'Building a new public idea about language'?: Multilingualism and language learning in the post-Brexit UK

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ABSTRACT

In 2003, Mary Louise Pratt published a hugely influential paper in *Profession* where she took to task misconceptions about multilingualism and language learning apparent in the USA in the wake of 9/11 and consequent counter-terrorism measures. She argued that a new public idea about language was necessary in order to ensure unity and security. This article argues that in the aftermath of Brexit, the UK also needs to develop a new public idea about language to ensure a future that is prosperous, socially, culturally and economically. To do so, it first challenges a number of prevalent myths about language learning and multilingualism in the UK through a review of scholarship, media articles and reports which focus on languages and multilingualism since 2013. It then suggests that interest in the Anglosphere has meant that the value of English is now artificially inflated and that the value of other languages is underplayed. We argue that this turn to the Anglosphere and to (English) monolingualism should be challenged through proposing a new public idea about language for post-Brexit UK.

Introduction

In 2003, Mary Louise Pratt published a hugely influential paper[2] in *Profession*, where she took to task misconceptions about multilingualism and language learning in the USA, in the wake of 9/11 and consequent counter-terrorism measures. She provided a set of 'concepts to propose,' discussing antidotes to the misconceptions and suggesting ways forward to sustain 'a new public idea about language' (2003, p. 115). One aim was to 'prevent national security measures from arising' (2003) as, in Pratt's view, a public with a developed understanding about language would recognise that 'linguistic others' (2003) are not potential enemies. Pratt placed multilingualism and language learning at the centre of how the USA could develop unity and security at a time when many felt under physical threat, arguing that monolinguistic language policies had contributed to an inability to identify or prevent hazards. Discussions along

similar lines were also initiated by Kramsch (2005), who argued that clarity about the role of language learning and teaching was critical to twenty-first century debates about the place of the US in the world, and Pennycook (2007), who suggested that the belief prevalent in the USA that English alone is enough for communication with the rest of the world had led to its isolation. Each of these papers eloquently highlighted issues and warned of dangers, taking the view that there was an urgent need to change the way that the public understood multilingualism and engaged with language learning, in order to bring about change.

Two decades later, the UK is in the throes of responding to a challenge that has similarly tested our assumptions about multilingualism and the purposes for language learning: Brexit. Between the announcement of the referendum in 2015 (in the Conservative Party manifesto), and the run-up to the UK leaving the European Union (EU) on January 31 2020, the advantages and disadvantages of remaining or leaving were extensively debated. Media coverage often reflected negative discourses on multilingualism and language learning, including the view that because English is the 'global language,' other languages are no longer necessary and that knowing English is enough. (See Lanvers & Coleman, 2017; and Lanvers et al., 2018, for discussions of the origins of these ideas and their consequences.)

A host of academic and professional voices challenged these views. For example, the British Council's 2017 report on *Languages for the Future,* whose goal was to 'identify the priority languages for the UK's future prosperity, security and influence in the world,' addressed the dangers of monolingualism as well as the consequences of Brexit and argued:

> Among the skills and capabilities the UK will need, an understanding of other cultures and languages will continue to be important for successful international relationships at all levels. Both within and beyond Europe, 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. (Tinsley & Board, 2017b, p. 4)

This view is supported by Kelly (2018) in his conclusion to an edited collection of academic articles on *Languages after Brexit*; by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages,[3] which collates information on language issues for MPs; by the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded research project, *Multilingualism Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies,*[4] which ran from 2016 to 2020, and set out to 'investigate how the insights gained from stepping outside a single language, culture and mode of thought are vital to individuals and societies'; and by a report authored jointly by the UK's four academies, the British Academy, the Academy of Medical Sciences, the Royal Academy of Engineering and the Royal Society (2019), unequivocal in its message:

> The UK has the potential to become a linguistic powerhouse. If it did, it would be more prosperous, productive, influential, innovative, knowledgeable, culturally richer, more socially cohesive, and, quite literally, healthier. To achieve this, concerted and coordinated action is needed, beginning with a systematic policy approach across all sectors of education, but extending across social, economic, and international policy. (p. 2)

Even more recently, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the British Academy, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, and the Royal Society of Canada (2020)

have issued a joint statement highlighting the importance of language learning to developing clear and precise communication, which they believe is crucial to the health and security of every nation.

We agree wholeheartedly with these views, and, in this article, want to consider how the UK might fulfil its exciting potential as a linguistic powerhouse. We will do so by exploring what is intended by a 'public idea about language.' Like Pratt, we first review misconceptions in the UK about languages and language learning, which we believe reveal the complexity of our current position and will need to be refuted if we wish to move forward to develop this public idea. We then address an issue which has not to date been much debated in terms of languages and language learning – the Anglosphere. We will argue that this ideological phenomenon is irrefutably linked to Brexit and to current proposals to promote a 'global Britain,' through a belief in the supremacy of the English language, and has undermined efforts to put languages and language learning on the agenda. Finally, we propose a new public idea about language, based on a counter proposition, and consider how and why this should be promoted.

A 'public idea about language'

What is a 'public idea about language' and why do we need one?

