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20. Language Matters 2: Modern Languages

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Walk down the shopping streets of any city in the country and you are bathed in a rich array of languages and cultures. Many people tune this out and walk through a reduced landscape of their own language and culture. The sights and sounds of other languages, and the cultures that accompany them, then appear as no more than a background radiation of foreignness. However, a little knowledge rapidly brings the background into clearer focus. It reveals meanings that were otherwise concealed and brings life to the landscape. In this way, knowledge of other languages and cultures can transform and enrich everyday life.

A knowledge of languages can transform and enrich many other aspects of life in the UK. It contributes to economic prosperity, social and political relationships and cultural pleasures. This has been broadly recognized by recent governments and was acknowledged succinctly in a language strategy document of 2002: 'The ability to understand and communicate in other languages is increasingly important in our society and in the global economy. Languages contribute to the cultural and linguistic richness of our society, to personal fulfilment, mutual understanding, commercial success and international trade and global citizenship' (Department for Education and Skills 2002).

Languages can be learnt or acquired in many ways, through formal education or through personal learning. But both routes rely on the work of scholars and researchers who produce the knowledge, who communicate it in ways that can be assimilated and who develop strategies that support teaching and learning.

In this chapter, we shall show how languages contribute to knowledge, how they enrich our culture, how they help to build a more open society, and how they contribute to prosperity. We shall look at how public policy in this country has recognized that, and could do more to strengthen our capacity as a country to function in other languages.

How languages contribute to knowledge

Knowledge of other languages and cultures provides access to a broad range of research resources. It includes the ability to understand material of contemporary or historical importance in libraries and archives in other countries. Consider the internet, which provides a voice to those wishing to impact on global society for good or ill. Almost all languages are now represented by virtual communities in which the whole range of online

services is available. These communities conduct their affairs behind virtual closed doors since users without the appropriate language background are in practice excluded, even though they may have ready access in principle. This process of closing off whole areas of the virtual world is likely to accelerate if the language competences of native English speakers continue to decline. Those wishing to enter these virtual communities will need a knowledge of the relevant languages. They may want to do so for many reasons, for example, to assess the social needs of minority groups or to investigate the activities of suspected terrorists. And the languages they need will not be confined to the major Western European languages.

Some of these issues concern the security services, who have always been obliged to grapple with the language factor in intelligence activities. More conventional armed forces are also familiar with the language challenge, and have usually invested heavily in linguistic and cultural preparation for conflict situations. This has often worked out rather differently in practice, and current research is seeking to draw lessons from conflict experiences as diverse as the NATO-led multinational peace-keeping action in Bosnia in the 1990s and the Allied occupation of continental Europe at the end of the Second World War (Footitt 2007).

In civilian terms, though, the study of foreign languages can and does enhance the study of a range of subject areas. The editors of the most recent edition of the *Dictionary of Human Geography* lament the Anglo-American bias in dictionary's coverage (Johnston *et al.* 2000). And the UK Benchmarking statement for History recommends that: 'all single honours students should be assessed in some way or another on their understanding of and their ability to handle primary source material' (Quality Assurance Agency 2007). Topics based on non-English speaking countries remain popular with students, but they find it difficult to grasp the nuances of primary sources not written in English. For that, they need at least a reading knowledge of the original language.

The researchers who teach the students have even greater need of language competence. Recent evidence has shown that the UK is struggling with this. The British Academy has noted that: 'With the increasing development in collaborative work, and the large sums of money attached to such work by national and international agencies, lack of language skills inflicts a real handicap on scholars in many parts of the British university system, and therefore weakens the competitive capacity of the system itself' (British Academy 2009). The 'increasingly insular' perspective represents a knowledge deficit for the UK. The result is that Britain has less understanding of the wider world. This is a dangerous position to be in if we are to address worldwide issues, such as global economic movements, international terrorism or world climate change.

The knowledge value of language competence goes beyond its role in providing access to information. Without some knowledge of another

language, it may be difficult to grasp concepts that have developed in non-English speaking contexts, and to understand and engage with the finer points of debates around them. In sociology, for example, the terms '*Gemeinschaft*' and '*Gesellschaft*' are widely employed in German in scholarly discussions because the common English translations ('community' and 'society') are not adequate for understanding the ideas of a theorist like Ferdinand Tönnies, who developed these tools for understanding the social world.

