

## **Language Education Activism.**

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**Background and Perspective.** In January this year, I took up the post of AHRC Leadership Fellow in Modern Languages, an area of strategic priority for the Arts and Humanities Research Council. A key part of this post involves working with the Modern Languages community around the UK to champion the value of languages and to promote the vibrant research agenda in the field. In particular, I am working closely with the four Open World projects, including of course 'Language Acts and Worldmaking', and am a strand lead myself on 'Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies'. The Leadership Fellowship also incorporates a research project which in my case is on language policy in the three devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - policy with regard to foreign language learning, community languages and indigenous languages. My own field is French Sociolinguistics (linguistic variation and change, orality, policy, corpus linguistics). I come to this debate also as the former Head of the School of Modern Languages in Queen's Belfast. In that capacity, I was acutely aware of the recruitment issues facing the subject, the importance of collaboration with the post-primary sector in Northern Ireland and the need to be able to explain to university Senior Management why a thriving Modern Languages unit is a vital part of the university's future.

**Language Education Activism.** The creation of the post of AHRC Leadership Fellow has come at a crucial moment for Modern Languages. I need not rehearse here the facts and figures: suffice to say that numbers are dropping alarmingly at both secondary and HE level, with applications to University down in ML by some 23% in 2017 relative to 2012, and admissions down between 2011 and 2016 by more than 25% in French and German. 'Language Education Activism' is certainly required if these trends are to be reversed. This activism will need to be multifaceted because the problem has many dimensions. There is no single issue. The OWRI projects are very much part of the AHRC's activism: as you will know, they aim to transform the Modern Languages research agenda (in part through new interdisciplinary research collaborations), to help re-invigorate teaching through the incorporation of these new research-led areas into university curricula, and to engage in a public conversation about the importance of languages, not least through collaboration with a vast range of non-HEI partners. The latter include examination boards, creative artists, policy makers, schools, community groups and many others.

While OWRI is a wonderful opportunity to refresh our research and teaching agendas, this alone will not solve the recruitment problem in universities. The other components of OWRI are crucial to its legacy. In truth, it is difficult to find any clear evidence that an unattractive curriculum in HE is the primary source of the problem. Not only does an exercise such as the NSS (however cynically some might view it) suggest that levels of satisfaction are robust relative to other subjects, but also, those of us working in the field

know that our students and our graduates are often our very best ambassadors. In my experience, the majority of our students and our alumnae are very much the 'converted' who have opted into languages and, to use the terms of this debate, are able to 'reflect and connect with themselves, their cultures and their surroundings'. This was demonstrated most eloquently by one of your students, Ellie Osborne, in her article in the Daily Telegraph (17 January 2017). It is unquestionably important that we have curricula that offer choice, that deliver high-quality teaching, that cater for students with A level profiles that now include sciences and social sciences as well as humanities subjects, that go beyond narrow notions of nation states to embrace a more transnational view of Modern Languages. OWRI will play a key part in this. However, in my view, our primary problem is our inability to convince school pupils and their parents of the point of studying Modern Languages to an advanced level or ultimately taking a Modern Languages degree. The falling intakes in universities in turn create resource-related problems which are exacerbated by the fact that language teaching is resource intensive, even when numbers are strong. We have lost our HEFCE funding status as 'part-lab', a status that helped support our language teaching methodologies; and we now find ourselves explaining why our discipline matters at all or worse still, fighting off cuts and potential closures. Personally, I do not believe that re-invigorating the curriculum at third level, important as it is, will be sufficient to solve the recruitment problem.

In my view, our best chance at reversing the trend needs two key ingredients. One centres on ideological persuasion around the value of studying languages (to a wide range of constituencies); the other is about very practical steps that join up the different education sectors, particularly post-primary and university. Both ingredients could be classed as forms of 'Language Education Activism', and the two meet in the post-primary sector, a sector which is crucial for the future of languages in the UK.