In taking Pratt's work as a starting point, rather than, say, the Nuffield Languages Inquiry (Nuffield Foundation, 2000), or more recent UK position papers mentioned above, we may be open to the charge of selecting a proposal that is historically and contextually irrelevant to the post-Brexit languages landscape in the UK. Our reasons for choosing it are two-fold. Firstly, Pratt makes the call for a 'new *public idea* about language' explicit in her title and it is this notion – that public attitudes and understandings need to be engaged if things are to change – with which we engage in this paper. Secondly, Pratt's paper was prompted by a 'real-world' crisis (9/11) which was widely seen in the US as requiring significant re-thinking of political assumptions in a variety of contexts, including communications with the wider world and issues of national security, in which provision for the learning and use of languages other than English had a key role to play. Similarly, we argue, Brexit has constituted a 'real-world' crisis for the UK, in which our relationships with Europe and the wider world have become salient and unsettled. As with 9/11 for the US, we hold that this is a moment at which the argument for considering public opinion, as well as the views of policy-makers and politicians, needs to be made.

In her paper, Pratt (2003) sets out the position that philosophical or political perspectives need to be tested openly and broadly, hence her view that the USA needs a new *public* idea about language. The concept of public ideas can be traced back to the Enlightenment which moved away from the notion that ideas should gain their influence from 'authorities' such as people with religious, political or economic power and argued instead that ideas should be tested on the basis of their rational or logical consistency, through public debate (Gripsrud et al., 2010). It is through this process that new ideas take hold: they then gain authority when the public supports them, becoming a public idea. For these reasons, Pratt argues that we need, firstly, to identify the misconceptions that the public hold about language learning and societal multilingualism and to challenge these; secondly, to propose alternative concepts or perspectives; and, thirdly, to

use every opportunity to put these new concepts forward, so that they can be publicly debated. The third step is perhaps the most challenging, at least for academics, in that it involves moving away from theoretical debate to public action.

Challenging misconceptions

In order to initiate public debate, Pratt's original article lists four misconceptions (2003: 112–115) to be challenged:

(1). Immigrants and their children do not want to retain their languages of origin.
(2). Americans are hostile to multilingualism.
(3). Second-language learning has to start in early childhood, or we might as well throw up our hands.
(4). The primary public need for language expertise is national security.

Undoubtedly these points speak of the time and place when they were formulated, but underlying each are broader issues, which are equally valid in other parts of the world and almost two decades after Pratt's paper was published. Specifically, in the UK, in the context of what we might term 'Brexit embroilment' (the period from when the Brexit referendum was first formally proposed, in 2015, to the present – early 2021, at the time of writing – when the first consequences of the UK's exit from the EU are beginning to be identified), similar kinds of 'misconceptions' are widespread media tropes and therefore, we argue, as did Pratt, that these need to be publicly contested. We list five particularly pervasive and damaging misconceptions here. We are of course not the first to identify these: however, in bringing them together we hope to reveal the complexity of the challenge of developing a new public idea about language.

Misconception 1: the UK is monolingual

The myth that the UK is a place where people speak only English has long prevailed, and is currently promoted through the notion of the Anglosphere – a development we discuss further in Section 3 of this article. In reality, we have always been multilingual: speakers of languages long associated with these lands (e.g. Welsh, Gaelic, Cornish, as well as English), have been joined, as a consequence of centuries of immigration, by a host of others. (See Mac Giolla Chríost and Bonotti (2018) for a full overview of linguistic diversity in the UK.)

Research over the last two decades has revealed different dimensions of this linguistic diversity. A landmark survey by Baker and Eversley (2000) found over 300 languages in use among London school children, and it seems likely that the numbers of languages and of those who speak them will have grown significantly since then. The last UK Census (2011)[5] revealed that around 4.2 million people in England and Wales (7.7% of the population) spoke a language other than English as their 'main' language, with Polish, Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali and Gujarati as the most widely used. A survey conducted for the British Academy and reported in the Guardian in 2014,[6] found that 20% of young people spoke another language at home. The UK, therefore, is rich in both numbers of people speaking other languages and in the number of other languages people in the UK speak.

Misconception 2: UK citizens don't value language learning

The UK media have contributed to a discourse in which language learning is seen either as pointless or else something which is beyond the competence of British citizens (recently explored by Lanvers & Coleman, 2017). This view is summarised by an article in 2015 article in the Daily Telegraph,[7] a right-leaning British broadsheet:

> Is it time to admit that, as a nation, we just cannot be bothered with language learning? Sadly, 'can't', 'won't' and 'don't', continue to be three words that tend to sum up our national view when it comes to speaking foreign languages.

