1 Linguaphobia

Speaking in September 2016 at the first Conservative Party Conference after the June referendum in which UK voters decided by a narrow margin to leave the European Union, British Prime Minister Theresa May said that Britain's success on the global stage was guaranteed because 'our language is the language of the world'.[1] Just a few weeks before he succeeded her as Prime Minister in July 2019, Boris Johnson declared that there were 'too many parts of the country' where immigrants 'did not speak English as their first language'.[2] Two strands of a colonial legacy surface in these statements: the aspiration to maintain global hegemony for the benefit of the former empire and its prosperity, and the view of immigrants as a commodity brought in to help build the homeland, refusing to accept that their mobility has created a multilingual reality in that very place.

Linguaphobia – the fear of people who are heard or seen or are just known to be speaking other languages – was a noticeable theme in the public debates leading to the Brexit vote.[3] The Conservative government introduced legislation for a referendum in a bid to outmanoeuvre Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which portrayed Britain, a nation that had colonised more parts of the world than any other, as a victim of European colonialism fighting for its independence. In early 2014 Farage held a carefully choreographed and widely publicised interview launching the decisive stage of his campaign of many years. Riding in a train carriage he complained that he didn't hear any English from London to Kent. That, he said, made him feel 'awkward' and proved that immigration was making Britain 'unrecognisable'.[4] The public face of multilingualism was presented as substance to persuade voters that the UK needed a radical move to regain its independence not just from European political institutions but also from cultural invaders. Just days before the referendum senior Conservative politician Iain Duncan Smith admitted in an interview with the BBC that there was no real economic problem around immigration, nor were migrants a real burden on public services. 'It's not about money,' he said, 'it's about human beings'. The real issue, he argued, was that many British people felt uncomfortable living next

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door to people whose first language was not English.[5] For Farage and Duncan Smith suspicion towards other languages and their speakers was a natural human instinct, one that could and should be allowed to shape the country's economic, domestic and foreign policies, indeed its destiny.

English First, 'Once and for All'

Hostility to multilingualism had made its appearance before the EU referendum was officially on the agenda. In March 2013 Communities Secretary Eric Pickles called on local authorities to stop translating documents 'once and for all', arguing that translation had an 'adverse effect on integration'. It was, he said, 'a waste of taxpayers' money' and was putting migrants at a disadvantage by taking away their incentive to learn English.[6] There is, it must be said, no known evidence to support the assertion that translation de-incentivises the learning of English (I come back to this in Chapter 4). The EU debate and its isolationist overtone brought about an escalation. A report by a senior civil servant, Dame Louise Casey, published just a few months after the referendum, flagged low proficiency in English among Muslim immigrants, insinuating a link between language, lack of integration and political extremism. Casey went further and asserted that not talking about 'the issue' would 'leave the ground open for the far right'.[7] At the very same time one of the Labour Party's aspirational leaders, Andy Burnham, soon to become Mayor of Greater Manchester, offered a left-wing pitch on 'the issue'. In a speech he suggested that there was 'nothing socialist about a system of open borders' if it was used to drive down labour costs and that reluctance to engage in the debate about immigration was 'undermining the cohesion of our communities and the safety of our streets'.[8] Predictably this strategically ambiguous statement was widely paraphrased as if Burnham had said that 'immigration made our streets unsafe'.

Perhaps he wasn't guilty of saying that directly, but Burnham was certainly responsible for joining the emotive bandwagon. In reality it was the Brexit debate with its linguaphobic element that made the streets of Britain unsafe for multilingual residents. Hate crime soared in the UK in the year leading to the referendum, rising by around 20 per cent. It made no distinction between those who had made use of EU freedom of movement to settle in the country, those who had come from other regions of the world and those who had been in the country for generations but belonged to a religious or ethnic minority. Just a few weeks before the vote a man attacked a Spanish immigrant in Bournemouth, hitting him with a wooden plank after shouting at him to 'speak English'.[9] Soon after the referendum, in September 2016, a twenty-one-year-old student of Polish origin was attacked in a small town in Shropshire after being heard talking in Polish. A group of young men swore at him, told him to

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speak English and then stabbed him.[10] *The Guardian* newspaper reported in the same month on the stories of other immigrants from Eastern Europe who said things like 'I now avoid speaking in my native tongue whenever I'm outside the house. People stare, sometimes they even sneer or change seats on the train', and 'I generally do not speak much in my native eastern European language, but I am very careful now of using it in public, as I am scared of the reaction'.[11] In early 2020, as Brexit was gradually turning into a reality, a YouGov opinion poll found that 41 per cent of people who voted 'Leave' in the referendum said they were bothered by hearing conversations not in English,[12] while in Norwich posters with the title 'Happy Brexit Day' said: 'We finally have our great country back; we do not tolerate people speaking other languages than English in the flats.'[13]

