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Questions and Answers

Multilingualism – Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies

By Wendy Ayres-Bennett, Professor of French Philology and Linguistics University of Cambridge and Principle Research Investigator Multilingualism – Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies.

Q: There seem to be many changes going on globally in the World, the UK has voted to BREXIT the European Union, there are significant movements of people across the globe, not to mention the conflicts taking place, would you agree this project is timely and if so why?

A: Yes, understanding the value of languages, both nationally and internationally, and showing how languages can help us respond to the key issues of our time such as these, is vital today. In the UK there is a wide-spread misconception that speaking English is enough and that monolingualism is the norm. In fact, more than half of the world's population speaks more than one language on a daily basis, and in the UK nearly one in five primary school pupils has a first language other than English. Our project aims to demonstrate the value of languages both to individuals and to society, and the importance of speaking more than one language, or being multilingual.

Q: But the UK isn't renowned for the love of learning languages why is that?

A: Languages in the UK have often mistakenly been thought of as too difficult or only suitable for the brightest students. When you speak a global language like English, the immediate benefits of learning a language seem less obvious. That is why our project is looking at the value of languages both to societies and to individuals, as well as some of the obstacles and challenges presented by multilingualism.

Q: Could you give me an example of the benefits of learning a language?

A: One of the most exciting areas on which our team will be working concerns the cognitive benefits of learning a language. This will build on research already conducted by one of our team, Thomas Bak in Edinburgh. We are beginning to find important results both for healthy old ageing and dementia. In 2014 Thomas looked at a large sample of 850 people, all born in 1936, and was able to show that those who had learned a second language in later childhood or adulthood performed better than would be predicted by the results of their IQ test at age 11. These advantages concern mainly the so-called executive functions (attention, task switching, monitoring and so on). Just this year he showed how people up to the age of 78 can improve their attention after just one week of an intensive Gaelic course. Even more exciting, perhaps, is the work on dementia. Building on work conducted in Toronto, Thomas, together with colleagues in India, has found that bilingual patients develop dementia 4-5 years later than monolinguals. At a time when the UK population is ageing and there are real concerns about the funding of the care of the elderly, this finding – which

shows a delay longer than can be achieved currently by any medication – is also important to society.

Q: So learning a language whatever our age is actually good for our brain functions?

A: As in all science, there is some conflicting evidence, but most experienced researchers in bilingualism agree that there are consistent effects. In another study, Thomas Bak demonstrated, for example, that bilinguals were twice as likely to show a full cognitive recovery from strokes compared with monolinguals. Our project is aiming to show that some of these cognitive advantages can also be enjoyed by those who learn a language at any time in their lives.

Q: Is there also a practical need to learn a language to help solve conflicts in the World today, if so why is that?

A: The experiences of the British Army in Afghanistan and Iraq highlighted the acute need for officers with language skills, and as a result, the military has sought to implement language skills training through its organizations, as a core competence. In situations of tension or conflict, language differences can divide communities and fragment societies, as is evident in some of the areas we have chosen for our case studies such as Catalonia and the Ukraine. One of our teams of researchers will be looking at Northern Ireland, where there are positive signs as to how language learning can promote social cohesion and peace-building. For instance, the team will be working with Co-Operation Ireland (an all-island peace-building charity) and particularly its LEGaSI project which seeks to develop leadership skills and confidence in disenfranchised loyalist communities. The alienation felt by this community towards Irish language and culture is being tackled in two ways. First, through the study of place names. In showing that Irish is part of the shared 'linguistic landscape' of Northern Ireland, greater awareness of the rootedness of the linguistic traditions is promoted across the whole community. Empowerment of loyalist communities, including former paramilitaries, is also being facilitated through language training in Irish. This allows them to feel some ownership of the language as well as developing the soft diplomatic skills which will help them to negotiate respectfully across the community divide.

Q: The Metropolitan police, prisons and the NHS need more language skills. Is there a pressing need for languages to run our public services?

A: There is a pressing need for interpreters and translators with good language skills to work across these services. Internationally, the UK is under-represented, for instance in the translating and interpreting departments of the UN, as a result of a shortage of linguists. On the other hand, the Metropolitan Police, like the army, is a good example of an institution which has come to realise the value of language skills. The Met's recruitment campaign for applicants able to speak one of 25 languages (in addition to English), ranging from French and German through to Arabic, Farsi, Polish and Yoruba, is interesting in pointing out that: 'Whilst our police officers are able to effectively carry out their duties without the ability to speak a second language, a police constable with this skill is an asset in helping both themselves and their colleagues to more effectively engage with the community and deal with everyday policing situations in our diverse city'. Languages, then, are an asset in a number of different areas of public life.

