



Report 2021



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Attitudes towards second and foreign language learning in the British press

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1 Introduction

The following research project consists of a discourse analytic study into attitudes towards second language learning in the British press. The research aim is to explore competing discourses surrounding multilingualism in the British press (Jaworska and Themistocleous, 2018), and explore how the journalistic tendency to tell stories influences the construction of these narratives surrounding multilingualism (Bird and Dardenne, 2009). Furthermore, the dichotomy between the attitudes towards migrant language learners is explored, as racist undertones are often featured when referring to migrant language learners (Blackledge, 2010), in contrast to the concern expressed over the UK language learning crisis when discussing anglophone learners (Lanvers and Coleman, 2013).

This project comprises an analysis of articles from four press institutions with differing political leanings, with four articles from each being featured to explore whether these factors have any influence over the portrayal of multilingualism in the press. Keywords such as “migrants”, “language learners”, “anglophone” etc. were run through search engines to find suitable data for analysis, with the aim to balance the number of articles about migrant and anglophone learners

Ultimately, it was found that the portrayal of multilingualism and second language learning is largely Eurocentric and dismissive of migrant multilingualism, particularly when these groups have not yet learned English. It appears also that the presentation of multilingualism varies in accordance with the political leanings of both authors and press institutions. The articles analysed have been coded for reference; the full code can be found in the appendix.

2 Findings and Analysis

General Discussion

Following a discourse analysis of four newspapers, a number of general trends were identified. Right-wing newspapers and authors tend to perpetuate their political narrative surrounding second language learning more heavily than left-wing newspapers do, with stronger views on immigrants learning English. There were generally more negative views towards migrant multilingualism as opposed to anglophone multilingualism, with the exception of The Guardian, which exhibited support for all types of second language learning.

English has become highly globalised, acting as a lingua franca, with great commercial wealth. The analysis of the four newspapers indicated that the commodified nature of English is celebrated within the press, and migrant speakers are expected to be competent within the language; to not be fluent is seen as a fault and a detriment to British identity.

The analysis also identified a trend of Eurocentric languages being favoured over non-Eurocentric languages. Perhaps due to their worth within “linguistic markets” (Bourdieu,

1991), competency within these languages is preferred and celebrated, whereas fluency in non-Eurocentric languages receives less positive feedback. The press support perpetuates this hierarchy of languages, where English is at the top, and native non-Eurocentric languages are at the bottom. While the current analysis does not explore this issue in great detail, it would be a good foundation for further research into press attitudes towards migrant versus anglophone second language education.

Eurocentrism

A persistent attitude found in tabloid newspapers is Eurocentrism and this is particularly apparent in *The Daily Mirror* (MO). Attitudes are generally positive towards learning MFLs in this newspaper, with Britons described as “lazy” (MO3) for often not being bilingual. However, this positive attitude only encompasses European languages, with Princess Charlotte’s Spanish nanny, Teresa Borrallo, being praised for helping the young royal learn MFLs, as implied by “thanks to” (MO2), which gives all the credit to Borrallo. This is reflective of the multilingual elitism discussed by Jaworska and Themistocleous (2018), where certain languages are presented as superior to others. In this case, European languages are categorized at the top of a language hierarchy. The characterisation of Mandarin as the “most useful non-European language” to learn (MO1) also highlights this multilingual elitism, as Mandarin is described as less useful in relation to European languages, suggesting a general view of European languages as the most useful. However, even the mention of Mandarin suggests some awareness of the advantage of speaking non-European languages, suggesting that the *Daily Mirror* is attempting to become less Eurocentric.

Daily Mail further contributes to this attitude of Eurocentrism surrounding second language learning by featuring an article expressing concern for Britain being perceived as inferior to other European nations due to a lack of bilingualism. An article described second language learning as being in “free fall” and this being a “problem” (DM4), suggesting that fear of inferiority in Europe is an insecurity for this newspaper, reflecting a national concern. However, the Eurocentrism of *Daily Mail* is demonstrated by the absence of a discussion of the benefits of speaking any eastern languages like Mandarin, suggesting that this newspaper is less open to the benefits of speaking non-European languages than *The Daily Mirror*.

