

# In Defence of Modern Languages

*Gerda Wielander*

The launch of Modern Languages Open comes at a moment when Modern Languages as a discipline is going through a difficult period.

News articles and reports on the state of Modern Languages in the UK have been plentiful in recent months and years. Several initiatives have been started, most recently the Language Festival, jointly launched by *The Guardian* newspaper and the British Academy. The ongoing Festival consists of a programme of lectures, reports and activities designed to highlight the importance of language learning for British commerce and industries, and British diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> As part of the Festival's campaign to start a national debate on language learning, the public was invited to vote for a language champion and duly crowned the Frenchman Arsène Wenger with this award. Clearly, the discipline of Modern Languages is in crisis.

The usefulness in speaking a foreign language is an undisputed fact. But the utility of Modern Languages as an academic discipline is less obvious. What do we do other than teach people French grammar and Chinese characters? There seems to be very little imagination, on the part even of fellow academics, when it comes to answering this question. I suspect the ready image is that of the (allegedly) non-thinking, mechanical translator, or of the interpreter who stands *behind* those who really have something important to communicate. Most people do not realise that the discipline of Modern Languages and Cultures is not just about enabling conversation between people who already know they want to talk to one another. Rather, it is the cultural knowledge produced by academics working in language-based areas studies, translation studies and intercultural communication which helps bring people together in the first place. Often it is the outcome of languages-based research that makes them realise that they need to talk to one another.

An illustration of this may be taken from a typical holiday in a foreign destination. Even the staunchest monolingual will appreciate that the

experience of a foreign holiday is very different when one of the party speaks the language and understands the culture of that country. The results might be more typical food, visits to more interesting places, cheaper shopping and a more authentic experience. By being restricted to just the use of English, the visitor will be stuck with what others have preselected on the basis of what they think he or she may like, or worse, what ought to be seen and done. He or she will be unable to ask questions and, where an interpreter is at hand, will fail to ask the most meaningful questions, and will thus be unable to tap into the most important source of information, namely what people say to one another, whether written or spoken, or in other forms of communication.

The same logic applies to intellectual enquiry. The study of another culture, be it its literature, politics, social structure or visual art, will invariably be extremely limited if English is the only linguistic and cultural framework through which such study is approached, however much one may embrace multiculturalism and diversity, however much one may reject the hegemony of the West or the dominance of the global North. The monolingual academic will be unable to engage with and assess the intellectual thought and theory, literature, arts and social phenomena within the cultural and linguistic context that has produced them. Academic researching outside 'home territory' is not dissimilar to the well-meaning Englishman who just speaks a bit louder when confronted with a foreigner. Equipped only with the English language and anglicised theory, the resulting research will be the academic equivalent of the foreign holiday, where the most important questions remain unasked and the most interesting places unvisited. This is the area where Modern Languages and Cultures are of utmost importance, where the shrinking of the discipline should be considered most worrying.

The Modern Languages discipline's crisis does not just originate in the sorry state of languages at primary and secondary school level in Britain. In 2007, the Swiss philosopher and writer Peter Bieri<sup>2</sup> resigned from his professorship at the Freie Universität Berlin, because he felt that, post-Bologna, there was no longer a guarantee of serious academic work at university. As he said about universities at the time:

[...] all I see is a facade with nothing behind it. Universities are currently being ruined by the perspective of business consultants, who confront us with a steady flow of questionnaires: How many visiting professorships have you held? How much third leg income have you generated? All these things have absolutely nothing to do with the authentic motivation of academic work.<sup>3</sup>

Bieri has called this the *Diktatur der Geschäftigkeit* or 'dictatorship of being busy'. It refers to a state of being that values activity for activity's sake, where

one engages in activities because one has to be seen to be engaging in them. The Viennese philosopher Konrad Paul Liessman<sup>4</sup> expanded on this in a blog entry for the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard* on 31 December 2012:

Under the dictatorship of artificially created competition, more and more academic disciplines are guided by criteria which neither enhance their quality, nor their development, nor their societal relevance. Impact factors, lists of publications, third leg income, research trips, visiting fellowships, project proposals all sound good and are, first and foremost, measureable. But they do not serve the real motor of academia: curiosity, truth seeking and the moral imperative to reason.<sup>5</sup>

Liessman argues that Bieri's expression of the 'dictatorship of being busy' implies that restriction of academic freedom today is no longer carried out by state or church. It is a frequent outcome of rather dubious means of control to which universities freely submit. This argument can be taken further by saying that, as such, the *Diktatur der Geschäftigkeit* not only endangers the freedom of the individual academic but it also endangers the diversity of disciplines. A discipline which is measureable, marketable and sometimes middle of the road is favoured at the expense of those which are considered difficult, expensive and hence thought marginal – a familiar tale to all involved in Modern Languages.

