
Revitalising Modern Languages: Content, Culture, Community

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The following article is based on a speech given at the Moore Society Dinner 2023 at St John's College, Oxford.

I'm going to start by jumping back twenty years, as I was here at St John's then, studying for a Masters in European Literature. At that point I was following an academic career path, and I went on to do a PhD in German literature and translation at UCL.

But from my time at St John's onwards I became increasingly aware of, and concerned by, what was happening to languages in schools, and increasingly motivated to do something about it. In 2004 the Labour government stopped languages from being compulsory at GCSE, and introduced language lessons at primary school. It's more complex than simply this one change, but that date does mark the beginning of a major decline in numbers learning languages at schools, which has developed from a small leak to a gaping hole. I promise that this talk is not going to remain so doom-laden, but to set the scene it is worth looking briefly at the statistics – since 2005 numbers taking French at GCSE have dropped by 125,000; German by 65,000. Spanish has increased by 50,000 – but this is not enough to plug the gap, and the increase is slowing.

As a result, there are fewer languages graduates to become teachers, and teacher retention is also very low, so we're close now to the cycle being broken. There will not be enough teachers, regardless of how many pupils there are wanting to learn languages.

So what do we do about this? This is the question I started to ask myself seriously when I came back to Oxford after my PhD, and began a lectureship at Queen's College. During those early years back in Oxford, I decided to move away from a conventional academic career path and into promoting international culture and language-learning in this country. At the time I didn't have a name for what I was doing, and it felt a bit risky to leave a well-trodden path, but at a conference after a few years somebody introduced me as a “cultural activist”, and I realised that I'd found my calling.

Through that activism I became very involved in the world of literary translation, working closely with translators and publishers to bring more translated literature to readers in the UK. At the same time I was still lecturing here at Oxford, and taking part in faculty outreach activities with schools. And I became aware of a real disjuncture between these two worlds. On the one hand, literary translation was becoming increasingly dynamic, collaborative, and lively, and on the other there was a real lack of dynamism, collaboration and life in languages in schools. Numbers were plummeting, culture and creativity were being stripped from the curriculum, and university departments were starting to downsize and close.

I had begun to run translation workshops with adults

as part of my non-Oxford work, and I saw that something really special happens when you bring people together to share and translate a literary text. I experienced so many university outreach events where pupils were *told* that it is worth continuing to study languages – that it would enable them to travel, to have an ‘international career’, to earn a bit more money – but those promises tended to meet with dead-eyed stares. By contrast, when we started to run translation workshops with pupils, their eyes were bright and alive – because this activity was *showing* them what it means to be a linguist in the here and now, not *telling* them, not trying to sell them an imagined future.

So this has become the principle of all the work I have done since then: showing, not telling; treating pupils as real-life linguists from the moment they learn one word in another language; focusing on what they *can* do in another language, rather than what they can't.

I'm going to talk in a minute about how this all works in practice, but first I just need to backtrack and explain what happened next in my career. In 2018 I set up a centre based at Queen's, now called the Translation Exchange, which uses translation activities to inspire lifelong engagement with languages. The same year I became Director of a small charity called the Stephen Spender Trust, which has a similar mission. We run competitions for young people, translation workshops in schools, book clubs for all ages, and workshops for adults. The project that I'm most proud of is our Creative Translation Ambassadors scheme, where we train university students to design and deliver creative translation workshops in schools. I particularly like the way that this is a cascading model: professional translators run workshops for the students, who then run workshops for school pupils. We're now looking at continuing this cascade – translators delivering workshops to university students, who deliver to sixth formers, who work with Year 9s, who run workshops in their local primary school...

At the Translation Exchange we also run a prize for schools called the Anthea Bell Prize for Young Translators, which we launched in 2020. It's grown enormously since then and in 2022 over 14,000 pupils took part with their teachers. So we know that we're onto a good thing with creative translation, and I've spent a lot of time in recent years thinking through why that is. We learnt through experience that creative translation really helps to enthuse and motivate learners and teachers, but we didn't know exactly why it worked so well. My thinking has led me to my three Cs: Content, Culture, Community. I'm going to close by talking a little about these three areas and sharing examples of how they work in practice.