In fact, education policy in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has ensured that most of the UK population has at least some knowledge of another language apart from English. There is now incipient demand for provision (e.g. language immersion programmes, as used in Gaelic-medium education in Scotland, where demand continues to rise[8]) to enable new generations to reach a higher level of linguistic ability. Data concerning UK citizens' existing language competence and the demand for language provision are widely available, although rarely cited to counter the media line exemplified in this quotation. For example, a series of surveys (British Council, 2015; European Commission, 2012; Scottish Government, 2016) have shown that over 70% of the adult population of the UK views the ability to speak other languages in addition to English as an asset. The British Academy survey of 2014, mentioned above, similarly discovered that 70% of 14–24 year olds would be interested in learning a foreign language in the future. The challenge is to make provision available in a wide range of languages, designed to meet specific needs, at times and in places accessible to potential learners. The existence of between 3000 and 5000 'complementary' schools in the UK (Borthwick, 2018), which teach the languages of migrant and refugee communities, such as Punjabi, Somali and Gujarati, as well as languages which have global reach as well as local speakers, such as Chinese and Arabic, is similarly often overlooked as evidence of demand. And if we need further proof, the 2020 report from the makers of the language learning app, Duolingo, states that it has been downloaded by 13 million UK users, with a median age of 26, placing the UK is in the top five countries worldwide for daily lessons completed.[9]

Misconception 3: UK citizens do not need to learn other languages as English is a global lingua franca

The widely-held perception that English is the world's lingua franca has led many people to infer that there is no need for Britons to learn other languages. This view is widespread. Lanvers and Coleman (2017), analysing media debate about the language crisis in UK education, in an earlier period (2009–2012), concluded that newspapers play a key role in 'perpetuating the fallacy that "English is enough"' (p. 21); and Lanvers and Chambers (2020) linked young people's belief in the widespread nature of global English to their lack of motivation to study other languages.

However, there is growing evidence demonstrating the short-sightedness of this position. Earlier critiques focused on our lack of competence in the languages of our trading partners limiting the UK's export potential: for example, Foreman-Peck and Wang (2013) suggested that that the UK loses around £48 billion pounds per year (3.5% of GDP in 2006) because of language deficits. More recent research identifies a range of other contexts in which an over-reliance on English can constitute a liability. In

international business and industrial contexts, English is not as widespread as is often imagined (Kubota, 2013), and in the field of international aid and development, Footitt (2017) argues that unless local languages are also used, aid agencies (and others) will not be able to promote new thinking and organisational change.[10] Furthermore, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Swahili and Arabic (amongst other languages) are all being used in different 'contact zones' (Pratt, 2008, p. 8), contributing, as alternative lingua francas to trade, communication, aid and diplomacy.

In fact, according to the British Council (2013), 'English is spoken at a useful level by a quarter of the world population.' This means that English is *not* spoken 'at a useful level' by approximately 75% of the world population. It is a myth, therefore, that everyone in the world speaks English. They don't, and many counted as speaking English may have only limited competence. It is also true that the varieties of English spoken by many of the 25% are not well understood by British English users. Indeed, scholars of English as a lingua franca (ELF), such as Seidlehofer (2011), Jenkins, (2006) and Wright (2008), have argued that the ELF spoken amongst speakers of other languages (for example speakers of German, French and Italian) exhibits very different characteristics from standard varieties and are not mutually comprehensible. Therefore speaking a standard variety may only offer limited advantages particularly in contexts where the speaker of the standard is in the minority rather than the majority (see Seidlhofer, 2011).

Misconception 4: UK citizens lack the motivation to learn other languages

In the Guardian and British Academy poll of 2014, discussed above, 39% of young people responded that they were discouraged from learning another language because they believed that most people around the world speak English. Scholars have also linked the rise of global English to UK citizens' lack of motivation to study other languages (e.g. Lanvers & Chambers, 2020), presenting, as evidence to support this view, the decline in take-up of provision for language learning at school and university level.

While it is important to recognise that the data concerning decline are more complex than they seem, with contradictory trends in relation to different languages, different levels, and different parts of the UK, our view is that arguments about low motivation need to be balanced by a recognition that the education systems of the four UK nations do not prioritise language learning and consequently do not provide the 'pipelines' that Pratt (op. cit.: 117) noted were lacking in the US context, twenty years ago. In other words, there is a lack of joined-up provision, which means, for example, that the language(s) a child studies at primary school may not be available for study at secondary level; or secondary schools may start the process of learning the same language again from scratch, because of disjointed provision. Experiences of discontinuities and repeated 'new starts' may be compounded by a failure to recognise and build on existing multilingualism in the school population, so that pupils who already speak at least one other language in addition to English are treated as if they have no relevant linguistic knowledge or language learning skills.

Similar blocks in the pipelines can be identified in further, higher and adult education, where *ab initio* courses dominate, and opportunities to develop intermediate and advanced levels of competence are limited. Constant reference in the media to English as *the* global language, and frustrating experiences of learning other languages at every level of the education system may indeed have demotivating effects on would-be

language learners in the UK, but we need to be careful of a narrative which places the blame on individuals rather than institutions (here, the media and the education system), as in the Telegraph article cited above, if we hope to bring about change.

Misconception 5: using languages other than English in public is 'unbritish'

Our attitude to languages other than English being spoken in public is complex. In some places, speaking foreign languages is met with hostility or disdain. For example, in the run-up to the Brexit vote, the Daily Mail (2014)[11] reported on workers being forbidden to use Polish even during breaks, despite the seeming illegality of such rulings,[12] while, according to a YouGov survey in February 2020,[13] 26% of people were very or fairly 'bothered' if they heard people speaking a language other than English in public: see Wright and Brookes (2019) for an analysis of media presentations of the view that only English should be spoken in England; and May (2018), for a discussion of why public multilingualism is considered destabilising. On the other hand, when a public figure speaks a foreign language in public, it makes headline news,[14] positioning the speaker as special but bilingualism as abnormal. Neither view is healthy in terms of a new public idea about language.