The hostility did not stop at immigrants. In September 2017 a town councillor in southwest Wales received abuse after speaking to her child in Welsh.[14] Once unleashed, the Brexit genie turned out to be disconnected from any historical timeline: talking about 'the issue' reopened the threat even to the indigenous languages of the Isles that had been suffering the consequences of an Anglo-Saxon invasion that took place a millennium and a half ago. Just days before the referendum representatives of organisations that support regional minority languages in the UK – Welsh (Cymraeg), Scottish Gaelic (Gàidhlig), Irish (Gaeilge), Cornish (Kernewek) and Scots – published an open letter in which they warned that Brexit would be 'potentially disastrous' for minority and lesser-used languages.[15] They were referring primarily to the status of minority languages under EU human rights law as well as to access to EU funds that supported regional languages. But there was also mention of 'aggressive language policies designed to eradicate our languages' including the withdrawal of UK government support for languages like Cornish. While pro-Brexit and 'English first' campaigners described 'the issue' as being immigration from Continental Europe, their message resonated as one of general hostility towards other cultures and languages.

Dame Louise Casey's report resurfaced in March 2018 in connection with a government Green Paper on Integrated Communities.[16] It called for measures to 'boost English language skills' in order to help people get jobs, mix with others and play a full role in community life. But it also pledged to 'strengthen the language requirements' for those wanting to become British citizens. In the official public narrative language was not just part of an individual's heritage and set of skills but also a manifestation of political loyalty, deeply anchored in the notion that a single language is what binds the nation together. Commenting on the Green Paper, Dame Louise Casey called on the government to set a target date by which 'everybody in the country' should 'speak a common language'.[17] If that happened, she added, it would adequately address the 'tides of immigration' and 'the public would feel relief'.

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But the reality in Britain is not usually one where people on the streets, in markets or in hospitals cannot communicate because they lack a common language. At any given time only a very small minority of people does not know English. In the 2011 Census 7.7 per cent of the population of England and Wales, around 4.2 million people, declared a 'main language' other than English (we will come back to the framing of the question in Chapter 7). But only 0.3 per cent or 138,000 people reported not to know English at all.[18] For comparison, over half a million international students come to the UK every year to study or improve their English.[19] And proficiency in English is dynamic: relatively few people are stuck in a situation where their level of English is unlikely to improve (we return to this in Chapter 4). By 2021 Census figures showed a significant rise in the number of people declaring a 'main language' other than English, yet the proportion of those with the lowest level of English remained exactly the same, at 0.3 per cent, still just 161,000 individuals.[20]

The debate about a 'common language' is not about efficiency of communication nor, for the most part, about people's opportunities to integrate socially or join the labour market. The rhetoric is, as Dame Louise Casey, Iain Duncan Smith and others admit, about the discomfort that some British people feel when they are exposed to the fact that other people around them talk among themselves in a way that escapes the scrutiny and control of the monolingual majority. Behaving differently is seen as an act of defiance, a rebellion, and is taken personally as an insult by individuals who feel that their co-ownership of public space is under attack. It is the presence of multilingualism, not the absence of English, that triggers an urge to take action – among those on the street who stab a person for talking in Polish or among policy makers who propagate 'English first' and an end to immigration.

The Brexit Ambivalence

Not everyone in Britain sees languages as a threat. A study of media representations between the years 1990 and 2014 found that the keywords 'multilingualism' and 'bilingualism' were most frequently associated with education, particularly with learning French, German and Spanish, considered prestigious foreign languages and useful skills. A further association was with Alzheimer's disease and tentative evidence that bilingualism slows down loss of memory.[21] The referendum caused alarm bells to ring among those concerned that the 'English first' oratory might discourage more young people from acquiring language skills, further weakening institutions that offer language courses. Press reports began to argue that learning foreign languages was now 'more vital than ever'.[22]

In October 2016 the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Languages, in part a lobby group on behalf of language teachers, stated that 'Brexit must

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make the UK's language skills a top policy issue' since language skills were 'vital for our exports, education, public services and diplomacy'.[23] The Association of School and College Leaders went a step further: 'We understand that Brexit means Brexit' they declared submissively, citing a slogan introduced by Prime Minister Theresa May to reassure sceptics that her proposed Brexit deal would meet their demands to categorically sever links with the EU (she failed to convince her party and lost her job, and the country lost the prospect of a 'softer' Brexit). And the College Leaders added: 'But it is vital that it does not also mean a full-blown crisis in language teaching.'[24]

By June of 2018 the *Financial Times* reported that 'a third of English schools report a drop in interest in studying foreign languages following the Brexit vote'.[25] School Standards Minister Nick Gibb reacted by saying: 'It has never been more important for young people to learn a foreign language than now.'[26] He announced a programme to support a small selection of nineteen schools across the country that would be granted government funds to promote the learning of French, German and Spanish, at what would be 'Centres of Excellence'. The initiative wasn't formally inaugurated until late 2022, four years later,[27] and drew some criticism for wanting to turn languages into an elite subject.