Firstly, *content*. We have to recognise that *what* we learn when we learn languages really matters. There are a couple of examples that teachers often cite in this context

– the ‘what’s in my pencil case’ example and the ‘pros and cons of skiing’ example. Some of you will recognise these: a frequent topic in the early years of secondary school; and a recent German GCSE oral exam question which asked candidates to discuss the ‘advantages and/or disadvantages of a skiing holiday’. These topics are by turns dull and exclusive. The first doesn’t match the age of the learners – I know that my seven-year-old daughter finds it pretty exciting to talk about pencil cases, but I suspect that enthusiasm will wane by the time she reaches secondary school. And I don’t need to explain why the skiing topic is a problematic one in terms of inclusion.

By contrast, creative translation provides interesting, authentic content that everybody can access. It levels the playing field. In our workshops we often use a lovely graphic novel series by an author from the Ivory Coast, about a mischievous seven-year-old. All the French vocabulary and grammar around friends, describing homes, hobbies etc. is there, but the pupils are talking about a character, not rehashing details from their own lives.

The most memorable example of this impact came from a conversation with a teacher in the North West who uses our teaching resources. He described how he was running one of our workshops about migration in South America, for his Year 8 Spanish learners. The discussion was lively and the class found themselves talking about their own related experiences – which ranged from migration from another country, to moving house and starting afresh in a new community. At one stage one of the Year 8 boys turned to the teacher and said “This feels important”. That is exactly what we are aiming for – an awareness that learning languages is important, is relevant. That it speaks to the learners at their age and stage, rather than talking down to them and promising them some imagined future when they’ll be able to access cultural content. That it enables them to learn about important things.

Which leads me on to my second C, *culture*. Everything that we do at the Stephen Spender Trust and Translation Exchange revolves around authentic culture, mostly with a capital ‘C’ – literature, film, music. Translation is the perfect way of getting people to engage in that culture because – as you all know – translating requires careful reading and careful writing. You become a writer when you translate, so you don’t just observe or consume the culture, you participate in it.

As with my Ivory Coast example, this also enables us to represent diverse and inclusive culture – not just the Eurocentric culture that school textbooks often focus on. My concrete example here comes from a recent conversation with a languages teacher, who told me that using our creative translation resources had reminded her of why she studied languages and went into teaching in the first place – which was something that she was beginning to lose sight of. She said something that we often hear, which

is that the activity of translation enables her to take a different role in the classroom. She is no longer standing at the front, teaching word lists and grammar points, but feels that she is sitting alongside the pupils, collaborating with them and working towards a shared goal.

This of course is something that we’re all familiar with from the tutorial system here, in its ideal form, and I guess I may have been influenced more by that than I realised. But I think it’s so important that that collaborative learning experience isn’t delayed until university. Really, it shouldn’t be delayed beyond primary school, and creative translation makes that possible.

So, finally: *community*. As numbers learning languages in schools decrease, so does any sense of community. You might be one of only two pupils doing Spanish A Level, for example, or you may be unable to join the community at all because your school has stopped offering German.

My view is that we have to show our young learners that they are part of a community of linguists, which spans generations and continents, from the moment they learn their first word in another language. That engaging in other languages and cultures isn’t just some esoteric thing that happens at 2 o’clock on a Tuesday afternoon with their French teacher, but is a mindset and a way of life that can stay with them throughout their lives. Creative translation builds these communities, not least because the pupils often get to meet – or see on screen – languages students like you and professional linguists who are leading exciting lives with languages.

My example here is from a visit to a primary school about an hour’s drive away from here in Buckinghamshire, two weeks ago. We’d just run three days of Ukrainian creative translation workshops in the school, and I interviewed some of the pupils about the experience. One of the Year 4s said:

‘My nan speaks another language. I don’t know what language it is... and I’d never spoken to her about it. After the workshop I talked to her about it for the first time, because I’m a translator now, so I know about languages and can talk to her about them.’

I thought this was incredible. One 90-minute workshop had completely changed her attitude to languages, had changed her own identity, had given her the confidence to ask about something she’d never really thought about before. And to me this is because the workshop made her feel part of a community – of translators and linguists.

So it’s with community that I’ll close. It’s been lovely to be welcomed into this community this evening, and we shouldn’t take for granted the pleasure that comes from our community of linguists here in Oxford. But our work at the Translation Exchange and Stephen Spender Trust is about extending that community as far as we can, and I do hope that many of you will join us in that endeavour.