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DOI:

[10.1093/applin/amw019](https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amw019)

Document Version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Coffey, S. (2018). Choosing to study modern foreign languages: Discourses of value as forms of cultural capital. *APPLIED LINGUISTICS*, 39(4), 462-480. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amw019>

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Choosing to Study Modern Foreign Languages: Discourses of Value as Forms of Cultural Capital

Simon Coffey

In this paper I present the widely reported crisis of modern foreign languages study through a discourse perspective. I review the ‘problem’ of languages uptake in English schools and then present a qualitative study for which groups of 14 year-olds from different schools were asked to discuss their choices either to continue studying or to drop modern languages. To interpret findings I drew on Bourdieusian social practice theory and Foucault’s notion of the discursive field, which seeks to identify the power dynamic inherent in naturalized discourses, such as, in this case, language learning is a worthy enterprise. Findings suggest that we need to rethink the way languages are perceived as opportunity by different stakeholders: students most favourably disposed to language study perceive languages in more holistic ways, embedded across actual and projected networks and educational and career pathways. Most significantly, the value of language study as an asset is articulated as a form of cultural capital in an educational discourse of liberal, humanistic tradition of education rather than purely as an instrumental goal.

BACKGROUND

The take up of modern foreign languages (MFL) (other than English) in post-compulsory stages of education has been the subject of concern across the world. In Anglophone countries the challenges of promoting language study in the wake of the global spread of ‘English fever’ (Park 2009) have produced different initiatives reflecting local socio-historic complexity. For instance, in New Zealand, where there is no national language policy despite a long established advocacy movement (e.g. Waite 1992), the leading language studied in schools is Maori, followed by French, then regional Asian-Pacific languages which are increasingly promoted (Royal Society of New Zealand 2013). In the United States, where the leading studied language is clearly Spanish (followed by French) there is also a strong advocacy movement, driven largely by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, yet the latest Modern Language Association survey (2015, reporting on 2013 figures) shows a reduction in the number of students studying languages in Higher Education. In the absence of a U.S. national policy for languages, there is variation across states about requirements to study languages for high school graduation. In non-Anglophone countries there has also been considerable concern that English dominance has reduced the diversity of language study in post-compulsory phases; in Sweden, for instance, it has been widely reported that the ‘English is enough’ mentality has narrowed the range of languages studied (Cabau-Lampa 2007; Edlert and Bergseth 2003; Hyltenstam and Österberg 2010). Globally, demographic diversity has resulted in a complex picture for school-taught languages, requiring a ‘professional dialogue between teachers of English, traditional foreign languages, heritage/community languages, and other categories of language interest ... to foster a new overall understanding of the enterprise of language education, suited to the altered world context of contemporary globalization’ (Lo Bianco 2014: 312)

In England, despite an increasingly multilingual school population and despite a number of targeted initiatives to promote languages in England¹ and a raft of reports² commissioned by government-funded agencies, fewer young people are choosing to study languages at school and university. Analysis of press coverage in the UK print media shows that ‘the language crisis is predominantly a concern of the broadsheet [i.e. “quality”] press’

(Lanvers and Coleman, 2003: 12) and that the same press emphasize the ‘economic importance of language skills’ (ibid), a discourse also underscored by commissioned reports. Furthermore, there is dearth of scholarly investigation into the causes of the decline, especially concerning how attitudes are formed and reproduced in the social lives of learners, with social class variation (unlike gender for instance) continuing to be a neglected factor.

MFL study in England has not been statutory beyond the age of 14 since 2004, although some schools have retained its compulsory status. Independent schools (not state aided, parents pay full fees) are most likely to retain compulsory MFL at age 14 (Board and Tinsley 2014; British Academy 2011). Dearing and King noted ten years ago that the take up of languages at age 14 was ‘closely related to social class’ (2007: 3) and socio-economic factors are now increasingly acknowledged as important in shaping attitudes to language learning (Gill 2014; Grenfell & Harris 2012), most vividly salient in the latest ‘Language Trends’ survey (Board and Tinsley, 2015). Elite UK universities classify languages as a ‘facilitating subject’ (Russell Group 2015: 27) for university entry and students from independent schools are more likely to take ‘MFLs and achieve higher grades relative to students in state-funded schools and colleges’ (Ipsos-MORI Report 2014: 12). MFL has also been identified as one of the indicators of inequality in accounting for the significant difference in uptake of subjects benchmarked for school performance league tables (the so-called English Baccalaureat or Ebacc) between the richest and poorest students (i.e. according to family income, DfE 2011; NCSR 2011).

