Response: Research in languages, societies and cultures

Liz Wren-Owens | June 2023 | Dialogues

Writing on behalf of the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) in my capacity as Vice-Chair (Research), I very much welcome the reports of the three Fellows of the AHRC Future of Languages scheme. They shine an important light on the current research landscape and its relationship to internal and external stakeholders. Building on this, they also indicate some of the research needs and gaps, as well as potential underdeveloped areas and new directions of research, as articulated by researchers and by other stakeholders who informed the Fellows' studies. This collaborative approach of the Fellows, engaging with individuals and institutions beyond the academy, is itself a marker of the way languages research can and does make a contribution to the daily lived experience of many people. Their reports highlight ways that languages research could expand still further its impact on policy and communities, whilst also outlining some of the obstacles to realising these new research directions. This gives us a clear starting point to begin thinking about how we overcome such barriers to enable new research landscapes to thrive.

The three pieces cover distinct areas of languages research, outlining the current practices, expertise and engagement of researchers across the UK, addressing the research needs of the UK's indigenous languages, and exploring the community languages landscape through the case study of Birmingham. Despite the different focus of the pieces, striking synergies emerge. These include the strength and breadth of current languages research, the need for greater, more responsive, and swifter forms of engagement with stakeholders, and inequalities between language users (and their communities). My response is structured around these themes.

The strength and breadth of current languages research

McLelland's piece highlights the diversity and scope of languages research in the UK. As we saw from the Main Panel reports from REF 2021, a key strength and characteristic of languages research is its interdisciplinarity. McLelland's work gives us quantitative proof of the multiple ways in which languages research engages with societal issues

and of the breadth of topics covered. It also evidences the extent of engagement with stakeholders beyond Higher Education (HE) within and outside the UK.

The discipline's capacity to engage in interdisciplinary research is significant as the policy makers interviewed by Macleod called for increased interdisciplinary research to investigate society's attitudes to languages, in order to address barriers to language learning with a view to supporting the normalisation of multilingualism in the UK. An interdisciplinary approach facilitates a holistic view of how language education needs to be supported by the provision of services. Collaborations between disciplines such as languages, education, the social sciences and information technology may be particularly fruitful here. Her report reveals a need for quality, evidence-based research to understand the barriers to accessing services in indigenous languages, echoing Labeau's findings on the barriers to accessing services in community languages in the UK. Macleod highlighted how policy makers need research into whether interventions are working or not, and why, in addition to new interventions to increase language use over a broader range of languages.

Enabling swifter and more responsive engagement with stakeholders

McLelland's findings, like the REF reports, show that as a discipline we already have the skills and expertise to undertake the kind of interdisciplinary work called for by Macleod and Labeau, examining language policy, enablers, and barriers. We might think about what kinds of research would facilitate this. Macleod makes an important point about the types of research and funding available to stakeholders and how these do not easily map onto university preferences for larger projects undertaken over a longer period. Macleod shows how as a sector we need to be more nimble in responding swiftly to smaller budget projects with quick turnarounds, working across disciplines and across languages. It highlights the need for agile sets of funding in HE – such as the model of UKRI Impact Accelerator Accounts (IAA), including the AHRC as a Research Council for the first time in the funding round of 2022. Such funding is precisely aimed at building partnership and collaboration between researchers and communities outside academia, innovating with impactful research that respond to need on the ground. This kind of funding would support some of the research needs outlined by Macleod around the need to evaluate and measure the impact of any new language policies, enabling collaborative research between language planners, policy makers, and social scientists. The need to respond more swiftly also encourages us to look at the ways we manage teaching and administration in our sector, and the

resilience of programmes and roles where individuals are enabled and empowered to step out of their daily work for short periods to carry out time-sensitive tasks. Macleod's report notes there are examples of good practice in this area. We might want to think about the role of institutions such as UCML and ILCS in highlighting and sharing this good practice to equip colleagues with knowledge and information to enable this to become more widespread.

Labeau's work shows that schools are looking for a stronger link to universities through staff training and support for pupils via careers advice and ambassador schemes. Schools also want research into the effectiveness of teaching methods and pupil motivation. As a sector we need to think about how we enable these links. There are positive moves afoot, such as the creation of the Routes into Languages national network under the UCML umbrella, which is enabling Routes centres to share best practice and resources. This is crucial at a time where colleagues have little resource (financial or time) to invest in the programmes. We also have the British Academy's Languages Gateway, which makes resources on careers (amongst many other things) widely accessible to teachers. Labeau's findings invite us to think about the ways in which we look at our civic mission, and also at the ways in which we engage with colleagues in university departments such as Education to undertake collaborative studies to meet the needs of stakeholders.

