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Feminisation, masculinisation and the other: Re-evaluating the Language Learning Decline in England

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Abstract

Modern Foreign Language (MFL) education has long been described as being 'in crisis' by virtue of a long decline in the numbers of students being entered for exams at age 16 and 18. Whilst this decline is generally attributed to policy, harsh grading and the rise of global English, this paper challenges this view by positioning the decline at the intersection of the feminising of the subject and an othering of the speakers of the languages taught. Using a loosely Foucauldian form of discourse analysis, academic literature, published reports on language needs and language teaching, and original qualitative data from two studies are drawn together. A feminising discourse around the subject of MFL is identified, juxtaposed with a masculinising discourse around education more generally, leading to the devaluing of the subject. Edward Said's orientalism is explored as a framework for the discussion of the media and public 'othering' of the speakers of the languages commonly taught and the 'fetishisation' of less commonly taught languages. It is argued that overcoming the decline in

uptake of modern foreign languages will require reconceptualising of the problem at policy

level and a change in the media and public discourses surrounding the subject.

Keywords

Introduction

There is a long-established notion that language education in the UK, and in England

specifically[1], is in crisis (Lanvers and Coleman 2013; Tinsley and Board 2017a, 2017b).

However, this narrative has recently been questioned, as crisis is 'perhaps an ill-suited

buzzword for a larger and more gradual picture' (Bowler, 2020, p.10). Indeed, GCSE

(General Certificate of Secondary Education; taken at age 16) and A-Level (Advanced Level;

taken at age 18) exam entry figures, the main indicators used (see Figure 1), make clear that

the decline in take-up of the subject has been in evidence for many years.

This article explores possible reasons for this sustained decline, moving beyond those

commonly cited, which include national-level policy decisions, severe grading in the subject

and the rise of global English, to identify more deeply ingrained societal reasons which need

challenging in order to address the issue. This introduction chronicles some of the commonly

cited arguments for the decline in uptake of modern foreign languages (MFL), before

subsequent sections explore new lines of argument based on ideas of feminisation,

masculinisation and othering.

One key, oft-cited reason, is curriculum policy (Coleman et al, 2007; Hagger-

Vaughan, 2016; Lanvers, 2017a), which currently makes the subject compulsory in England

only between the ages of 7 and 14, beyond which it has been optional at the level of national

policy since 2004 following the end of the policy known as Languages for All. Implicit in the

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[1] The picture is different in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

end of the Languages for All policy was the notion that the learning of a modern foreign language was not 'essential' (Hagger-Vaughan, 2016, p.363); as an optional subject, the status of modern foreign languages tends to be perceived as low (Coleman et al, 2007; Fisher, 2011). Indeed, since this policy change there has been a gradual and sustained decline in take-up of the subject in the post-compulsory phase (see Figures 1 and 2), although the subject's lack of popularity pre-dates this (Francis, 2000; Macaro, 2008).

<Insert Figure 1 near here>

<Insert Figure 2 near here>

The policy picture is more complicated than simply optionality, however, due to two performance measures used to compile league tables of schools which impact on modern foreign languages provision. The subject forms part of the EBacc (English Baccalaureate) performance measure, introduced in 2011, which has accounted for some small patchy increases in take up (Tinsley, 2015), although these have not been sustained (Hagger-Vaughan, 2020). The EBacc measure is formed of GCSEs in English, maths, science, a foreign language and a humanities subject, and it has been shown (DfE, 2019; Hagger-Vaughan, 2020; Mills & Tinsley, 2020) that for those students who do not take GCSEs in all five of the elements which make up the EBacc, it is most commonly the language GCSE that is missing. The competing Progress 8 performance measure, introduced in 2016, is made up of a complex combination of eight subjects, which may include a language, which accounts for the patchiness of increases in take-up.

The inclusion of modern foreign languages in the EBacc, advertised as being made up of 'a core of academic subjects' (DfE, 2011, p.26) has served to cement its 'academic' reputation. Despite the applied – communicative – nature of language use, the subject in school is viewed as distinctly 'academic' rather than 'vocational' (Hagger-Vaughan, 2016), a

significant distinction in this context. There is a marked overall divide between academic and vocational subjects within the curriculum (Fisher & Simmons, 2012), with a clear link to the socio-economic status (SES) of both students and school (Lanvers, 2018), which extends to languages. The subject is seen as the preserve of those of higher SES (see Coffey, 2018; Lanvers, 2017a; 2017b; Tinsley & Board, 2017a): those who wish to enter university, those who are expected to gain higher grades, and those who have the social capital to be able to imagine undertaking foreign travel (see Lanvers et al, 2018; Netz & Finger, 2016). For some students and their families, indeed some communities, a lack of this social capital can make the idea that languages might be of practical use in the future alien: distinct regional variation exists in entries for MFL examinations, with the lowest numbers of entries in deprived regions, often in the north of England (RSA, 2015; Tinsley & Board, 2016; 2017). Lanvers et al (2018)'s critical discourse analysis of journalistic and website texts found that texts by academics, which made up 16 of 33 analysed, tended to reinforce a social divide in language learning and blame 'those framed as possessing a monolingual habitus' for a lack of engagement with the subject (p.785).