However, these statistics do not explain the variation in uptake and there is, as remarked by Coleman, Galaczi and Astruc (2007), an urgent need for ‘complementary qualitative data’ (p. 280) to understand how language study is perceived differentially as more or less relevant. Block (2015) describes a ‘social class erasure’ (p. 1) in talking about the demographics of language study, and makes a plea for more engagement with social class perspectives in applied linguistics research, concluding that ‘in the SLA/L literature, there is not at present, neither does there appear to have been in the past, anything resembling a line of research exploring the possible links between social class and the processes and outcomes of second language learning in both formal and informal settings’ (Block 2014: 148). In this paper I suggest that discourse analysis drawing on social practice theory can lend some purchase to this end.

In terms of methodological inquiry, since the 1990s parallel developments in the social sciences have shifted the focus away from measurements of attitude as fixed variables that reside in the person towards framing language learning as a complex identity project inseparable from wider social *investment*, this term signalling ‘the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practise it’ (Norton 2010: 349). This social turn (Block 2003) has been informed by a range of diverse perspectives – from feminist theory to narrative analysis – that privilege language, including discourse analysis, to understand how meaning is made through linguistic resources in structuring our situated experience. Discourse analysis, I suggest, offers a fruitful approach to extend our understanding of choice and investment in school-based language learning through listening closely to how choice is constructed in the words of actors in the field, in this case the students involved, in particular how socially classed discourses can be a dispositional factor for language study. The current paper does not quantify socio-economic status of participants but seeks to understand how MFL study is articulated as forms of capital. I use independent school status as a proxy for middle-class, given that parents pay substantial fees, but recognise that state-maintained schools include a wide socio-economic demographic. My focus here is on the ways of talking about language learning and how these might differ across different groups, I cannot claim that the

discussions reported on are representative; rather, I am investigating language learning as an orientation to a particular form of capital. Framing social class as a discursively produced set of dispositions clearly³ draws on Bourdieu (1986, 1998), whose work has been extensively used to understand social practices and how these are underscored by ‘attributions of value’ (Skeggs, 2004: 186). My intention therefore is to examine how motives for choice draw on and reproduce ways of talking about language learning as a signifier for lifestyle practices that are real and imagined.

THE STUDY

Methodology

This study set out to investigate perceptions of the relevance of school-taught languages by addressing these two research questions:

1. What motives do students from different school contexts cite to explain their GCSE⁴ option choices?
2. How are these choices discursively constructed?

This study did not profile students’ socio-economic status (other than the independent school students had fees paid by parents and school-provided data showed that three of the maintained school children claimed free school meals). The aim of this study is not to make causal links between socio-economic status of individual students and language take up, but to examine available discourses in schools with different regimes of choice. The institutional decision to make language study compulsory is made within a discursive context of valuing languages and my intention is to see how far students articulate their agency (to choose and justify choices) within the structural constraints of different school contexts.

Four London schools were recruited (Figure 1) and of these two are independent (parents pay fees) and two are maintained (funded by the state). Nationally, 7% of UK schoolchildren attend independent schools (Independent Schools Council 2015), but in inner London this figure rises to 14.8% (Greater London Authority Intelligence Unit 2012).

Figure 1 Schools recruited

Name of school	Funding status	Gender	GCSE language compulsory	Groups (number of languages) [number of students, total 26]
Ind-B	Fee paying (independent)	Boys	Yes	Ind-B (2) [n3] Ind-B (1) [n4]
Ind-G	Fee paying (independent)	Girls	Yes	Ind-G (2) [n4] Ind-G (1) [n3]
Mtd-G	Non- fee paying (maintained)	Girls	No	Mtd-G (1) [n3] Mtd-G (0) [n3]
Mtd-Co	Non- fee paying (maintained)	Co-educational	No	Mtd-Co (1) [n3] Mtd-Co (0) [n3]

In each school two mini-focus groups took place at the end of Year 9 when students are 14 years old. During this school year in English schools children choose their *options*, that is, which subjects they wish to study over the next two years leading to GCSE level. In the independent schools the groups comprised students who had opted to study two languages (2) or students who had decided to just do the minimum required one language (1). In the

maintained schools, groups either decided to opt for one language (1) or to drop languages altogether (0). For each school then the number of languages is indicated in brackets (Figure 1). Twenty six children participated in all. Students were invited to participate by their teachers, and interested students were given information sheets and consent forms for themselves and their parents. All eight discussion groups took place on school premises, were audio-recorded then transcribed. In terms of student profiling, it is relevant to point out that some students had a home language other than English and in all groups there was a mix of 'British' (having English as a home language) with other ethnic and language backgrounds *except* for the independent boys' schools where both groups of participants were exclusively white British with English as the only home language. During the discussions we asked all groups if they knew or spoke other languages at home, and if they thought that this had a bearing on the language learning in school. Only those who spoke French, German or Spanish thought so, and opted to continue these languages at GCSE. Those who spoke Urdu, Bengali or Lithuanian (the other languages represented) reported that they did not feel there was a connection to school languages.

