



Stephen Hutchings, “Modern Languages and/as Area Studies: Towards a New Humanities or Path to Oblivion?”, *New Area Studies* 1:1 (2020), 73-99.

Modern Languages and/as Area Studies: Towards a New Humanities or Path to Oblivion?

Stephen Hutchings, University of Manchester

Abstract

There is an ambivalence regarding the traditional disciplinary affiliation of Modern Languages, split between Area Studies, with its orientation to the social sciences, and an arts wing aligned with literary and cultural studies. The Area Studies contingent has itself been hampered by its struggle to convince social scientists that linguistic expertise is anything more than a practical tool enabling them to extend their research agendas to non-English speaking environments. My article will argue that the apparent incoherence highlighted by this double tension provides an impulse for Modern Linguists to renew their discipline by forging a more equal partnership with the social sciences and enhancing their significance within the humanities. It focuses on the renewed social scientific interest in spatio-temporal situatedness, contending that language’s critical role in the lives of humans as spatio-temporally embodied beings can transform linguistic expertise from a mere facilitating skill into the intellectual core of a reconceived New Area Studies (NAS). It will demonstrate how, freed from Cold War geopolitics and from its attachment to the Great Power as its primary unit of analysis, NAS rejects the very notion of areas as bounded entities, privileging what ‘flows through’ them (media, artistic forms, images and knowledge, as well as people) over what is ‘in’ them. I will discuss what this means for the future of Modern Languages in the academy, concluding that the discipline’s ability to operate across multiple boundaries in this context gives it the power to reassert itself in the forefront not just of NAS, but of a revitalised humanities more generally.

Modern Languages and Area Studies: Rescuing A Troubled Relationship

It is commonplace to admit that Modern Languages has a problem in defining itself as a discrete discipline within the Humanities more broadly (Kohl 2016, 2018).¹ Ironically, this problem centres precisely on the role played by language in carving out an intellectually distinctive niche. For whilst Modern Languages degrees have language teaching at their very core, and the imparting of linguistic proficiency as their main selling point, Modern Languages researchers typically focus on the histories, literatures, music, societies, cinemas and other cultural outputs and contexts of the nations/regions in which their languages are spoken and written. The research, then, is conducted within the conceptual frameworks and according to the methodologies of multiple other disciplines: History, Literary Studies; Musicology; Film Studies; Cultural Studies, and so on. Issues relating specifically to language are generally incidental to such research; even close readings of poetic texts generated in languages other than English, where acute attention to linguistic nuance is essential, are ultimately subsumed within the parameters of prosody, metrics, versification and so on. The time when every good Languages Department boasted its own linguist has long passed and linguistics, anyway, is a defined discipline with its own neat subdivisions and branches and its own shared conceptual base. Modern Linguists are prone to being re-classified as historians, literary scholars, film specialists and cultural studies experts who happen to require linguistic expertise to ply their trade. The objection that 'all disciplines are synthetic and develop through interaction, and sometimes symbiosis, with other fields, and that Modern Languages is therefore no exception' has a certain validity, no doubt, but interdisciplinary work requires the pre-existence of discrete fields capable of synergising. As Andy Byford argues (Byford

¹ For another recent, and cogent, expression of, and effort to address, the problem, see a 2017 conference organised by the OWRI 'Language Acts and Worldmaking' project, and aptly entitled 'Modern Languages—A Discipline (still) in Search of an Identity?', <https://languageacts.org/events/modern-languages-identity/>



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2018), Modern Languages is, like Area Studies, and unlike other humanities subjects, perceived to be an “aggregate discipline” thriving only as a “multi/cross-disciplinary formation”. It is true that many other subjects have had cause to bemoan their own inner fragmentation and ragged incoherence (Film Studies and History to name but two). One might, therefore, refer to the quirks of institutional history (with a small ‘h’) to explain just why it is that historians have the stable, defined intellectual home which modern linguists lack (despite the fact that a history department may include specialists in politics, economics, cultural studies and many other areas). Indeed, Modern Languages has its roots in older, more respected, traditions of Philology in which linguistic and literary methods occupied equal and complementary status, and which enjoyed a similarly stable status within the academy. If Philology is found at all nowadays, it tends to be languishing at the margins of Linguistics. Nonetheless Modern Languages departments have, until recently at least, been given every bit as much right to autonomy, and space to develop their own intellectual boundaries, as History Departments, and can hardly blame their predicament on the demise of Philology.²

