

Dialogues

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Languages across government

by [Wendy Ayres-Bennett](#)

In this article, Wendy Ayres-Bennett, Principal Investigator of the MEITS (Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies) research project, argues for the urgent need for a national languages policy and for a more holistic and coherent approach towards languages across Whitehall and the devolved administrations.

Languages are relevant to key issues of our time: immigration, integration and social cohesion; defence and security; conflict resolution and peace building; international relations and soft power; well-being and healthy aging, to name but a few. Yet, in terms of government policy, most people tend to think of languages as being the concern principally of the Department for Education, and possibly of Ofsted and the Higher Education Council for England (Hefce), and their equivalents in the devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This is because in the UK ‘languages’ often means ‘Modern foreign languages’, and many people’s encounter with languages is the relatively painful experience of learning French, Spanish, or decreasingly German, at school. If only I had a pound for every time someone replied to my ‘confession’ that I am a Professor of French along the lines ‘I did French at school, but I was never any good at languages...’.

The need for a national language policy

A national languages policy needs to adopt a more holistic approach towards languages in the UK. This means not just thinking about the teaching and learning of a small number of European languages, but also about the indigenous languages of the UK (Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Scots, Ulster Scots, Welsh, Cornish), and community languages, that is the languages spoken by members of minority groups or communities. The [2011 Census](#) revealed that in London 22.1% of the population had a main language other than English, with this rising to 41.4% in the London borough of Newham. The same linguistic diversity is evidenced by the [January 2017 school census](#). In primary schools, 20.6% of pupils are exposed to a language other than English in their home, an increase of 0.5% since the previous year, and a figure which has steadily increased since 2006. At secondary school, the percentage is 16.2%. A language policy needs to accommodate, then, not only the monolingual British citizen who, as a native speaker of English, struggles to see the benefits of learning another language, but also the bilingual Welsh speaker, and, for instance, the child who speaks Bengali or Polish at home and acquires English as an additional language in the classroom.

Language policy across the UK needs to be connected in at least two important ways. First, there is much to be learnt from sharing experiences and best practice across Whitehall and the devolved administrations. [Scotland](#) has adopted the European Commission’s ‘Mother Tongue + 2’ policy, whilst [Wales](#) has a ‘Bilingualism + 1’ policy, and both countries are currently grappling with implementation issues. Whilst the introduction of compulsory languages at primary school level in England is welcome – although this has equally been accompanied by its own implementation issues, not least the lack of suitably qualified teachers and their lack of confidence in language teaching –, numbers taking languages at A level in England continue to decline year on year. According to the

latest [Language Trends survey](#) for 2017, the Department for Education (DfE) reports that there were 26,796 entries for A level modern language subjects in Summer 2016. This represents a decline of around one third (32%) since 1996 and a decline of 3% from the previous year (2015). In contrast to the previous trend, which had shown the number of entries in French and German in steep decline, but increasing numbers for Spanish and other languages, there were falls in numbers of candidates for Spanish and for other languages between 2015 and 2016. As regards languages of international importance in bodies such as the UN or in terms of defence and security, there were 2445 entries for Chinese (although it is anticipated that the [Mandarin Excellence Programme](#) might improve these numbers in future), and 1067 for Russian. As for Arabic, the figure rose by 15% in 2016 according to the British Council's report, *The Teaching of Arabic language and cultures in UK schools* (Alcantara Communications 2016), but remain low at 749. Notwithstanding the bilingualism in certain parts of Wales, take-up and achievement in modern foreign languages has been particularly worrying in this part of the UK. The [Language Trends survey for Wales](#) (2016-2017) indicates that 44% of schools have fewer than five pupils studying a foreign language at AS level and 61% have fewer than five foreign language pupils at A level. What could the different countries learn from each other in terms of policy and its implementation, or indeed from language policies across Europe or beyond? Another example might be the question of languages and social cohesion. In Northern Ireland, Irish has typically been associated with the Catholic, Nationalist and Republican community and thus rejected or viewed with suspicion by the Protestant Unionist Loyalist community. There are some exciting developments at grassroots level and through the work of charitable bodies, such as the [East Belfast Mission](#) or [Co-Operation Ireland](#) which, in partnership with the AHRC funded research project, *Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies*, is providing language teaching and the acquisition of soft diplomatic skills in Irish to members of the Protestant community as part of post-conflict peace-building. The question of an Irish language act remains, nevertheless, at the centre of current political debate. Might there be value in looking at this situation in relation to the tensions in certain parts of England between the indigenous monolingual community and newly arrived migrants or refugees? Could some provision of very basic knowledge of an indigenous or community language to monolingual British citizens in areas where there are high concentrations of speakers of these languages be of value in promoting greater cross-cultural understanding and cohesion between different communities?

The need for greater co-ordination and collaboration

Second, there would seem to be much to be gained from greater collaboration and co-ordination between different Whitehall departments. For instance, to what extent is thinking about the training and use of translators and interpreters in the immigration service, the police, the criminal justice system, in security and defence and the health service joined up? How effective is it to have the provision of English language teaching, notably for immigrants, shared between the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), with its responsibility for community-based English language provision, the Home Office, particularly in terms of visas and immigration, and the Department for Education, responsible for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision (with planned devolution of budgets for adult education to local authorities from 2018/2019)? There is a cross-Whitehall language focus group which is an operational group reporting to the International Next Generation HR Group and which seeks to find efficiency savings through joint procurement and the pooling of resources. As such, it is a valuable forum for exchanging ideas and sharing best practice and information on training opportunities. However, it appears that not all departments where languages are important to policy work are represented. In October 2015 the group had representatives from the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the National Crime Agency, the Metropolitan Police, HM Revenue and Customs, the Department for International Development, the British Council, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice. There are some positive signs, not least the recent appointment of a Senior Champion for Languages from the FCO to help coordinate language policy across Whitehall. She would presumably be all the more effective if there were also a Minister designated with similar responsibility or a Chief Government

Linguist along the lines of a Chief Government Scientist. The statement made by Baroness Anelay of St Johns (Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office) last December announcing the relaunch of the group and the desire to include other government departments who have an interest in, or the need for, foreign language skills was also encouraging ([HL3284](#)). The formulation is, however, perhaps rather narrow. Would this include promotion of the Cornish language which has come under the DCLG, although funding for the previous programme stopped in April 2016? And, to what extent is it possible for languages to gain traction in new areas?

Take the case of health. There is a growing body of empirical evidence that languages are beneficial not just for the promotion of healthy aging, but also for delaying the onset of dementia and aiding recovery from strokes. In a series of papers, researchers have shown, for instance, that the onset of dementia in bilinguals is on average 4-5 years later than in monolinguals (for a summary and references, see the [LSP policy paper](#) by Bak and Mehmedbegovic). The effect may be even greater in those with low or little literacy (Alladi, Bak et al. 2013). Perhaps even more exciting is the finding that some of the cognitive advantages of knowing more than one language can be enjoyed by those learning a language later in life, providing they continue to practice it regularly (Bak, Long et al. 2016). Will there come a point when the National Health Service has a budget to fund language classes for those who can't afford them alongside, say, its budget for drugs or other therapies?

Concluding remarks

A series of reports, including [The Value of Languages](#) (2015), have made powerful cases for the importance of languages across key areas of government and society. The MEITS research project, like the [All Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages](#), continues to campaign for languages having greater visibility in public policy and for the need for a national languages policy. Concerns about globalization, immigration, and about the future of the UK once it is no longer part of the European Union, all mean that a coherent and holistic languages policy is now more necessary than ever.

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