

Language Education Activism – Debate 1

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Do we need a new ‘raison d’être’ for ‘foreign’ language learning?

The introductory text that accompanies this first debate outlines succinctly the current state of affairs around modern languages education and changing linguistic conditions in many parts of the Anglophone world. Furthermore, it starts from the premise *‘that we need a radical new and coherent scope for the field that not only reflects current social and demographic change, but also aspires to exert influence and bring about change in society’*. This is a premise with which I empathise and agree. This also applies to the next comment: *‘Foreign’ languages are an essential element in a super-diverse and multilingual world where new cultural roles, stances and responsibilities are needed’*. It is this statement that attracted my attention in particular because it touches upon the very nature of ‘foreign’ language learning and also exposes, in my opinion the complexity of ‘foreign’ language learning and teaching in current times.

In the next few paragraphs I would like to share my reflections on the question posed in the title and on the statements made in the introduction to this debate. I will argue that I hope that the goal that underlies and inspires engagement with the learning of another language will not ‘fade’ or make room for something else. However, we need to reflect critically on the interpretation of that goal in the current context and be willing to engage in various actions to achieve this. Some of these could be seen as radical, others as impossible and yet others will cause major disagreements among the various ‘stakeholders’ – I prefer the term participants -. So far I have not yet mentioned what I consider to be the underlying goal of ‘foreign’ language learning: I will keep you in the dark a bit longer so that I provide some contextual scene-setting before presenting some critical reflections on that goal in current times.

Living in the era of globalization: linguistic realities and ideologies

We are now very familiar with our current era being described with labels and terms such as super-diversity, hypermodernity, new economies, transnational mobility, etc., not only in scholarly publications but also in popular texts. These terms and labels are all associated with the phenomenon of globalization that has affected and continues to affect multiple aspects of our lives, including communication, language practices and linguistic environments. In the past ½ century we have become witness to quite dramatic changes in the linguistic constellations of regions, states and continents as well as modes of communication and in the linguistic repertoires of people. Although linguistic changes have been the norm rather than the exception for many centuries, the reach, rate and speed of change in the past 50 years has increased exponentially and is affecting many more people on a daily basis. The (potential) contact that the majority of citizens now has with other languages in their everyday lives is constantly growing and ranges from mere visual contact (e.g., signs and other forms of linguistic landscapes), receptive auditory contact (e.g., hearing languages in public and private settings, in the electronic media) to interactive

contact (e.g., listening to and speaking with people). In fact, even if people would like to live 'monolingually', this is now almost impossible, especially in urban centres. In other words, the prevailing linguistic reality in such centres is one of 'superdiversity': more languages are being seen and heard than ever before, more people's linguistic repertoires and practices draw upon several 'languages' [i.e., linguistic systems], sometimes only temporarily, at other times long-term. As a result we see many more examples of 'hybrid' language practices such as code-switching, translanguaging occurring in a wider spectrum of contexts (e.g., home, among friends, media, on line, education, business).

These new developments, both in general and linguistic terms, are putting a lot of pressure on the structures, agencies and institutions of nation-states whose existence and legitimacy are built around the ideal/ideology of *nationalism* -an alignment of nation (people), state, language and cultural environment. The linguistic ideology associated with nationalism is known as *linguistic nationalism*. This ideology stresses the key role language plays in achieving the goals of nationalism. Language is viewed and promoted as a *bounded entity or system* that carries the culture of the people (nation) unified in a state. Furthermore, linguistic nationalism granted a privileged position/status to the *standard* language, endorsing it as the linguistic 'symbol' and model of the nation-state. This variety of the language was promoted as the only desirable and legitimate form of language, not only for the nation but also for those from other nation-states – foreigners- who wanted to learn about the nation, its people and culture.

Linguistic nationalism and foreign language learning

Given the dominance of this linguistic ideology over the past 2 ½ centuries, it should not come as a surprise that it also had a major impact on the study of foreign languages. Although the desire of learning another language pre-dates the nationalism era, it is this era and ideology that shaped and continue to influence the formal study of foreign language in major ways.

This influence is particularly strong in the interpretation of the goal of language learning and in the linguistic model selected for the learning process.