The Guardian presents a comparatively less Eurocentric view by including Mandarin in its discussion of the falling rates of MFL language learning. Sean Harford, an Ofsted employee, describes MFL learning as being vital for children learning how to become a “global citizen” (TG4). The use of the word “global” suggests a lack of Eurocentrism in this newspaper, as emphasis is placed on learning languages from all parts of the world, rather than categorising languages by continent.

Patriotism

Patriotism was a common theme found among the newspapers. Daily Mail exhibits patriotism in a way that disparages other countries, as seen in Sarah Vine's article, where immigrants are blamed for their failures to learn English and integrate socially and culturally into the UK. This sentiment is widely propagated in an apparent effort to protect the government from any criticism in their failure to provide English learning education. Anything that is not deemed British, including language, is denigrated, seen in "...cling to customs that run counter to British values and remain hidden away behind the language barrier" (DM3). There is an implicit assumption between writer and reader about what constitutes these 'customs', and how they should be viewed. The overtly negative representation of immigrants is unsurprising, given Vine's background as a staunch conservative supporter.

The Guardian is comparably less patriotic, and more inclined to criticise the government and call attention to the country's downfalls. In an article highlighting the decline in language qualification uptake, the author, David Cannadine, discusses the importance of multilingualism. The first paragraph of the article provides an instance of sarcasm, where Cannadine writes "we Britons have come to believe that we are naturally proficient – exceptional, even – in certain pursuits" (TG1). Here, the writer essentially mocks the patriotism that is also present in many other newspapers. The noun phrase "we Britons" includes a relatively archaic term that few readers would resonate with due to its nationalistic undertones.

The Daily Mirror fluctuates in its patriotism, as it advocates for multilingualism in some articles that assert its benefits while criticising the UK for failing to promote it. In one, Princess Charlotte is lauded for her bilingualism, noted for her "abilities beyond her years" (MO2); the Royal Family is one of the cornerstones of British patriotism, which this writer utilises in an effort to endorse language learning. Another article weighs in on the sentiment that immigrants should be accountable for learning English by reporting on a review produced by an all-party parliamentary group. Unlike the aforementioned Daily Mail article, there is comparably less of a direct blame on the immigrants, as the responsibility is somewhat shifted to the government (MO4).

The Telegraph also perpetuates a similar sentiment to Daily Mail: "if you don't want to learn English, then Britain is probably not the country for you" (T2). This condescending tone and the use of personal pronouns allows the writer to address the reader from a pedestal, signalling their belonging to a nation that is superior and inaccessible. The categorisation of this article in the *News* section of The Telegraph is particularly compelling, as the article is heavily opinionated which contradicts with the conventions of traditional news articles. The article's author, Julia Hartley-Brewer, is a notable, long-standing supporter of Brexit, and her articles often align with her right-wing agenda. The attitudes presented in the article: "we have no duty of care to improve the lot of poor Romanians or Poles or Pakistanis or anyone

else who is not a British citizen”, have a more enduring effect on public opinion because of its presentation as a news piece rather than the author’s opinion.

English as a Commodity

Over the last century, the English Language has become pervasive and wide-ranging in its wealth of speakers. It can be labelled as somewhat of a lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2005). It acts as a common ground between languages, and as such, has become highly globalised and is featured in all aspects of society.

This pervasive presence has led to English becoming somewhat of a commodity. Bourdieu (1991), states there are “linguistic markets” where more globalised languages have greater value than others, or standard English has more worth than vernacular dialects. This highlights the role of the English language as a commodity and a commercial trademark of the global markets.