Important breakthroughs in science have been published in languages other than English. Knowledge of the German language was once essential for studying science at university level, and knowledge of the other languages continues to be a benefit for developments in science. French social theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault or Pierre Bourdieu have made substantial contributions to the development of the social sciences in the English-speaking world, but most academics in these subjects are still dependent on the translation into English of very complex ideas. The more complex the thought, the less easy it is to understand without consulting the language in which it was originally composed. In many subjects, a 'linguistic turn' has radically changed the way we think about subjects. It has provided new paradigms of thought, in which language plays a key role. As a result, the nuances of particular languages can no longer simply be ignored. If anyone needed proof of this, they need look no further than Jacques Derrida's celebrated essay on translation, whose title '*Des tours de Babel*' remains obstinately untranslatable (Derrida 1987).

Languages enrich our culture

Access to other languages and cultures does not only extend our knowledge and understanding, it also gives a richer texture to the cultural life of our own country. Simone de Beauvoir is not on our television screens as often as Germaine Greer, but she is nonetheless a basic point of reference for UK debates on feminist issues. Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky are not as popular in the UK as Charles Dickens and Jane Austen, but they are nonetheless part of our mental landscape. Similar comments might be made about film makers (Fellini, Bergman, Almodóvar), playwrights (Ibsen, Chekhov, Molière), philosophers (Confucius, Kant, Foucault), cultural critics (Bakhtin, Habermas, Barthes), and many other writers and artists whose work comes to us from other languages and cultures. The well-known names are but the tip of the iceberg.

The works of the most prominent writers are often available in English and can be enjoyed on their own terms. But even when a tale of love and death seems to have a universal meaning, it is still situated in a time and a place, and draws the reader into worlds that are different from our own and not simply reducible to human universals. A majority of readers may

do no more than dip into these worlds, but they will still be aware that they have crossed a threshold to enter complex cultures that will repay further exploration.

The pleasure of deeper understanding is increased by a greater knowledge of the social and cultural contexts, and even more by some knowledge of the language. There is a special delight in being able to watch a foreign language film without subtitles or read a poem in the original, even with a translation or a dictionary to hand.

The work of researchers and scholars plays an important role in making the great monuments of world culture available to a wide audience, through translations, introductions, reviews and critical analysis. Scholars bring a grasp of languages and a deeper knowledge of cultures with which they can shine a light that illuminates the wider context. They help us to see the underwater dimensions of the iceberg.

An important part of cultural research consists in engaging with researchers from other countries, especially the countries in which particular works were written. A British reader's pleasure and understanding is greatly enhanced by the insights of editors and commentators who share the language and cultural milieu of the work in question. And a UK-based scholar is well-placed to act as a mediator, offering a bridge between the British reader and the linguistic and cultural life of the country from which the work originated.

The role of intellectual mediator is not just about high culture. Increasingly, the circulation of popular culture also requires well-informed cultural intermediaries to make it accessible to UK audiences. This is obviously the case with cinema and fiction, both of which reach across the cultural range. But it is also true of television, sport, popular music, comics, festivals or circuses, where the resonances of language and the cultural contexts of a work or an event hold the key to understanding what is happening. UK researchers are playing a leading role internationally in creating a vibrant culture of enquiry in this area. The increased understanding of popular culture not only opens a window on the life of a society, but also provides conceptual tools for the growing media industries that produce it.

Whether high or popular, culture is principally concerned with making and sharing meanings, and language is therefore the main means by which culture may be understood: Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasiński point out that:

The shared meanings of culture are not 'out there' waiting for us to grasp them. Rather, they are the product of signifying practices, most notably those of language. Language constitutes material objects and social practices as meaningful and intelligible, it structures which meanings can or cannot be deployed under determinate circumstances by speaking subjects. To understand culture is to explore how meaning is produced

symbolically through the signifying practices of language within material and institutional contexts. (Barker and Galasiriski 2001: 4)

In other words, language is the most fundamental way in which a community's set of beliefs, values and norms is codified. And the linguistic construction of a community's culture is not an activity which occurs predominantly through the use of English as a lingua franca, nor can it be adequately carried out monolingually.

A good deal of the impetus to learn about other languages and cultures is motivated by travel. As Alison Phipps has suggested: 'the experience of detachment from places we call "home", from "community", from the normal locations of our work, comes to provide a strong symbolic and experiential set of possibilities through which we can develop common-feeling with others, both at home and abroad' (Phipps 2006: 29–30). Travel and communications are leading to greater mobility and migration, and intensifying the transnational patterns of linguistic and cultural exchange. For example, around 1 million Britons live in Spain and 17 million UK tourists visit the country each year (Foreign Office 2009). This coincides with the continuing increase in students studying Spanish at all levels of secondary school and through into higher education. No doubt the flamboyant appeal of Latin American popular culture has played a part in this, too.