The problem that renders Modern Languages identity issues distinctive, if not unique, is at root one of hierarchy and subordination—both from within and without. Modern Linguists cannot complain that their expertise is subsumed into that of other disciplines when they themselves are prone to relegate the core of the expertise—knowledge of another language—to the status of a mere tool, and when language teaching, especially at the beginners’ level, is often delegated to non-academic language tutors, or to junior scholars who have yet to achieve recognition in their research field—a consequence of our discipline’s internalisation of the very societal disregard for language learning it so laments. The idea of assigning an experienced professor beginners’ language classes, at least as far as some of the research-intensive,

² For discussions of what is often (and not always helpfully) referred to as the current ‘crisis’ in Modern Languages, see Kohl 2018, and Hutchings and Matras 2017.



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Russell Group universities are concerned, tends to be considered a misuse of resources, though there are plenty of honourable exceptions to this rule.

Arguably, the most egregious example of the subjugation suffered by Modern Linguists from without would seem to have been that imposed by Area Studies, with which several individual language disciplines have had close, if tense, relationships. This is in part because of the aggregate status that Area Studies shares with Modern Languages, each combining multiple different national and regional foci, and each adopting multiple disciplinary methods with which to study them. For economists, political scientists and sociologists of the regions in which we Modern Linguists specialise, our language skills are unambiguously intended to provide them with a mere instrument enabling them to carry out research in non-English speaking environments. Many of them, in fact, acquired the relevant languages themselves, allowing them, for better or worse, to dispense with our services altogether. It is true that, in the best examples of collaboration between Area Studies and Modern Languages, ‘our’ cultural and historical knowledge and insight furnishes valuable (and sometimes explanatory) context to ‘their’ economic, political and sociological /anthropological findings. But even here, the implicit hierarchy subordinating culture and history to politics and economics generally remains intact, and even when the collaboration is on a more equal basis, Modern Linguists themselves collude in the relegation of language to the status of a secondary facilitator of non-linguistic findings rather than a primary research concern; except, perhaps, in instances where the interpretation of complex and ambiguous texts is the primary issue at stake. The relationship between Modern Languages and Area Studies is thus a deeply troubled one. To the extent that the two disciplines have entered a partnership it appears (at least, from the perspective of one of them) to have taken the form of a marriage of considerably more ‘convenience’ to one party than to the other.



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Even traditional Area Studies specialists, however, cede place to scientists in their adoption of the default assumption that, where interdisciplinary collaboration is involved, the task of us Modern Linguists is to provide ancillary linguistic help (and occasionally contextual knowledge of particular cultures) allowing them to address questions that they must invariably take the lead in formulating. It is for this reason that alarm bells are ringing in our community at news that the priorities of the newly unified British research council entity, UKRI (UK Research and Innovation), are to be cross-council collaborative initiatives which tackle the big societal issues of the day. In UKRI’s recently published 2019 Delivery Plan (UKRI 2019), the mission statement asserts that:

UKRI is enabling all of the research councils to work together to deliver an ambitious, globally significant agenda. In these delivery plans, we set out UKRI’s overall approach to support the Industrial Strategy—boosting productivity through research and innovation investment, which will support meeting the government’s 2.45 target.

In the associated Delivery Plan 2019 of the AHRC (AHRC 2019), which, unlike its predecessor, contains barely any reference to Modern Languages, the vision and objectives section includes a revealing summary chart in which the verb to ‘create’ (which one might expect to see in a humanities-led vision) is linked to ‘economic value’. The AHRC’s long-term ambitions as stated later in the document refers to the need for “ongoing engagement with other UKRI bodies to identify opportunities that build added value through creative research in areas such as construction, education, healthcare, and automotive and advanced manufacturing”. Because such areas inevitably tend to foreground Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths (STEM) and the social sciences anyway, there is little doubt among Modern Linguists about who will be setting the agendas and who will be clutching at their coat tails in the race for research funding.³

³ This is notwithstanding the belated recent effort to mount an equivalent to the STEM campaign within the humanities and expressed through the competing acronym, SHAPE (Social Sciences,



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It is perhaps odd, then, that it is the social sciences rather than, say, English, or History, which has, through Area Studies, offered Modern Languages its most consistent and high-profile partner. The partnership is even reflected in what was effectively the predecessor to the AHRC’s Open World Research Initiative targeting Modern Languages (OWRI) which provided the motivation and context for the present article: the five, now discontinued, national LBAS (Language-based Area Studies) centres, whose ownership passed belatedly from the ESRC to the AHRC. The ambivalence regarding the disciplinary affiliation of Modern Languages reflected in this change is linked to two other problems that this history brings to light: (i) the arbitrary division of Modern Languages into those worthy of an LBAS centre (Russian, Arabic, East Asian Languages) and those deemed to belong elsewhere (including, ironically, the most commonly taught languages, French and Spanish, and the so-called ‘community languages’); (ii) our struggle to convince social scientists that our expertise is more than a practical tool enabling them to extend their research agendas to non-English speaking environments.