Within the press, journalists are compelled to tell stories, often reinforcing existing ideologies (Bird and Dardenne, 2009). It is fair to assume that the British press would therefore be inclined to celebrate the pervasive, commercial nature of the English language, as it has a greater ‘worth’ than other languages (Bourdieu, 1991). Therefore, fluency in English is highly valued in British society; in a Daily Mail article, the author says “do it our way, or go home” (DM3). This asserts English as the language of priority, with fluency in other languages being less impressive. The use of the first person plural ‘our’ pedals the monolingual ideology and subsequently reinforces the ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy which pervades the British press (Blackledge, 2004).

The commodified nature of English, therefore, has led to other languages – particularly those which are not eurocentric – being portrayed as less useful in the press. A lack of fluency in English is presented as almost criminal; within a Daily Mail article, emotive and connotative verbs such as “forced” and “ordered” are used in relation to immigrants learning English. The imperative tone established within the article implies that a lack of fluency in English is highly negative, and presents multilingualism as a threat to British society (Jaworska and Themistocleous, 2018). Britons who learn a foreign language are celebrated as “heroes”, but migrants who do not learn English are viewed as “villains” (Bird and Dardenne, 2009). Individuals who do not possess knowledge of the highly commodified language are painted as “them”, the foreign ‘other’, in the press, distanced from British society despite other achievements they may possess.

Immigrants Responsible for Integration

A recurring theme in many of the articles is the narrative that migrants should be solely responsible for their integration into British society, including all aspects of language learning. This theme is particularly prominent in the right leaning publications, with articles about migrant English language learners being overtly negative in tone. Such articles support findings that in the dominant media discourse surrounding multilingualism there are two main patterns of thought: multilingualism as a problem versus multilingualism as an opportunity (Jaworska and Themistocleous, 2018).

The Telegraph articles about migrant language learners perpetuates an underlying responsabilisation of migrants for their integration as well as the narrative of multilingualism as a problem, as depicted in “if you have something to offer Britain... sit down and put the kettle on” (T2). The excerpt suggests that migrants do not offer anything to Britain unless they fully integrate and accept British cultural traditions, thereby implying that their native languages and cultures do not offer any value to British society. This is emphasized in (T1), an article concerning the need for migrants to learn English to integrate, which states “to be and feel British...and to learn English”. The tone of this statement implies that the ability to speak English is synonymous with British identity, thereby denying the identity of many British nationals who are learning the language or have been unable to adapt due to lack of resources or personal circumstances.

The Daily Mail also follows the dominant right-wing discourse of the responsabilisation of migrants for integration, with headlines such as “Teach Polish in schools? No, migrants need to learn our language, says Sarah Vine” (DM3). This rhetorical question creates a mocking tone by disregarding the plight of migrants, with the author using racist undertones throughout their writing, as seen in the extract: “isolated foreigners trapped in their own cultural ghetto” (DM3). The negative lexicon employed by the writer in using terms such as “ghetto” to describe migrant language communities reinforces Blackledge’s (2010) findings that racist discourse remains prominent in the media as well as in far-right groups, as well as Jaworska and Themistocleous’ (2018) claims that multilingualism is perceived as a problem in media discourse. In this case the author of the article, Sarah Vine, is the wife of a Conservative politician, which may explain why her views align with those of her husband and the Conservative party, which Daily Mail publication supports.

Evidently, right-wing newspapers villainize migrants in their discussion of migrant language learning, and portray them as responsible for any lack of integration; thus aligning with Bird and Dardenne’s (2009) findings of newspapers adopting a story-like narrative, as the tone of these articles adopt the traditional hero/villain convention, wherein migrants are the villains and English-speaking Britons are the hero.

Us vs Them Dichotomy

A recurring theme in the analysis of the British press is an 'us vs them' dichotomisation between anglophones and non-English-speaking immigrants. This is most explicitly realised using polarizing pronouns: "we", "us", "our" are used in opposition to "immigrants", "anyone else", "migrants". The danger of such inclusive pronouns in opposition to the foreign "other" is the antagonism it creates between English speaking "us" and foreign "them", implicitly suggesting that language is an integral factor separating the two groups. Authors exploit inclusive pronouns in order to ally the reader with the writer, therefore encouraging a mutual political alliance.

