Languages and the government's missions

Document compiled by Wendy Ayres-Bennett & Charles Fordick

KEY POINTS

- **There is an opportunity cost in not valuing languages: in international business and trade; social cohesion and integration; equitable access to justice and healthcare, etc.**
- **Normalization of multilingualism is key to respecting people's language and identity**
- **Home, heritage and community language (HHCL) speakers are a vital untapped resource**
- **Linguists are crucial for advising how/when AI tools are used to avoid potentially serious errors, inefficiencies or reputational risk in government/business (Federici et al. 2023)**

KICKSTART ECONOMIC GROWTH

International trade enhancement

- **Not sharing a common language acts as a trade barrier**: a full eradication of language barriers with Arabic-, Chinese-, French- and Spanish-speaking countries could increase UK exports annually by c. £19bn (Ayres-Bennett et al. 2022)

Supporting growth of UK business

- **SMEs are 30% more successful** when they use language capabilities (LO-C 30 report 2021)
- Languages are important in the **creative industries** (Easton 2024)

Driving tourism and hospitality

- There is a growing **language skills gap in the UK tourism industry** (UKinbound 2018), exacerbated by EU exit and decline in UK language training; intermediate language skills are valuable in this sector, including those of HHCL speakers

TAKE BACK OUR STREETS

Whether in policing, victim support or ensuring fair access to justice and the judicial system, certified interpreters and translators are vital; there has been a concerning decline in public service interpreters, including for BSL

Improving community policing

- Messaging, including online, to communities **in their own language in culturally sensitive terms** – e.g. during riots or protests – is crucial
- In 2023 UK Police forces made **400,000+ bookings for interpreters in c. 160 languages** to capture statements relating to communication between police and limited/non-English speakers

Victim and refugee support

- Not knowing English forms complex barriers for **victims of domestic abuse** (Tipton 2020); similarly lack of cultural and structural competency creates barriers for **survivors of modern slavery** to access support (Shirgholami et al. 2024)
- In research on **refugee integration,** language was the **single element that made the difference** for people remaking their lives and for community cohesion (Phipps et al. 2024)

Fighting globalized crime

- Crime is increasingly organized by networks whose members communicate across multiple languages (Europol 2015); **forensic linguistics** is vital, e.g. in linguistic authorship analysis and sociolinguistic profiling (Grant 2022)

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BREAK DOWN BARRIERS TO OPPORTUNITIES

Improving opportunities for disadvantaged children and young people

- Research shows that **disadvantaged students** are less likely to study a language, have fewer languages to choose from, have lower uptake at GCSE and lower probability of success (Lanvers 2017); **boys** are less likely to study a language and **are underperforming** (British Council 2020)
- Only c. 43% of the target for **recruiting secondary language teachers** was reached 2024/25 (all-languages.org.uk); **cold spots are emerging in the provision of languages at HE** and closures in post-92 institutions affect disadvantaged students disproportionately (Muradás-Taylor & Taylor 2023)

Supporting HHCL speakers

- **One in five pupils** starting primary school **has a home language other than English**
- The teaching of HHCLs is delivered primarily through **complementary or 'Saturday' schools** – in Cambridge alone there are 33 covering 25 languages – these teach social integration and emotional well-being alongside language and culture; they require more attention and better integration into the mainstream system

Getting children ready for work and the future

- Language learning **supports other parts of the curriculum** (Forbes & Fisher 2020), as well as **cognitive development** (Bialystok 2017); language skills **enhance employability** (Ayres-Bennett et al. 2022)

BUILD AN NHS FIT FOR THE FUTURE

Not using patients' and carers' language (L1) creates barriers to access, delays diagnosis and treatment, can bias clinical decisions and create inequalities in clinical outcomes

Lessons from COVID-19

- From 10 languages pre-pandemic, **guidance was offered in 30 languages**; as of June 2022 **over 150,000 translated formats** had been downloaded from gov.uk
- Accurate translation is not enough: communicating health threats using **linguistically sensitive and culturally appropriate terminology** is vital for understanding and building trust (Adolphs et al. 2023)
- Research by Tang et al. on COVID-19 in minority ethnic communities with a strong oral tradition shows how consideration of HHCL speakers must be built into **preparedness protocols**

SERVING THE COUNTRY

Languages and national identity

- A pervasive **monolingual ideology creates divisions**: the UK has always been multilingual and this should be celebrated (Copland & McPake 2022)
- The 2021 England and Wales census has 90+ categories for the 'main language' of households, demonstrating the **inherent linguistic and cultural diversity of the UK**

Supporting devolution

- A better understanding of minoritized languages and their relationship with **collective identity and well-being** can enhance government models (Lewis & McLeod 2021) and thereby strengthen devolved administrations

BRITAIN RECONNECTED

Languages as the basis of diplomacy, defence and security

- Use of **soft power** to further our international partnerships, lead a Clean Power alliance and secure new trade agreements
- Cooperation within and across borders is vital as we work to solve **global challenges** (British Academy et al. 2020)

Providing the linguists the country needs

- The UK needs linguists with excellent intercultural skills in key languages such as Arabic, Mandarin and Russian
- **Untapped skills of the civil service** across government should be harnessed, both learned languages and HHCLs

Underpinning development initiatives

- Paying close attention to language and embracing communication approaches **improves development initiatives**; contextual knowledge leverages the presence of UK Government/NGO agencies across the world (Footitt et al. 2018)