Do 'Modern languages' include 'Community languages'?

A plea for a domestic language policy agenda

Yaron Matras
Founder, Multilingual Manchester
The University of Manchester

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The OWRI scheme seeks to be transformative and to re-conceptualise Modern Languages research and impact. Its success will partly depend on whether or not it can re-define what actually counts as ML research. Recently, Katrin Kohl, PI of the Oxford-based OWRI consortium Creative Multilingualism, added her voice to various calls for reform, suggesting that "Modern Languages suffers from a fragmented identity, unhelpful hierarchies and an inability to garner a true spirit of cohesion across sectors and language groups" and calling on the discipline to "address its identity crisis" and to "reinvent itself". Echoing wider discussions among participants in the scheme, she calls for the field to be re-named as 'Languages' as a way of getting rid of at least one such unhelpful hierarchy.

Historically, ML research has concentrated on languages and cultures overseas and not paid much attention to the country's multilingual reality – hence the dispossession of a whole class of languages as "community languages", i.e. outside the scope of its default mission statement. But things have been changing, and initiatives such as Translating Cultures have been bringing together scholars across discipline boundaries to explore local multilingual practices incorporating perspectives from linguistics, education, ethnography, and translation and interpreting studies. Some of the OWRI

projects highlight the benefits of multilingualism for the individual at home: the widening of intellectual horizons and performative capacities as well as social and cognitive skills and wellbeing. There is thus increasing attention to everyday multilingualism as it manifests itself outside the ML classroom and beyond the acquired qualifications of graduates, namely among those whose communicative interactions at home, with neighbours, in places of commerce and worship, through cultural celebrations, media consumption and social networking involve languages other than or in addition to English, and with reference to the duty of key service provides in all sectors to take account of language needs and to ensure equal access and opportunities to cultivate cultural heritage.

For over a decade now, the ML community has been feeling "beleaguered", in the words of Michael Worton's 'Review of Modern Foreign Languages provision in higher education in England'. It is now trying hard to get policy makers to give it recognition and support. One example that I personally find counter-productive is the enthusiasm with which some appear to be embracing Brexit as an opportunity to boost the UK's pool of language skills. Many of those who enabled it by voting Leave are people who fear neighbours with foreign accents and want to see their presence in Britain curtailed. That such isolationism could give rise to opportunities to immerse in other languages and cultures seems to be beyond wishful thinking.

On the other hand, while policy briefings by scholarly associations often emphasise the importance of language skills for diplomats, trade envoys, and security agents, more and more attention is also being given to the fact that Britain is an increasingly multilingual society. A call was recently made on behalf of the OWRI research scheme for the government to appoint a 'Chief Linguist'. The initiative is new and comments and proposals from the wider research community are yet to follow, but it is interesting to note that the

accompanying statement released on behalf of OWRI, while emphasising the familiar themes of diplomacy, security and defence, also mentions prosperity, education, and social cohesion, and includes a brief reference to "support for community languages".

There are many reasons why cities, in particular, need a language policy, and therefore many incentives for researchers to get involved in drafting policy measures that will not only forward opportunities to learn Spanish, French and German but also support service providers with intelligence on language needs and strategic solutions to manage language provisions. As enrolment in secondary school and university level language courses continues to decline, we are actually seeing the reverse trend among the populations that the majority likes to call "communities" – people of non-English background who, drawing on their own resources and usually without any government support are setting up and running weekend schools to teach children heritage languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Urdu, French, Ukrainian and many others. Demand for such supplementary schools is, according to all testimonies and observations, increasing.

There's a lot that ML researchers can do in this area. On the research side, supplementary schools provide opportunities to examine new conditions of language vitality and cross-generation language transmission. They often challenge our very conceptualisation of 'community' by bringing together people of different backgrounds who share an interest in a single language, and by promoting transnational links. Their pedagogical approach of using multiple language resources has inspired key contributions to the theoretical notion of 'translanguaging'.

Neglected by national government and by most local authorities, the country's many supplementary schools can also benefit from university civic engagement. In 2017, our Multilingual Manchester research unit (which delivers the Multilingual Communities strand of the OWRI consortium Cross-Language Dynamics) set up a supplementary school support platform which facilitates teacher training and offers curriculum enrichment sessions. We have continuously invited input from supplementary school staff into our general outreach and public engagement activities, motivating parents and staff and making the point that these are initiatives that make a valuable contribution to the city and society as a whole. Our OWRI consortium is also supporting a new pilot project based at University of Westminster, which aims to create a network of researchers with an interest in community language schools, and we will be working with the NRSCE to help implement accreditation schemes in the local sector.

This is just one way to transform and re-conceptualise Modern Languages research and impact: To support those who are motivated to learn and to teach languages, even if they are not working in Her Majesty's Secret Service; to ensure that where there is a rise in interest in languages among young people and their families, we are part of it; to help nurture the language skills

of young UK residents regardless of their race or ethnicity; to make a contribution to cultural confidence and the building of bridges among communities; and to help shift some of the language policy agenda to the domestic arena.