A further systemic issue is evidenced in the extensive concerns about severe grading in the subject, something which has been shown to be a problem but which has not yet been addressed (Thomson, 2019). This compounds the subject's lack of appeal to many students, who cannot risk a low grade (Hagger-Vaughan, 2018), and is likely to disproportionately impact those of lower SES (Lanvers, 2018; Mills & Tinsley, 2020). This concern seems to affect other subjects less; Wikeley and Stables (1999) found that subjects such as maths and science were also seen as difficult, but were seen as being valued by employers and thus worth persevering with.

A further, more far-reaching challenge facing modern foreign languages in Anglophone contexts is global English (Hagger-Vaughan, 2020; Lanvers & Coleman, 2017;

Lanvers 2017a), and in the English context issues with the content and format of the GCSE course (Lanvers et al, 2018) compound this. In line with Bowler's claim that the crisis narrative in MFL is a longstanding one, work from the 1990s reveals the same attitudes as are present in more recent work (see for example Clark & Trafford, 1995; Wikeley & Stables, 1999), with students reporting that languages are only useful for work or travel and viewing the subject as difficult and irrelevant.

Despite these clear challenges facing the subject, I argue here that there are further issues, of a more societal nature, which have yet to be fully explored and which may account for the subject's unpopularity. This article puts forward these issues and proposes that in order to tackle the problems facing MFL, we must take a wider societal, rather than simply policy focused, view.

This Study

Concept

Using a loosely Foucauldian form of discourse analysis, this article draws on the academic literature, published reports on language needs and language teaching, and original qualitative data from two studies (Parrish & Lanvers, 2019; Parrish, forthcoming) to argue that the 'crisis' of language learning in England sits at the intersection of feminisation and othering. Discourse in a Foucauldian sense involves both the representation and shaping of meaning, and this method was chosen as it allows the exploration and challenging of taken-for-granted assumptions and how they have come into being (Cheek, 2012). Using this method pulls the literature into the analysis itself, rather than structuring the paper in the more traditional way with the analysis preceded by a literature review, and allows the data (in this case, student comments) and the literature to be taken as a single body of work illustrating the same discursive formation. In constructing the paper in this way, an argument is constructed based on the discourse evident in the literature and the data taken together, and

which challenges the traditional narrative to explain the challenges facing language teaching and learning in English schools.

For Foucault, the concept of power/knowledge shapes the discourses that come to be known; what can and cannot be said about the world (Foucault, 1978). This process, according to Foucault, shapes what is understood to be true, regardless of any objective truth (Hall, 2001). When considering school-level language learning, we can argue that the views of students are shaped by the wider social context, and the views of their family and friends, whose views are in turn affected by wider public discourses around the subject (see Coleman, 2009). Student attitudes are thus shaped by the power/knowledge held by parents who are 'slightly "afraid" of languages' (Hagger-Vaughan, 2020, p.10) and influenced by 'limited community confidence' (p.10) in a subject which government policy implies is low status, but which nevertheless requires a sometimes intimidating level of cultural capital. I argue here that the power/knowledge of a society which views English as 'enough', views speakers of languages other than English negatively and presents language learning as a feminised pursuit cannot help but influence the views of students, both directly and through their social networks of friends and family.

Literature
The body of literature considered in the paper forms a purposive sample drawn together from academic publications and reports looking at modern foreign languages in the UK, but does not claim to be an exhaustive survey. Its role here is to construct an argument rather than outline all developments in the field. Publications in the sample date from the mid-1990s onwards, representing the periods when interest in the issues under consideration peaked. Much of the literature relating to gender and MFL comes from the early part of this period, when there was a concern about the differing experiences and attainment of boys and girls in the subject. Work illustrating masculinising and othering discourses is primarily from later in

the period, reflecting the focus on measurement of performance and shifting attitudes towards 'the other' which have come with wider changes in social attitudes, which will be discussed further below.

Student comments

The first set of original data ($n = 224$; see Parrish & Lanvers, 2019) consists of student open-text responses to three questionnaire items which came towards the end of a more wide-ranging instrument, namely:

- Are there any languages you would have liked to have been able to learn at school?

- Do you have any other comments or ideas about the languages available in schools?

- Is there anything else you would like to say about languages and GCSE options?

The study involved students in Year 10 (aged 14-15) from six schools in England. The second study ($n = 28$; Parrish, forthcoming) was a purely qualitative study focused on student views of the languages taught in schools. Participating students attended the same rural grammar (selective) school and were aged between 11 and 17, with the youngest being in Year 7 (age 11-12) and the oldest in Year 12 (age 16-17). All were studying a language except one group of Year 12 students. They were given the verbal prompt 'what do you think of the languages taught in school?', a set of cards showing the languages available at GCSE as a further prompt, and a large piece of paper to record their responses on, but were not given any guidance or restrictions as to what they should record. The students worked in groups of four, with each group being made up of students from a single year group, and in the event drew up lists and typologies of languages labelled based on perceptions of importance, and made annotations around these relating to importance, usefulness and choice.

The comments from both studies were uploaded into NVivo for analysis for the purpose of the present study. The three main themes explored here, namely feminisation,

masculinisation and othering, had previously been identified within the student data following inductive analyses conducted for the main studies, and drove the design of the present work. Where comments are reproduced here, they are reproduced exactly as typed by the students including any spelling, grammatical or formatting errors.