Q: What other educational benefits are associated with being multilingual?

A: There are huge benefits from being able to step outside a single language, culture and mode of thought and see the world through other people's eyes. The gradual opening up of new worlds and the move from incomprehension to being able to make sense of another language and culture can be truly magical. There is a wealth of books and films in other languages to enjoy, and there is nothing like reading them in the original language. Through reading literature in the language in which it was written we begin to see the world through the linguistic categories and world view of its speakers. Works of literature, films and theatre can also tell us much about the cultural and political situation of a country, either directly or indirectly. And then there is the pleasure we get from a good story or a beautifully expressed piece of poetry. We know from research carried out by the BA Born Global project that it is the combination of language and intercultural skills that makes linguists attractive as employees.

I am also pleased that there is an important historical dimension to our work. For instance, one of our strands will consider how standard languages – which play a key role in language education – have developed, how multilingualism has shaped and challenged them, and how they are being changed by contact with other languages or their use in new media, such as the internet.

Q: This years' A level results here highlighted that there is a problem, why is that?

A: Once again the decline in numbers taking A levels in foreign languages has been striking, particularly in French and German. The Government is taking steps to stop the decline, and we are pleased that a foreign language is part of the English Baccalaureate. There are also new syllabuses this year for GCSEs and A levels in languages. But we also know that there is a shortage of teachers in Modern Languages, from primary level right through the school system. Our programme has a strong policy dimension and we expect our research to be useful to policymakers and practitioners alike. But we need to bring about a fundamental change in the way people think about languages – to develop an understanding that not to speak another language is to be limited, disadvantaged, and that this differentiates us from educated people in many other parts of the world.

Conversely, those who can speak more than one language have considerable advantages. To cite a manager interviewed in the British Academy's Born Global survey of languages in business: 'It is the employees with additional languages that get the best career development opportunities when we expand internationally'.

Q: Did you learn languages at home?

A: No, I started as the typical monolingual Brit with no languages in my background and no experience of foreign travel! I started French at school at the age of 11 and it was, as the French say, a *coup de foudre*, or love at first sight. I had always liked words, patterns and puzzles and so I enjoyed learning grammatical patterns and new vocabulary. Like many of my generation, I then learnt Latin, and with the help of this I can now read Italian and Spanish. Later on at school, I took up German and ended up studying French and German at university.

Q: Are there other things which can be done to improve the teaching of languages in the UK?

A: One of our research teams will be investigating the transformative power of multilingual identity in foreign language learning. We aim to chart the development of multilingual identity and how this might have an impact on learners' motivation and progress. We'll look at two broad categories of adolescents in the early stages of classroom-based foreign language learning: monolingual speakers of English becoming multilingual through acquiring competence in a second language; and multilingual learners (e.g. a pupil whose first language is Punjabi or Lithuanian and who has English as an additional language) who then learns another language at school. As UK schools are increasingly multilingual, there is a need to investigate the relationship between the development of multilingual/transcultural identity and foreign language learning. The premise is that, regardless of linguistic profile, language learners' enhanced understanding of what it means to be multilingual, and of themselves as developing multilinguals, leads not only to greater motivation and achievement in school, but also to them wanting to engage with lifelong language learning, as well as to enhanced social cohesion.

Q: How did this project come about and what role will the different partners play in this ambitious project?

A: In May 2014 the Arts and Humanities Research Council announced that it wished to fund 'ambitious, multi-institutional and multi-disciplinary research programmes that demonstrate the strategic importance of language-led research and enhanced language expertise across the arts and humanities, and beyond.' At that time, I was already leading an informal research group on multilingualism at the University of Cambridge and we were immediately attracted by this exciting opportunity. We knew there were research strengths in complementary areas at the Universities of Nottingham, Edinburgh, and Queen's University, Belfast and we soon formed a coherent team. Edinburgh, for instance, has great expertise in researching the cognitive benefits of languages. We wanted to bring in the community and heritage languages of the UK, and so expertise in Irish at Queen's was important. Nottingham, like Cambridge, has a large number of researchers in modern languages, and particular expertise in the history of ideas. We also have international partners at the Universities of Bergen, Girona, Peking and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, all of which are leading centres in different aspects of our project.