As Modern Languages academics struggle to defend their existence in an area of academic enquiry rather than as the providers of subsidiary tools linked to 'employability' or 'internationalisation', the meaning of the term Modern Languages itself is undergoing a transformation. Originally conceived to indicate the spoken languages of Europe as opposed to classical Latin and Greek, it is clear, for example, that the increase in the uptake of Spanish is linked to its importance as a global language, similar to the gaining importance of Chinese. 'Modern Languages' are now spoken – and studied – around the globe.

As a Chinese studies specialist, I might be expected to quote a Chinese philosopher rather than a Swiss and a fellow Austrian. Certainly, from a linguistic and cultural point of view, quoting German is now as alien to the majority of audiences in Britain as is Chinese. Learning Chinese should not, as recently promoted by Prime Minister David Cameron,<sup>6</sup> be at the expense of learning French and German. All languages need to be studied with renewed earnestness and rigour if British academia is not to lose its international standing. The aim of Modern Languages departments, policymakers and initiatives like the Language Festival must be to restore other languages and cultures back from the margins and to make them both equally familiar.

As China holds so much stock and promise in the eyes of government and

industry, let me engage for a moment in a comparative study of academic environments. Although Chinese and British universities operate within the larger context of two very different political systems – one a socialist dictatorship, the other a liberal democracy – the more immediate context within which academics operate is remarkably similar. The *Diktatur der Geschäftigkeit*, to stay with Bieri's term, reached China some time ago. My colleagues in China find themselves under much the same pressures as in Britain: the triple expectation of teaching, generating research income, and publishing – ideally in English-language publications – are a global reality for academics. In keeping with an individual's position in the academic hierarchy, the aforementioned employability and internationalisation may be added. The latter includes the securing of internships and partnerships with international universities.

During my recent visits to several Chinese universities for just this purpose, my Chinese colleagues and I found much common ground over which to commiserate while dining on Sichuan hotpot. One crucial difference between the Chinese and British environment is that in the former there are clear material incentives for academics to engage in such activities. Publishing, securing partnerships and generating research income will translate into tangible benefits (in the form of higher salaries) in China. In this regard, the British system is decidedly more socialist; it is a centrally planned economy where Human Resources reign supreme. While academic managers are regularly faced with the scourge of targets – Key Performance Indicators and Key Performance Objectives (to use the University of Westminster's terminology) – they possess no tools to incentivize their colleagues. Not unlike the Chinese socialist spirit of yesteryear, British academics are expected to engage in all these varied activities with passion and love of their country/university, or failing that, at least for the privilege of working in academia.

There is a further uncanny similarity between British universities and the Chinese socialist system of the 1950s and 1960s. In order to demonstrate an ever-present spirit of innovation and progress, credit frameworks, curricula and academic regulations are overturned with relentless regularity. As soon as one pattern has embedded, it is time to rip it up and start again. Not content to present this as a mere dictum from above – often a new leadership making its mark – the grassroots have to be seen to embrace such initiatives enthusiastically. Indeed the leaders present the latest projects in the *Diktatur der Geschäftigkeit* as having emerged from the masses in longstanding consultation processes. Academic managers of departments find themselves in an unenviable position comparable to that of the local cadre, tasked to implement the latest campaign, while the wary grassroots question the legitimacy of his or her leadership on the grounds of having 'left behind the masses'.

Where no dissent is accepted and exile is difficult to achieve, the choices and decisions of fundamentally decent communist cadres in the China of the 1950s and 1960s suddenly become much easier to relate to for the academic in British higher education. Faced not only with campaign after campaign, but also ever-increasing targets, which in scope and rhetoric have a faint whiff of the Great Leap Forward, it may only be a question of time before we resort to the academic equivalent of Chinese pragmatism in the face of the impossible. During China's Great Leap Forward (1958–61) all manner of methods were employed so as not to upset the leadership, from planting adjacent to the roads along which the Chairman travelled, while the hinterland lay parched and deserted of life, to cleverly placed benches in cornfields to create the illusion of such thick growth that children could bounce on it. Various methods come to mind when faced with targets for the number of first-class degrees awarded or the percentage of overseas students enrolled.

It is the application of such methods in the face of measurable targets which has contributed to the difficulties Modern Languages faces as an academic discipline. The introduction of league tables into a school system which allows pupils to drop subjects at the age of 14, and more drastically again at the age of 16, has resulted in a situation in which not only pupils avoid difficult subjects but also schools positively discourage students from certain subjects at GCSE or A level. Fear of reckless choices (possibly driven by enjoyment or curiosity) might impact negatively on the statistics – the only aspect by which a school's performance is measured. The 'difficult' foreign languages have suffered to a far greater extent than other subjects. Despite the introduction of the English Baccalaureate Certificates, which shows a promising trend of languages uptake at GCSE level, at A level the uptake of modern foreign languages is continuing its rapid decline. Recent figures suggest that this trend is further exacerbated by an increasing tendency to drop the modern foreign language at AS level, not taking it to A2.<sup>7</sup>