The three problems point to the wider sense of ‘identity crisis’, arguably purported rather than actual, which OWRI was designed to overcome: who are we? what are our disciplinary norms? who are our natural allies? how can we speak with a single voice and make it count within the humanities more broadly? Building on an earlier blog post for the OWRI ‘Cross-Language Dynamics: Reshaping Community’ website (Hutchings 2017), I want in this article, however, to argue that the apparent incoherence highlighted by the LBAS story could provide an impulse to revitalise our discipline, forge a more equal partnership with the social sciences and enhance our significance within the humanities, whilst offering a route to overcoming the sense of

Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy). See:
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jun/21/university-and-arts-council-in-drive-to-re-brand-soft-academic-subjects>.



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terminal decline with which Modern Languages is often misleadingly associated. Controversially, at least for other Modern Linguists, I shall suggest that is precisely with the social sciences—via a newly reconfigured Area Studies (which, as a linked disciplinary aggregate is, like Modern Languages, currently rethinking its conceptual base)—that we might link our future evolution, rather than with superficially more amenable, and more stable, disciplines like History, English or Film and Media Studies. I do so for intellectual as well as tactical-pragmatic reasons. It is all the more fitting, then, that my article should appear on what some of my colleagues might think of as ‘foreign terrain’: in the launch issue of a journal—*New Area Studies*—whose mission is “driven by an expansive and innovative vision of the discipline that speaks to the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century” and moves “beyond the traditional constraints of national boundaries”. In fact, implicit in the arguments I present is the notion embodied in this journal mission statement that, more important than securing either the national, or the disciplinary, borders of Modern Languages, Area Studies, or any other subject (a defensive activity that constrains ambition and curiosity), is how to combine our respective skill and knowledge sets in a way that enables us collectively to tackle the most important intellectual, ethical and societal challenges facing humanity (singular), and thereby to advance the humanities (plural).

Strength in (Common) Adversity: The Birth and Intellectual Drivers of New Area Studies

First, though, let us retreat even further in history than the LBAS centres to trace the parallel crisis that hit Area Studies in the late 1980s. Whilst the imminent end of the Cold War, to whose geopolitics Area Studies was tied, was a primary cause of this phenomenon, the trend towards what has sometimes been called ‘Grand Theory’ which swept across the social sciences around the same time, and which rendered

detailed study of specific regional contexts redundant, was also a factor.⁴ A vivid example of the deleterious influence of universalising theory on my own branch of Modern Languages—Russian—is ‘Transitology’. This theory’s central tenet that regime change – from authoritarianism to democracy—can be studied as a single process conforming to common patterns (O’Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead 1986) seems to have escaped Vladimir Putin among others, leading to the retrospective branding of the theory as a “glorious failure” (Agh 2005).

However, the shock of 9/11 produced a painful recognition that the apparent vacuum created by the end of the Cold War was being filled by radical jihadist threats emanating from regions in which informed policy expertise was lacking (Goodman 2003).⁵ At the end of the decade, the first stirrings of the ‘Arab Spring’ hit news headlines. Subsequent disappointment at its failures, and the ensuing disastrous western military interventions, underscored the need to bolster regional expertise. The first decade of the new century was also rocked by the 2008 financial crash which few predicted, least of all mainstream economists within whose abstract models such crises no longer occurred. Subsequent scepticism about the economic orthodoxy brought with it a questioning of the same universalism which had supplanted traditional Area Studies. Finally, there was Russia’s re-emergence as a belligerent, if paranoid, ‘Great Power’, leading ultimately for some commentators to announce the advent of a “New Cold War” (Lucas 2008).

Such post-Cold War developments were, not surprisingly, the background to the emergence of a new local turn in sections of the social sciences, and ultimately of a

⁴ For a critique of this trend, see Steinmetz 2005.

⁵ Goodman (2003) focuses on the lack of area expertise in determining why the US was so ill-prepared for 9/11. In 2006, however, President Bush announced a national initiative to increase funding for strategically important languages under the ‘Title V’ program which has subsequently suffered from severe cuts.



