

Talk at Newnham, 13 May 2023, by Baroness Jean Coussins

Good afternoon everybody. It's wonderful to have the opportunity to talk about the importance of languages in friendly territory amongst like-minded people. And I'm going to say a few words not just about how smart you've all been to choose to study languages, but also about how that decision has paved the way for you to have far more career advantages and choices in a global, mobile labour market, perhaps in sectors or roles you hadn't considered before. There has never been a better time to be a linguist.

And that probably comes across as a very counter-intuitive statement, against a background of the usual stereotypes of monolingual Brits who believe they needn't bother to learn other languages because everyone speaks English. So I'll be doing a bit of myth-busting as well.

So, myth number 1, is well, now we've left the EU, we needn't bother to learn languages any more. I've heard plenty of anecdotes from school teachers saying that their students are sighing with relief that they don't need to bother with their French lessons anymore because they won't need it in future. What a contradictory world these young people live in: on the one hand retreating into a post Brexit little island mindset, and on the other, being in instant contact every second of the day via their smart digital devices with anyone and everyone in the world.

Myth number 2 is that now we can always turn to Google Translate, so we needn't bother to learn any languages ourselves because a machine will do the job. But while machine translation undoubtedly has its place, it can never replace humans when it comes to nuance, cultural sensitivity and complex understanding or meaning. The excellent language training in the diplomatic service, the armed forces, the police and the security services is testimony to the importance of real people making a crucial difference with their language skills. Indeed, language skills are now a requirement for promotion in the armed forces and the Metropolitan Police. And it's no surprise that the latest recruitment drive being run by the National Cyber Security Centre is targeting three specific groups of people: computer scientists, coders, and linguists.

You might have seen an amusing story that made the media headlines a while ago to illustrate the pitfalls of turning to google. A supermarket in Wales was re-doing all its signage above the aisles and one of the new categories it had to put up a sign for in Welsh as well as English was alcohol free drinks. Well, the machine wasn't very well up on the importance of word order and it turned out that the Welsh version said 'free alcohol' instead of 'alcohol free'.

We can only shudder to think of what the infinitely more serious consequences might be if machines not people were doing the translation and interpreting for soldiers on deployment, or if algorithms rather than specialist linguists were translating what might be crucial detailed information about terrorists or people traffickers.

And myth number 3 is everyone speaks English anyway, so what's the point of making an effort? But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, English is not enough. Speaking only English is as much of a disadvantage as speaking no English.

In fact, only 6% of the world's population are native English speakers and 75% speak no English at all.

In a post Brexit world, where the UK seeks to redefine its place and establish leadership in international relations, security and soft power, negotiating umpteen new free trade agreements, young people will need languages more than ever for the culturally agile, mobile and interconnected jobs of the future.

The amount of internet content in English is declining, while content in Mandarin is soaring. Arabic is the most used language across all social media platforms. There are more blogs in Japanese than in English. And French and German still regularly come top of UK employers' skill-set wish list. And groundbreaking research published recently from this very University by Professor Wendy Bennett on the economic value to the UK of learning and using other languages included the headline finding that if we taught more people French, Spanish, Mandarin and Arabic, we could increase UK exports by £19 billion a year. Research by the British Council added German to that list, to give the top five languages needed by the UK for our prosperity and influence after Brexit. The next five languages ranked in importance after those were Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Japanese and Russian.

Other disciplines, such as classics, science and history, have thrown up high profile media figures and prime time TV programmes. Look no further than our wonderful very own Mary Beard for example. But there are no TV linguists to help fire up the interest of the next generation in learning a language. I think that it's because language and the cultural knowledge that goes with it is not only an academic and intellectual discipline in its own right, it's also a vital enabling ingredient running through all other disciplines. So people don't quite know where to place languages and so they become invisible.

Yet the demand for language skills has never been greater and that goes for practically every sector of the economy, with higher than average demand in the Financial Services, IT and Telecommunications, Passenger Transport, Fashion & Design and Tourism. British companies are losing out on £50 billion-worth of contracts every year because of a lack of language skills in the

workforce. That amounts to 3.5% of GDP. Yet astonishingly, neither the government's Industrial Strategy nor the Export Strategy even mentioned language skills. As new markets open up in the Far East, Central Asia and Latin America, employers are looking not only for French and German speakers, but also Mandarin or Cantonese, Spanish, Russian and Arabic.

In the security and diplomatic services, and in the world of development and humanitarian aid, as well as in business, there's a need for Farsi, Hindi, Turkish, Portuguese, and Korean, amongst others. The Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office now provides training in 86 different languages and the Defence Academy for Language and Culture in 40. Our Ambassadors abroad are frequently complimented on the language skills of our embassy staff, at all levels, and the UK has acquired a good reputation for our language competence when in post. When we put our minds to it, we Brits can do brilliantly at languages.

Thinking about humanitarian work, I just wanted to mention a splendid international NGO called Translators Without Borders I've been working with, who have provided interpreters and translators to work alongside the health professionals in Sierra Leone and other countries where the ebola crisis broke out.

Language was one of the main difficulties faced by humanitarian workers. Language is not usually seen as a priority in emergency responses and as a result, misinformation and panic can spread quickly.