A Problem at the Intersection

First used in legal circles, the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) is used here to argue that the 'problem' of modern foreign languages sits at the intersection of two key issues. Crenshaw argued that discrimination against black women sat at the intersection of both race and sex discrimination, and could not be ascribed to either alone – it was the combination of the two, their intersectionality, which explained the issue (Crenshaw, 1989). The theory is not confined to the law, race or gender and has since been applied in a range of disciplines to 'study and examine the ways in which structures of power interact to produce disparate conditions of social inequality that affect groups and individuals differently' (Cho, 2013, p.385). It has, however, not previously been used to explore subject teaching in schools. Here, I argue that the decline in uptake of modern foreign languages in the post-compulsory phase can be attributed to the intersection of the feminisation of the subject (sitting alongside a masculinising of education more generally) and the othering of the speakers of those languages – both issues of identity, which has been found to affect students' choice of subject (Regan & DeWitt, 2015).

Feminisation

Clark & Trafford (1995) refer to modern foreign languages as a 'traditionally "female" subject' (n.p.) and Carr & Pauwels (2006) discuss its gendered nature, primarily studied by girls, a theme also found in Williams et al (2002). More recently, the British Council produced a report investigating the pronounced gender gap that exists in MFL at school level (Mills & Tinsley, 2014), something clearly seen in Figures 1 and 2 which show the gap

between the number of male and female students sitting GCSE and A-Level exams in modern languages as well as the overall decline in numbers. This gap is particularly pronounced in French at A-Level, where the median difference between genders across the time range is 37.3%, and in Spanish at GCSE where the median difference is 16.7%. In French at GCSE, the percentage difference has increased considerably across the time range. Nevertheless, the concern here is with a feminising discourse around the subject rather than the gender imbalance *per se*, and with the discourse rather than anything inherent in the subject.

Much of the writing on gender and MFL comes from the 1990s and early 2000s, and some reveals attitudes that are at odds with current thinking. There is a prevailing discourse around the feminising of the subject (Callaghan, 1998; Francis, 2000; Kissau, 2006 etc) and boys' underachievement (Barton, 1997; Callaghan, 1998). A dominant narrative at the time was that, after an earlier period of focus on girls' underachievement, girls' progress had come at the expense of boys', who were now marginalised, even victimised, by a female-dominated education system (Barton, 1997; Carr & Pauwels, 2006).

> Barton (1997) notes that any concern about boys' achievement
>
> clearly peaked in the summer of 1994 when G.C.S.E. results revealed that girls had surpassed their male counterparts in all subjects, most notably in the traditionally boy-dominated areas of maths, science and technology. Hot on the heels of the celebrations, enjoyed no doubt most heartily by the pioneers of girl-promoting projects like G.I.S.T. (Girls Into Science and Technology), came the realisation that success for girls meant failure for boys (p.11).

The tone of this piece is striking, particularly when referring to 'girl-promoting projects' and their 'pioneers' who appear to callously celebrate the success of their initiatives rather than

recognising the fate of the boys. It is not clear why 'success for girls meant failure for boys', but it is such a key notion that it appears as a pull quote alongside the main text of the article.

Barton (1997) suggests that the problem of boys' underachievement is not in fact accounted for by the feminising of the *subject*, but by the feminising of *effort*. Williams et al (2002) found that students believed that girls would put in effort when work 'appeared tedious' (p.515) but boys needed to enjoy it. They also felt that 'it was not "cool" for boys to like languages, and even if they did, it was not appropriate to show it' (p.516) and might lead to teasing, whereas girls did not mind being seen to enjoy the subject, because many girls did so. Appearing disinterested is part of the construction of a masculine, 'laddish' identity, but the nature of language learning necessitates practice and sustained, sequential learning (Barton, 1997; Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009) and as such may run counter to boys' conceptions of their identity (Barton, 1997; Bartram, 2006; Fisher, 2001; Kissau, 2006; Kissau & Turnbull, 2008) and the image they wish to portray, 'polic[ing] the acceptable boundaries of masculinity by encouraging male[s] to distance themselves from activities and positions that are conventionally understood as feminine' (Chan, 2011, p.746). Chaffee et al (2019) note that 'if men perceive foreign language as feminine and also see masculinity and femininity as incompatible opposites, they might avoid foreign language learning, especially if their masculinity is questioned' (p. 303), mooting the possibility that boys' interest in languages may be at the mercy of a fear their male peers could interpret their taking the subject – straying into the territory of the feminine – as running counter to their masculinity (Martino, 1999). We can see here clear links to Butler's notion of gender as performative; 'manufactured through a sustained set of acts' (Butler, 2002, p.xv).

McCall (2011) notes that French fares particularly badly, suggesting that the nature of the curriculum (considered to include more topics favoured by girls than boys) and the high proportion of female teachers lead to a situation where 'the French classroom is

considered by many to be a feminine space, in which "lads" feel less at home than girls'
(p.6). Serving to emphasise the perceived gendered nature of the curriculum, McCall (2011)
describes a football-based project designed to 'partially redress the curriculum imbalance that
favours girls' interests' (p.6). The project included both girls and boys and as well as football,
included teaching of parts of the body (a standard MFL topic) 'using a shirtless photo of
David Beckham's iconic body' and other activities using 'pictures of players known for their
good looks' and 'a resource based on the lives and glamorous outfits worn by three famous
footballers' wives (WAGs)' (p.10). This project seems to emphasise, rather than diminish, a
performative gender divide.