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New Area Studies (NAS).⁶ It is worth emphasising that, rather than merely recapitulating the earlier focus on bounded states, imperial zones of influence and great powers, NAS embraces the new realities of transnational flows and hyper-networks, and of the growing influence of grassroots affect on world events. In its future development it will also need, however, to take full account of the meaning for our notion of nations and regions of the digitally connected world, with its attendant potentials and dangers. It must address the hitherto latent geopolitical configurations and transnational identities associated with that world. Such phenomena demand interdisciplinary approaches that acknowledge the emergence of new communities within and across national boundaries, and recognise that, whilst nations stubbornly refuse to fade, the multiple global flows traversing the world have created fresh building blocks with which to interpret it. Appadurai’s five “scapes” (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes) are a starting point (Appadurai 1990: 296). Study of their interrelationships demands an integration of empirical and quantitative methodologies with qualitative and theoretical paradigms drawn from cultural studies. This offers a further rationale for the reinvigoration of Area Studies, which has traditionally hosted expertise that cuts across the arts/social sciences divide.

Another important theoretical development that has arisen in the wake of the same trends is Critical Geopolitics, which, as two seminal practitioners put it:

seeks to illuminate and explain the practices by which political actors spatialize international politics and represent it as a ‘world’ characterized by particular types of places (Tuathail and Agnew 1992).

Since geopolitical knowledge within this approach is conceived to be partial and situated, nation-states are not the only ‘legitimate’ unit of geopolitical analysis. Instead, geopolitical knowledge is seen as diffuse and cutting across national divides,

⁶ For the most complete articulation of the origins, mission and scope of the New Area Studies, see Hodgett and James (2018).



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with popular geopolitical discourse considered alongside formal and practical geopolitics, and critical discourse analysis open to integration with empirical methodologies characteristic of the traditional toolsets of geographical analysis. A productive variant on Critical Geopolitics is the Popular Geopolitics illustrated by Robert Saunders in his work on the Soviet successor states:

In the current era of postmodern geopolitics defined by globalization, deterritorialization, and cultural fragmentation, mass media’s role in shaping geographical imagination and making sense of the geopolitical order is steadily increasing, making popular geopolitics as important in international relations as its elite and academic counterparts. (Saunders 2016, p.3)

There is a vital space, too, for ‘the regional’—a traditional unit of Area Studies analysis—within the new thinking that has swept the humanities in the path of accelerated globalisation. W.J.T. Mitchell (2015) describes the region as “the excluded middle which tends to be left out in the polarising concepts of the global and the local” (p. 104). Noting the regional entity’s productive ambiguity, he characterises it as “what is ‘ruled’ but also what is free of central rule, contesting the power centres, often in a struggle between country and city”, noting its ambivalent status as “part or whole, fragment or totality” (p. 105) and emphasizing that “the region is a more potent factor in global politics than ever” (p. 104).

Situatedness, Translocality and the Re-insertion of Languages into Areas

The emphasis in Critical and Popular Geopolitics on discourse, imagination and the role of participatory aesthetic practices in establishing connections between spaces represents a real opportunity for the literary, film, drama, and cultural specialists who currently represent the Modern Languages mainstream. We should, to be clear, not be turning our backs on the core, ‘soft humanities’ scholars who form the backbone of Modern Languages in its current manifestation, nor asking them to abandon their principles and their intellectual training. Rather, they should begin applying their

skills in new contexts, such as digitally mediated geopolitics, whilst forcefully advocating an expansion of the definition of ‘politics’ into realms like gender, race and the environment which Modern Linguists have been actively exploring for decades, stressing the importance of historical perspectives on these issues. At the same time, the reorientation of priorities decouples them from the elitist national canons whose influence on our field has undoubtedly waned, but continues to shape some Modern Languages curricula. Even the eminently worthy embrace of emergent postcolonial literatures and cultures and their incorporation into university Modern Languages course syllabi fails altogether to erase the preceding colonial biases (Matras 2018), including the privilege accorded to particular high cultural genres, hesitant gestures towards the inclusion within certain university Modern Languages syllabi of popular cultural forms notwithstanding. Well-intentioned courses on the Francophone arthouse cinemas of North Africa, for example, reinforce the status of French as a post-imperial language of import, and of arthouse as the genre most likely to triumph at the international festivals still dominated by western money and aesthetic values. It also continues the obsession with the colonial experience which often defines such cinemas, despite their subversive intent.⁷ Thus, Modern Languages has unusually powerful potential to play a leading role in the movement to ‘decolonise the curriculum’, a phenomenon whose significance has only grown in the aftermath of the global ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests and associated debates around the toppling and/or contextualizing of monuments tainted by the crimes of the colonial era.