There have certainly been some positive developments in the post-primary sector. A language is now required for the English Baccalaureate and there are some indications of improved uptake at Key Stage 4; an attempt is now being made to address the 'severe grading' issue in language A levels (in my view, the extent of the damage due to severe grading cannot be overstated); the reformed GCSEs should, in theory, be more enabling, intellectually creative and, crucially, more enjoyable for pupils. However, there are still many major concerns. There are fears around performance in the new GCSEs, since they are more challenging than previously; there are worries about the transition in the next few years for pupils who took the old GCSE and who find themselves taking the new A-level, the latter having been constructed on the basis of pupils being prepared by the new GCSE; and while we can be cautiously optimistic about the question of severe grading, it will take some time before confidence levels improve. Moreover, according to the latest 'Language Trends' survey, the number of 'dual linguists' is declining dramatically, not least because of the new challenging GCSE specifications; there are concerns around the move from 4 to 3 A Levels and the increased possibility of languages being the losers, not least because of continuing

perceptions around difficulty. For those who survive all the obstacles, perform well at GCSE and still love studying languages when they are 16, accessing well-informed careers advice about the opportunities for language graduates is a further hurdle in decision-making for A level and university. The pressure is on to select other degree subjects, even when a pupil is passionate about languages. While most of us in this room, and indeed our graduates, fully understand the importance for our society of people who can, to use the debate's terms, 'reflect and connect with themselves, their cultures and their surroundings', this is not language that has sufficient currency to convince pupils and parents to pursue languages, nor school principals to support them when hard decisions have to be made. The issues for most pupils, parents and principals are much closer to the ground, especially in the state sector where our recruitment problem is greatest.

Some of the practical steps that could be taken involve collaboration across sectors. Amongst these I would mention:

- Universities working closely with schools and language teachers to promote the value of languages. This is now happening increasingly and forms part of the Language Acts and Worldmaking project but it is still a minority activity. A key resource here is our students. In Wales, for example, a new mentoring scheme is a key part of the Welsh 'Global Futures' strategy, where Languages undergraduates in four Welsh universities mentor Key Stage 3 pupils in local schools, with the goal of raising the number opting into languages at GCSE. In turn, the undergraduates are trained and accredited for the mentoring work. This initiative was launched in 2015 and the initial report after one year suggests that there is already an improvement in numbers: 13 of the 21 schools reported increased numbers for GCSE. The scheme is very popular with undergraduates. There are also several initiatives across the OWRI projects to help increase the value placed by post-primary schools on home languages, spoken by nearly one in five of UK children entering primary school.
- Universities (ML, language centres, Schools of Education) and teachers collaborating to help deliver the new GCSE and A level curricula in a way that pupils feel inspired to opt into languages. As a discipline, we need to find ways of doing this in a resource-efficient way: the Language Acts and Worldmaking project is already engaged in this.
- Universities, schools and government working together to develop a 'joined up' strategy around languages. While there are significant implementation issues, it is nonetheless impressive to see all sectors in Scotland working together to roll out their '1+2' policy: HE, FE, secondary and primary schools, local authorities and the devolved government in Edinburgh. Given the range of fields where language graduates are needed (e.g. the arts, security, health, business), the case for languages would also be greatly enhanced by collaboration across government departments. This is more difficult in Whitehall than in the devolved administrations. For example, the OWRI MEITS team was closely involved recently in bringing together civil servants from the Departments of Health and of Communities in Northern Ireland, in order to discuss the benefits for social cohesion and for health of a strong strategy for languages, including Irish.

- The languages sector as a whole pushing for relatively small levels of financial support for strategically important languages in schools. Languages such as German, which consistently appears second on the CBI's list in their Education and Skills survey, are increasingly becoming unviable at A level for principals whose budgets are under severe constraints. There may be possibilities here in 'area learning communities' but it will require creativity on the part of schools, a will to make it work and some financial support from government. Similarly, the latest Language Trends survey expresses concern about the cost of language assistants in schools, especially in the state system.
- Involving public champions of languages, as well as the business world, in advocacy for languages. STEM's success in turning the tide was, at least in part, due to a campaign of public engagement.

In terms of persuasion, multiple sectors need to be convinced of the value of learning languages. Simon Jenkins recent article in the Guardian ('Ignore the panic. There's little point learning languages at school') is not, alas, indicative of a maverick isolated viewpoint. Unfortunately it expresses a widely-held view amongst large sections of the public. And the general public includes parents, governors and pupils. It is an attitude even found amongst some senior colleagues and decision-makers in the post-primary and HE sectors. We need to convince the key parties - pupils, parents, careers teachers, principals, university senior management, politicians.... of the value of languages, and, at the same time, support practical measures that centre on addressing the most problematic issues. Only then will young people who love the subject have no hesitation in taking it further, backed without reservations by their teachers and parents.