As indicated by the Figures in this article, although exams in other languages are
available, the overwhelming majority of schools offer some combination of French, Spanish
or German. Previous studies have shown that students in secondary schools are interested in
languages other than this 'Big Three' (Parrish, 2019), but these are taught in only a small
percentage of schools (Tinsley, 2019). Although Callaghan (1998) suggests that it is MFL in
general which is viewed as feminised, more recently Mills & Tinsley (2020) note that there is
anecdotal evidence that take-up of German and Chinese (taught in around 3% of schools;
Collen, 2020) is less skewed towards females. Exam entry data over time are not available
for Chinese specifically, but when comparing French, Spanish, German and 'other modern
languages' data for GCSE, we can see that the percentage difference between male and
female entrants is indeed lower for German and 'other languages' than for French or Spanish
(see Figure 3). Tinsley & Board (2014) report that more boys than girls take GCSE (but not
A-Level) Chinese: 52% compared with 44% of MFL GCSE entries overall (p.67).

<Insert Figure 3 near here>

This may be attributable to different perceptions of the languages. Williams et al (2002) found that French was seen as 'the language of love and stuff' whereas German was seen as representing 'the war, Hitler and all that' (p.520); similarly Phillips & Filmer-Sankey recorded a participant who stated that she would 'much rather learn French as German is a more masculine language than French.' (1993, p.93). French has also been identified as the language of 'fine wines, haute couture, good cooking and luxurious perfumes- all either "domestic" or "feminine" in orientation' (Pritchard, 1987 cited in Callaghan, 1998). More recently, Tinsley & Board tentatively suggest that the relative popularity of Chinese among boys may be down to the nature of the language rather than perceptions of it, specifically 'the way that learning Chinese draws in other abilities such as spatial awareness or artistic or mathematical intelligences, rather than mainly literary competences' (Tinsley & Board, 2014, p. 100).

It is evident that the majority of articles discussing gender and MFL are from the 1990s and early 2000s, after which the theme fell out of favour. The only recent work in this area is a report into boys' engagement with MFL, which found that girls were more than twice as likely than boys to attain grade 4 or above (a pass grade) at GCSE in the subject, after controlling for disadvantage and prior attainment (Mills & Tinsley, 2020). The study found that 'school policies towards languages which include some form of compulsion for at least some pupils are the greatest determinant of higher than expected participation and achievement by boys' (Mills & Tinsley, 2020, p.48). This suggests that where boys are allowed to drop the subject, they do so, which leaves us no better off in term of encouraging greater take-up. It also raises questions about the motivation of these boys, who are not given a choice (Parrish & Lanvers, 2019), and a wider question around whether choice, in the form of the end of Languages for All, may indirectly have been introduced as a way of creating space for boys to withdraw from a feminised subject. Chaffee et al (2019) suggest that the

perceived threat to masculinity evident in the feminisation of the domain of language learning, making it something that 'should not' be done by males, might lead directly to its devaluation, and Callaghan (1998) makes a clear link between low value and feminisation, suggesting that 'the status of foreign languages is not high enough to warrant concern and boys' performance is therefore seen as adequate. Foreign language teaching in our schools is becoming increasingly feminized' (p.2).

Turning now to student comments in the original studies included in this discourse analysis, those which were identified as referring to feminine themes (responses to the item 'Are there any languages you would have liked to have been able to learn at school?') primarily focused on the 'niceness' or beauty of the language and related to romance languages, predominantly Italian[2], which was described as a 'beautiful language' (ST_203) and 'a really nice language' (ST_104). Although comments were made about a wide range of languages, none which were coded under this theme referred to any other languages, suggesting that it may be primarily romance languages which are seen this way.

Masculinisation

A dual and competing feminising and masculinising discourse interacts around language education in schools. It is at once a feminised subject, as described previously, and at the mercy of a masculinist move to measure performance. The inclusion of the subject in the EBacc, and the government's ambition to increase take-up of the suite of subjects, positions it squarely within a competitive masculinist narrative of comparing and measuring school performance (Chan, 2011; Mahony et al 2004).

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[2] Because of the nature of the question, none related to French.

Also at odds with the feminisation of languages as a school subject is the masculinisation of the policy discourse around it. Recent reports from organisations charged with promoting the learning of languages tend to focus on the benefits for business and the economy, both traditionally coded as masculine (Connell, 2005; Connell & Wood, 2005; Koller, 2004). The Languages for the Future report (Tinsley & Board, 2017b) opens with a statement about 'the UK's quest to be a major international trading partner' (p.4) and continues to state that 'we will need to reach out beyond English, not only to maintain and improve our economic position but to build trust, deepen international influence and cultural relationships, and to keep our country safe' (p.4). Using the language of business, 'the supply and demand for language competence' is described (p.4), echoed in the subtitle of the British Academy 'State of the Nation' report: Demand and Supply of Language Skills (Tinsley, 2013). This document was commissioned to understand the nature of the 'strategic deficits in language learning' (p.23), noting that 'languages are under pressure to demonstrate their contribution to the economy' (p.23). Even when stressing that 'The British Academy has made clear that the national need for languages goes far beyond the competitiveness of individuals or companies in the global economy… Language study is intellectually and culturally beneficial in its own right' (p.25), the language of business is used: 'The ability to understand the languages and cultures of others holds "non-market" value for society and for intercultural relations at home and abroad' (p.25). A second British Academy report from 2013 is subtitled 'The Need for Languages in UK Diplomacy and Security' (Chen & Breivik, 2013).

