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Attitudes of the British press towards multilingualism in education

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1 Introduction

The United Kingdom is home to a vast and diverse range of ethnic, cultural and linguistic communities. However, the harmony between these communities is tenuous in the face of hostility aimed towards ethnic groups, both intra- and inter-ethnic. In particular, the white community's hostility towards minority ethnic groups, directed from a state of domination of media and politics, has a large impact on the way in which these minority ethnicities are viewed by the general population. Whilst the state is dominated by media and politics, the education system plays a big role in society.

Negative stereotypes are produced, built upon and sensationalised by the news press in particular, presenting an ideologically biased viewpoint. This in turn colours the ideology of the consumers of this media, who rely on the news media heavily for information and are therefore equally heavily influenced by it.

In this paper, we detail the findings from our research into press attitudes towards multilingualism, particularly in the field of education. We will review how previous studies directed our research, detail our methodology, and provide a comprehensive report of the information gathered from our study, along with our conclusions.

2 Previous studies

Previously published studies about multilingualism and language learning provided valuable information regarding the topics at hand, which we used as a frame of reference for our own research.

In terms of language motives and the benefits of multilingualism, the British press highlights the economic advantages of speaking multiple languages, reflecting the increasingly globalised world we are living in. Bourdieu argues that knowledge of many languages, most notably European languages, has become a "marketable commodity" (Bourdieu, 1991). However, this is selective and does not consider other languages that can take businesses beyond the continent, enabling the UK to further strengthen connections globally and in doing so, strengthen financially. It can also be argued that some British news outlets are only looking at multilingualism in a way that benefits the UK economically and not the health and well-being advantages of being multilingual.

Multilingualism can also be linked to ethnic minorities. Scholar van Dijk argues that "white journalists are assumed to write 'impartially' about ethnic relations", while minority journalists

are seen as less credible and competent. Additionally, “bilingual and bicultural competence of minority journalists is undervalued” (van Dijk, 1993). Arguably, due to the relation between multilingualism and ethnic minorities, some languages may be portrayed impartially or even alienated.

3 Our research

The goal of our study was to examine this process of propagation of ideological bias by the media, via discourse analysis of news articles from various British broadsheet newspapers. Specifically, we investigated the ways in which multilingualism in education is portrayed by the British press.

Methodology

For this study we found four news articles, each from a different broadsheet newspaper with a different political leaning. The newspapers we chose, in order of ‘strongly left-wing’ to ‘strongly right-wing’, were the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Times* and the *Telegraph*; all broadsheet-quality newspapers that were accessible online. This was in order to investigate the extent to which the political leaning of the news sources might impact their portrayal of multilingualism. All four articles were published within the previous five years and discussed multilingualism in education; this narrowed the focus of our study and increased the validity of the findings. Beyond this, we did not filter our selection of articles, as we also intended to observe which particular aspects of multilingualism in education would be focused on by each newspaper.

The four articles we selected to analyse were as follows:

- From the *Guardian*: ‘*Brexit Britain cannot afford to be laissez-faire about its languages crisis*’ by David Cannadine
- From the *Independent*: ‘*Students with English as a second language ‘outperform native speakers’ in GCSEs*’ by Maria Todeo
- From the *Times*: ‘*Bilingual pupils outperform native English*’ by Nicola Woolcock
- From the *Telegraph*: ‘*More migrants taking modern language GCSE in native tongue*’ by Javier Espinoza

Conducting discourse analysis on each article in turn, we observed factors such as area of focus, use of language, author credentials, informational sources, and sensationalist headlines; these combined to form a cohesive view of the ideology being received by readers.

Alterations

During the process of conducting our research, we made various changes to our earlier outlined research proposal, including narrowing the scope of our research and altering our methods of analysis according to what we agreed was most suitable for the study.

A notable change made was the reduction of the number of news articles we elected to analyse for the purposes of our research. Our initial goal was to select two articles from each newspaper for a total of eight articles. However, due to the limited scope of the project, it was decided that the number of articles be reduced to avoid complications, and instead we found only one article from each newspaper, selecting four in total. We also decided to use the *Independent* rather than the *Observer*, as the latter, being a sister publication to the *Guardian*, would bias the research.

We also intended to bring more specificity to our initial research topic, which referred to multilingualism in a general sense. While searching for articles, we discovered that often multilingualism was discussed with regards to education in particular. We therefore turned our focus in the same direction, analysing the portrayal of multilingualism specifically in the field of education.

Finally, although we hoped to be able to conduct a small amount of quantitative analysis on the articles, this was not feasible due to the small number of articles we were using. Therefore, we exclusively used qualitative analysis to study the articles.

4 Observations

Our analysis of the articles provided large amounts of qualitative data that cannot be presented in a statistical format. However, many underlying commonalities were noticed between the articles when the observations were compiled, including similar ideological biases.