A Daily Mail article (DM3) employed an "our" vs "her" dichotomy to discuss a Polish-speaking Briton, deliberately disassociating Polish and British identities by portraying the two as mutually exclusive. This is inconsistent with the article's opening that identifies Poles as the largest group of foreign-born immigrants in Britain (DM3). By employing these contrasting pronouns, the author is implicitly rejecting the integration of Polish immigrants into British society, suggesting instead that language is vital to establishing cultural harmony. However, the article lacks any evidence of cultural clashes or unrest between the opposing groups of English-language and Polish speakers, undermining the article's central argument that language is critical for achieving integration. This dichotomisation aligns with Blackledge's (2010) assertion that racist discourse is prominent in political and media resources, supported by his analysis of a news item which employed linguistic features to create an "us" and "them" divide between Islamic immigrants and Britons. The same applies to the articles analysed above, which manipulate language to create a partition between English-speaking and non-English-speaking Britons.

Inconsistencies

Inconsistencies are rife within the British press surrounding the discussion of language learning. Julia Hartley-Brewer (T2) acknowledges that being born in Britain is nothing more than "lucky", yet in the same article demands that the reader be more "choosy" regarding who Britain lets into the country. This is inconsistent with the rest of the article which values immigrants solely based on their ability to speak English. It appears incoherent to suggest that the pure chance of being born in Britain warrants the entitlement to control who can migrate to Britain.

Another inconsistency is presented in the form of quotes from Prime Minister Boris Johnson. T1 establishes the PM's insistence that immigrants should be forced to learn English, embedding Johnson's words "I want everybody who comes here to be and to feel British... and to learn English", implying that British identity is contingent on learning the English language. This assertion is undermined by another quote embedded later in the article, in which the PM identifies another aspect of British identity: "he said freedom of speech was "at the heart of our country's imprint on the world". The value of freedom of speech is used in

antithesis to Johnson's earlier demand that immigrants restrict their speech to the English language, in order to undermine his assertion that migrants must learn English. By using such contrasting quotes in the same article, the author encourages the reader to be skeptical and critical of Johnson's attitudes to language learning and migration.

3 Conclusion

The discourse analysis approach permitted a rich exploration of the UK press coverage on issues concerning second language learning. British broadsheets and tabloids, since 2016, have contributed to this discourse; featuring themes including eurocentrism, patriotism, English as a commodity, immigrants responsible for integration, an 'us versus them' dichotomy, as well as inconsistencies. The UK newspaper publications analysed here offer mostly transparent political stances and, depending on their bias, present the language crisis in a way that aligns with their political agenda. Right-leaning newspapers present their opinions in a way that is more forceful than their left-wing counterparts. The disparaging rhetoric about migrant multilingualism that is prevalent in newspapers like the Daily Mail appears more frequently than positive representations on the topic. Comparatively, a more left-leaning publication, The Guardian, focuses most of their narrative on the governments' failures in teaching multilingualism, in terms of both second and foreign language learning. Generally, the British press equates British identity with English language; an individual's national identity is dependent on their capacity to speak English. The subsequent emphasis on English as the only British language risks negative consequences for other native minority languages. Welsh, for example, has been steadily declining for decades, as its speakers frequently opt to use English in daily communication instead of Welsh (Hodges, 2021). It would be valuable to conduct further research into the representations of alternative British native languages, as it would illuminate the apparent hierarchy of languages in the UK.