The purpose of the Languages for the Future report is to provide a 'systematic analysis of the UK's language needs, looking at a variety of economic, geopolitical, cultural and educational indicators' and to 'identif[y] the languages which will be of crucial importance

for the UK's future prosperity, security and influence in the world' (p.4). Ten indicators are used for this analysis, as shown:

1. Current UK exports

2. The language needs of UK business

3. Future trade priorities

4. Emerging high growth markets

5. Diplomatic and security priorities

6. The public's language interests

7. Outward and inward tourism

8. International educational engagement

9. Levels of English proficiency in other countries

10. The prevalence of different languages on the internet (Tinsley & Board, 2017b, p.4).

The first four relate to business, identified above as being viewed as masculine, and the fifth to diplomacy and security. We can argue, then, that half of this list consists of traditionally masculinised uses for languages – diplomacy and security, here analogous with defence, being historically male-dominated arenas and generally coded as masculine (Towns, 2020).

In contrast to this masculinised discourse, the HEPI report prioritises six 'individual returns' on language learning: Cultural literacy, empathy and interpersonal connections, personal enrichment, preserving heritage, mental value and brain health (Bowler, 2020, pp.16-18). This was followed by the 'strategic reasons', with the term being used euphemistically to refer to economic benefits.

Masculine-coded themes identified in student comments related to the economy or to defence, and never in connection with romance languages, except where the Year 7 boys referred twice to French as the language of 'an ally'. Students in the questionnaire study

commented: 'Germany has a large role in Europe's economy' (ST_24); made a reference to 'China's economic power' (ST_207) and to Russia and China as 'the dominant countries in the world' (ST_98). In the smaller study, the Year 12 non-linguists listed German as the fifth most important language and labelled it as 'economically important'. Russian was sixth, labelled as 'military important – be friends, no fight'. The Year 10 page included a list of languages in order of importance (with Chinese and Arabic at the top) and a separate group labelled 'Geopolitical'. This contained Russian, Farsi, Chinese, Arabic, Hebrew, Basque and Kurdish. Farsi, Basque and Kurdish did not appear on the cards that students were presented with.

Othering

Our other route to the intersection is through the notion of 'the other'. A hostility, part of a monolingual mindset or ideology, has been identified towards both languages taught in schools and the languages of communities within the UK (Lamb, Hatoss & O'Neill, 2020; Lamb & Vodicka, 2017; Nuffield, 2000; Wei, 2011). Skutknabb Kangas & Phillipson (1986) refer to linguicism, the structural inequalities perpetuated on the basis of language, and we can read this in the languages given a place on the school curriculum, which are rarely those of minority communities within England. Policy-makers and those with power/knowledge in this arena create a climate whereby not only are languages in general devalued, but the languages of minority groups are minimised to the extent that they are not taught at all. Many schools have a linguistically diverse school population (Bailey & Marsden, 2017) but home or heritage languages are often only supported when they can be examined but not taught (Tinsley, 2019) – when they can offer instrumental (masculinist) value to a school through accountability measures. In addition, it must be recognised that what is taught in school are exclusively the 'standard' varieties of languages – little or no consideration is given to, for example, the numerous varieties of French spoken in Africa.

Given the Foucauldian notion of power/knowledge and its ability to both shape and describe society, and the conceptualisation of policy as, at its simplest, whatever is done or not done (Dye, 2016), the attitudes and actions of both society and government will influence school curricula and students' choices. Coleman (2009) suggests that even the most positive policy initiatives, such as the inclusion of MFL in the EBacc, will not succeed if they run counter to public opinion, which in his words is 'hostile to language learning' (p.116) and characterised by 'casual xenophobia' and 'jingoism' (p.117). He notes that, given the decline in language learning, 'there must be forces in the climate of public opinion, and in the public discourse, which outweigh even the most laudable educational initiatives' (Coleman, 2009, p.116).

A 'societal and political insularity as well as a certain disdain for linguistic "otherness"' (Pachler, 2007, p.4), alongside both a false sense of linguistic superiority and an 'Anglophonic reluctance to become bilingual' (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009, p.8) are in evidence both in the press and in the public opinion which it both shapes and reflects, and may be linked to the spread of global English and, more recently, Brexit. The latter has increased the politicisation of language policy (Lanvers et al, 2018) and impacted on student perceptions of language learning (Collen, 2020; Tinsley, 2019) but not lessened the need for language skills (British Academy, 2019; Kelly, 2017). However, the notion that 'English is enough' is not new; it is reflected, for example, in a speech by Prime Minister Gordon Brown which suggested that 'if you have skills, educated in Britain, you can work almost anywhere in the world', without acknowledging that language skills might form part of this desirable skillset (Brown, 2008).