We have therefore categorised our findings into the following themes:

Nationalism and the Alienation of Migrants

Billig (1995) argues that print media plays a large role in normalizing elements of nationalism, describing how, in newspapers, “Beyond conscious awareness, like the hum of distant traffic, this deixis of little words makes the world of nations familiar, even homely.” (p.48)

Sir David Cannadine, the author of the *Guardian* article, uses his academic knowledge of history to drum up nationalistic sentiment. His use of the pronoun “we” suggests a context in which “we”

means “the British people”. Cannadine’s argument for multilingualism largely rests on the idea that an individual would study language in order to better the nation, as he focuses on transforming “the UK into a more prosperous, productive, influential nation” and includes only one paragraph on individual benefits. The *Guardian* article pushes this myth further, as all communication benefits listed are relegated to trade and diplomacy. There is no mention of using other languages within Britain, be they indigenous, like Welsh, or immigrant, like Polish or Arabic. The languages Cannadine encourages tend to be known for their importance in politics, such as Russian and Chinese.

In the *Telegraph* article on bilingual students taking their other language in GCSE’s, Espinoza uses the word “migrant” and “bilingual” interchangeably, alienating these students from the British readership of the newspaper. He also quotes Professor Alan Smithers, saying that parents may be “planning either to go back or for their children to learn the language so they can communicate with relatives”. This ignores the use bilingual students might have for that language within the UK. There is also no mention of students who are bilingual in Welsh or Gaelic, who may also be taking advantage of an easy GCSE.

The *Times* uses more cautious wording: most of the text uses the word “bilingual” to describe EAL students, but there is also the use of “non-native fluent English speakers”. This adds to this myth that only a non-native child would be in an EAL class, even though these classes frequently have native deaf children. The original study that the *Times* was reporting does not use the term non-native within the report, so this was an extrapolation by Woolcock.

The *Independent* article also makes use of the “native” epithet when describing non-EAL students. This also reinforces this nationalistic feeling for English, that one must be non-native to speak it as a second language and conversely, native to speak it with fluency. These deictic words like “we” and “native” create a sense of “us vs. them” and implies that these languages do not belong to the UK.

In talking about multilingualism the articles often focused on ‘migrant’ languages, and in turn frequently referred to migrant students in a way that was alienating, pitting them against their English peers. The *Independent* article was an example of this, focusing on “students with English as a second language” rather than simply bilingual pupils or those who spoke multiple languages; English was presented here as the default or standard, while having a different first language appeared to be the author’s sole criterion for considering them to not be British. The *Telegraph* article is more direct in tone, its headline being ‘More Migrants Taking Modern Language GCSE in Native Tongue’. In this case, the article cites Urdu, Polish and Mandarin as the “native tongues” in question, despite a large proportion of Urdu, Polish and Mandarin speakers being not direct immigrants but rather second- or third-generation immigrants, who are often born and raised in

the UK; however, they are still referred to in an impersonal and somewhat hostile way, with the author, Javier Espinoza (who, interestingly, grew up in the US and has lived in the UK “for the last 13 years,” and therefore has experience of being an immigrant himself), attempting to imply that the very act of taking a foreign language GCSE in a mother tongue that is not a “traditional” modern language (such as French or German, according to Espinoza) is an unfair practice.

The *Times*, as well, separates bilingual pupils from “native English” pupils, but to a lesser extent than the aforementioned two articles. The *Guardian*, in contrast to the *Telegraph*, does not refer to immigration at all in its discussion of language learning.

Eurocentricity

Eurocentricity is the idea that the world is split between the “West and the rest” (Shohat and Stam, 1994:2). Europe is synonymous with progression, science and humanism and this is at the expense of non-western traditions, languages and cultures and some of the articles give precedence towards European languages, suggesting that the British press views multilingualism positively when the languages in question are European. For instance, the *Telegraph* article makes the point that “traditional foreign languages like French and German” are declining as a GCSE language choice in schools. Presumably, the author used the adjective “traditional” as these were the languages traditionally studied at school. However, he does not explicitly state this and they appear to outweigh other languages. Meanwhile, other foreign languages are on the rise and the article quotes the director of Education and Employment Research at Buckingham University as saying that it is an “easy” way for students to get a good grade, but this is just speculation as there may be many other reasons for students studying their mother tongue.

The *Guardian* article also looks at multilingualism from a European standpoint. The author mentions that the study of languages at A Level is “dropping” but he only provides figures for German (16%) and French (8%). From the same BBC report, Cannadine completely omits the rise in languages like Spanish, with a 49% increase since 2002. He also omits the 295% increase in the “other” category, implying a growing diversity of language interest in the UK, especially in non-European languages. This fits into the Eurocentric narrative of strengthening ties with the rest of the continent by learning European languages. Although Cannadine mentions establishing “new relationships across the globe”, there is a greater emphasis on Europe with the reference to European languages in education, which is ironic given the current political context of Brexit. However, the author does eventually refer to non-European languages such as “Japanese” and “Chinese”, but this seems like an afterthought, as the author only includes them when talking about the language learning app Duolingo.