One reason British bilinguals may hide their language skills is that it is somehow not very British. The Economist calls this 'the politics of patriotism',[15] particularly when politicians hide their linguistic skills; and Lo Bianco (2014) discusses similar examples of politicians from other Anglophone countries (the US and Australia), arguing that these public performances of competence (or incompetence) in another language are symbolic language policy acts.

Another reason is elitism. In the UK, some languages matter more than others. When concern is expressed about declining uptake of languages provision, the focus is on particular European languages taught in schools – primarily French, German and Spanish. These languages have gained importance through proximity, empire-building and culture and are considered important enough to teach in schools and in some HEIs. Thus they have prestige. In contrast, a recent British Academy report (2019) has highlighted the invisibility of community languages in the UK while Blackledge (2005), in a far-reaching discussion of language, power and race, suggests that there is a 'common-sense ideology that community languages are of little worth in England' (p. 115). Bourdieu (1977) reminds us that 'language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power' (p. 648). Those whose languages are not recognised as legitimate (here Urdu, Polish and so on) have no power – as we use language not merely to communicate meaning but to be 'believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished' (p. 648) – and these rights are denied to them. The fact that they are not considered legitimate speakers (Bourdieu, 1977) in countries where English dominates is evidence of the stigma attached the public use of languages other than English, while contributing to the myth that the UK is monolingual.

In summary

Misconceptions about multilingualism and language learning in the UK are common and far-reaching. Far from being monolingual, lacking interest in other languages and incompetent language learners, much of the UK population is multilingual, and interested in

expanding linguistic competence, but often hampered by limited provision, particularly in school.

While internal discourses about competence in languages other than English are largely negative and inaccurate, discourses about the role of English as the global lingua franca are rosy – and also inaccurate. Everyone does not speak English and it is spoken far less than seems to be imagined. Languages other than English frequently mediate discussions in business and other realms, and monolingual English speakers can find themselves at a disadvantage in conversations where they do not speak the local language. Even in conversations where people use English as a lingua franca, monolingual English speakers may not understand or be understood and therefore they miss countless opportunities for social, cultural and economic exchange.

If we are to develop a new public idea about language, we need to acknowledge that the current public idea about language is based on partial information, complex realities and unhelpful discourses, as discussed here. It is also important to ask how these misconceptions came to hold sway. It is to this question that we now turn.

The Anglosphere

The ascendancy of English as a consequence of empire

The historical roots of misconceptions concerning the role of English in the world, and multilingualism and language learning in the UK, are inextricably bound up with empire, and so we start with an examination of its role in spreading English around the world.

Bourdieu (1990, p. 133) argued that 'any analysis of ideologies in the narrow sense of "legitimizing discourses" which fails to include an analysis of the corresponding institutional mechanisms is liable to be no more than a contribution to the efficacy of those ideologies.' The corresponding mechanisms behind the view that English is, and will continue to be, the global lingua franca can be seen in two ways, one tangible and one existential. At its greatest extent, in the early twentieth century, the British Empire ruled over 412 million people, 23% of the world's population at the time (Maddison, 2001). English was the lingua franca of Empire (Parsons, 1999), and framed Sir Winston Churchill's popular *History of the English-Speaking Peoples,*[16] which celebrated the link between the English language and the British Empire, up to its apotheosis in 1902. Following its break-up in the mid twentieth century, many former colonies continued to use English as an official language (e.g. Nigeria, India, Jamaica). Although the varieties of English used in these countries are different from standard British English, and continue to diverge, the symbolic power of English is apparent in this legacy and contributes to the myth that 'everyone' in the world speaks English.

The existential mechanism is perhaps more important, and certainly more insidious, in terms of the current discussion. Rather than viewing the English language legacy as evidence of a shameful colonial history responsible for death, slavery and destruction, many see it as a benefit: Gordon Brown, a former UK Prime Minister, famously called it our 'gift' to the world (The Guardian, 2008[17]). This is the theme of Roberts' continuation of Churchill's history, *The History of the English-speaking Peoples since 1900* (Roberts, 2006), which, according to Roberts himself, 'brilliantly reveals what made the English-speaking people the preeminent political culture since 1900 … a phenomenal

success story … an enthralling account of the century in which the political culture of one linguistic world-grouping comprehensively triumphed over all others' (Roberts, n.d.; cited in Lo Bianco, 2014, p. 70). Although this conception has been forcefully challenged over the years by academics such as Phillipson (1992; 2016), Pennycook (2007), and Dorling and Tomlinson (2019), the positive view of English as a global good has been difficult to dislodge.