The Chinese Great Leap Forward is an extreme example of excessive target setting that resulted in the disaster of more than 30 million casualties. This example may be considered exaggerated or frivolous; it is certainly not my intention to make light of it. That setting targets does not necessarily result in the desired outcome is a psychological truism that is routinely ignored in management.<sup>8</sup> Yet targets lead to a situation where their fulfilment becomes the primary focus that distracts from the actual problem or issue at hand. The target becomes the new problem that needs to be addressed, leading to a situation where the focus is shifted from finding creative approaches to teaching, research or people management to filling in numbers on a spreadsheet or clicking through the stages of a 'system'. This type of dictatorship when applied to the field of education will not cause human deaths. It will,

however, lead to a discouragement of creative thought processes and a numbing of the mind. It can also lead to the demise of academic disciplines.

These concerns are well known. The repetition is usually accompanied by sonorous wallowing in self-pity by affected academics who bemoan the decline of their discipline and who (often rightfully) fear for their positions. Caught between this difficult external environment and the specific contexts of institutions with their own 'visions', 'strategies' and 'objectives', Heads of Modern Languages departments fight over every student like a precious commodity. As our hands reach out to drag another unsuspecting student into our own lair before our competitors can lay hands on them, we are now presented with a new challenge: to cooperate. The Modern Languages sector is currently presented with a number of opportunities, projects and initiatives that may offer a way out of the conundrum but which stipulate co-operation between us. In a fiendishly tricky exercise we are invited to direct all our self-acclaimed superior skills of communication and intercultural understanding towards each other and to come up with new programmes of study, new ways of delivery and new ways of accreditation. This will ensure that our discipline remains 'modern' and able to respond positively and creatively to these changed realities within which we find ourselves.

We may all wish to return to the legendary golden age of well-rounded A-level graduates able to converse in French, German or Latin, or perhaps even harbour visions of bright futures in which a modern foreign language is compulsory at A level. In sober moments we all know that language learning has changed irreversibly, and that it is our responsibility to make sure that the discipline adapts to this new reality. We may wish for our students to be calligraphers. But is the insistence on hand-written Chinese characters really the best use of teaching time when graduates will never need to do this in professional life? We aspire to standards of accuracy and sophistication in the foreign languages at degree level that elude the majority of native speakers save the most highly educated.

Yet accuracy, attention to detail, and a probing mind are the qualities for which linguists are valued in the professional world and in research. The development of these qualities takes time and effort for all partners in the learning process. While 'burst modes' and 'blended learning' have interesting and valuable innovations to contribute, they cannot ultimately eliminate the need for deeper immersion, repetition and reflection that is the path to true linguistic and cultural understanding. The *Diktatur der Geschäftigkeit* and the expectations of universities to churn out job-ready graduates equipped with skills rather than knowledge have created an environment where Modern Languages departments (where they still exist) are reduced to providers of a tool – reasonable language competence ideally with a business focus – rather

than appreciated as places of rich and diverse academic inquiry.

The academic discipline of Modern Languages and Cultures makes a key contribution to the understanding of the multitudinous experiences of global humanity. If we do not want this humanity to be judged and misjudged through a monolingual, Anglophone mind frame, if we want to ensure that British academia remains relevant, we must ensure that the place of this discipline is safeguarded. As academics we must endeavour to pool our ideas and expertise to ensure that what we offer is innovative, exciting, inspiring and relevant to a new generation of Modern Languages students, researchers and academics. Modern Languages Open is an important new arrival at this difficult time – a platform that enables us to come together across a wide range of linguistic and cultural areas and to showcase the wide range of knowledge to which our discipline contributes.

(This commentary piece is an amended and extended version of the author's speech at the launch of the new Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Westminster in December 2013.)

### **Notes**

- 1 The website of the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML), the UK's most important lobbying body for Modern Languages, provides an invaluable source of information on all the various campaigns, initiatives and reports. [www.ucml.ac.uk](http://www.ucml.ac.uk)
- 2 Bieri is also known as Pascal Mercier.
- 3 Konrad Paul Liessman, *Die Diktatur der Geschäftigkeit*, blog entry, 31 December 2012, <http://derstandard.at/1350259754298/Dikatatur-der-Geschaeftigkeit> (last accessed 29 April 2014). The translation is my own.
- 4 Konrad Paul Liessman is Professor of Philosophy and Ethics at the University of Vienna.
- 5 Liessman, *Die Diktatur der Geschäftigkeit*. The translation is my own.
- 6 'David Cameron urges British students to ditch French and to learn Mandarin', *The Guardian*, 5 December 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/dec/05/david-cameron-ditch-french-learn-mandarin-china> (last accessed 29 April 2014).
- 7 The Language Trend Survey 2014, <http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/british-council.uk2/files/language-trends-survey-2014.pdf>.
- 8 For an informative and entertaining treatment of the subject, see 'Goal Crazy', Chapter Four, in Oliver Burkeman, 2012, *The Antidote. Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*, London: Canongate.