Media coverage which focuses on negative, rather than positive, aspects of EU membership and multilingualism, in both the tabloid and broadsheet press, is well established (Coleman, 2009). The broadsheet press tend to focus on the decline in language learning and

language skills, emphasising economic arguments for language competency and the personal and professional benefits (Lanvers & Coleman, 2013); by contrast, the tabloid press has been shown to present an othering, immigration-focused view of Europe (Sogelola, 2018; Tong & Zuo, 2019). Readership of the two types of paper tends to be split along socio-economic lines (Boykoff, 2008) with the tabloid press more widely read than the broadsheets (Mayhew, 2019), and as such this media discourse is likely to both reflect and shape the socio-economic divide in language learning outlined previously. Worse, 'one might argue that the overall weak policies and practices regarding language teaching in the United Kingdom are themselves a manifestation of linguaphobia, or indeed xenophobia' (Lanvers et al, 2018, p.778), or, we could add, linguicism.

Such attitudes are evident in student comments, which often reveal a striking 'English is enough' mentality: 'coz i was born in england' (ST_8); 'I AM HAPPY SPEAKING MY LANGUEDGE WHY WOULD I WANT TO LEARN ANY OTHER' (ST_46); 'the international language is English why do I need it when I'm not of to a country where they do not speak a language I do not know.' (ST_109); 'you should not learn other languages because everyone should learn english' (ST_58) and 'THERE BORING AND WE SHOULDN'T HAVE TO DO THEM EVERYONE SHOULD SPEAK ENGLISH' (ST_6). In the qualitative study, the group of Year 12 linguists put it slightly more eloquently, noting that 'living in England, we may not feel we need to learn a language because English is so widely spoken'. Both groups of Year 7 students listed English as the most important language to learn, adding it to the list of foreign languages provided on the cards as prompts.

A link road: New Orientalism
Returning to our intersection, there is a third key concept which plays a role, and which can be conceptualised as a link road running between our two main routes – that of New Orientalism. Orientalism (Said, 1978) refers to the controversial depiction of the fetishisation

of the Other, specifically the 'Orient'. Said describes 'the Orient that appears in Orientalism' as 'a system of representations framed by a whole set of… political forces and activities' (Said, 2018). Looking at education as a whole, a 'new Orientalism' (You, 2020, p.744) is evident in the ways East Asia has been represented as 'as an inspiration for education reforms and a threat to the domestic economy' (You, 2020, p.744), constructing a dichotomous characterisation of the East and West. Chinese teachers are 'friendly and professional', 'explain[ing] the concepts clearly' and giving 'instant feedback' (Truss, cited in You, 2020, p.748); English teachers must presumably be, by extension, somehow lacking.

The othering embedded within this New Orientalism is framed in masculinised terms. The interest in China stems from its success in international comparisons – the fact that when measuring students (and by extension, their teachers and the national education system as a whole) using standardised tests, they appear near or at the top of the table. The nation's economy is booming.

As a consequence of the fetishisation of the region, in the past ten years British government figures have made several trips to China to 'identify the secrets of high achievement' (You, 2020, p.742) with an eye to educational policy borrowing. In 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron travelled to China and used the visit as a way to advocate for the teaching of Mandarin in schools, focusing on its economic benefits (Watt & Adams, 2013). In 2014, schools minister Elizabeth Truss announced two initiatives inspired by government visits to China: maths mastery programmes based on those employed in Chinese schools, and the ambition to double the number of students taking Mandarin in schools by 2017 and doubling it again by 2020. Language Trends data suggests that this ambition has not been fulfilled, while the maths hub programme seems to be thriving (https://www.mathshubs.org.uk/). We can see then that the masculinised discipline of maths

has progressed while the feminised discipline of languages has languished behind (Busby, 2017), despite suggestions of the appeal of Chinese to boys.

In line with the discourses around language needs discussed previously, the ambition for Mandarin was couched in economic terms:

> Imagine if [students] started learning Mandarin at age 7, how fluent their Mandarin would be by age 11 and 16. That's our intention with the new languages curriculum offering Mandarin from age 7. By the time they leave school they will be able to converse and do business. A huge asset (Truss, 2014).

The picture painted here, of students leaving school with a level of fluency allowing them to 'converse and do business' is at odds with the level generally attained by students of modern foreign languages, which does not meet employers' needs (Tinsley, 2013).

As well as this New Orientalist policy discourse, public discourse also celebrates and admires East Asia. Lanvers & Coleman (2013) conducted a critical discourse analysis of 90 newspaper articles appearing between February 2010 and February 2012. Nine of the articles analysed attributed the decline in MFL learning in schools at least in part to the increasing importance of languages other than those traditionally taught, particularly Mandarin. As shown in Table 1, students of all ages also emphasise the economic value of Chinese as a language to be taught in schools; by contrast, references to Japanese (absent from the government discourse) highlight its cultural value. This lends further weight to the notion that the power/knowledge of a public 'hostile to language learning (Coleman, 2009, p.116) is more influential than government policy, and that the masculinised, monetised, instrumental value of Chinese is not enough to counter it.