A new empire based on the English language

One reason for this ongoing positive view is that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, a new kind of empire, based on language rather than geographical territory, began to be formulated, through use of the term 'Anglosphere' (Lloyd, 2000). Phillipson (1992; 2016) had earlier warned of imperialistic overtones in English-speakers' enthusiasm for the rise of English as a lingua franca, particularly in European contexts, but writers such as Bennett (2004) and Roberts (2006) embraced the opportunity to use English as a means of furthering the global power of the 'English-speaking peoples' – principally the UK, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. These are all countries aligned by 'an attachment to individualism, the rule of law … and the elevation of freedom' (Laughland, 2008), in their view.

Wellings (2019, p. 12) argues that the Anglosphere concept was powerful in the run-up to Brexit (although politicians were wary of using the term). He suggests it presented Eurosceptics with an alternative grouping to the European Union that was built on:

> Three interlinked narratives concerning the development of representative democracy, the positive effects of empire and free trade, and the defeat of totalitarianism in the twentieth century.

The Anglosphere, therefore, is neither neutral nor benign. The English language is central to both its membership and to how business will be done within it. Cohen, writing, in 2016, in The Spectator,[18] calls out the racial underpinnings of the term: '"Anglosphere" is just the right's PC replacement for what we used to call in blunter times "the white Commonwealth".' Nonetheless, as Wellings (2019, p. 14) argues, 'Britain's imperial past allowed Brexiteers to imagine a global future for the UK,' where its past is seen as positive rather than negative and where its centrality in terms of global politics and economics is assured.

According to Wellings (2019: 92), pro-Brexit Conservative politician, in 2000, David Davis attended one of the original Hudson Institute Conferences which introduced the Anglosphere as 'a new concept in right-wing transatlantic discourse.' In 2017, when Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, Davis claimed that the UK would be more successful outside the EU than other EU countries could be, because of the unique advantages English conveys:

> Nobody else is really like us. […] We have the English language. Look, English is the language of science, medicine, international law, and if you count American, the media. There are things available to us which wouldn't necessarily be available to everybody else.[19]

This view, that the English language effectively constitutes a unique advantage for the UK, makes clear the intention of aligning post-Brexit UK with the Anglosphere, to

exploit its linguistic capital and to enhance global economic power, effectively creating a new, language-based, empire. As Lo Bianco (2014) has pointed out, however, these early twenty-first century ideas about the ascendancy of English failed to predict the rise of China, or the consequences of the global economic crash, phenomena which challenge the view that the current century will see the triumph of the Anglosphere. To these caveats, we might now add rising concerns about climate change and the impact of a global pandemic, both of which suggest that policies based on international co-operation (and necessarily across many different languages), rather than those concerned only with the interests of English-speaking nations, will be required.

Consequences of the Anglosphere for a multilingual UK

This emergence of the Anglosphere in relation to Brexit is important in understanding the current ambivalence about multilingualism and language learning. Given that its very premise is based on the dominance of one language, it is evident that moves to validate multilingualism and to promote language learning run counter to the Anglosphere discourse. Failures, at the start of the twenty-first century, to consolidate and build on existing formal provision for language learning in schools and colleges, and to develop the UK's existing, and very extensive, competence in hundreds of languages already in use in the country, might be attributed to policy makers' ignorance of the importance of joined up thinking where languages were concerned. However, we believe current approaches are not necessarily unwitting. As we have shown, it suits the interests and ambitions of the current UK government, and the right wing media which supports it, to assert the value of English and to downplay the value of other languages, in order for a post-Brexit Britain to take its place in the Anglosphere. Trumpeting the value of the English language and Englishness is a way to 'rally Britain' (The Daily Telegraph, 2019[20]), whether or not the narratives are true or even in our best interests. As Foucault (1980) reminds us when narratives circulate they can be conceived of as truths so that nobody even thinks to challenge them.

The prevalence of misconceptions about multilingualism and language learning in the UK can therefore be attributed to a complex combination of pervasive but inaccurate discourses which encourage wilful ignorance or dismissal of existing competence in languages other than English across the UK population; fail to articulate or implement educational policies which effectively support language learning; and glorify, instead, the ascendancy of English. These discourses are associated with a nostalgia for an imagined past in which a (largely white, largely monolingual English-speaking) Anglo-Celtic 'Britain' was 'Great,' accompanied by a reluctance to acknowledge that the UK's status and economic power derived from colonial exploitation. In turning to the Anglosphere, the UK now seeks quite explicitly to link its economic future to what is, in all probability, the illusion that English can continue to be a dominant (imperialistic) force.

We thus see the Brexit 'turn' in British politics as 're-colonial' in aspiration, but also as rejecting early twenty-first century discourses of globalisation, including – in particular – the enhanced mobilities of people, ideas, goods and services, facilitated by rapid technological advances (Sheller & Urry, 2006), and the developing recognition that responding effectively to the great challenges of the twenty-first century – migration, climate change

and public health – will require international co-operation rather than competition. In these senses, we characterise current UK policy, post-Brexit, not only as turning away from Europe and towards the Anglosphere but also as 'pulling up the drawbridge' to 'protect' the UK from the supposed evils of globalisation, and rejecting opportunities for international co-operation.

Having considered misconceptions about multilingualism and language learning prevalent in the UK today and their roots in historical and contemporary imperialism, we now turn our attention to ways in which these might be countered by a new public idea about language which challenges the Anglosphere vision and its consequences.