Throughout the 'history' of foreign language learning the main incentive or attraction to engage in such learning was and continues to be to learn more about 'the other': about another culture, other people, other social and cultural customs and practices. Language is seen as a main key to accessing this 'otherness'. Of course the reasons for wanting to access this 'otherness' are multiple and diverse, e.g., there are those who see immersion into another culture as an escape from their own, others learn a language to 'spy' or gain (economic/political, etc.) advantage over the 'other', for some it is a necessary asset for employment, advancement or even survival and for yet other people it is mainly a matter of enjoyment. Furthermore, at times particular motivations are foregrounded for the *formal* study of other languages because they are seen to *serve* societal and/or institutional purposes. These changes have

affected modern language education in various ways: it has had an effect on enrolment patterns, on the choice of language to be studied, on the method and orientation of teaching (e.g., Grammar/Translation, Behavioural, Intercultural, Communicative approaches). The choice of approach/method also provides insight into which aspects/elements of 'otherness' are particularly highlighted. For example, the Grammar/Translation method aids access to the 'grand' literature and other key cultural icons of the 'other'. The communicative competence approach, on the other hand, enables the learner to gain insight into the everyday of the 'other', either as an observer or to become a participant who can 'pass' for a member of the 'other' group. While methods, approaches, reasons and motivations may have changed over the past 75 or so years, I contend that the interpretation of the 'other' in the underlying goal for the learning of another language is still largely hostage to the linguistic ideology of nationalism: 'Otherness' is interpreted as those linguistic, cultural practices and values that *ideally* represent the nation-state. The linguistic vehicle that best represents the nation-state and through which this 'otherness' is to be studied, is the standard language, both in speech and writing. For its spoken form, it is the language of the 'educated' *native speaker* [henceforth NS] who stands model for learning because s/he is the 'best' or most suitable representation of the 'other'.

A nationalism-focused interpretation of the 'other' in today's foreign language learning

I am well aware that my presentation of the current state of play in foreign language learning is oversimplified. Indeed there is now a growing body of literature that critically engages with 'nationalism-focused' elements in foreign language learning. For example, Hu (1999) in a paper on intercultural learning (in language) talks about the fact that the following ideas still pervade foreign language education: (1) that cultures are homogenous and more or less assumed to be monolingual, and (2) that collective entities can continue being described objectively described as well as contrasted with one another. Such ideas are couched in the linguistic ideology of the nation state. She then comments that such ideas are no longer appropriate for current societies and especially no for the young generation. In a similar vein Kramsch (2004: 1) comments on the narrow interpretation of the notion of the 'native speaker' that still dominates in modern language education,

"In the US FL education is still very much hostage to a view of language and culture that privileges the nation-state and its national native speakers...the ultimate goal...is to approximate the (nationally conceived) native speaker and to discuss and interpret canonical works of the native speakers' national literatures. The notion of cultural difference might very well ... form the core of the humanities' at American universities, but this does not mean that American FL education teaches cultural difference, for example between the worldviews of Germans now living in Germany, Germans naturalized as Americans, Germans living in France and Jewish Germans now living in Israel."

However, to date the majority of critiques have focused on *English*, given its global spread as a second and foreign language and as a global lingua franca. These

critiques are far-reaching and tackle almost all elements in the learning of English including the variety/ies to be learned, the speaker models, the text types and genres, cultural aspects of communicative practices, etc.

Although I am aware that there *is* greater sensitivity to, and awareness of these issues among parts of the foreign language teaching corps, this mainly concerns those involved in the teaching of well-known pluricentric languages such as French, German, Spanish. Here we see an expansion of the notion of native speaker to include educated native speakers of 'regional' standard varieties, e.g. South American Spanish, Canadian French, Austrian German.

However, overall speaking, the nationalism-focused interpretation of the 'other' continues to shape the perceptions of many involved in foreign language education, especially students and the 'end-user' (e.g., agencies, the service sector and others using foreign language speakers) as well as the general public. This is especially evident in the discourses around the continued centrality of the 'narrowly defined' native speaker. Let me give some examples from a recent student survey that I conducted among European and Asian students learning languages other than English.

The survey explored their linguistic biographies as well as their language learning practices and motivations. With regard to the latter the student responses to a range of statements suggested that a native speaker focus still plays a prominent role.