While the self-selecting nature and the limited size of sample renders findings ungeneralizable, the analysis has generated a set of themes which resonate with and extend the theoretical propositions of previous studies and which, as discussed below, are useful for generating conceptual frames to facilitate further work. The project was designed by me and data were collected and transcribed by a research assistant, Christina Richardson. Both I and Christina coded the data separately (July 2014) and then spent two days together comparing notes, codes and emerging themes. From then onwards I continued to engage with the data and refine codes and themes.

We first indexed a set of 'descriptive' (Miles and Huberman 1994) or 'structural' (MacQueen et al. 2008) codes i.e. they related to the discussion prompts and were explicit and referential. These were *home*, *school*, *imagined future*, *general beliefs*. These codes signal both spatial fields (home, school) and categories of belief drawing on discourses of value (imagined future, general beliefs). The code *imagined future* denotes future-oriented goals, these were primarily instrumental motives (instrumental here meaning focused, time-limited objectives such as job, exam success, university entry) but also broader cultural ambitions to travel and to communicate with others, expressed as imagined transactional moments of encounter when travelling. The conflation of languages and mobility is constructed here both as a known reality (current or past mobility) and also a plan for the future. The term *general belief* was used where the spatio-temporal source of motive was not stated or not easily identifiable. Such beliefs may have an instrumental orientation such as 'Spanish is more useful' or express an aesthetic appreciation such as 'Russian looks fancy'.

Each of these four codes (school, home, imagined future, general beliefs) had both a negative and a positive valence. For instance, school-oriented factors could be cited as positive influences (reasons to take languages) or negative (reasons to drop languages). Likewise, subcodes of *imagined future* such as 'job' denoted a construction of languages as relevant or irrelevant. For each discussion group, data chunks (Lichtman 2012; Miles and Huberman 1994), alternatively called 'text fragments' (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 124), were arranged under these codes for both positive and negative motives. At this stage it became necessary to look more closely at *how* students were talking, and to look for patterns across the data. Each section of text relating to a motive was analysed for recurrent features within and across scripts and these were then further coded *inductively* (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011) to eventually develop into themes. The first-level coding then identified explicit motives for dropping or taking languages whereas the second-level coding attended more to

thematic threads. These were interpreted according to theoretical frames that I found useful, and which I discuss later (presented in Figure 2 of the Discussion section).

FINDINGS

Of the independent school groups, even the groups less favourable to languages reported the importance of learning a language, especially at Ind-B, where reasons to study languages were phrased most positively and unanimously with no negative motives reported in either group. The groups giving up languages from the two maintained schools (Mtd-G(0) and Mtd-Co(0)) were, unsurprisingly, the most negative about languages. The dominant category for these two groups was *school*, with students often stating that the languages were hard and confusing and lessons boring, and these groups cited fewer out-of-school factors but where these were cited, they had a negative valence. Other than lack of enjoyment and difficulty, languages were perceived as irrelevant for their imagined future, which, for these two groups, was constructed through usefulness for professional ambitions e.g.

Extract 1: Mtd-G Group(0)

- Amanda ... it depends on like what you want to do because if like another language has nothing to do with what you want to do it's not that really /
- Marta And also what I want to be which is a midwife I don't think you need a language so that's why I have never really thought of doing a language or it would be needed in that job
- Amanda And I want to do musical theatre
- Marta I also think it depends what you want to be
- Amanda If you want to be like a language teacher then it's important to pick a language and study it

Extract 2: Mtd-Co Group(0)

- Ali It's alright for travelling and stuff but nothing more unless you want to go into a career with like languages

In these extracts we see how instrumentality is constructed through tightly linking knowledge of and ability to use languages with professional aspirations, and the role of language for professional purposes is reductively imagined as useful only for language teachers or 'a career with languages'. As mentioned earlier, the wider, mediatized discourse of crisis surrounding the decline in language study has focused predominantly on societal benefits to the economy, with benefits to individual learners pointing to improved job opportunities and personal benefits such as an increased likelihood of access to university. However, Taylor and Marsden (2014) found that societal benefits do not resonate with learners, and that personal motives are much stronger. Personal motives, though, cannot always be understood within a simplistic frame such as travel (whether current or intended). The students from Mtd-G Group(0) do travel and could not be caricatured as inward-looking locals:

Extract 3: Mtd-G Group(0)

- Amanda I have travelled on and off and I have been abroad quite few times and the places I go I am not going to live there it's just like a holiday I don't really need to talk to the people because most like speak English as well as their own language so I don't really need to learn their language to speak to them in their country

Amanda does indeed travel, as do other students dropping languages, yet the languages they are learning do not seem relevant for holidays or family trips. This contrasts with students who report that they do use languages when they go abroad, especially children from the independent schools e.g.