A *new* public idea about language

We consider ourselves to be proposing 'a *new* public idea about language' in a different context from Pratt, and at a different historical point in time, but for similar purposes. Pratt understood the 9/11 attacks on the USA as a critical moment from which to argue for change, because a failure to engage, culturally and linguistically, with the wider world was one factor underpinning the misunderstandings, miscommunications and missed intelligence that facilitated the attacks. Here, we argue that Brexit and its aftermath represent a similar critical moment for those of us who do not support the neo-colonialist 'drawbridge-up' position and who, at the same time, want the UK to prosper.

How are the misconceptions we have discussed, and the underlying Anglosphere discourse to be defeated? How do we ensure the success of proposals, noted above, from bodies such as the British Council and the four Academies? Pratt's view is that academics and professionals engaged in languages education need to argue their case to the public. Her paper is presented as a starting point, rehearsing the arguments. She holds that 'If a new public idea is vigorously asserted, it can generate resources that will help make its promise a reality' (Sheller & Urry, 2006: 112). To this view, we add two further considerations. The first is that there is a need for a simply stated, overarching principle, similar in style (but contrary in political orientation) to the notion of the Anglosphere, which, as we have seen, is able to align a range of political perspectives with practical outcomes, fuelling first the drive towards Brexit and onwards, now to 'Global Britain' (Daddow, 2019). The second is that we change our approach to how the concept is conveyed and to how we create the new public idea. Like Pratt, we do so through 'concepts to propose,' but in our case, in order to create a clear and compelling central idea, we limit this to one. We then suggest how it might be achieved.

Concept to propose: multilingual UK

All the evidence presented in the first part of this paper challenges the notion of the UK as a monolingual country. Therefore, after Blackledge (2005, p. 229), we propose that *the UK declares itself multilingual*. This is a radical idea. It explicitly challenges the ideology of the Anglosphere and provides a clear and different reading of how the UK might prosper post-Brexit. Three arguments support this position.

Supporting proposition 1: multilingualism is real

In contrast to the idea of the Anglosphere, which is posited on myths about the linguistic supremacy of English, and which seeks to create a new anglophone empire based on language rather than territory, a multilingual Britain is a statement of fact which reflects and responds to global super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007) in the twenty-first century. Declaring the fact enables us to acknowledge and value (rather than wish away) the reality that the UK has always been multilingual, that the numbers of languages in use and the numbers of speakers of these languages continue to grow. Importantly, declaring the UK to be multilingual explicitly challenges current discourses that the UK is monolingual, setting up a clear contrast with which the public, the media and policy-makers can engage.

Supporting proposition 2: multilingualism is a resource

Thus – contrary to certain discourses from those promoting the Anglosphere – there are extensive and growing opportunities for UK inhabitants to use languages other than English in their daily lives, as our review (above) of UK surveys concerning language learning and use has indicated. Lo Bianco and Peyton (2013) have pointed out that multilingualism thrives when people have opportunities not only to develop the capacity to use different languages, but also opportunities and the desire to do so. The UK's various education systems have a responsibility to build that capacity, acknowledging that language learning is a lifelong endeavour, that people need and want to use different languages for a variety of purposes, and identifying and using opportunities for us all to be able to do so.

Pratt's recognition of pipelines enabling language learners to achieve advanced levels of competence will be central to this endeavour (2003: 117). While endorsing this position, we suggest that in fact individuals may not need or wish to achieve advanced levels: indeed an imperative to do so may be demotivating. For those who do, we suggest that previous generations' notions of 'advanced competence' may need to be expanded, in view of the huge range of contexts in which people now work multilingually: a degree built around the classic literary canon associated with a particular language may no longer suffice. In fact, degrees combining a language with another subject are on the increase: Doughty and Spörling (2018) report an 11% increase in degrees of this kind over the period 2011–2015 in Scotland, and suggest that this is evidence of a 'changing landscape' (p.141) at HE level. Many universities have introduced 'languages for all' programmes which provide opportunities for students and staff to learn a foreign language either as a (small) part of their degree or as an enrichment activity.[21] These developments suggest a move away from traditional language degree courses towards provision which allows students to integrate language learning with a much wider range of academic and professional fields.

We argue, therefore, that not only do we need to see an expansion in provision of language learning, but that the language elements of degree programmes need to develop students' advanced competences relevant to the professional fields in which they expect to be employed, whether in multinational companies, where the ability to work multilingually at a high level will be a necessary corollary skill, or in other fields, such as academia, scientific research, contributing to international responses to global challenges. At the same time, we need to find ways to recognise, value and develop the

linguistic resources which students bring with them to school, college and university so that these students too progress their linguistic skills and their confidence in deploying them.

An effective language education policy, therefore, needs to engage with contemporary understandings of language learning processes, and promote a comprehensive and inclusive vision of outcomes relevant to the wide range of contexts in which today's students can expect to use their multilingual repertoires, now and in the future.