Contact with other cultures is not an automatic result of travel, however, since many forms of travel provide a moral or physical shield between travellers and the community whose space they cross. The business hotel, the all-inclusive holiday resort, the cruise or the guided tour will shepherd the traveller into familiar paths, designed to minimize strangeness. This is a loss, reducing the wonder of new and unfamiliar experiences. It also takes away the opportunity to view our own culture through other eyes. There is a sense of discovery that accompanies children's learning about other languages and cultures. As one educator put it 'Viewing the mother-culture through the eyes of the target culture can be an enlightening experience.' (Morgan 1993) The confrontation with other cultures is an important part of a broad education, and can wean us away from a blinkered monolingualism.

Languages help to build a more open society

Languages and cultures are a fundamental part of identity. They serve to build up and express the sense of who we are and where we belong. They can provide a privileged form of access to the cultural resources and complex patterns of life in other countries. And they have an important place in promoting relationships and mutual understanding between countries. This is particularly important as the population of the UK becomes increasingly diverse. A clearer understanding of linguistic and cultural differences is necessary if we are to maintain social relationships and foster a more inclusive society.

The connections between language, culture and social identity are well documented. Research in this area gives us a better understanding of the factors that shape individual and group identities in relation to gender, ethnicity and other types of belonging. Languages are a fundamental factor. They are 'more than skills; they are the medium through which communities of people engage with, make sense of and shape the world' (Phipps and Gonzalez 2004).

Research on multilingualism in the UK has highlighted the wide variety of languages and language experiences found within the population. It reveals the complex nature of the relationship between communities and their languages, examining the way in which language choices change from one generation to another, how people make decisions to maintain or abandon a particular language and how they switch effortlessly between different languages, perhaps within the same sentence. These patterns have important implications for language policy, including issues of schooling and public communication, for example. In this way, research on the many languages and cultures that contribute to the multicultural landscape of the UK plays an important part in developing a clearer understanding of differences and fostering a more open society.

Learning to understand other languages is closely connected to the development of active citizenship on a national, European and global scale. Language learning is never content-free, and it often involves learning about issues that have an impact on people in another community or culture, considering different perspectives and trying to understand how communities work. A participative pedagogy in language learning can also give learners the experience of democratic decision-making, involvement in the local community and respect for different opinions and approaches (Anderson and Chaudhuri 2003). Foreign language learning has the potential 'for offering alternatives to inward-looking insularity, for addressing a lack of preparedness to engage with the notion of otherness and for tackling negative stereotypes' and is a means to 'foster cross-cultural understanding as well as peaceful co-existence, mutual respect and integration in a multi-cultural society' (Pachler 2000: 72).

Along with developing a general sense of intercultural understanding, research has shown that language education has a political and moral role in developing learners' sense of engagement with other cultures and nations. This is increasingly important in the context of the European Union, 'where the usefulness of language teaching will be evident in the preparation of young people to live in the multilingual and multicultural democratic polity' (Byram 2002: 45).

Language learning itself is an implicitly political proposition. John Trim makes this argument in his report for the Council of Europe, suggesting that language learning is a way to: 'promote the personal development of the individual, with growing self-awareness, self-confidence and independence

of thought and action combined with social responsibility as an active agent in a participatory, pluralist democratic society and a well-informed, positive attitude towards other peoples and their cultures, free from prejudice, intolerance and xenophobia' (Starkey 1999: 156).

Language learning may also involve explicit political education as students learn about political institutions in other countries, allowing them to reflect on their own political institutions and perhaps develop a more active sense of citizenship in their own country. Research in this area, including research on the discourses surrounding ideas of citizenship and political participation in different countries, can have an impact on language policy, language learning and broader political awareness. Languages are clearly essential tools in diplomacy and international relations, and research has argued that learning languages is essential to the development of flexible identities and mutual understanding in such situations: 'Multilingualism and "linguistic flexibility" and the more "provisional loyalties" that they necessarily engender are routes to both the preservation of identity as opposed to the nihilism represented by the events of September 11, and to the mutual intelligibility that will rescue us from that destruction at all its levels' (Davies 2003: 54).

The increased diversity of the UK population increasingly requires a clearer understanding of linguistic and cultural differences, to maintain social relationships and foster a more inclusive society.