Extract 4: Ind-B Group(2)

James Erm I go to France maybe three or four times a year to do erm skiing and mountain-biking and stuff like that and it's very useful at that time to speak to people

Students dropping languages reported that they could use English when on holiday (extract 3). On the other hand, students who were more favourable to learning languages cited the benefit of speaking to local people, even with the help of a phrase book.

Extract 5: Ind-B Group(2)

Edward Yeah and it's always much more enjoyable if you can speak a bit of a language and of course with French it helps very much I mean doing French and Latin kind of you can communicate with a phrasebook fairly easily in places like Italy.

All four groups from both independent schools (that is, both independent school groups who opted for more than one language GCSE as well as both independent school groups who opted to do the minimum one language GCSE) extended their motives beyond the strictly instrumental. In both groups from Ind-B and in the Ind-G Group(2) students emphasized that they found lessons enjoyable and interesting, while in Ind-G Group(1), although the girls cited family support and a range of broader benefits such as 'it helps you to understand English better' and 'it helps you to learn other stuff because it gets your brain going', they stated that they found lessons hard. Parental encouragement to study languages and modelling provided by parents and siblings who spoke or who had learnt French were most prominent from the independent school groups e.g.

Extract 6: Ind-B Group(2)

Edward So with French I think it's definitely partly because I have been doing it for a very long time and so and both my parents speak er I think well my Dad did French A level and my Mum did French GCSE

Extract 7: Ind-B Group(1)

Tim even if French wasn't a compulsory GCSE I would have done it because it is actually quite fun subject to learn it is definitely enjoyable but you can see physical progress so I can look back to at the times when I couldn't even put a sentence together but now I can have a decent conversation with my parents and brother in French

Extract 8: Ind-B Group(2)

James I generally I do really like French because I have been doing it for so long I have enjoyed it that whole time and also that my Mum is also fluent in French and would like me to speak it for when we go on holiday and things like that

Family support reinforced promotional initiatives from schools valuing languages and encouraging students to take them, explaining the importance of them. Positive motives therefore formed a virtuous circle of mutually reinforcing motives from different domains that were embedded in the multi-dimensional experience of the student. Where general beliefs were expressed as positive motives (e.g. French / Spanish is useful) one can imagine the echo of these across different sources. This pattern of connections was most clearly noticeable in the independent schools, but also in the groups taking languages from the maintained schools.

School encouragement to take languages was cited in isolation by one student, Cheryl, in Mtd-G Group(1), but not reinforced by other sources. Cheryl was unusual in that, although she opted to take a language at GCSE, her overall attitude to languages was not favourable. She repeated several times that she did not like languages but had chosen them only to improve her chances for university entrance:

Extract 9: Mtd-G Group(1)

Cheryl I don't like it and I know I don't like doing it I have never liked it for the three years I have done it you know I haven't liked French or Spanish but like you know like that Ebacc thing obviously for that you have to do a language ... I was advised to do one they was saying I was capable of doing one but I didn't want to do it even now I don't want to do it but it's like I picked it in case I changed my mind and I want to go to university it's sort of like my options

Cheryl's insistence on being coaxed by the school to do languages points to the problem of persuasion coming from one source and the persuasion being exclusively instrumentally oriented. There is not a deep belief in the value of languages articulated here and her choice is not supported by a connecting web of consensus. There is a clear tension here between the school's discourse (promoting languages as useful and important for progression on to university) and Cheryl's subjective (felt) experience.

Students who spoke most favourably about languages (in terms of recognizing the benefits and enjoying them), were able to make explicit links to other areas of learning, especially boys from Ind-B Group(2). Whereas all groups reported mostly instrumental motives, both groups from Ind-B and Ind-G Group(2), as well as reporting instrumental motives, also cited broader benefits, which, as shown in extracts 4 and 5, relate to enjoyment and communicating with locals when travelling, and also in terms of understanding cultural history and developing cross-curricular skills:

Extract 10: Ind-B Group(2)

Edward You do more kind of things about history it's not just language ...
 And it kind of helps you develop ways of learning ... It's useful for things like English

Extract 11: Mtd-Co Group(1)

Mik I took it because if you study one language it becomes easier to learn other languages

Extract 12: Ind-G Group(2)

Emily It just really helps you learning stuff for other subjects

Here we see connections made between ‘language’ (English) and connections to other areas of learning (history). These connections, including developing study skills and learning strategies, were included most in the independent school groups but also featured in the two maintained school groups taking languages. There was no instance of this epistemological connectivity in the two groups dropping languages.