The reorientation of Modern Languages away from association with the values of established national traditions and their post-imperial successors, and towards the shifting, transient spaces within which geopolitically significant transnational flows of current geopolitical significance converge, establishes common ground with social scientists in another sense. Those who have embraced emerging sub-branches of NAS

⁷ This point has been taken on board in Latin American Studies, where the study of indigenous languages now has a higher profile.



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like Critical and Popular Geopolitics recognise that the processing of vast amounts of empirical data—increasingly the method promoted within the mainstream of their own disciplines—cannot fully capture the fluid and elusive new realities. Modern Linguists, indeed, have been at the fore of efforts to calibrate the relationship between qualitative and quantitative approaches within what has become known as ‘Digital Humanities’, demonstrating how Modern Languages expertise offers the basis for a powerful cultural critique of the excesses of big data analytics (Pitman and Taylor 2017).⁸

The real key to a re-accommodation of Modern Languages and Area Studies, however, is the renewed social scientific interest in spatio-temporal situatedness (Hünefeldt and Schlitte 2019). Given language’s critical role in the lives of humans as spatio-temporally embodied beings rooted in specific circumstances whose complexity and diversity do not submit to universalising generalisation, linguistic expertise is transformed from mere facilitating skill into the intellectual core of a reconceived Area Studies freed from Cold War geopolitics and from its attachment to the Great Power as its primary unit of analysis. For central to the complexity inherent within spatio-temporal embodiment are the languages spoken by particular communities, along with the different modes of conceptualising the world encoded within those languages. Lack of relevant linguistic skills is an impediment to gaining an in-depth understanding of particular regions. Language is also fundamental to the identities both of the new communities forged across national borders, and of the increasingly “super-diverse” communities (Vertovec 2007) inhabiting urban spaces within those borders.

The realignment project I describe ultimately targets the very notion of areas, or spaces, as bounded entities. It privileges what ‘flows through’ them (media, linguistic

⁸ For general discussions of limitations to the value of big data analytics to social and human sciences, see White and Breckenridge 2014, and Boyd and Crawford 2012.

forms, discourses and knowledge, artistic images, as well as people) over what is ‘in’ them. Since all such movement ultimately requires language, attention to shifts from one linguistic idiom into another—and specifically to issues of translation—is, as Susan Bassnett (2013) argues, suddenly at a premium. For translation is the vehicle by which concepts are transformed as they transit into new cultural contexts. It is a means of both instigating and resolving the tensions that invariably result from mass migration trends. It is a vital resource to be made available to new settlers, but it can also be a dangerous tool to be deployed by those who aspire to linguistic homogenisation. Debates within Modern Languages about whether translation should form an intellectual (as well as a practical, career-oriented) mainstay of Modern Languages, or its peripheral, add-on (one might even say, Derridean) supplement are, under this scenario resolved decisively in favour of the former.⁹

The realignment gestures beyond centre-periphery/global-local structures, even when they are invoked implicitly, via the masking or erasure of one term in the binary as with, say, Provincial Studies, or Regional Studies, the very name of which, as W.J.T. Mitchell points out, masks the hidden etymology of the word ‘region’. Instead, it establishes nations as ‘localities’ in their own right, alongside other geo-spatial units, such as cities. Yaron Matras (2018) has in this context made a call for a ‘Locality Studies’ to focus specifically on globalised *multilingual* cities, “their super-diversity, and the intertwining of a range of linguistic and cultural practices in metropolitan areas” as “a logical step from a trajectory of past epistemologies that have sought to utilise the study of language and culture in the service of the nation”.

Geographers Clemens Greiner and Patrick Sakdapolrak (2013) take a broader viewer in proposing ‘Translocality Studies’, exploiting the dual sense of the prefix ‘trans-’ as ‘across’ and ‘beyond’. This gesture posits interaction at the level of disembodied

⁹ For a good overview of the relationship between Modern Languages and Translation, and an effective argument in favour of their closer integration, see Kemp 2013.