Languages contribute to prosperity

As well as being a social marker, the ability to use a foreign language is, by any definition, a useful acquisition and one which is held in high regard by many employers. Graduates in languages and related studies have high employability rates. This is not only a result of their academic knowledge and skills in language and culture, but also a result of the other skills that they acquire, such as critical thinking, independent learning, working with people and the ability to take risks, often acquired during their experience of working or studying abroad.

The success of the UK economy is strongly affected by our ability to engage with markets and trading partners in their own languages, notwithstanding the widespread (but overestimated) role of English as a language of international communication. As James Foreman-Peck put it recently, 'Lack of a common language is a barrier to trade. Overcoming the barrier is costly but there are widespread benefits from doing so that may warrant public intervention' (Foreman-Peck 2007: 21).

The inability of some businesses to function in a foreign language effectively acts as a tax on trade, reflected both in the loss of business opportunities, and in the economic and social costs of using translators and interpreters. Linguistically challenged businesses are less able to explore and identify opportunities that would have otherwise been

apparent. It may be, as Foreman-Peck has suggested, that the lack of investment in languages by small and medium-sized businesses is an example of market failure, from which the economy as a whole suffers (Foreman-Peck 2007: 14).

Various surveys have suggested that a significant number of firms recognize they have lost business because of the language skill factor or cultural barriers. One recent study argued that 'a significant amount of business is being lost to European enterprise as a result of lack of language skills' (CILT and InterAct International 2007). Many companies have reported difficulties in trying to expand in key emerging markets such as East Asia, South America and Eastern Europe.

In June 2010, Simon Nathan, senior policy advisor on education for the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), argued that fluency in languages such as French, German, Mandarin and Arabic can open new doors for traders. He pointed out that, 'Obviously employers greatly value language skills, particularly for overseas trade and breaking ice with clients. I think in general business terms it is a very good thing to have, in terms of building client and business relationships, if you can speak to someone in their own language.' (Parish 2010) He suggested that possessing language skills can help to reduce costs, but also help communicate with overseas companies on their own terms. He did not believe that pure fluency was a prerequisite, but that it was valuable to be able to hold a conversation in a different language, in order to 'break the ice'.

Incoming business is also affected. The UK tourism industry is currently going through rapid changes with implications for the language support it needs. For example, between 2005 and 2008 tourist visits from Poland, India and Russia grew by more than a quarter, and as a result of the recent recession Britain has been more reliant on visitors from long-haul destinations (VisitBritain 2010). Having staff who can communicate in the languages of these countries is clearly of some importance for the development of the tourist industry, but in the absence of British workers with this ability, it seems that firms are generally meeting their needs by recruiting staff from abroad.

Beyond competence in speaking a language, it is important for people in most industries to be able to understand the cultural context of their business partners. Unless they can navigate cultural differences and intercultural relations, they are not likely to be successful in their dealings with non-UK customers and suppliers. The experience of learning a language and engaging with another country is an important key to understanding the cultural practices of others. 'The ability to adapt ... to unfamiliar environments is becoming one of the key skills demanded by an internationalised economy and rapidly changing domestic social contexts' (Campbell 2000). Language is the important key to understanding the cultural practices of others. This is in turn critically important in business.

Naturally, business has become sharply aware of these issues and there are now thriving industries offering language tuition for business purposes and cultural briefing for international trade relations. Many of these services are offered by universities through language centres and enterprise units, creating direct links between higher education and the business world. Their work benefits directly from the research of specialists in language learning and intercultural communication, which can make the difference between amateur and professional teaching.

Languages in public policy

The importance of languages in everyday life is deeply felt, and many writers have explored its intricacies (Sherringham 2006). We began by suggesting that knowledge of languages reveals meanings that are otherwise concealed and brings life to the landscape. We can go further and suggest that it also empowers the individual, giving them greater knowledge, enabling them to play a fuller role in the life around them and giving them access to a wider palette of ways to present themselves. This is perhaps the meaning of the Slovak proverb, '*Koľko jazykov vieš, toľkokrát si človekom*' ('The more languages you know, the more of a person you are') (European Commission 2005). In a more physiological sense, there is also evidence that language learning may have unexpected health benefits. Controlled experiments have demonstrated that bilingual elderly people are less likely to develop senile dementia than their monolingual peers (Bialystok *et al.* 2004).