1. A teacher who is a native speaker of the language is the best role model for learning the language. (96% agree)
2. Achieving a native-like accent is very important for me. (86% agree)
3. Being able to communicate with native speakers is not the main goal of my language learning. (70 % disagree)
4. The language we learn in class should be the language of educated native speakers (80% agree)
5. I am likely to use the language mainly with native speakers in their country (89%)

Although these responses do not give detailed insight into whom they consider to be a native speaker, some initial follow up interviews clearly confirm that this is mainly the educated native speaker who is associated with the *heartland* of the language, i.e., the dominant nation-state in which the language is spoken.

With regard to the 'end user' community, I am unaware of any studies that specifically probe this issue. Yet, anecdotal information combined with reports about demands for foreign language skills suggest that a nationalism-oriented NS model still dominates.

Beyond a nationalism-focus in foreign language learning: How?

The linguistic realities of today's world together with the language and communicative practices many people now engage in, all point to heightened diversity, increased

fluidity and indeed hybridity. To date the discipline of foreign language learning, with the possible exception of English language teaching – ELT - , is still in the early stages of engagement with this changed reality and its consequences for or impact on the practice of foreign language learning.

In a world whose linguistic and cultural borders are increasingly porous, it becomes more difficult to define what the focus of foreign language learning should be. If the study of the 'other' is at the heart of language learning and this 'other' becomes increasingly difficult to define because of fluidity and hybridity, what do we focus on in the teaching of another language, who are the 'role' models? Should we abandon the study of the 'other' as the ultimate goal of foreign language learning? If so, what do we replace it by? And what about the linguistic focus: should the standard language and the native speaker model continue to be the main reference point for linguistic knowledge and skills? While I may not have answers to such questions, my reflections on them have helped me set some parameters around which to formulate possible answers in the context of foreign language learning in higher education

1. The resilience of the nation-state and its ideology

There are numerous signs – political, social and indeed linguistic – that the nation-state is re-asserting itself in light of the increased porosity and fluidity of borders, boundaries and systems. There is no need to point to recent examples of this 'fightback' in the political and social arenas as they are widely known and reported on. In the 'linguistic' arena one could point towards two developments: (1) a return to a more 'traditional' approach to teaching the 'mother tongue' and its literary and cultural canon (at least in the UK and some other Anglophone countries) and (2) a return to foregrounding linguistic assimilation of 'newcomers'. This resilience will undoubtedly continue to influence people's perceptions of the *what* and *why* of foreign language learning.

2. The institutional context: consumer ideology dominating the higher education scene and structures of learning

Universities in the 21st century are also struggling to (re) define themselves and face multiple challenges to 'accommodate' the desires and demands of its various stakeholders. The majority of universities (outside of the US) are still supported by the state whose demands for greater financial self-sufficiency on behalf of the universities is constantly increasing. As we know, this affects decisions about which disciplines and courses should be supported. Irrespective of their state-funded or privately- funded status, most universities are also subjected to a consumer ideology that affects not only which courses are offered but also how they are offered (format/mode) and to what extent they suit not only the 'student-consumer' but also future employers of the student. Taking into account the desires, expectations and demands of both these stakeholders has already impacted on the teaching of languages in universities and may very well constrain how the challenges identified in this paper could be addressed. For example, the acquisition of 'intercultural' knowledge and skills through modern language education is increasingly appreciated as a major asset in the work force. However, in the work force 'interculturality' is generally interpreted as knowledge of separate/distinct cultures and language

graduates are seen as brokers between these distinct cultures rather than carrying knowledge of hybridity.

In debates about the future shape of education, structural limits or constraints are often pushed into the background as they tend to stifle the range of options for change. This is no different for debates about redesigning modern language education in universities (or similar agencies). Yet taking them into account when formulating alternatives assists in understanding the degree of resistance likely to be encountered or the magnitude of the task to effect change. For modern language education, important issues include 'time on task' and 'managing differential (prior) knowledge within the structure'.

In my view these are important parameters for framing proposals around changing modern language education that have a chance of succeeding.

Finally, my own response to the fundamental question posed in the title of talk - do we need a new 'raison d'être' for 'foreign' language learning? is a negative one. We do **not** need a new goal for foreign language learning, i.e. a desire to learn more about the 'other'. However, we do need to move away from an interpretation of the 'other' as defined within an ideology of linguistic nationalism. An important and very challenging task in light of the constraining parameters I have outlined!

References

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Kramsch, C. (2004) The multilingual experience: Insights from language memoirs. *Transit* 1/1: retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9h79g172>