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nation states as of no greater significance than communications between spatio-temporally embodied, non-state actors, and within and between localities and informal transnational networks. Translocality can be operationalised in contexts which involve communication across transnational communities sharing a *single* language, yet operating in dynamic multilingual environments, including non-state modes of mitigating and, conversely, exacerbating, inter-community conflict and tension. This includes interethnic communication generated by labour migration, global diasporisation, and minority language revitalisation, by the development of broadly understood political narratives in non-state and grassroots media, and by a range of transnational aesthetic practices (e.g. theatre, visual art, cinema and community filmmaking). Another variant of Translocality Studies would target *translingual* community formation, for example translation networks that foster citizen activism across language boundaries; and initiatives to promote the digital archiving of the shared cultural heritage of diaspora communities speaking different languages in the UK.¹⁰

The last example indicates that rather than consigning the nation to history, the concept of Translocality can work to invigorate it whilst challenging its associations with nationalist ideologies. It provides a suitable conceptual umbrella, for instance, for study of the capacity of minority communities to foster new, informal approaches to cultural diplomacy practices and (inter)national security normally considered the sole province of states. This is the innovative approach to cultural diplomacy adopted by Ien Ang et al (2015). Accepting the durability of nations as shapers of globally circulating meaning, they advocate a recasting of cultural diplomacy as a ‘transnational process’ in which governments are not the sole actors, and as ‘a form of intercultural dialogue based on mutuality and reciprocal listening’. They highlight

¹⁰ For an extended discussion of how these agendas can be applied to the specific context of the need to rethink the scope and epistemology of Russian Studies (but applicable likewise to other Modern Languages), see Byford et al (2020)

the ‘interface between government-sponsored cultural diplomacy and the free flow of popular culture’, drawing attention to “counter-hegemonic forms ... driven by forces working against established nation states”. They examine ways in which “policies are not only remoulded when ... adopted in a new place, but ... reshaped in, and through, the process of mobilisation itself” (Ibid, 371-73).

It is because the intercultural dialogue and mutual listening that Ang et al. advocate necessarily foregrounds the role of language that some of the best examples of the informal cultural diplomacy they have in mind are those of minority language communities building bridges across national lines, including via the networking of multilingual cities—a powerful bulwark against the inward-looking nationalisms with their emphasis on monocultural homogeneity that, sadly, are on the rise.¹¹ The fact that sub-state actors like the British Council are inclined to support and even sponsor such activities, thereby nudging an increasingly introspective Brexit Britain a little further towards favouring diversity and openness over monolingualism and the protection of national sovereignty, illustrates what Ang et al. mean when they refer to the “remoulding of policies ... through the process of mobilisation”. It also confirms that the nation state can remain a powerful source of identity construction, provided that it is flexible, decentralised and non-hegemonic in its modes of projection.

In his discussion of the local turn now inflecting the social sciences more generally, Jan Kubik (2015) proposes distinguishing locality and location. Locality, he suggests, refers to the physical site where people live and engage in economic, political, or social activity, location to the cultural (often virtual) space that interacting individuals recognize as ‘theirs’. The concept of community, meanwhile, is reserved

¹¹ A vivid illustration of city networking in action is the rolling out of an innovative language mapping app developed for use in Manchester under the auspices of the Multilingual Manchester research team to other global cities, including Melbourne. See: <http://www.linguasnappmel.manchester.ac.uk/>.



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for situations where location and locality tightly overlap. Understanding that overlap will require the same collaborative effort involving social scientists working on ‘locality’, together with linguists, cultural, film and media studies scholars focusing on ‘location’, as in Popular and Critical Geopolitics.

There is another angle on Translocalism’s rejection of the global/local dichotomy that brings Modern Languages to the fore: the move in parts of the social sciences to shed the entire conceptual framework/case study paradigm. Actor-Network theorists like Bruno Latour call for social science to be liberated from universalising frameworks altogether in favour of the careful tracing of networks of specificities (Latour 2005). They transfer the rejection of the global/local axis from the object of study to that of the mode of studying. Here, Modern Languages’ lack of an overarching framework and tendency to traverse disciplinary divides serves to its advantage, consolidating its rightful place at the forefront of a ‘translocalized’ Area Studies. Crucially, however, this right requires us to associate language less with the lexical inventories, grammatical paradigms, rules of syntax and communication skills preoccupying modern languages classes than with the idiolects, attitudinal tones, speech genres and stylistic registers through which ideas, thoughts, and ideologies acquire flesh in specific contexts of usage through ‘individual, concrete utterances’ (Bakhtin 1986, p. 132). It is this at once wider, yet also more ‘local’, understanding of language which Bakhtin uses to differentiate the exact and the human sciences, distinguishing the former’s focus on voiceless things from the latter’s interest in spatio-temporally embodied, speaking ‘subjects’ (Ibid. p. 211). This version of the humanities links language in the broad sense to the plurality of languages in their concrete contexts of usage. Far from constituting a route back to subjugation, Modern Languages’s collaboration with a revitalised Area Studies could enable it to play a role in renewing the humanities as a whole.