Information was available mainly in English or French, but only a minority of the people affected spoke either of these. In Sierra Leone, only 13% of women understand English and this led to important knowledge gaps. So TWB developed its Words of Relief project, the first translation crisis relief network in the world. Hundreds of ebola-related items were translated and disseminated, including posters, videos, cartoons and maps. More recently, TWB have deployed people into refugee camps in Bangladesh to disseminate accurate information about covid and vaccinations in the right languages.

Research at Reading University has shown how much more effective the UK's development and humanitarian aid can be if language issues are taken into account at every stage of a project, from design to delivery.

And we shouldn't forget the language industry itself. This sector includes not just interpreting and translating, but also writing language teaching materials such as textbooks, CDs and online resources, subtitling and dubbing for films and advertising, adapting websites for other countries

and much more. It's estimated to be worth over 20 billion euros across the EU, and has a very high growth rate. As an English-speaking nation, we are uniquely well-placed to take strategic advantage of this expected further growth, not only in Europe but worldwide.

For specialist linguists, another career path that's often overlooked is public service interpreting. These are the people who are needed every day in the courts, police stations and hospitals, to translate and interpret for people whose English is non-existent or not good enough to understand what's going on, often where their human rights or indeed their life might be at stake.

If that's a glimpse of the demand, let's have a look at the supply side of the equation.

Sadly, out of the 164 universities in the UK, only 62 are now offering modern language degrees. The total number of modern language graduates has declined by 54% in the last decade or so. And even if every single one of the students currently doing languages went into teaching, we still wouldn't meet the officially predicted shortfall in MFL teacher numbers. But if you who are recent or soon to be graduates didn't know this already, you might be interested to know that the teacher training bursaries for MFL are set to increase next year from £15,000 to £25,000, tax free, with some scholarships also available at £27,000 for teachers of French, Spanish and German, making teaching a very strong career option for the ambitious languages graduate.

The EBacc has managed to increase take-up of languages at GCSE but this now seems to have stalled at around half of all pupils, compared to well over 80% before the subject was made optional after the age of 14. And A-level languages are in freefall, especially German, although the government has recently announced that it'll be funding a new German Excellence Programme to boost take-up.

Another factor to consider is the current trend for foreign language skills to become the preserve of a privileged educational elite. Languages up to age 16 are compulsory in 70% of independent schools but in only 16% of state schools.

And there are stark regional differences in participation and attainment, which correlate with regions of poor productivity and low skill levels.

So all of you, as linguists, are already well ahead of the game, personally, professionally and academically. Employers will make a beeline for you, whether you want to work explicitly as a linguist, or whether you can offer one or more other languages as an add-on to your main role. One absolutely crucial element in what marks you out as gold dust is the year abroad. Taking a year abroad as part of your degree, whether you're a linguist or not, makes it 19% more likely that you'll get a First.

And those who have taken the year abroad are also 23% less likely to be unemployed after graduation.

This is all because employers consistently say how much they value graduates who have had some international and cross-cultural experience. One study in the US reported that employers rated language skills and an international mindset as even more important than expertise in STEM subjects.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that 5 years after graduation, the median earnings of modern language graduates is well into the top half of the earnings table, higher than graduates in law, biological and physical sciences, business or psychology.

But looking at all those other disciplines, and the way they intersect with languages, is also important for the future viability and fundability of academic researchers in the UK. A great deal of the cutting edge research which the next generation will be taking forward, for example into climate change or counter-terrorism, is by definition international and comparative. And at the moment, graduates from the US, China, India and EU countries are more likely to have another language, or two, in addition to their main subject, whether that be law, chemistry, geography or economics. So please, don't write yourselves out of participation and leadership in these important fields by letting your language skills go.

And finally, I can't resist mentioning that we now know for sure that languages are good for your health. Robust research from Edinburgh University has shown that learning and using another language can delay the onset of Alzheimer's for up to 5 years, and can also be of significant help in cognitive recovery after a stroke.

I think the value of language specialists is now much better understood than it used to be, both domestically and in international relations. This doesn't mean everything is perfect of course. Another campaign I'm supporting is to get a UN Security Council Resolution on the protection of interpreters working in conflict zones, along the same lines as the existing Resolution on the protection of journalists. After all, at the end of a conflict, journalists go home, but the interpreters are local and so stay and face the vulnerability to kidnap, threats, torture or death, from the Taliban or whoever it happens to be. The Geneva Conventions are inadequate to protect these civilian interpreters and I'm hoping to change our government's mind on supporting a new Resolution. The UK's success post Brexit requires cultural intelligence and agility, whether in business, diplomacy or research.

As for those of us in the UK, not everyone needs to be a professional linguist, but whether we're talking about better public services, in justice or in health care, improving human rights or negotiating trade deals, the social advantage, the economic advantage and the soft power advantage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century surely belongs to the multilingual citizen and nation, not the blinkered Brit of the past who just thought all we had to do was shout more loudly in English. I hope I've given you a flavour of the huge range of possible career paths open to you, whether that's teaching, research, diplomacy, security and defence, business and commerce, public service, development or humanitarian aid – and I'm sure that's far from being an exhaustive list. You have a head start as linguists – and you're Newnhamites – what a combination! So go for it!

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