

## *A Discipline (still) in Search of an Identity?*

Derek Hird

Department of Modern Languages and Cultures

University of Westminster

### **Bio**

Derek Hird is a senior lecturer in Chinese studies at the University of Westminster, UK. His research interests include Chinese migrant men's experiences in London and Chinese white-collar masculinities. Recent publications include *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China* (with Geng Song) (Brill, 2014), "Making class and gender: White-collar men in postsocialist China," in *Changing Chinese Masculinities: from Imperial Pillars of State to Global Real Men*, ed. Kam Louie, 137–56 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), and "Moral Masculinities: Ethical Self-fashionings of Professional Chinese Men in London," *Nan Nü* 18.1 (2016): 115–47.

### **Introduction**

My undergraduate degree was in a Chinese Studies department. My Master's was in a School of Asian Studies. I did a PhD on masculinity in China in a politics department. I now work in a Modern Languages department. I have never researched language pedagogy or any linguistic issue per se. My educational history is not uncommon, at least in Chinese Studies, and I imagine also in other non-European languages, because of the historic exclusion of non-European languages from the discipline of Modern Languages in the UK.

Before I continue, I want to acknowledge the generosity of my colleagues in sharing their thoughts with me on tonight's debate's central questions. In particular, I want to thank my colleagues Rob Williams and Gerda Wielander, whose comments have particularly benefited sections of my talk.

### **Crisis**

Modern Languages recruitment in the UK is in crisis. As Professor Janice Carruthers set out in the previous debate there has been a 23% drop in Modern Languages Higher Education applications over the past 5 years. In my position as East Asian Studies representative on the executive committee of the University Council of Modern Languages, I attend meetings and workshops every 3 months in which reports of falling recruitment, threats of closures of language departments, redundancies and so on are becoming ever more numerous and severe. If Modern Languages is "A Discipline (still) in Search of an Identity?", as the title of this debate puts it, it may not be for much longer, because, as a discipline, it might simply cease to exist if current trends continue.

For Modern Languages to survive, it needs to get a move on in finding a more appealing identity for itself. I don't believe it is an exaggeration to say that this is an existential challenge for those of us working in Modern Languages. The problem is multidimensional, but I shall limit my remarks to the three questions at the heart of tonight's debate. As you will see, I focus not on the challenging, even hostile external environment towards languages in the UK. Instead, I focus on the discipline of Modern Languages itself, and I shall argue that, in part, the problem, is us – modern language and culture specialists.

**Point 1.** Current definitions of language competence, and the ways in which they inform language learning, are far from adequate for today's plurilingual social encounters. Plurilingualism, or code-switching, in everyday language use is increasingly researched. But is it sufficiently recognised in definitions of language competence? Let's take the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for example. The CEFR describes communicative competence, albeit often in unwieldy ways, but it does not

describe, let alone prescribe, the linguistic complexity required to arrive at communicative competence.

Do modern languages curricula sufficiently attend to plurilingualism? Or even to differently accented voices? I may teach what our textbook claims to be the Beijing variety of northern standard Mandarin, but in terms of plurilingual sensitivity, what I teach is inadequate for Beijing, let alone the rest of China and the wider Sinosphere, where switching between multiple varieties of Chinese and other languages are everyday realities in personal interactions, social media, and even in broadcast media outputs. Yet bringing plurilingualism into the curriculum should not be done in language silos. Any such effort requires strong cooperation with colleagues across multiple languages. Too often, I fear, we are designing curricula without sufficient interaction specialists in languages other than our own.

**Point 2.** Culture and language are inextricably linked, as I'm sure we all agree. Even teaching relatively simple communicative tasks, like basic shopping practices, needs the provision of cultural contexts. Sometimes there is too much focus on Big C Culture over small c culture. Yet, by anchoring words in the culture of the everyday, by teaching this culture of the everyday, as well as "high culture", we can better equip our students linguistically and culturally.

How is the language use in everyday culture to be researched? It has to include sociolinguistics and the long, deep methods of ethnography. At a recent workshop on ethnography and modern languages organized by the Institute of Modern Languages Research, it was clearly shown that ethnographic and ethnographically informed research techniques can be very fruitfully deployed in teaching and research involving languages. Language students as ethnographers is a marvellous starting point, pioneered by Professor Shirley Jordan. It raises students' awareness of plurilingualism, sensitises them to the different language varieties they experience abroad and at home, and enables them to critically reflect on their own linguistic and cultural learning and research.

**Point 3.** Increasingly, Modern Languages departments are expanding to encompass non-European languages. It is wonderful that specialists in non-European languages are now working alongside and collaborating with specialists in European languages. But is this truly transforming the nature of language learning? Or are we still largely operating in individual language silos? More ethnographic research across different languages and cultures would provide us with data that could bring us together in developing new insights into learning language and culture.

I recently started learning Japanese in our institution-wide language centre. What an eye-opener. I'm learning as much about teaching language as I am about Japanese. I think every teacher of language should have to learn another language, sitting in with students. Teachers of European languages could learn non-European languages, and vice versa.

Sadly, some non-European specialists based in Modern Language departments do not even identify with the discipline of Modern Languages: *Modern Languages Open*, Liverpool University's flagship open access interdisciplinary modern languages journal, never receives submissions from East Asian languages. Non-European specialists often identify more strongly with another discipline, be it anthropology, history or politics, for example. They may even disdain language teaching and belittle language pedagogy research.

## Conclusion

Moving forward, what do we do? Embedding plurilingualism in our curricula would make it more lively and appealing. As was pointed out by Dr Tita Beaven at the previous debate in this series, resistance to this comes more from teachers, not students. Students are excited

by translanguaging; language teachers, on the contrary, are apt to look down on code-switching as not “proper” language use.

Encouraging our students to see themselves as ethnographers would make them alert and passionate language and culture learners and researchers. Yet ethnographic research is marginalised and demeaned in modern languages research, where research on literature is still often deemed of higher status.

If European and non-European languages specialists fully cooperated with each other, just imagine what we could achieve. Yet silo mentalities still largely prevail, and the legacy of the historical apartheid that shut out non-European languages from Modern Languages departments leaves non-European specialists feeling that they don’t belong in the discipline of Modern Languages.

Perhaps most tragically of all, language teaching and language-learning pedagogy remain relatively undervalued areas within the discipline of Modern Languages.

Modern Languages is in crisis. And part of the problem is us.