Language Learning Motives

The purpose of the *Guardian* article is to persuade readers to learn languages because of the “huge educational, cultural and psychological benefits of multilingualism”. Bourdieu (1991) calls languages such as European languages a “marketable commodity”, and Cannadine clearly cares for this commodity as he emphasises connecting through trade with our “global neighbours”. However, the article moves swiftly onto other language learning motives: “diplomacy”, developing “cognitive flexibility” and increasing “employability”. Ultimately, the main motive here is to turn the UK into “a linguistic powerhouse”; there is a clear nationalistic approach and the primary motive for learning languages is to benefit the country on a global stage. This is an opinion piece, the only one of the four at hand; this allows for greater levels of subjectivity and appeal to pathos than is regular for an article in the *Guardian*. The first paragraph of the article cites British historical achievements, highlighting reasons why Britons may think “they are naturally proficient - exceptional, even - in certain pursuits”.

Meanwhile, the *Telegraph* states that “students from other countries” are studying their native languages at GCSE level in order to easily obtain a good grade. The motives of the parents of schoolchildren are another factor; by learning their mother tongue, their children will be able to better “communicate with relatives back home”. The term “back home” seems almost cynical, as though the only reason people are studying their native languages is to benefit themselves. Similarly, the article claims that schools are keen to make students study their native languages because the good grades achieved enhances the schools’ “performance measures” and this makes the schools more appealing to parents. The attitudes towards multilingualism in this article is somewhat cynical, other than its reference to Polish and Portuguese, the native languages of students are non-European, and it does not acknowledge that the study of these languages could go beyond personal benefit. They do not seem to hold the same value as the “traditional” European languages studied in school, perhaps because of the sometimes-negative attitudes of the British press towards “migrants” (Bleich et al, 2015), who are utilised to describe the correlation between the decline of these languages with the rise of other foreign languages.

In contrast to the *Telegraph*, the *Independent* does not choose to link the outstanding performance of EAL students to their choice of “easy” subjects. Maria Tadeo’s influence as an author is marked in its omissions. Most of the article’s content can be found in a *Telegraph* article by Paton (2014) from the previous day. However, Maria chose to omit details such as the fact that one of the requirements of the EBacc is a C or above in a foreign language. This may be a factor in the good EAL student results. She also omitted the detail that this was only the first year this had occurred, which implies that EAL students routinely outperform monolingual students. Choosing not to include those reasons the *Telegraph* includes provides a warmer tone towards immigrants and their children.

5 Conclusions

The above findings shine a new light on the pervasive nature of media-perpetrated ideological bias. While on one level, our expectations were met regarding the vast amount of politically-charged commentary within the articles, presented in an allegedly factual manner (with the exception of the *Guardian's* opinion piece), the interesting observation was made that this propagation of bias was seen in each and every article regardless of political leaning. Although we expected to find more objectivity in the more centrist publications than in, say, the far-right leaning *Telegraph*, each publication engineered and coded its own belief system into its journalism, and more interestingly, all of them displayed certain common ideologies, for example, ideas of eurocentrism and otherification of migrants.

In his book *Banal Nationalism* (1995), Michael Billig states, "Nationalism is too general a phenomenon to be projected on to the working-class readers of popular newspapers, as if 'we', the liberal, educated classes, are removed from that sort of thing" (page 48). Nationalism, he argues, persists in journalistic media regardless of political or social stance. Our research findings, as we have laid out here, appear to reinforce and support this theory.

6 Limitations

This research paper highlighted the attitudes of the press towards multilingualism: namely, its largely positive stance towards the traditionally studied European languages and its predominantly negative attitudes towards non-European languages. However, as our focus was directed towards multilingualism within education, these findings cannot be generalised, and further research should be done regarding other aspects of multilingualism, as well as other forms of media, in order to gain a clearer overall understanding.

Additionally, for reasons aforementioned, we were obligated to limit the scope of our analysis to four articles in total. It must be acknowledged that the articles we analysed were not necessarily representative of the views of each newspaper as a whole and indeed may have been outliers. For example, the social media presence of Nicola Woolcock, the author of the *Times* article, suggests that she may have a less conservative stance than the newspaper is known for - for example, seemingly endorsing the Labour Party on her Twitter account, retweeting "[...] we voted to put Jeremy Corbyn [...] in Downing Street". A larger number of articles per newspaper would have increased the reliability of our research, as well as allowing us to use quantitative analysis in the study for more precise data.

Finally, the possibility of researcher bias must be acknowledged, particularly in the process of selecting the articles for analysis, as it is possible that the content of the articles preemptively biased our selections of the articles, and in turn our analysis.

Despite these limitations, the findings from this study provided valuable insight into the manufacture and distribution of ideological bias by the media, and may be used as a foundation for future research within this field.

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