revised (2014) curriculum pupils are required to:

*read literary texts in the languages [such as stories, songs, poems and letters] to stimulate ideas, develop creative expression and expand understanding of the language and culture.*

The changes in these statements reflects input from university scholars in the steering committee who claimed (and it's a perennial claim) that schools were not preparing students adequately for university. This, in itself, begs the question about the purpose for school-based language education: is it preparation for a university humanities programme or is it a self-contained, albeit foundational, course?

University programmes with a linguistics and communication orientation have gained ground since the 1960s and the inception of applied linguistics as a field. However, 'applied' language programmes have always suffered from an image problem. Applied programme for foreign languages were mostly developed by new universities between the 1960s and 90s, attracting broader social access as the entry criteria (in terms of 'A' level points) were lower than for literature-based degree programmes at elite universities. Unfortunately many of these departments have since closed or at least no longer offer specialist language degrees. Holmes (2011) describes how "the 30 polytechnics almost all established departments of [foreign] languages and interpreted their mission of relevance and vocationality ... appealing to many language enthusiasts who ... 'didn't really like literature'". In research scholarship, applied linguistics – and more specifically where this refers to language education – suffers from its own chameleonic breadth of interest. Li Wei (2015) comments that "‘applied’ is often taken as synonymous with atheoretical, therefore of lower scientific value”.

The third question we are asked to consider (Is the increase in learning more recent 'World Languages' such as Chinese and Arabic changing the nature of Language Learning more widely?) seems to me something of a red herring. Implicit in the question (as I read it) is the assumption that different pedagogical approaches are required to teach languages with other alphabets or that are non-Indo-European. However, at least as far as school-taught languages are concerned, I think that cross linguistic congruity, while certainly relevant to scaffolding activities for learning, is unlikely to be as important as the broader motivational dimension, which is determined by micro-(classroom and institutional) cultural norms as well as broader macro-(societal and international) conditions. A more pertinent question, in my view, would be 'why is this student learning/studying that language?'. The instrumentalising dogma of 'communicative language teaching' has presented problems in contexts where the language in question is not envisaged to be useful for the prescribed communicative goals of the curriculum. This is the case of modern languages in England. Yet would we wish to promote languages simply for business?

Languages mean different things to different people: there is not a language education. Preliminary investigation across the independent and maintained school sectors (Coffey, 2015) suggests that "beliefs around the use of language learning are highly situated and are formed and reproduced within multi-layered discursive fields that presume foreign language competence as a form of cultural capital". Conceiving of a programme – much less an ideology – that is flexible enough to incorporate all the needs of all language learners (of different socio-economic and ethno-cultural groups as well as different generations) is unrealistic, and, I hope, unattainable. Language education has never been a universal enterprise and has always been multiple in terms of motivations and methods, reflecting

local traditions as well as transnational power dynamics. The closest we have come to universalising a 'discipline' of language education is in the totalising hegemony of global English with the concomitant worldviews purveyed through Anglo-American publishing, forms of scholarship and so forth.

Maybe the will to universalism implicit in the 'languages for all' rallying cry needs to be replaced by a more nuanced inquiry into what language education can offer in specific contexts. I do not see that mandating languages for all throughout the whole of the school career is a desirable goal. Certainly, the rationale for 'languages' needs to be broadened away from narrow instrumentalism yet this challenge is dwarfed by the broader tendency to commodify learning. Introducing the learning of foreign languages within a broader educative project of language and cultural awareness seems indeed to be an apposite goal for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but with the caveat that, while need and desirability are perceived locally, local contexts are embedded in broader ideological webs. The problem with a single 'languages for all' policy and curriculum is that a single model fails to reflect – as it always has failed to reflect – the diverse and multipolar demography that characterises English society.

## References

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