<Insert Table 1 near here>

Conclusion

It is common to attribute the decline in uptake of modern foreign languages in schools to policy changes, harsh grading and the rise of global English. This article has demonstrated that there are broader societal issues at play which need to be addressed, and which may actually account for the policy decisions made. I have argued that the decline is attributable to the intersection of feminist-masculinist tension and a 'new orientalist' othering of the speakers of the languages taught. This is evident in the academic literature which has considered issues of gender in the teaching and learning of modern foreign languages, in policy reports around modern foreign languages and in student comments.

Arriving at the intersection from one angle, the feminist-masculinist tension is apparent both at a student level, with students perceiving specific languages in specific ways, and at a policy level. At the student level, decades of studies have revealed a distinct gender divide in perceptions of the 'suitability' of the subject, particularly French, which remains the dominant language taught and has traditionally been so by a large margin, impacting on take-up. At a policy level, the implied policy of 'MFL for most' included in the EBacc performance measure sits at odds with the masculinised nature of the measure itself, as well as with the rationale for its importance, which tends to be framed in economic terms. Masculinising a feminised subject has not had the effect of increasing its appeal to students, or to policy makers – the dominant discourse is one of a feminine subject at odds with performative notions of gender and as such its value is perceived as being low. These perceptions are embedded within schools themselves, and in the professional literature around language teaching. Overcoming this means reframing the subject and its value in a way that goes beyond what are to students abstract notions of future benefits (Parrish & Lanvers, 2019; Taylor & Marsden, 2014), and addressing its feminised image. This is something which needs to be done systemically and means recognising the implicit in

students, schools' and language organisations' framing of the benefits and value of the subject.

Approaching the intersection from another direction, othering is apparent in wider media and public discourses. Although through the masculinising of language teaching rationales certain language communities are highlighted as being of more interest or value than others, these rationales nevertheless remain less impactful than the feminised image of the subject, as well as a general fear of 'the other' perpetuated by negative media attitudes which both shape and reflect public perception. The new orientalist fetishising of East Asian education systems and languages, mapped against the low numbers of schools offering Chinese, creates a tension whereby students, parents and government, are able to say that the problem with languages is that the 'wrong' languages are on offer.

Overcoming the decline in uptake of modern foreign languages is not an easy task. I argue here that approaching the problem from the direction of policy change misses the intersection where the problem itself lies, and that by changing the route we take to tackling the problem, we may be able to have more success. It will nevertheless not be simple; the power/knowledge lies with the public and the students who are able to choose whether or not to take the subject, and is both reflected in and created by the media discourse around the subject, as well as a student perception that language learning affronts the identity of many. This article does not offer solutions, but by highlighting these issues, it does propose another route to viewing, and subsequently tackling, the problem.

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TABLE 1

Student References to Chinese and Japanese

	Year 7 boys	Year 7 girls	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12 linguists	Year 12 non-linguists
Chinese	3rd Over 1 billion speakers	4th Leading language of the world	2nd Lots of people speak Chinese Lots of Chinese communications Everyone should learn Chinese	3rd Business and trade for future	1st equal Ranking labelled: Most important? Sorted in most populous	1st Big population Large country all speak Chinese	4th	2nd A lot of people speak it; a lot of Chinese people speak English
Japanese	10th	10th Games and art Video games Pokemon	4th Are a big part of our culture	'second tier languages' group – joint top Hard to learn	3rd level of the hierarchy	4th Not very global language Only useful if visiting or moving to country Unique language	n/a	1st equal Anime fast growing in western culture