Thus far, analysis has focused on language as referential to spoken content. However, in line with Foucault’s claim that ‘statements’ (‘enunciative modalities’, 1972: 50) are both referential and inseparable from language forms, in the next section I turn to a more linguistic analysis of the discursive strategies deployed by participants in order to understand how agency is structured not only through referential (person to world) statements but also through linguistic stance-taking.

Linguistic patterns in the data

When coding data it soon became apparent that lexical referents differed between the groups, not only in the way relations to language study were explicitly reported but also in the way choice and motivation were constructed deictically. Even where boys at Ind-B did not decide to pursue a second language, their decision to drop one (as all were currently studying two languages) was framed positively, not in terms of liking / disliking, or irrelevance, but in terms of their ‘best interests’.

Extract 13: Ind-B Group(1)

Tim ... for GCSE I am going to drop Latin as it’s a very hard GCSE and I want to prioritise other work but I am still going to do French as a modern foreign language.

Ian I dropped Mandarin at the end of Year 8 but I continued Latin into Year 9 but I have dropped it as I perceive other priorities ... I will continue with French ... Well I dropped Latin because I wasn’t finding it as useful as they made it out to be. I found that it was a bit of an encumbrance, it was getting in the way of other things so I decided that it probably wasn’t in my best interests but I am continuing with French because it’s spoken quite widely around the world

The use of the first person pronoun and the choice of subjective verb can be identified as significant markers of agency. In these extracts Tim and Ian present their choice as a conscious act which coheres within an overall narrative of rational decision-making. As life narrative scholarship shows (Johnstone 1996; Ochs and Capps 2001), strategies such as pronoun choice and expression of causality are powerful social resources for creating and maintaining identities. Life story analysis has typically looked at (adult) retrospective accounts where order is imposed retrospectively e.g. Linde’s (1993) analysis of career choice narratives; however, life stories also project forward and we see in these extracts how the ‘I’ shapes adolescent identities in the making. In the discursive field of school curriculum options, agency is enacted not only in the choice of curriculum subject but in the articulation of that choice.

Here, the expression of choice and the agentic sourcing of that choice within one’s own subjectivity appear as a rational project of acting for one’s own good. Speaking this project signals a discursive power which coheres with institutionally endorsed norms of prioritizing and planning for subsequent accrual of capital. In Foucault’s description, power does not reside in the individual but is dispersed, denoting a network of resources which are

made available, taken up and resisted in concert with multiple agents. Following this model, then, Tim and Ian are not displaying their own agentive (or subjective) power, but are engaging with powerful discourses which are available to them and which appear logical to them. These discourses are hegemonic inasmuch as they are endorsed by institutions (school, parents, elite universities, broadsheet press, possibly peer groups and so forth) and are distributed across other discourses such as those of languages-for-cosmopolitanism.

In contrast, students intending to drop languages expressed greater struggle, through frequency of words like ‘hard’ (n7 in Mtd-G Group(0)), ‘confusing’ (n7 in Mtd-Co Group(0)) and ‘boring’ (n6 in Mtd-Co Group(0)):

Extract 14: Mtd-Co Ed Group(0)

Mala	It’s confusing
Int	(.) can you say a bit more about that why are they’re confusing
Mala	It’s hard as well because I don’t understand it
Int	Okay which languages have you studied so far
Mala	French
Int	Only French yep (.) what about the rest of you
Bikram	I found languages a bit boring and it was like hard a bit confusing as well
Ali	Just kind of the same mostly boring