Supporting proposition 3: multilingualism creates a wealth of benefits

At the start of the twenty-first century, Lo Bianco (2001) drafted a language and literacy policy for Scotland designed to build on existing multilingualism and to promote language learning. The policy identified seven types of benefits – educational excellence, global presence, heritage, cultural vitality, substantive citizenship, social inclusion and commerce – which would follow from the nation's enhanced communicative capacity. All benefits remain relevant, but in this section, we focus in more detail on one of these benefits: cultural vitality.

While it may be difficult to make the economic argument for teaching Gaelic (but see Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2014) or Welsh (but see North Wales Skills Partnership, 2018), or Somali or Sylheti, for example (but see Hogan-Brun, 2017), it is easy to make the cultural one. Byram (2008) proposes the concept of 'tertiary socialisation' (p. 29) which emphasises 'the ways in which learning a foreign language takes learners beyond a focus on their own society into experience of otherness or other cultural beliefs, values or behaviours' (Byram, 2008: 29; see too Cook, 2016) to underpin the purpose of foreign language learning in schools. From this perspective, language learning is less about the technicalities of language and more about how we understand each other locally and globally. Byram also links language learning to citizenship education, making the case that citizens with language skills have the potential to see the world in a different way and to appreciate the views of others (Byram, 2008).

As a nation of people speaking over 300 languages, a number of which have been spoken here for hundreds of years, we are well-placed to cultivate and develop cultural acumen and vitality. However, to do so, we need actively to create the discourse that bilingualism or multilingualism represents an asset for individuals and for society as a whole.

Having put our cards on the table, outlining our vision for a new public idea about language and its underpinning by three key arguments, we now examine how the new public idea can be conveyed.

Conveying the concept

As Gramling (2020) has recently argued in a review of the impact of Pratt's article in the US, such 'calls to arms,' though they may successfully generate intense activities on the part of a range of interest groups, seem not to have made a difference to the ongoing downward trend in engagement in language learning provision in the US. Although he frames the underlying counter-arguments differently, focusing on 'monolingualisation,' as extensively documented and analysed in his earlier work (Gramling, 2016b) rather than on the Anglosphere, his analysis similarly concludes that this alternative

discourse trumps those in favour of multilingualism and language learning. Is it possible to bring about change?

We need look no further than at examples of projects within the UK for evidence of how a strong public idea about language can engage the public and drive policy change. In Scotland, the *Gaelic Language Act* of 2005 has had a powerful impact in terms of recognising that Scotland is a bilingual country where both languages command 'equal respect.' Concrete developments to support this recognition include funding for Gaelic-medium education and for community-based initiatives (McLeod, 2020). The *Gaelic Language Act* has also spearheaded moves to develop similar formal recognition of Scots and British Sign Language as languages in use in Scotland: the *British Sign Language Act*, similar to the 2006 *Gaelic Language Act*, was passed in 2015, and is beginning to have a similar impact; a policy document on the place of Scots in schools was produced the same year (Education Scotland, 2015).

In Wales, the latest project to increase the use of Welsh, *Cymraeg 2050* (Welsh Government, 2017), has been successful in stimulating public debate around the idea that there should be one million Welsh-speakers by 2050. This is as a result of what Jones and Lewis (2019, p. 266) have described as a 'relational, emergent, multi-stranded and mobile' process to bring together the work of policy-makers, to involve the public in developing concrete ideas that would support existing commitment to a 'flourishing' Welsh language, to lobby politicians for support, and to accommodate diverse views on strategies and goals. The situation in Northern Ireland is more complicated, given the association of Irish and Ulster Scots with the sectarian divide, but nevertheless, there have been gains as a result of ongoing negotiations around the recognition of both (McDermott, 2019; McMonagle & McDermott, 2014).

These initiatives, and many others, demonstrate there is already a substantial number of people, particularly in the devolved nations, who are supportive of recognising multilingualism and who advocate for language learning. Which begs the question, asked by Pratt in the conclusion to her paper, 'To whom might we take these ideas? How does one go about creating a new public idea?' (2003, p. 118). She suggests that the best thing scholars can do:

> is work as LEPs (linguistically endowed persons)[22] to assert themselves in educational institutions, in the media, in community organizations, and in state and federal educational bureaucracies, advocating a new public idea, accompanying that idea where possible with concrete suggestions.

Applied linguists, educationalists, psychologists, policy scholars, political scientists, economists and linguists can all contribute to this work with the support of learned institutions, such as the British Council and the Academies, already noted, and sympathetic policy makers. However, it is our belief that asserting ourselves is only one way forward. We also have to organise more effectively and learn from successful campaigns, such as those which have enhanced the status of Gaelic and Welsh, and uptake of provision for learning these languages. These lessons include: emphasising a clear central idea; making an appeal to common sense; creating an alliance of advocates, including academics, public figures and celebrities; developing a strategy for engagement with the media, public offices and ensuring that plausible and charismatic spokespeople

represent the alliance. Rallying round the argument that the UK is multilingual (clear central idea) and that multilingualism is real, is a resource and creates a wealth of benefits (appeal to common sense) provides the basis for a campaign to create a new public idea about language.