Figure 1: Percentage of Students Sitting a Modern Foreign Language GCSE, 2000-2019 Broken Down by Gender
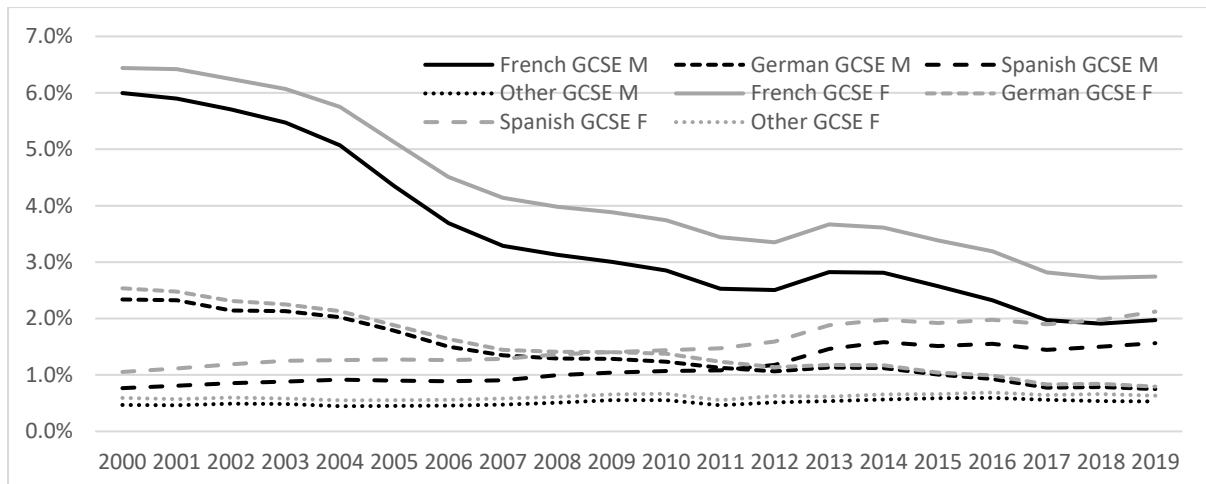
Figure 2: Percentage of Students Sitting a Modern Foreign Language A-Level, 2000-2019
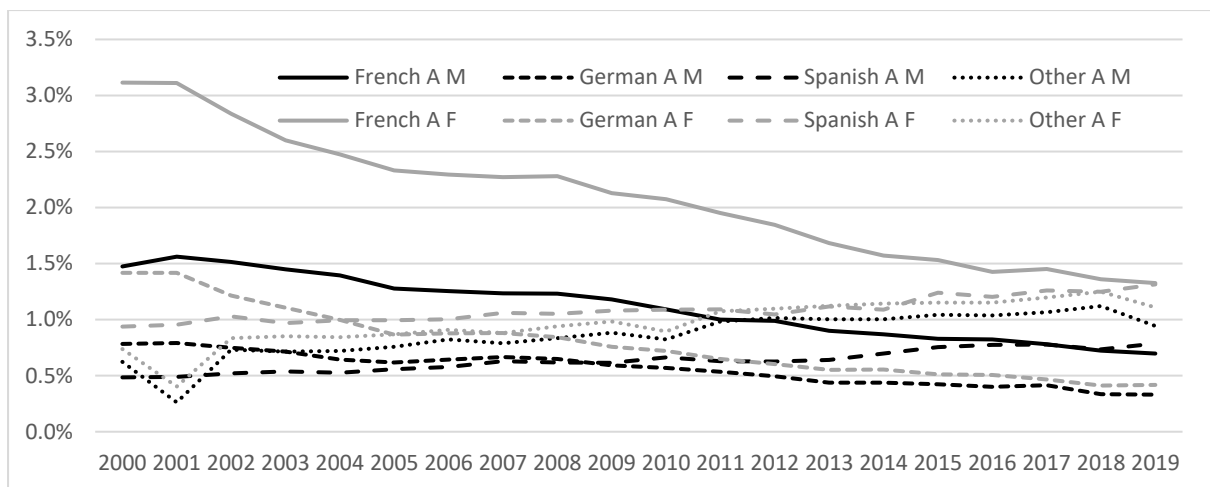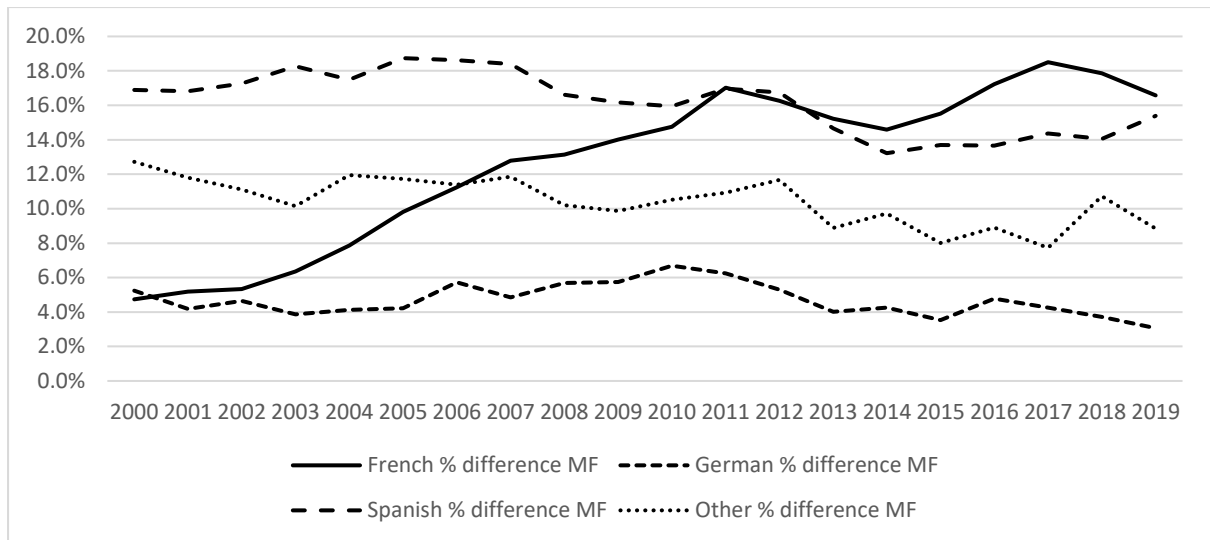Broken Down by Gender

Figure 3: Percentage Difference Between Male and Female Entrants for GCSE Languages, 2000-2020.

Figure 1: Percentage of Students Sitting a Modern Foreign Language GCSE, 2000-2019 Broken Down by Gender

Figure 2: Percentage of Students Sitting a Modern Foreign Language A-Level, 2000-2019 Broken Down by Gender

Figure 3: Percentage Difference Between Male and Female Entrants for GCSE Languages, 2000-2020.