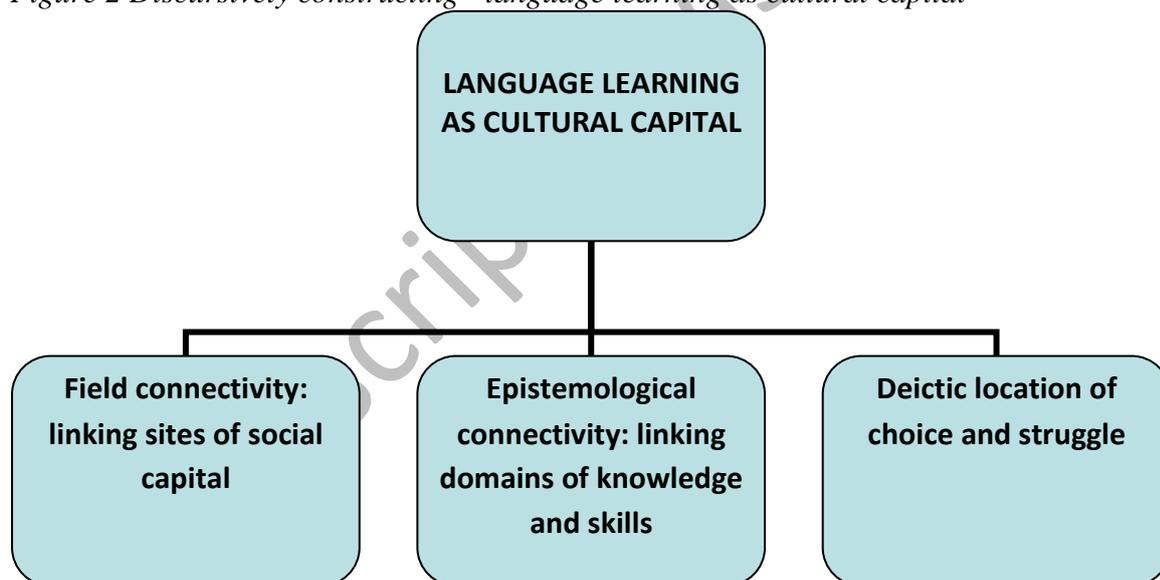
Personal choice was expressed by locutions such as ‘I thought’ and ‘I chose’ by students favourable to languages. Students less favourable to languages justified their choices by locating a (negative) quality within the curriculum subject (language learning) itself (as useful, or boring ...). This suggests that difficulty is conceived as something beyond their control, residing exclusively in the activity of studying languages. Within a psychologically oriented interpretation this attribution of agency could be defined as self-efficacy, yet this model of belief-action cycle supposes a competence model where isolated variables are viewed as conditioned responses. A discourse model, on the other hand, allows us to examine the broader material constraints of discourse and how this circulates in social fields. The language used by the independent school students may appear reminiscent of Bernstein’s (1971) elaborated code. In Foucauldian terms, these students are displaying and participating in a valorized discourse shared across their contact fields (home, school).

DISCUSSION: DRAWING ON SOCIAL PRACTICE THEORY TO INTERPRET FINDINGS

Instrumentality (since Gardner and Lambert 1959, 1972) has been a common theme in research seeking to understand students’ subject choices but it became clear quite quickly in this study that *usefulness* meant different things to different students depending on situations they habitually found themselves in, what they imagined for their future, and the discursive context of the motive being invoked. In other words, itemizing motives for taking or dropping languages was meaningless without taking into account *how* students discussed their choices. Of the reasons cited above, some were invoked to explain reasons for taking languages and other were invoked only to be refuted as a legitimate motive: travelling, for instance, and the contact with others during travel were described differently. As Norton (2000) describes, people invest differentially in different worlds and different life projects. Motivation, therefore, requires a model that is supple enough to account for the way it is distributed across different agencies and self-constructions rather than conceived of as residing in the

individual. The depiction of an imagined future is akin to the deontic dimension of Dörnyei's 'ideal and ought selves' (2009: 13), although motivation framed as a social practice is not located in the individual, it is distributed across the life experience of the student and is therefore a sociological rather than a psychological model of inquiry. Here I found useful the work of Bourdieu (1986) and Foucault's (1972) notion of discursive field. The Bourdieusian framework of habitus, field and capital(s) is used to explain how dispositions are imbibed from parents and other modelling agents (peers, institutions, the media etc.) in the form of preferences (tastes) which shape our choices and become embedded (sedimented) as habituated practices and beliefs (habitus). Bourdieu's social practice theory (the practice here being engaging with language learning and the discourses around language learning) offers a nuanced model that has been widely used in social science research to bridge the ontological gap between agency and structure, demonstrating that action or non-action represents the accrual of capital in highly localized material contexts. Actions and preferences are not wholly determined by structural constraints (a criticism sometimes levied at Bourdieu though this reading has been challenged by Kramsch, 2015) and there is scope for individual agency to effect change, but always within the parameters of the imaginable, and the imaginable is more or less constrained by the social horizons of the habitus so that individuals and their world mutually constitute experience in a tension of normative expectation. The themes which were identified across the data, and which can all be subsumed under the definition of cultural capital, are summarized in Figure 2:

Figure 2 Discursively constructing "language learning as cultural capital"