Language inequalities

Inequality is a thread through all three reports. McLelland highlights the inequality of participation in languages research for colleagues in different institutions, according to the extent to which the institutions are research-intensive. This also shapes the kind of research opportunities available to researchers and their connections to other researchers. McLelland also notes concern around the sustainability of the pipeline into languages. The well-documented problems of the pipeline from GCSE to A-Level and to undergraduate are now impacting the uptake of PhD study, with only 53% of the 150 PhD respondents having completed their undergraduate degree in the UK. This pattern looks set to continue, as Labeau notes the increasing concentration of lesser-taught languages at the more prestigious universities, which reduces opportunities for students still further. This aligns with the findings of the recent report, 'Languages Learning in Higher Education: Granular Trends', by the British Academy and UCML which highlights the threat of the emergence of cold spots in language learning in the UK due to regional variation in opportunities for language study, and the dominant position of Russell Group

universities. Labeau also suggests that these programmes at the more prominent institutions are often disconnected from the communities who use these languages. This has an impact on pipeline and also on the capacity of languages research to make meaningful and visible impacts on local communities. Labeau's report shows the need for a broader range of languages within translation programmes to support the needs of public services and businesses. Issues of resource and sustainability of programmes make these programmes challenging to deliver in all but the most well-resourced institutions coming back to the question of (in)equalities of provision and access. Beyond the value in studying community languages as a practical means of improving industry and public services, we might also want to think about the extent to which it is possible to study community languages to full degree level, focussing on their literature, history, cultural production and so forth. To what extent can we talk about valuing and nurturing languages more widely if only a very small subset can be taught at university level? This is obviously a difficult issue given the challenges in recruiting to language programmes and the closure of some languages departments, but is an important point to consider as we map the future of languages research and provision.

Labeau also highlights the way not all languages are equally valued or visible. Macleod highlights the low societal value of some indigenous languages, although of course there are marked differences here between the value of a language such as Welsh which enjoys official status within the devolved nation and some of the other indigenous languages. In the academic sphere, there are opportunities to study full undergraduate and postgraduate degrees focussed on Welsh literature, history, culture and languages (in addition to the opportunity to study some other subjects at least partly through the medium of Welsh), whilst this is not always possible with some other indigenous languages such as Cornish (nor with some community languages). Written communications from Welsh Government, local councils, schools and so forth are presented in both Welsh and English (usually in Welsh first), underlining to the public readership the importance of the language in Wales. This raises an important point, which is understandably not explicitly mentioned in the reports but perhaps underpins many of the findings – the importance of the context in which languages research takes place. Whilst the devolved governments may have a more open approach to languages and cultures, languages research in the UK is taking place in a context of a national government which is less than welcoming to other languages and cultures.

Mobilising the research findings

The reports of the Fellows offer rich insights into the languages research landscape as it stands and give us some clear indicators of future directions. The reports highlight how, as a discipline we have a great deal to offer, and the potential to extend our reach still further. As we navigate changes to the universities landscape, we can promote the potential of languages studies to encompass societies and cultures, including in the value-driven way highlighted by McLelland, with its interdisciplinary potential. We can, through our research agenda, engage with the issue of inequalities of language provision and access for community and indigenous languages. Collaboration, as always, is key, through individualised engagement with research networks and stakeholders and in harnessing the potential of formal structures such as the British Academy, ICLS, and UCML.

Author statement

UCML represents the views and opinions of scholars and professionals in modern languages and cognate disciplines to Government, the funding councils and other bodies at national level. It also collects and disseminates information about the state of study, research and teaching of modern languages and cognate disciplines in the United Kingdom and provides a forum for debate on issues of concern to its members through meetings, working parties, discussions, conferences, seminars and publications and presents the case for languages in the media. For further information see the UCML website: https://university-council-modern-languages.org/ [accessed 3 May 2023]. I am grateful to Fransiska Louwagie and Emma Cayley from the UCML Executive Committee and to Claire Gorrara as Dean of Research and Innovation in the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Cardiff University for their help in formulating this response. The views expressed are my own.