

Modern Languages in Blue Jeans

Cristina Ros i Solé

I agree, we are the problem. But we should not beat ourselves up as this type of forum is precisely what we need to start making Modern Languages the pursuit of the many. But how?

I suggest that we stop seeing the discipline of Modern Languages as a problem and as a subject in crisis (as Simon Coffey said in his paper), or as an essential luxury that is only for the chosen few (as he intimated). Instead, following Hird's thinking, I make a call for seeing languages as 'ordinary' and essential to understand today's society. Languages conceived, not as obscure and exotic spaces, but day-to-day practices that defy and subvert the familiarity of our day-to-day lives. As any language person and professional linguist knows, languages help us see the world in a different light, but how this is achieved is where things get more complex.

Recently, I have been increasingly interested in the relationship between languages and the ordinary, and in particular, in how we experience languages, not in relation to some distant, exotic and imagined life that we want to escape to, but in relation to our day-to-day living: in our wardrobes, our bookshelves, our record collections, our cafés and our dining-tables. Such an approach would agree with the methodological and epistemological de-colonising project of the discipline that Alison Phipps proposed a few weeks ago in these same Debates. In this sense, we could think of languages not as an essentialised and distant 'Other', which looks to create high-brow homogeneous and fixed cultural identities, but as the way languages are taking shape in the different corners of our lives and practices of everyday life. Languages as an essential ingredient not only for understanding someone

else's reality, ie 'the Other', but for understanding our presents, our biographies and our futures.

But, isn't focusing on the everyday and the contexts that language learners going to meet what we have all been doing by developing curricula informed by the pragmatically-oriented Communicative Language Pedagogy? So what is missing here? I believe that what is missing here is not a leap of faith but (as Derek has just mentioned) a scrupulous ethnographic approach to languages (by making the familiar strange), a recognition that language learning is, yes, a practical task, an exercise of placing oneself in the mundane and ordinary of another culture, but a pragmatism and grounding that also goes hand in hand with more aesthetic, profound and spiritual questions about what we appreciate, how we behave, and how we think and understand our places in the world.

So far, we have talked about embedding language learners and languages into cultures to make them more authentic and worthwhile. Perhaps where we have gone wrong is the fact that we are still being hung up on modernist and humanistic views of language learning where cultures are monolingual and highbrow. A place where speakers inhabited monolingual reified spaces, as Anne Pauwels pointed out in her talk last October, and Derek Hird has also argued in his paper. Unfortunately, these narrow approaches foster a view of Modern Languages where speakers are blinkered to today's multilingual realities.

Instead, we would do well to open up our minds to new ways of understanding languages and cultures, where there is room for multilingual states and posthuman agencies, that is to say, where as well as human agency we appreciate the vitalism and vibrancy inherent in the experience of dealing with our most banal and ordinary surroundings such as food, clothes, music and other day-to day objects. Such a new approach would not only blur the boundaries between nations and languages, but also would allow language learners real movement between languages, their people and their material world. If languages are seen

as such flexible, dynamic and friendly spaces, students may feel more enticed to invest in them and explore the multilingual worlds that can be created through language learning.

So, if we had to give a name and give an identity to such approach to language learning, we may do well to pull our forces together, as Hird has pleaded, and to make Modern Languages more desirable. To do this, we may want to point out that Modern Languages is no luxury, but that is possibility within us. We only need to acknowledge it and inhabit, in the places we frequent, the material culture we experience, and the ideas we engage with. Languages should no longer be a strange and exotic costume for folkloric displays, but like our favourite pair of blue jeans, a second skin, a sticky and empowering feeling and state of mind that makes us confident to question, explore and shape our own intimate inhabited worlds.