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Curricular Conclusions

Such a manifesto is all very utopian—but what does it mean for the actual future of Modern Languages at universities? One obvious implication is the need for us to reach out as researchers to the growing number of social scientists who are embracing the local turn: in politics, international relations, development studies, anthropology, geography, not to mention urban studies. Like Sommer (2019) I would also advocate including elements of business management—organisational behaviour, for example. As is clear from the emphasis on attention to aesthetic forms in my discussion of translocality, I regard the arts/social sciences dichotomy, requiring us to pick one or other side, as unhelpful. Nonetheless, if forced to operate within this framework, I make no apologies for prioritising a return to the flawed relationship we established with the social sciences within the LBAS context, not least for tactical reasons. For better or worse, long-term student demand is likely to be stronger in business management, politics and development studies than it is in English, film studies and art history. This is especially the case outside of the sub-group of universities within the Russell Group, the perceived prestige of whose degrees offers even humanities graduates a degree of protection against the harshest exigencies of the jobs market. Even the all-powerful History and English, however, appear, according to recent data, to be suffering uncharacteristic vulnerability to the career-driven, utilitarian motivations forced on students at schools and universities as a result of Higher Education policies designed to favour STEM subjects—a trend the British Academy has warned about (British Academy 2017), and which the post-Covid-19 economy is likely to exacerbate.

Another corollary of a concept of language both broader and more local than that which underpins much language teaching in UK universities is the need to return to the target-language debate. If language belongs inextricably to a nexus that also includes space, time and embodied beings then, at best, to teach languages separately from the contexts in which they are used is to negate that reality—a point that is



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broadly accepted within the Modern Language community, even if it is not easy to adhere to. At worst, it is to facilitate the very subjugation of languages to other supposedly weightier disciplines we are at pains to reject. It is also to justify others’ accusations of incoherence. However, the term ‘target-language teaching’ is as unhelpful as the pedagogical dogma it connotes: that of a ‘full immersion’ training resting on the illusion that local circumstances can be replicated with ease within classrooms. In a spirit of greater realism I advocate merely the closer alignment of the syllabi of language and ‘content’ modules respectively—something that most Modern Languages departments aspire to. This principle dovetails with that of the renewed emphasis on translation as the theoretical basis around which to rebuild the Modern Languages edifice; if the repertoires and skills needed to speak and read foreign languages are to be imparted in harmony with the precise knowledge of their contexts of use, differences and similarities with the contexts of use and related semantic specificities of the ‘mother tongue’ inevitable come to the fore.

To conclusively distance myself from target-language teaching dogmas, I should stress that the principles I am outlining in no way assume full native-speaker competence as the final goal, or even the ultimate yardstick, of success—a goal as intellectually dubious as it is self-defeating and constraining of student aspiration. Quite apart from the fact that the notion of native-speaker competence is an ideal to which actual language use rarely if ever corresponds (Crystal 2019), particularly within new multicultural environments in which translingual transactions and interactions are slowly negating the very idea of the native speaker, such an ideal only intimidates learners—an argument made cogently by Vivian Cook two decades ago (Cook 1999). It reinforces the damaging perception that Modern Languages are ‘too difficult’, intended only for those with an inherent ‘gift’ for language learning, or with the money to afford the endless foreign holidays, costly *au paires* and family exchanges needed to recreate the immersion experience so lacking in the classroom.



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To summarise, then, the four key principles that might guide the integration of the translocalised New Area Studies mission into Modern Languages into are, quite uncontroversially (because they are largely being adopted): (a) the reorientation of notions of language away from fixed lexical inventories and grammatical paradigms towards the speech genres, idiolects and stylistic registers through which ideas and ideologies acquire flesh in individual utterances; (b) the realignment of language-teaching and ‘content’ syllabi to consolidate the focus on concrete, local contexts of use; (c) the establishment of translation—in its capacity to highlight how translocal flows of peoples, discourses, cultures and meanings gain linguistic expression—as a Modern Languages bedrock; and (d) the abandonment of native-speaker competence as the Gold Standard of Modern Languages excellence.

