

Labex TransferS – Projet de l'équipe ARIAS – Glossaire "les discours de la globalisation"

Teaching and research in “strategically important” languages: a comparative perspective, between France and the United Kingdom

This one-day seminar was held at University Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3 on Friday 25 November 2016, in the amphitheatre of the Institut du Monde Anglophone. The seminar was conceived as a follow-up to a workshop entitled “What Is Modern Languages Research?” held by the Institute of Modern Languages Research, University of London, in July 2015. The Paris event was jointly organised by Christine Lorre-Johnston (U Sorbonne Nouvelle and LabEx TransferS programme), Catherine Davies (U of London, Institute of Modern Languages Research [IMLR]), and Charles Forsdick (U of Liverpool and leadership fellow of the Translating Cultures theme of the Arts and Humanities Research Council [AHRC]), with the generous support of our respective institutions and research programmes.

The seminar took its cue from the fact that in England, Modern Languages, along with area studies and related languages, were considered “Strategically Important and Vulnerable Subjects” in the 2005 report of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The aim of the day’s discussions was to investigate the notion of “strategically important” languages, in a comparative perspective focusing on the UK and France, and the impact of that notion on higher education and research, as well as school education.

The introduction by Christine Lorre-Johnston recalled the existence of the parallel institutions that frame research and teaching in the UK and in France. The first panel, on European languages, was chaired by Janice Carruthers (Queen’s U Belfast) and Ricarda Schneider (Sorbonne Nouvelle). Andrew Hussey (U of London Institute in Paris) started with Juan Goytisolo’s novel *Landscapes after the Battle* (1982) to destabilise the notion of linguistic identity in France in the 21st century, with the omnipresence of Arabic. Catherine Davies discussed “The Growth of Spanish and Portuguese in the UK,” pointing out that because British universities are autonomous, government “encouragement” is not enough to sustain language degree programmes: dialogue with university management is important. Tatiana Matzenbacher (Sorbonne Nouvelle) stressed the diplomatic and political importance of learning Portuguese. Godela Weiss-Sussex (IMLR) described various initiatives that have been taken to emphasize German culture in an effort to counter the decline in the number of students of German.

The next two panels, chaired by Charles Forsdick and Stefan Sperl (School of Oriental and African Studies [SOAS]), dealt with non-European languages. Stefan Sperl explained how the SOAS Arabic Programme aims at transcending stereotypes for indigenous (English-speaking) students, and at gaining comparative perspective for heritage students (with an Arabic background). Luc Deheuvels (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales [INALCO]) retraced the long history of the teaching of Arabic in France, and pointed out that even though Arabic is taught in some 20 universities in France, there are still few Arabic teachers in secondary schools. Stephen Hutchings (U of Manchester), discussing Russian in the UK, evoked two current concerns: the notion of “securitization” of public discourse, and the need to explore the possibilities of research and teaching across language areas, because transnational and transcultural exchanges have spawned new geopolitical configurations. Nalini Balbir (Sorbonne Nouvelle) analysed the status of Hindi as a “rare” or “small” language in France, except in overseas departments with a population of Indian origin: in Guadeloupe, Hindi is taught at secondary level, and at the University of Réunion, a diploma in Hindi is available.

A whole panel, chaired by Charles Forsdick, was devoted to Chinese. For Derek Hird (U of Westminster), one challenge is to integrate Chinese language and another area of study, to offer a larger range of combined programmes. Li Wei (U College London) focused on the English Baccalaureate that was created in 2011, enabling high school students to join the “Mandarin

Excellence Programme,” in the context of the “Golden Era” between the UK and China. Joël Bellassen (INALCO) described the surprisingly long history of teaching Chinese in France, a language that ranked 5th in secondary schools in 2007, and has kept gaining ground since then. Because Chinese is so different from European languages, a better reference framework is still needed for it in the European Common Framework for languages.

The third panel, on “National Strategies,” was chaired by Janice Carruthers. Clíona Ní Ríordáin (Sorbonne Nouvelle) insisted on the need, in the case of the Irish language, to disentangle language from religion and politics and to acknowledge the presence of various traditions. Bernadette Holmes (Speak to the Future, UK) brought out the importance of a second language from employers’ viewpoint, and the value for young people of having cultural insight into another culture. Jocelyn Wyburd (U of Cambridge) explored the utilitarian aspect of the term strategic, including the importance of languages in the Army and the British Listening Services.

Catherine Davies chaired the fourth and last panel on “Strategic Usage of Languages.” Hilary Footitt (U of Reading) discussed the importance of languages in NGOs and the sense of temporality attached to it, of the need to learn a language now. Christopher Stone (U of Wolverhampton) noticed the same sense of immediate necessity with sign languages, often for economic reasons, notwithstanding the fact that sign language is a language of its own. Anna-Louise Milne (U London Institute in Paris) evoked the variety of linguistic experiences that English students have when they spend three years in Paris, and how it changes their relation to the language. Charles Forsdick closed the seminar by stressing the need for a shift from “strategically important” languages to the strategic importance of languages. He emphasized the intrinsic value of studying languages, as opposed to its utilitarian value, and the need to challenge the “linguistic muteness” in research, policy and practice.

By Christine Lorre-Johnston