Appendix

Full list of newspaper articles analysed:

The Guardian (TG)

TG1: *Brexit Britain cannot afford to be laissez-faire about its languages crisis.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/01/britain-learning-languages-brexit--education>

TG2: *We need to be careful about demanding migrants speak English.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language/2016/sep/09/we-need-to-be-careful-about-demanding-migrants-speak-english>

TG3: *The sorry state of English as a second language teaching provision.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/mar/19/the-sorry-state-of-english-as-a-second-language-teaching-provision>

TG4: *Foreign languages have seen less uptake within recent years, and are more vital than ever with Brexit*

[Foreign language learning more vital than ever in post-Brexit world | Languages | The Guardian](#)

The Daily Mail (DM)

DM1: *Britain far behind Europe in learning foreign languages with fewer than one in three under 30s able to read and write in anything other than English*

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7867173/Britain-far-Europe-learning-foreign-languages.html>

DM2: *Immigrants should be forced to speak English to help them integrate, government-ordered review is set to advise ministers*

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3993492/Immigrants-forced-speak-English-help-integrate-government-ordered-review-set-advise-ministers.html>

DM3: *Teach Polish in schools? No, migrants need to learn our language, says Sarah Vine*

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-3984624/Teach-Polish-schools-No-migrants-need-learn-language-says-SARAH-VINE.html>

DM4: *Young says 'non' to languages: Number of students studying French, Italian and German falls as fewer universities offer courses*

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2952899/Young-say-non-languages-Numbers-students-studying-French-Italian-German-falls-fewer-universities-offer-courses.html>

The Daily Mirror (MO)

MO1: *Revealed: best language for children to learn to 'boost their career prospects'*

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/revealed-best-language-children-learn-9565745>

MO2: *Princess Charlotte can already speak two languages - at age TWO*

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/princess-charlotte-can-already-speak-11848448>

MO3: *Britain officially laziest nation in Europe as report reveals we're bad at learning languages*

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/britain-officially-laziest-nation-europe-9523545>

MO4: *Immigrants should be required to learn English or be enrolled into compulsory classes upon entering the country*

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/immigrants-should-learn-english-before-9565687>

The Telegraph (T)

T1: *Immigrants should be forced to learn English, says Boris Johnson as he insists he is 'proud' of his gaffes*

Accessed at:

<https://www.lexisnexis.com/uk/legal/news/document/urn:contentItem:5WGY-TBJ1-F021-64W2-00000-00?q=immigrants%20learning%20English&contentTypeId=news&ht=244F7887CF9BD4551C80B13F4E9DB76DC3AA8F41E826CC1346AD067D84AF55F61E6E63C814B58E4310F12DAB4B61D1BBA49FE94F620C98D0D029E5DC9C5CF9544B0D237F7D1BFE0CAA82644182497DBEEB84A729A30856C8E4FC49966E72D25EC9A3033EB34D05E4D30F7A28033465F02D33467C941BAF6F5E0F5A779A93DD7C98E7CD2A79011BA05AF37A3114E4FA88C0CD916B78FFE49381540F2E727496925D924A14C3DC603B9104A0428955E5D0FA4FD89E326BC27D6B42814D6EA9DE277E82431DC6547AF1535B6F140B07D156F44A12432A2A2135162F20463C52346EA5CA6663FBE6BC0896DB3B0D0AB3E632A16B4FEEAA9905617DA63208A4C26F3F73DD59E4BEFDA4A58D37D17A262D287C5AC33F3D903109DE3642C3D019640AF74A58616CBD933D42E03A8AC937248EBE02318BBF8329BD2C>

T2: *After Brexit, ask not what this country can do for immigrants, but what immigrants can do for this country*

Accessed at:

<https://www.lexisnexis.com/uk/legal/news/document/urn:contentItem:5KM2-1C71-JCJY-G14M-00000-00?q=immigrants%20learning%20English&contentTypeId=news&ht=244F7887CF9BD4551C80B13F4E9DB76DC3AA8F41E826CC1346AD067D84AF55F61E6E63C814B58E4310F12DAB4B61D1BBA49FE94F620C98D0D029E5DC9C5CF9544B0D237F7D1BFE0CAA82644182497DBEEB84A729A30856C8E4FC49966E72D25EC9A3033EB34D05E4D30F7A28033465F02D33467C941BAF6F5E0F5A779A93DD7C98E7CD2A79011BA05AF37A3114E4FA88C0CD916B78FFE49381540F2E727496925D924A14C3DC603B9104A0428955E5D0FA4FD89E326BC27D6B42814D6EA9DE277E82431DC6547AF1535B6F140B07D156F44A12432A2A2135162F20463C52346EA5CA6663FBE6BC0896DB3B0D0AB3E632A16B4FEEAA9905617>

