Strategies for language?

Being a modern linguist is a pretty rotten business. Applications to study modern languages in UK universities have fallen by over a third in the last decade. Whilst Spanish and to a lesser extent Italian have fared reasonably well, other languages are in rapid decline. University applications have directly reflected falling numbers taking languages at UK secondary schools. In 1996 there were over 50,000 A-level entries in modern languages; in 2002 the figure had fallen to just over 30,000. Overall GCSE entries in 2002 were higher than in the previous year, though in French and German they were down by 8,500 and 9,000 respectively. Fewer GCSE entries means fewer A-Level candidates and fewer university applicants. The Arts and Humanities Research Board knows that it is not funding enough postgraduate studentships in modern languages to enable us to train researchers and future university teachers who would be equipped to replace staff due to retire over the next few years; but for the moment nothing is being done to remedy the situation. Whereas multilingualism is the norm in most of the world, the UK is becoming more resolutely monoglot than ever. English shields us against an outside world perceived as hostile at a time when anxieties about immigration and the fear of terrorism are rife. In consequence, language departments across the country are shrinking. In the most successful departments, vacancies are frozen; the ones perceived by their vice-chancellors to be unsuccessful are being closed down or limping on under the threat of closure.

The UK government's National Languages Strategy, launched in December 2002, states that the government is committed to improving language learning, and that it aims to increase the number of people studying languages in further and higher education as well as in other contexts ranging from primary school to the workplace. The strategy's aim is to create the appetite for learning whilst broadening and enriching the options available, and it outlines a number of measures designed to achieve this. The language assistants scheme will be extended and revitalized; a qualification in 'Teaching a Foreign Language' will be created; voluntary recognition systems and support networks will be established; every primary school will have a language coordinator, and by the end of the decade all primary pupils will have the opportunity to study at least one foreign language; the use of information technology will be extended; a National Director for Languages will be appointed; and all this will be supported by £10 million per year direct investment. But these measures go together with one major change which is causing concern among language teachers at all levels: it will no longer be *compulsory* for pupils to study a language for GCSE.

The National Languages Strategy is an object lesson in the new political discourse. Everything is proposed in terms of opportunities, options, entitlements and flexibility. In a modern liberal democracy we know that coercion is wrong, so instead of *forcing* people to study a language the strategy is geared towards 'motivating' and 'creating the appetite' to learn. In the supermarket of life, the National Languages Strategy adds to the dazzling range of options and opportunities available to us, and no choice is compulsory. You would have to be a moron or, heaven forbid, a socialist to object to this extension of our options. The language of choice and entitlement is so powerful that it undercuts any possible dissent. How could anyone deny that the freedom to choose is an absolute good and a fundamental democratic right? This discourse is subtly insidious because it brooks no opposition; its permissiveness is in its way deeply intolerant. Furthermore, we can see here how the rhetoric of education policy reflects the same ideological confidence apparent in the War

Against Terrorism: it is all about freedom and choice, and the willingness to stamp out any form of opposition to it.

To say that everyone is entitled to learn a language is the same as saying that no one is required to. There is no doubt at all that the National Languages Strategy will result in fewer pupils studying a language to GCSE level. This may not entirely be a bad thing. Some pupils who have no interest in or aptitude for languages will be able to study subjects which may suit them better. The government's wager is that those pupils who exercise their entitlement will be more committed and therefore more likely to continue to study languages at A-level and beyond. Inevitably, though, the attempt to increase the numbers studying languages in higher and further education by decreasing the numbers learning them for GCSE involves a risk, perhaps even a reckless one. In consequence it is hard to be enthusiastic about the National Languages Strategy. The introduction of top-up fees in 2006 is likely to weaken the position of language degrees even further, since most of them are four-year courses rather than three, so the debt incurred by students who enrol for them will be higher than for other subjects. The National Languages Strategy *may* work; but if it doesn't, by the time a new strategy can be formulated it will already be too late for many language departments.

Does this really matter? Since I teach in a French department it won't be surprising that I think it does. One of the disappointing elements about the National Languages Strategy is that, whilst insisting repeatedly on the importance of language learning and the government's commitment to it, it fails to make a coherent case for *why* anyone should bother. After all, we know full well that English is on the way to becoming a universal language. We pay lip service to lamenting the decline in language skills, but let's be honest: it suits us very well. English is the medium of global capitalism; and however we align ourselves politically, we endorse the new imperialism whenever we take for granted that we can order our coffee in English when in Rome or on a Greek island. The use of English is not ideologically neutral; it is tied to the exercise of economic power which forces the other to speak in our language.

The National Languages Strategy lacks any sense that the study of languages is and should be an intellectual undertaking rather than only the acquisition of a useful transferable skill. One of the major achievements of university modern languages departments over recent decades has been their role in studying and propagating the ideas of an imposing array of thinkers whose work has gone on to be a key influence in numerous other disciplines – thinkers such as Bakhtin, Adorno, Habermas, Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Levinas, Lyotard, Deleuze, Gramsci, Vattimo or Agamben. By reading such authors in their original languages and intellectual contexts, modern linguists have a perspective on their work which has been indispensable. In general, whether modern linguists are engaged in traditional scholarship or innovative criticism, the key issue is the relation to cultural, intellectual and linguistic otherness. This is not to say that language learning does not also provide a valuable transferable skill with important consequences for commerce and industry. But language learning constantly revolves around the difficulties of translation and communication; and in both teaching and research, language departments are involved in a particularly acute way with the problem of encounter with 'the other'.

Like many others involved in teaching languages, I am deeply anxious that the government's National Languages Strategy will not succeed in encouraging more people to study foreign languages and cultures. The measures it outlines are no doubt well meant; but it is hard not to be filled with gloom when one of the key means of increasing numbers in higher and further education turns out to involve allowing the number of those taking GCSEs to fall even further. Moreover, whilst the strategy offers a potpourri of measures, it gives little sign that the government has any real view of why it is important now, still, to learn languages.

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