Preface (2020)

The first version of this monograph was published in 1997. Since then I have rarely opened its pages until I began this version, but I was happy to see the text make its way in the world and become widely referenced. Maybe my secret wish was to see it become a ‘classic’, because my Director of Studies at King’s Cambridge, Dr R.R. Bolgar, was such a model to all his students with his book The Classical Heritage and its Beneficiaries. That bar was set too high and I have been content to see the book reach an academic half-life of 20 years.

Why then produce a second version when the first is still (half) alive? There are several reasons. One is that it has become clear from commentaries and criticisms that my meanings have not always been interpreted as intended and need to be made more transparent. Another is that there has been much development in theory and practice concerning ‘the intercultural’ – manifest in the appearance of handbooks, of new journals and academic societies, of new language education policies and of new practices in schools and universities. The innovations in practice are slower than the others, but this is not surprising, and what is important is that they endure.

It would therefore be possible to rewrite the monograph and include reference to all these changes. That would be a different and in fact a new work, surveying the literature, both academic and professional, and that is not the purpose of this book. Essentially, I am satisfied that what I wrote in 1997 can stand, and can remain useful for the future as it has proven to be in the past, albeit with full recognition of its weaknesses. I am conscious of those and, because I had read many theses and dissertations which quoted the book uncritically, I produced in 2012 a list of critiques and comments which I circulated to a network of researchers, encouraging them to use it with their students. Where new work has changed my views and text, I have cited and quoted, but I have not cut out older references which were the sources of my text simply because they are old. I will not follow the trend I often find among younger researchers who think that because something is more than a few years old, it is not worth reading.

This is then not a revised edition that changes the central message. That message remains, as do any inferences drawn from it for educational
policy and practice. It is a new version which revisits and renews the first. I will attempt to remove ambiguities, and add reference to recent research and practice which supports and enriches the content. In doing so I will consider the critiques that have appeared, as far as I know them, and will use them to help me in my task of renewal. Let it be said here that the ‘savoirs model’ largely remains as it was but that it has been changed in some details and in particular in the explanation of what is meant by ‘savoir s’engager’/‘critical cultural awareness’. Furthermore, I will in some places deal with ideas – such as moral relativism or mediation – which are related to the text but were not present in the first version; I will do this where necessary in a coda to a chapter.

One cannot of course trace the origins of all one’s ideas – neither to people nor publications. Some acknowledgements are nonetheless possible. First to all those dozens of doctoral students I have supervised or examined, who perhaps thought I was teaching them but who were also teaching me. Some were quoted already in the first edition and others appear in this one. Second, to the members of Cultnet, an informal group of doctoral and post-doctoral students – and others who joined out of curiosity or in search of kindred spirits – which has existed for over two decades. The network is large and not everyone can attend the annual meeting in Durham but these meetings and other contributions, such as sharing access to articles, copies of new books or information about conferences, have been a joy to work with. Third, to all those whom I have met in Strasbourg at the Council of Europe and who have been a constant source of intellectual stimulation and friendship.

I also had particular help with my text from Mattia Baiutti, Claudia Borghetti, Dorie Conlon Perugini, Manuela Guilherme, Stephanie Houghton, Claire Kramsch, Wen-Chuan Lin (Richard), Ana Matos and Manuela Wagner. In recent years I have also benefitted from writing articles and books with other people, which have had impact on this book too. Thank you, Sarah Boye, Fabiana Cardetti, Belen Diez-Badmar, Mike Fleming, Irina Golubeva, Adelheid Hu, Han Hui (Hellen), Jia Yuxin, Maria del Carmen Méndez García, Lamia Nemouchi, Lynne Parmenter, Melina Porto, Petra Rauschert, Maria Stoicheva, Manuela Wagner, Wang Lihong and Leticia Yulita. I have had help from numerous others – although they may not know it – who have commented both negatively and positively on the 1997 version.

Above all, in this list of thanks, I am extremely grateful to Karen Risager, Tony Liddicoat and Manuela Wagner for their meticulous reading and comments on the text, and to Karen for writing a Foreword.

I began with reference to my Director of Studies in Cambridge and will end with reference to another influential figure. John Trim was the head of the new Linguistics Department in Cambridge when I was an undergraduate, and he introduced us to this new discipline in memorable lectures and phonetics workshops. I met him again a decade or so later at
the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (CILT) in London and in Strasbourg at the Council of Europe. His influence on me – and many others – was significant. He too set the bar too high for me, but I have enjoyed trying to jump over it. I once overheard him saying that I had taught him about the significance of the intercultural dimension of language teaching, an accolade I treasure. I hope I can (still) do the same for others.

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April 2020

Postscript: ‘The world will never be the same again’ is the mantra I hear as I finalise this manuscript while in ‘confinement’ in France during the COVID-19 crisis. In Europe, the internationalism of the European ideal has been submerged under the nationalism of competition and self-esteem of different nation-states. The end of frontiers in Europe and the more general spirit of cooperation and globalisation have given way to national competition for medical resources within Europe and between Europe and the United States. Comparisons of statistics to see which country is best at ‘flattening the curve’ are rampant as a means of boosting national pride. All this is predictable from social group theory. As Catherine Jaeger, who is French but lives in Germany, wrote to me a few days ago, the fluidity and liquidity of the super-diverse world – phrases so beloved of post-modernists – give way to the ‘national solidities of the passport’, an insight from the way she was treated while being repatriated from Costa Rica after commercial flights through the United States were cancelled. The emphasis on countries somewhat mistakenly criticised in the first edition of this book is not entirely out of place in a context of national solidities.

Fortunately we do not know whether the world ‘will never be the same again’. I hope that the false patriotism which hides the rampant chauvinism famously condemned as ‘the last refuge of a scoundrel’ by Samuel Johnson – and there are as many scoundrels in the 21st century as in the 18th – will again retreat, aided in some small way by the work of language teachers and other interculturalists.