Previous studies report that 'students from "cultured" backgrounds may also perceive the benefits of cultural fields of study as being particularly high, since they value "cultural" occupations and cultural participation highly' (van der Werfhost *et al.* 2003: 45). However, van der Werfhost *et al.* do not problematize their use of the term 'cultured' as representing and issuing from a specific discursive field. 'Cultured' here takes on a particular meaning which requires further examination. Institutionally and socially structured fields are also *discursive fields* in which discourses and subjectivity are dialectically constitutive. This concept, developed by Foucault (1972), denotes the interplay between institutionally organized and locally managed power dynamics: 'Discursive fields consist of competing

ways of giving meaning to the world and of organizing social institutions and processes ... Discursive fields ... contain a number of competing and contradictory discourses with varying degrees of power to give meaning to and organize social institutions and processes. They also “offer” a range of modes of subjectivity’ (Weedon 1987: 35). Discourse, in Foucauldian terms, does not only refer to language in a textual or structural sense. In his conceptualization, discourse plays a mediating role between language and material practices that have naturalized to become normative. Furthermore, discourse is not a neutral conduit, it has ‘its own materiality’ (Saint Ouen 1984: 428) as it strengthens and reproduces extant forms of power. In other words, discourse (as used here) does not signal a conduit between talk and practice but constitutes pre-existing structural parameters which open or close down possibilities, so that ways of talking about choice or attitudes are inseparable from their instantiation.

The *type* of travel invoked by participants in this study differs in the manner in which engagement with local people is envisaged. The extent to which James (Extract 4) actually ‘speak(s) to people’ in French when he goes abroad is probably quite limited (we cannot know from his reporting), but what we see here is appropriation of a discourse of engagement with locals. It is this discursive appropriation and reproduction which constitutes capital as commitment to a discourse of cosmopolitanism. Cultural practices, at least in modern (post-Enlightenment) Europe, include travel for the cultivation of cosmopolitanism. A helpful distinction that could be brought in here is *cosmopolitan* vs *transnational* mobility, a distinction Grillo (1998) borrows takes from Hannerz (1992) to distinguish between different forms of multilingualism and multiculturalism. Cosmopolitanism here is not an ‘option’ but part of the roadmap inherent in the discursive field of middle-class Anglo lifestyle (whether enacted or imagined). It is implied and understood – rendered invisible by its implicitness – as desirable. Engaging with practices that are deemed culturally worthy is to practise a distinction, which Bourdieu states is ‘arbitrary’ but nonetheless encodes ‘the subtlest nuances of social position, of the sources of prestige, and hence of what is valuable and good’ (Taylor 1999: 42). Such discursive distinctions form part of the habitus as a set of dispositions which (to varying degrees) determine practice in a ‘relationship of ontological complicity’ (Bourdieu 1998: 77) between the habitus (in the person) and the field (social space). The cosmopolitan ideal has become what Bourdieu calls a *doxa*, and in Foucault’s terms, it forms part of the regime of truth that is no longer questioned. It is noteworthy that there was no explicit reference to peer influence in this study, yet the nature of the focus group talk inevitably contributed, as we see in the extracts above, to consensus building, itself a form of discursive structuration.

The status quo position conveyed in advocacy literature and press coverage of the ‘crisis’ (as reported by Lanvers and Coleman 2013) is that language learning is a valuable activity, given that the UK needs more linguists for economic reasons. However, the discursive valuing of language learning (as a worthy and worthwhile project) cannot be separated from its socio-historic context. ‘Power ... structures relations between different subjects within or across discourses’ (Weedon 1987: 114) so that forms of capital are not static but have localized currency within fields, and fields are not autonomous domains but constituted within spatially and temporally shifting networks. The activities of language learning and foreign language use, and beliefs around perceptions of usefulness can only be understood within particular discursive fields. In other words, language learning is not a singular activity; rather it is invested with meaning across different material and discursive contexts, and the aim of the analysis presented here is to tease out some of the tensions underpinning the ‘competing and contradictory discourses’ surrounding the choice to study modern languages.

Languages and language use are inherently relational, but the terms of these relations are not always obvious. In the school curriculum there has been an overwhelming focus on interactional language for use in particular contexts, usually service encounters (e.g. shopping, reserving a room) or other limited information-transactional encounters such as asking for directions. This transactional positioning as a tourist or consumer (Gray 2010) reinforces the ‘dominant contemporary assumption ... that the purpose of foreign language teaching is to develop communicative competence’ (Byram 2010: 317). However, this type of instrumentalism posits a set of motives that are easy for students who do not envisage a future needing this transactional capital to refute.

The emphasis placed on instrumental goals of language learning, found in all accounts but more exclusively in the discussions with students wishing to drop languages, signals a conception of foreign language learning as a skill. Previous work investigating social mobility and education distinguished between technical and diffuse skills, where ‘technical skills are linked primarily with economic and occupational goals, and lack of them limits access to various occupations, and their attendant economic rewards. In contrast, diffuse skills are linked primarily with status goals’ (Hopper 1981: 100). While technical skills are a given for all students in terms of employability, diffuse skills, which are ‘rarely taught directly as a goal linked technique (and) ... are likely to be informally organized and interdependent’ (p. 99) are most ‘necessary for high economic and status positions’ (p. 100).