As to language degrees themselves, in addition to the principles already outlined, the changes to the current Eurocentric ‘canon’ which have become a rallying cry for all of the OWRI projects, including the dismantlement of the Modern/Community languages binary,¹² is fully commensurate with a translocalized Area Studies. There are tentative signs, indeed, that this process is underway anyway, with Spanish (most of whose speakers are outside Europe) overtaking French as the UK’s most popular foreign language (Lough 2019), and with Japanese, Chinese, and to a lesser extent, Arabic, becoming more widely taught throughout the UK education sector. However, also inherent in the position I am advocating is a conviction that Modern Languages must remain as a distinct discipline with a distinctive set of degree programmes—one whose ability to operate across multiple boundaries becomes, as Byford (2018) argues, its strength rather than its Achilles heel. To absorb language study within other disciplines, however cutting-edge and inclusive they might be, both deprives Modern Languages of its unique contribution to humanities epistemologies, and risks a return to the position of subjugation that we decried in the LBAS framework.

¹² See in particular Matras 2018 for the most trenchant and extensively reasoned case for this dismantlement.



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Moreover, linguistically inquisitive students may be less likely to sign up to degrees in, say, urban studies, than they are to degrees in a revitalised Modern Languages.

Finally, there is the issue of the power imbalance that might render a hastily conceived re-accommodation with social scientists both unrealistic and liable to revive a binary rhetoric of ‘us’ (Modern Linguists) and ‘them’ (social scientists), thereby suffocating the ground-level interactions and collaborations which are slowly blurring the disciplinary divides anyway. The local turn and the revival of area studies offers an opportunity to give new momentum to such interactions. Thirst for the kind of localized, linguistically embodied, knowledge that we can offer is undoubtedly strong among students of subjects like Politics or Sociology, as enrolments on Russian History and contemporary Japanese Culture courses (the ‘Manga’ effect), for instance, indicates.¹³ It also appears that a new generation of researchers in these disciplines is more open to dialogue with us than before—hence the growing interest in Critical and Popular Geopolitics.

Ultimately, there may be a case for circumventing the practical and political barriers to collaboration across disciplinary boundaries. These are not inconsiderable by any means and include intractable timetabling problems that arise when subjects are combined across institutional boundaries, as well as a certain reluctance even to contemplate such combinations on the part of those in charge of high-recruiting disciplines like Politics or Business Management. One route to overcoming such barriers, though not the only one, is the creation of dedicated, Modern Language versions of these new, emergent sub-disciplines which permit the appointment of linguistically competent specialists in the local politics and societies relevant to our needs. Given the residual scepticism towards area specialisms in many UK social science departments, it ought not to be difficult to generate job descriptions

¹³ In her account of Manga’s effect on western teenage popular youth culture, Helen McCarthy comments that it has made Japan ‘the land of cool’ (quoted in Anonymous 2008)



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sufficiently differentiated from those designed for positions in Politics, Business Management, Law and so on.¹⁴ In doing so, we would be appealing audaciously ‘over the heads’ of social science gatekeepers to the younger post-Grand Theory generation, and ultimately even poaching some of them. We would thereby be inverting the hierarchy that has always placed Modern Languages in a subordinate role in any collaboration with Social Sciences, or most other interdisciplinary collaborations for that matter, blurring the boundaries between disciplines and in so doing mutually revitalising them.

I am aware that the route I am advocating would be more immediately amenable to, and more appropriate for, some Modern Languages departments than others, whose current operational contexts demand other strategies. I support Andy Byford’s (2017) call for recognition of the value of pluralism and heterogeneity in the Modern Languages ecology. I also acknowledge that, until prominent Russell Group universities adopt it, the New Area Studies approach, is likely to appeal more to the newer, more explicitly careers-oriented institutions where, because Modern Languages have traditionally struggled, the chances of success are reduced, thereby, in the eyes of some, ‘damaging’ the NAS brand. I may be reading the runes incorrectly, but it seems to me, however, that present developments point inexorably towards an NAS-type model for Modern Languages more generally. Despite my gradualist cautions, I recognise that I am pursuing a path to controversy, and on several different fronts, internal and external to Modern Languages. But, I would submit, it is decidedly not a path to the oblivion that remains a real danger to the discipline if it fails to address the conundrum by which, paradoxically, it is defined. It is, finally, on the terrain of New Area Studies, meanwhile, that the conundrum can be decisively solved.

¹⁴ There are UK precedents here. The University of Aston offers fully integrated Modern Languages combinations with Politics, Sociology and International Business run from a single School of Languages and Social Sciences. It is one of the few non-Russell Group universities to continue to offer Modern Languages degrees.



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This would be to the mutual benefit of two disciplinary configurations whose hitherto reluctantly shared space on the peripheries of the humanities would be transformed into its vibrant epicentre.

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