Q: You have other non-academic partners too, who are they and what role will they play?

A: Yes, there are over thirty of these, and working with them will be one of the most interesting parts of the project, since they will help us to ask the right research questions and provide channels for getting the word out about the results of our research. We wanted to include national bodies such as Age UK and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, commercial partners such as HarperCollins, which will provide internships for some of the younger members of our team, but also grassroots groups such as Cambridge Ethnic Community Forum, the Nottingham Writers' Studio and the East Belfast Mission. We will also have three 'policy fellows' from Whitehall and the devolved administrations working with us during the project, who will inform us of government priorities, and in turn have direct access to the evidence from our research to inform their policies.

Q: How will you conduct this research and over what time scale, is it going to be both quantitative and qualitative?

A: The research will be conducted through six interlocking research strands looking at different aspects of multilingualism. Over the four years of the project, which will run until June 2020, the whole team will of course meet regularly to exchange ideas. One of the interesting things about a large interdisciplinary team such as ours – we are 35 in total – is that we start from different disciplinary methods and conventions. In our planning meetings it became evident that the cognitive scientists who answer their research questions typically using quantitative data are very different beasts from our literary and cultural scholars who adopt a more qualitative approach. We hope that, through working together, we will be able to elaborate some new ways of working, and to introduce qualitative research into the quantitative work, for instance.

Q: Will you be creating new knowledge and opportunities?

A: Yes, that's right. If we are going to bring about a cultural change in the attitude towards modern languages, which is our aim, we have to have strong evidence of their value underpinned by first-class research. We want to speak not just to academics, but to policymakers, practitioners and the general public. That is why, for example, we are planning to have a pop-up museum of languages which will go to several locations in the UK. When we started, we found it very surprising that there are museums for dog collars and lawnmowers, but there is no museum for languages in the UK.

Q: Are you really going to be able to re-energise Modern Languages and if so how?

A: If we are going to re-energise Modern Languages research, we need to start by convincing pupils and parents of the interest and excitement of language learning, which is why two of our six research strands will be working with schools. We will integrate some of our research into our university teaching and we are nurturing a new generation of young scholars who will be able to take forward the research models and methods we develop. We are also pleased that the project has a fund to which researchers from other institutions can apply, so that we hope to draw in other colleagues and universities as the project develops.

Q: Will you succeed in changing attitudes amongst the general public and policy makers and your stakeholders too?

A: One of the great advantages of this project is that we are, from the outset, establishing close relationships with our non-HE partners, who, as I've said, include policymakers and key practitioners. This means that we will be discussing with them throughout the course of the project what their major concerns are, and this will help ensure we are asking the right research questions. We intend to produce guidelines and materials for teachers and, for example, for the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. Policy work is central to this project and we are planning a number of policy workshops and policy briefs. We are also planning a number of events for the general public, including a Celebration of Multilingualism, with performances and language tasters, towards the end of the project, as well as publications, such as a book on Myths about Multilingualism, which will seek to dispel some of the general public's misconceptions about languages and language learning.

Q: What new ground do you realistically think can be achieved with your project: Multilingualism – Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies?

A: The scale and scope of this project, and in particular, its interdisciplinary nature gives us the opportunity to do something really new and exciting alongside the other three teams funded under this scheme. Surprising as it might seem, it's been fairly unusual so far for modern languages specialists to look at so many different languages together – our work will include major European and world languages studied in UK schools and universities (French, German, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish), minoritized languages (such as Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Catalan) and community languages (such as Punjabi, Cantonese, Polish), and to do this from different disciplinary approaches ranging from literary and cultural studies through to cognitive science. That model has been much more common in the sciences, and it is clearly very powerful. We hope to create the same synergies and to energise not just our team and the people we work with, but also to create a real buzz amongst people who haven't so far thought that languages might be for them. Together, we hope to demonstrate the benefits of language learning for cultural awareness, national and international relations, social cohesion and conflict resolution, as well as for health and well-being. In demonstrating how languages are central to some of the key issues of our time, we hope to show the value of multilingualism for the UK, whether this comes from supporting and nurturing heritage and community languages, or from learning foreign languages in our schools and universities.

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