While a considerable onus lies with the individual to extend their language capacities, it is also the responsibility of policymakers to find ways of making this empowerment available to as many citizens as possible. This was part of the reasoning behind the Roberts Committee which advised the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) that languages were among the strategically important and vulnerable subjects (Roberts 2005). The report has led to a number of policy initiatives, providing funding and other forms of support for languages. It is an increasingly important task of research in languages to provide the ideas and evidence that can inform public policy. This is already happening on a greater scale than in the past.

There is a growing requirement for research that is able to identify wider changes in language use and language contact to which governments and state agencies will need to respond. In the UK, much of this work concerns the international role of English (Jenkins 2007). Otherwise, the main focus of policy-oriented research is on issues of language teaching and learning within formal education. Only the state is able to intervene where the market cannot, especially where timescales for education greatly exceed the tolerance of business rhythms. And certainly the thirteen-year education cycle from starting in primary school to the end of secondary school stretches well beyond the planning horizons of any Western enterprise.

Language learning requires research

Research into language learning has shown that the process of learning a foreign language engages learners in developing a wider awareness of other cultures and ways of life. This learning may be mainly concerned with giving students increased experience of a specific culture, but it also involves an increased awareness of cultural models themselves. Their increased awareness allows students to reflect on their own ways of life and cultural assumptions, leading to the development of intercultural understanding. This is a critical skill applicable to interactions at home and abroad. Research in this area can help develop these skills both within a language classroom and outside it.

Language learning in schools has undergone a severe decline in recent years in the UK, with examination uptake of French and German spiralling downwards. In contrast, learning languages in informal setting and particularly for tourist purposes is booming. As Phipps points out: 'The democratisation of travel in the west has brought about a democratisation in the learning of languages for tourist purposes, but not yet in mainstream study' (Phipps 2006: 4). Her study of tourist language learners offers a new paradigm for research into language learning. She argues against the criticism that tourist language learning undermines serious language learning. Instead, she highlights the motivations of learning language for travel, of becoming 'linguistic guests' and the resultant strengthening of intercultural dialogue. Much more than a set of functional skills, she suggests that languages and intercultural dialogue are:

an everyday quest, amongst other things, for alterity and as an encounter with other ways of living and speaking and acting. Such a quest, or engagement with the shifting realities of social life, leads to a re-attunement of the whole being, to an education of attention that does not change who we are, but expands our horizons and enskills us to dwell in different worlds. (Phipps 2006: 19)

Increasingly, language learning also requires an effort to overcome the 'smart monolingualism' of contemporary information technology. This effect is generated by the increasingly sophisticated way in which interactions through the internet are designed to present the user with the material most likely to appeal to them. As a result, the user who has frequently accessed material in English will generally find only English language material in the early pages of a browser search and may be under the impression that no other languages are used on the internet. When we access a webpage, the further links offered are also generally in the same language. However, language skills can enable the user to gain access to the rapidly growing resources of the internet in other languages. 'Wiki', Hawaiian for 'quick', is now an everyday word. Most internet users are familiar with Wikipedia,

which is now available in about 266 languages, of which around 30 offer more than 100,000 articles (Wikipedia 2010). Criticisms of Wikipedia are widely expressed, especially among academics, who have a more demanding view of the knowledge process. But this online encyclopaedia does at least raise awareness of the wealth of knowledge not accessible in the English language.

Conclusion

The impact of research in languages is felt across the whole of UK society, though it is usually the unseen hand behind the use of language in different domains. Nowhere is this clearer than in the process of education. A graduate in languages entering the job market carries sixteen or seventeen years of education with them, for two-thirds of which they will have learned languages. They embody research, and the entire process of their education has been informed by research.

It is often only toward the end of their higher education that the student makes direct contact with the activity of research, when they begin to produce knowledge and insights from their own study and investigation. At an earlier point, at university, they have met teachers who are engaged in research. Earlier again, towards the end of their secondary schooling, they have made contact with the direct results of research in the form of books written by scholars on the subjects they are studying. Their teachers from primary-school days onwards are also the product of a research-informed process, and have experienced research on the pedagogy of language learning and teaching, both directly and indirectly, as part of their teacher education. They may also engage in pedagogic research themselves.

A similar scenario can be sketched for the other social domains, where research contributes to greater prosperity, to the development of an open society and to a rich cultural life. Research in languages and cultures provides important insights into each of these domains. It enables us to develop tools and approaches that underpin the UK's capacity in languages and cultures. It enables the country to reap valuable benefits, which we need in the new global age. And it provides the means by which every one of us can become more of a person.

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