

Modern Languages — A Discipline (still) in Search of an Identity?

(Contribution to the debate by Dr Peter Skrandies, Coordinator for German and Sociolinguistics, LSE Language Centre)

In the context of tuition fees and an ever-growing pressure on universities to focus on employability and prepare students for the job market, let me start with the argument that the voluntary learning of (modern) languages at university (just like the acquisition of other subject knowledge and academic skills) is first and foremost a social good and value in itself. As expressed by the Council of Europe in their recently published companion volume to CEFR, where plurilingual language education is seen as a right as well as a way of promoting “democratic citizenship, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue” CoE 2017, p. 25). There are good reasons to believe that student language learners are intrinsically motivated, too. In a survey conducted in 2015 for the British Academy at the LSE, a representative group of student language learners taking credit and non-credit language courses at the LSE Language Centre “rated their interest in the country, society and culture in which the language is spoken as the single most important motivational factor for wanting to learn [a language] or improve their language skills” (British Academy 2016, p. 5; cf. Skrandies 2016). Of course students have important other reasons for wanting to learn languages, which include, amongst others, career prospects, plans for working, studying or living abroad or the desire to improve their ability to speak the languages of their families, friends and loved ones. These reasons point to a demand for language education at tertiary level which is based on seeing language(s) as a means for communication as well as complex sociocultural “objects” whose understanding allows students to comprehend and engage with “other” societies and cultures, and in turn develop a more comprehensive understanding of their own.

As UK university students have a multitude of good reasons for wanting to learn languages, they do so — according to data published in the annual UCML/AULC surveys on IWLP (Institution-wide Language Programmes) — in growing numbers: Between 2012 and 2017 the number of student language learners in IWLP increased from 49,637 in the academic year 2012-13 to 62,455 in 2016-2017 representing a growth of 26% (UCML-AULC 2013-2017). And in this academic year, the number of UG and PG students who are taking language courses at my institution is the highest ever. Admittedly, these increases have taken place during a period, in which the numbers of students learning languages at secondary level and those studying specialist language degrees at university have continually fallen. Indeed, it does not seem far-fetched to link these patterns: students who did not want to, or did not have the chance to study a language at secondary school, take the opportunity to do so in tertiary IWLP, while there is less interest and ability to join specialist UG language programmes which require existing linguistic skills (or the commitment to join demanding ab initio programmes). The fact that the majority of learners in tertiary IWLPs take courses at A1 and A2 levels seems to confirm such an interpretation.

Another important question is, of course, which languages student learners want to learn, and related to that, the issue of how quickly Language Centres and Departments can and should respond to changes in demand. The introduction paper to this debate included the question of whether the increase in the teaching and learning of more recent “world languages” such as Chinese and Arabic will change the nature of language learning more widely.” Based on the uptake and offer of languages in tertiary IWLP, it is clear that languages like Mandarin and Arabic, but also Japanese and Korean will be an important part of the language mix in tertiary education. At the same time, the languages of Britain’s European neighbours will continue to be in demand (maybe even more so after Brexit), as the example of the recent growth of German in IWLP confirms. With regard to the languages offered in degree programmes, however,

it is indeed likely that restructuring in the sector will “come at the cost of a reduction of the resource allocated to some of the traditional Western European languages” (Hutchings & Matras 2017).

Historically, these European languages became part of UK university education as “Modern Foreign languages”, i.e. as the languages of foreigners and foreign nation-states and the teaching of these languages was organised according to this view. In their recent article on reforming Modern Language education in the UK already quoted above, Stephen Hutchings and Yaron Matras have stated categorically that “[a]ny reform programme should begin with a rejection of the prevailing compartmentalised, nation-state based approach to the organisation of Modern Languages units and curricula (ibid).” In view of the multilingual and transnational character of both our students and the wider British society, I could not agree more with their assessment. It is indeed high time for Language Departments and Centres, to take into account the plurilingual repertoires of our students and to reach out to the multilingual communities of our cities. While we should still encourage our language learners to spend time abroad, we should also point out to them that they are surrounded by thousands of fluent speakers of the languages they learn. To illustrate this further, let me briefly mention two projects recently initiated at the LSE Language Centre by two of my colleagues. Lourdes Hernandez-Martin and Francois Simon have initiated projects which aim at enhancing language acquisition by integrating the exploration of London’s multilingual linguistic landscapes and soundscapes into language teaching and by encouraging language learners to engage with London’s French and Spanish-speaking communities. Through this the projects attempt to make a contribution to the description and valorisation of multilingualism in London, while providing UG student learners with real-life authentic opportunities to practise French and Spanish and developing their intercultural communication, research and study skills (Hernández-Martín 2017, Simon 2017, Hernandez-Martin & Skrandies 2018).

And just as language teaching should reach out to multilingual communities outside the university classroom, they should also strengthen and develop their cross-disciplinary cooperation within and across universities. Social sciences and humanities teach knowledge about non-English speaking societies and cultures and urgently need the input of language specialists who very often possess considerable non language subject expertise. The teaching of international history at university, for example, could and should be enriched in interdisciplinary, co-taught courses where students explore historical documents in other languages while they make use of their own plurilingual repertoires and those of their peers and teachers. This is a prime example of language acquisition in the contexts of culture, intercultural communication and subject learning.

Since multilingual language competence and the work of the Council of Europe were mentioned in the introduction to the debate, let me also highlight the recent publication of the *Companion Volume to the CEFR (with new descriptors)* (CoE 2017). Apart from adding pluricultural and plurilingual competences as well as mediation to the descriptive framework, it reminds us that the CEFR has always been far more than a tool for mapping and assessing language proficiency. Together with the *Guide for the Development and Implementation of Curricula for Plurilingual and Intercultural Education* (Beacco, J. *et al*), the documents, although not written specifically for the tertiary sector, can assist us in modernising and reforming UK university language education.

Finally, a move away from the “nation-state based approach to teaching modern languages” mentioned earlier, could also make a contribution to overcoming another problem identified in the introductory paper to this debate, namely the isolation and “institutional homelessness” of language education in universities. If language teaching and learning are indeed “isolated” and have “so far not found a permanent

home in Departments of Education, PGCE programmes or Applied Linguistics Departments”, the institutionalisation of interlanguage and interdisciplinary Departments and Centres combining language pedagogy, language research and the teaching of subject knowledge and language acquisition could be the way forward.

References

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