Why Study English Language?

I hope it’s no surprise to those who read this to say that my shelves are filled to the brim with books about languages and linguistics, and yes, that does include the English language. Over the years, I have accumulated these books in an effort to either learn a language itself, or to learn about languages as a whole, in the field known as linguistics. It would be a lie to say that either The Story of English in 100 Words, or Making Sense, both by the great David Crystal, had inspired me to pursue English Language at A level, instead it was English language at GCSE.

English language at GCSE level is, in the words of my relatives who live in Yorkshire, ‘naff’. The examination is a dreary experience of tapping at the surface of what English has to offer. Maybe you note that beginning a sentence with the adverb ‘indeed’ marks formal speech or an upper-class writer, but ultimately that’s the depth to which you are supposed to go. English Language at GCSE is hardly an education in the expansive and rich nature of the language we use every day. I would argue that there is little to no content, past knowing what a verb or an adjective is, and the lessons are filled with procedural knowledge, or skills; in this case those are the skills to pass an exam and impress an examiner. However, knowing that occasionally I get a whiff of such terms as ‘discourse’, ‘copula’ or ‘linguistic diversity’ or even ‘Sapir-Whorf hypothesis’, I was willing to trudge through the mud to find the jewel that is A level English language, and ever since Year 9 I have obsessively scrolled through past exam papers and specifications to gasp in awe at the majesty that is A level English Language.

Why not see how English Language and linguistics manifests? I have chosen a speech by Leanne Wood, leader of Plaid Cymru (a Welsh nationalist party in the UK) to briefly discuss, which can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZEmQjOSbZo. The first thing I notice is that Wood speaks mostly in the theme of hope, reminiscent of many of Barack Obama’s speeches in 2008 when he ran for US President. Wood describes ‘the old two-party system coming to an end’, carefully using the adjective ‘old’ to remind her party delegates that Plaid Cymru not only looks to the future, but also rejects artefacts of the past, detailing this end as a ‘demise’, and thus also making this a cause for celebration, as she progresses through the speech, to focus on the Scottish Independence referendum of 2014, contrasting the ‘old’ with ‘new’ and ‘two-party system’ with ‘democracy’. She then continues to discuss the work of the Scottish National Party. Interestingly, as a woman in power, it seems that she fits few of Lakoff’s principles on female speech, except for the hyper-grammatical nature of her speech, despite being from a Welsh-English background. Other Plaid Cymru members (and its newer leader, Adam Price) are generally more willing to sound Welsh in their speech, occasionally using Welsh English dialect terms, or saying informal greetings such as ‘hi’ rather than ‘hello’ (similarly, Prime Minister Boris Johnson uses ‘hiya folks’ regularly, whilst his predecessor, Theresa May, used ‘hello’ far more). This hyper-grammatical nature in Wood’s speech may be due, at least according to Lakoff, to an effort to grant herself legitimacy as a female politician.

Language is, in its entirety, social and political, and the way that I intend to understand that is by going further and studying A level English Language.