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T3: *Why making languages non-compulsory at GCSE is a step backwards*

Accessed at: <https://www.lexisnexis.com/uk/legal/news/document/urn:contentItem:5MN7-C4B1-F021-60MV-00000-00?q=english%20second%20language%20learning&contentType=news&ht=D36ED51A877B123D46EEC4B1CD1F5C77E9CA78FD19D332E4B86C9F5D699451D66D73019B52282C64593787FD737D5708C0D9855C3DF06C3E908896400A9618BB3032BE788EA71F2D35A3A365A264C5BB6318543BD81BADA131D9BDEFA04BCC1E6413E3E73F82C00BD29FC921D147E07A022698C62811430FCCBA92AD64A15B84D1F85485298D2FF7D986390559A4420B9E019C56CFF3B459FF3EF451302E6178F626D0A8726211D9A5D42F2BE7467C0701FF6E7E7294929AD03B25482C4E1CD147A3CEE3A0B83DD8807F7CC9946A4D751578BE19630646034BC39B88876A0BB95A499AFD089239481791694040CF7FB83512D3A8881BB1491CB23C50B1880ECC3615335E81BB63B681400473A7AB541BD09FCCD3B70CF21C6FB01C08CF7D7E1551439CC528FB9E3C1B9C3F06257F1BDFB56C3D7EA360CED1FD991872FF38BD0B06D798A27801F2C72D341C4EFAB5357478A84DED42161A60332A1111E462957B59065171AA918F2F7023B43DBF9988041C27DA12A6B69F7FCDA3CA9089A9655CCE945299394C03841318FBFF31B089395885069F1C9592DDB9D5340969449A1B7A22BF2120CC67F1878E6601C9D23F0D>

T4: *Britain among worst countries in world for learning foreign language, OECD report reveals*

Accessed at: <https://www.lexisnexis.com/uk/legal/news/document/urn:contentItem:60Y9-M0B1-DY4H-K1TV-00000-00?q=english%20second%20language%20learning&contentType=news&ht=D36ED51A877B123D46EEC4B1CD1F5C77E9CA78FD19D332E4B86C9F5D699451D66D73019B52282C64593787FD737D5708C0D9855C3DF06C3E908896400A9618BB3032BE788EA71F2D35A3A365A264C5BB6318543BD81BADA131D9BDEFA04BCC1E6413E3E73F82C00BD29FC921D147E07A022698C62811430FCCBA92AD64A15B84D1F85485298D2FF7D986390559A4420B9E019C56CFF3B459FF3EF451302E6178F626D0A8726211D9A5D42F2BE7467C0701FF6E7E7294929AD03B25482C4E1CD147A3CEE3A0B83DD8807F7CC9946A4D751578BE19630646034BC39B88876A0BB95A499AFD089239481791694040CF7FB83512D3A8881BB1491CB23C50B1880ECC3615335E81BB63B681400473A7AB541BD09FCCD3B70CF21C6FB01C08CF7D7E1551439CC528FB9E3C1B9C3F06257F1BDFB56C3D7EA360CED1FD991872FF38BD0B06D798A27801F2C72D341C4EFAB5357478A84DED42161A60332A1111E462957B59065171AA918F2F7023B43DBF9988041C27DA12A6B69F7FCDA3CA9089A9655CCE945299394C03841318FBFF31B089395885069F1C9592DDB9D5340969449A1B7A22BF2120CC67F1878E6601C9D23F0D>

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