Concluding comments

In this article, we have drawn on Pratt's, 2003 paper to examine multilingualism and language learning in the UK at a critical time in our nation's history. We have made the argument that while the language ecology in the UK is complex, it leads to one simple public idea about language: the UK is multilingual. We have suggested that this idea, based on fact, could challenge the current direction of travel towards consolidating the Anglosphere, a neo-colonialist construction, which, we believe, will continue to diminish the UK's linguistic capacity, and have a profoundly negative effect on our economic, social and cultural prosperity. Indeed, the development of the Anglosphere should be viewed suspicioulsy by many countries as its consequences could have unwanted effects on local language learning and language rights (May, 2018).

If our analysis is accepted by like-minded colleagues, it provides a new approach to making the case for languages and language learning. It would challenge dominant-negative discourses about monolingual UK by presenting a new, positive discourse which could lead to a new public idea about language. We all in our capacities as students, teachers, parents, community activists, academics, researchers, policy makers, language learners and language users could all take up this discourse in both the public and private domains of our lives, consistently and constantly, rallying round this single, clear idea first proposed by Blackledge in 2005. Sixteen years on, the case is even stronger and the stakes even higher.

Although it may have particular relevance to the UK as it negotiates its post-Brexit condition, there are other countries wrestling with issues of languages and language rights (see, for example, Chen (2018) on Hong Kong) where developing a public idea about language could be helpful in supporting social justice. As Chen (2018) notes, in many places, the development of public ideas is curtailed by historical, political and philosophical narratives and beliefs; in others, however, there is an opportunity for public ideas about language to influence policy. Moore (1990) suggests that a public idea will be more successful if it addresses a current pressing problem, and that 'the ideas which become powerful resonate with significant historical experiences' (p. 79), which is often the case in countries wrestling with colonial pasts. Reich (1990) goes further, aligning policy makers with public ideas. He argues that it is their duty to develop these ideas and to provide 'visions of what is desirable and possible' (p. 4), based not on the interests of the rich and powerful but on the public good. While Moore (1990) highlights the role of individuals and pressure groups in ensuring public ideas get heard, Gao and Shao (2018) rightly make the case that the media has a strong role to play in raising public awareness. It is important that coalitions, such as the one we describe above, understand the role they can play in developing public ideas about language and are ready to engage at all stages of public debate from everyday conversations to calling out misleading news reports so that new public ideas can emerge and affect policy decisions.

We can think of no better quote to support Pratt's call (and ours) for activism than the following from Dewaele et al. (2003):

> The number of bi and multilingual speakers a country produces may be seen as an indicator of its educational standards, economic competitiveness and cultural vibrancy. Clearly, bilingualism must be a condition to be aspired to and cherished, rather than one to be prevented and remedied. (p. 1)

There is clearly some work to be done before multilingual Britain becomes the new public idea about language. However, it should become an aspiration.

Notes

1. The title pays homage to Pratt's (2003) paper, 'Building a new public idea about language' in *Profession.*
2. This work has been widely cited subsequently by academics arguing for change in fields as diverse as translation studies (e.g. Buden et al., 2009) heritage language policy (e.g. Peyton et al., 2008), global English language teaching (e.g. Brutt-Griffler, 2006), language and literature studies (e.g. Forsdick, 2015), as well as by those in the target field of modern language learning and teaching (e.g. Porter, 2010); was republished in *Profession* in 2013, as one of the most significant articles in the journal's 35 year history; and now, as the 20th anniversary of the article approaches, new discussions, developing the original premises for new times, are beginning to appear (e.g. Gramling, 2020; and the present article).
3. https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/appgmfl-mflbrexit_oct16.pdf
4. http://www.meits.org
5. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/language/articles/languageinenglandandwales/2013-03-04#main-language-in-england-and-wales
6. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/nov/07/-sp-do-young-people-care-about-learning-foreign-languages-data
7. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/12000612/Will-Brits-ever-bother-with-language-learning.html
8. https://www.scotsman.com/regions/glasgow-and-strathclyde/scottish-government-pledges-ps2m-further-gaelic-education-1405457
9. https://blog.duolingo.com/uk-language-report-2020/
10. For an example of the linguistic challenges experienced in international aid work see https://www.irinnews.org/opinion/2018/08/15/opinion-ebola-responders-language-epidemic-congo-africa
11. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2559364/Foreign-workers-banned-speaking-language-told-speak-English-face-sack.html
12. http://www.shoosmiths.co.uk/client-resources/legal-updates/Can-employers-insist-their-workers-speak-English-in-the-workplace-4004.aspx
13. https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/survey-results/daily/2020/02/03/66818/3
14. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/jun/12/nick-clegg-foreign-languages
15. https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2019/04/27/foreign-languages-ought-to-be-an-asset-for-politicians-not-a-liability
16. This was published in four volumes between 1956 and 1958.
17. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2008/jan/17/gordonbrown.labour
18. https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/it-s-a-eurosceptic-fantasy-that-the-anglosphere-wants-brexit
19. The One Show, BBC, March 6, 2017.
20. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/08/06/unite-anglosphere-rally-brexit-britain-bold-canzuk-deal/
21. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/may/31/schools-languages-universities-courses-from-scratch.
22. This is a 'reclaiming' or 'repurposing' of the acronym LEP, more usually used in the US to denote 'limited English proficient', a dismissive term for bilingual learners in school.

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Disclosure statement

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