The cultural capital of knowing high prestige languages translates therefore as a material advantage (a ‘diffuse’, cultural skill), but goes deeper in its sanctioning a form of personhood. The discursive formation of intercultural skills (being multilingual with prestige languages) in the advocacy literature (commissioned reports and media coverage) posits cosmopolitanism as a deontic ideal (what is good / what we should be) and does not take into account the multilingual competences of transnational lives, where transnational denotes affiliations beyond the nation model, where ‘loyalties are anchored in translocal social networks ... rather than the global ecumene’ (Werbner 1997: 12).

While all children in the study have experience of travel and envisage mobility in their future, types of mobility differ as those more favourable to school-taught language learning imagine engaging in particular forms of intercultural communication (using high prestige European languages or Mandarin). Personal transformation through travel and contact with other cultures is a familiar trope in western travel literature dating from the *grand tour* (discussed in detail in Chard 1999) to the present day (Blanton 2002) and is a key motif in the discourse of cosmopolitanism. The projected contacts reported by children from the independent schools in this study (talking to locals while travelling) confirm this repertoire of cosmopolitanism, described by Harari (2011) as ‘romantic consumerism’, that has developed with the rise of humanist notions of self-development through intercultural contact and is reinforced by neo-liberal market networks that package mobility and engagement with the locals as desirable and worthy.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Although, statistically, there is a tangible difference given the numerical distribution of exams taken across school types, social class has received relatively little attention in qualitative research investigating language uptake, and indeed in applied linguistics more generally (Block 2014, 2015). The current study therefore goes some way to filling this gap by proposing a discourse analytic approach to understanding how perceptions are structured across discursive fields. That said, this study did not identify participants SES criteria and so cannot extend claims beyond the voices of students within different school contexts.

Institutionally-based language learning (as indeed applied linguistics as a scholarly discipline more generally) is a discursive field. That is, it is a field which, through historical and cross-disciplinary formations, constitutes experience of what learning a language means, constraining subjective experience within a specified number of discursive formations. In this article I have mooted what some of these might be, but this is only a beginning. I have tried to unpack some of the taken-for-granted understandings around the uptake of modern foreign languages. Languages such as French do not have an intrinsic value but are conferred value in particular fields. In encouraging uptake it is not helpful to posit a deficit model (UK is short of linguists, you should learn French).

The research presented here aims to make a contribution to our understanding of the kinds of discourse resources learners draw on to speak about their investment in language learning. The study confirms previous findings relating to other curriculum subjects showing that cultural capital is reproduced across different fields where there is a 'unity of discourse' (Foucault 1972: 51). In the case of this study, this means that the messages about the importance of language learning are reinforced across the fields of school and home and discourses of value expressed as beliefs about usefulness. The value of language learning is understood to offer actual, current capital in terms of home-school encouragement and approval, and this is embedded in a projected vision of the future as particular forms of mobility and contact are envisaged. Moreover, discourses of shaming, such as conveyed in the UK media ('the shameful comparison with other countries', Lanvers and Coleman, 2013: 12) are counter-productive (Every, 2013).

Given the dominant drive to promote STEM subjects, it has become especially important to make explicit the role of languages, but how languages are promoted risks becoming ensnared in an instrumentalist trap of utilitarianism which does not resonate with children. This study shows that beliefs around the use of language learning are highly situated and are formed and reproduced within multi-layered discursive fields that presume foreign language competence as a form of cultural capital. This capital (like all forms of capital) may translate into real resources in terms of job opportunities, but is also likely to translate more subtly into fields of symbolic value as personal qualities that characterize a good citizen in relation to transnational, neo-liberal circuits of resource distribution.

My intention has not been to essentialize attitudes within categories of class. Clearly, *all* middle-class children do not value languages or choose to study them further in their educational career. However, within a Foucauldian perspective, the range of responses points to discursive possibilities, that is, the statements uttered are bound within the discursive formation of 'reasons to learn languages' or 'why learning languages is good'.

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¹ Most notably the *Routes into Languages* programme, now in its second cycle (2013-2016), funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

² E.g. British Academy (2011, 2013, 2014), British Chamber of Commerce (2013), Confederation of British Industry (2012), Education and Employers Taskforce (2011) and UK Trade & Investment (Foreman-Peck and Wang 2014).

³ One anonymous reviewer, while agreeing that this claim is 'entirely legitimate' within the context of this study, justly adds the comment 'although there is clearly more to class than discursively produced sets of dispositions'.

⁴ GCSEs are the exams that students in England and Wales take at age 16.