In early 2019 the *Geographical* magazine published an opinion piece under the title 'Why foreign language skills post-Brexit will be vital'. It presented Brexit as an opportunity for language graduates: 'After Brexit,' it said, 'as migration from the EU is dramatically reduced, the employability of UK language graduates could increase'.[28] That followed a statement by Baroness Jean Coussins, co-chair of the APPG on Languages, who said at the House of Lords that languages were required in order to effectively fight 'terrorism and trafficking in people, drugs and firearms'. As examples of useful languages for those purposes she named 'Farsi, Kurdish and Nepalese, as well as EU languages such as Polish and Portuguese'. She described languages as being in the 'national interest', which she explained meant 'the economy and our capacity to play our part on the world stage' or what was commonly paraphrased as 'global Britain'.[29]

Some pro-languages initiatives found it both opportune and plausible to embrace the diction that Brexit would release Britain from its European constraints, unleash its potential and allow it to flourish as a global trade power (I come back to this in Chapter 7 when I discuss lobbying for languages). In the summer of 2018 the Co-op Academies Trust announced a new scheme to teach Mandarin Chinese. 'At a time of Brexit', it said in a press release, 'we need to make sure we look to China and equip our students with the skills they may well need to be successful'.[30] The Trust followed in the footsteps of the British Council, which said in a report in 2017 that Brexit 'has given urgency to the UK's quest to be a major international trading partner

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beyond Europe'. It calculated that this required Mandarin and Arabic to be added to the portfolio of the most frequently taught foreign languages.[31] In March 2019 the APPG on Languages released a further statement calling for a 'National Recovery Programme' for languages. Outlining a set of practical steps for various sectors, it tried to amplify its argument by what appeared to be an appeal to those driven by the imperial nostalgia that had become the mood of the day.[32] It said: 'The Foreign & Commonwealth Office, the Armed Forces and the police and security services are already prioritising language training' and added: 'We must build on this, so that the UK can be fully engaged in all international organisations and networks without relying on EU staff.'[33]

Many other statements about languages post-Brexit appeared to be caught in a similar way in the ambivalence of concern for language learning and what it represented in terms of reaching out and respecting other cultures, and the isolationist 'English first' tone that had come to dominate policy makers' agendas. Can one reconcile the two? Was it possible to fix the first by appeasing the second? In 2019 the British Council confirmed that many pupils didn't see the purpose of learning a European language after Brexit. It found it necessary to mention that this was true especially of young people of disadvantaged backgrounds. There was a hint at a link between social class and resentful attitudes towards other cultures,[34] possibly reflecting a wider perception that those who supported Brexit were the 'somewheres' whose identity was strongly localised, whereas Remainers were more likely to be 'anywheres' who adopted a more global if not quite cosmopolitan identity.[35]

In early 2020 the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) described a 'crisis' in language learning and offered its assessment that the post-Brexit climate has meant that multilingualism and multiculturalism have become politically contentious: 'To speak another language is to be associated with an internationalist mind-set, and the defence of language learning is charged with wider social issues beyond the scope of education policy.' Making its case for languages it lists cultural literacy, empathy, heritage and mental wellbeing as personal benefits. But then it adopts the 'now more than ever' air: 'A post-Brexit UK should open itself up to deeper interaction with countries right across the world.' And to further emphasise the point on the strategic, economic and military importance of languages, it presents a case study: 'A lack of language skills among recruits, resulting from declines in school and university learning, became a concern for the British Army after shortcomings in Iraq and Afghanistan.'[36] Language skills are a must, it follows, not least because they help forward the Rule Britannia agenda: they are an effective way of gathering intelligence and subjugating others in remote continents, much like in the imperial past. (In fact very few schools and universities in the UK teach Arabic, Kurdish, Persian or Pashto; the infamous

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decline in enrolment is usually measured for French and German, not the languages spoken in regions occupied by British troops in the Middle East.)

In July 2020 the British Academy along with the British Council and three other leading academic organisations joined forces to publish a proposal for a 'National Languages Strategy'.[37] Its recommendations focused exclusively on investment in language skills in an effort to reverse the decline in enrolment in language subjects, which, the proposal argued, would help 'strengthen our relationships across the world'. The statement hardly addressed domestic multilingualism, regulation of interpreting and translation services, accessibility of services and the importance of multilingualism for intergenerational relations and wellbeing or its role in cultural production (issues that I return to in Chapters 4–5). In fact the word 'multilingual' appeared in the document's twenty-five pages only seven times, five of which were citations of the titles of other documents and projects (some of them my own). The pro-languages lobby was being mobilised to forward an agenda that saw languages as a personal skill with which to equip today's Lawrence of Arabia: an elitist reserve, an imperial instrument. It did not engage with the fact that some policy makers saw the presence of other languages on Britain's streets as an annoyance, nor did it address multilingualism as an issue of domestic human rights. In fact it avoided a direct discussion of Britain's multilingual reality.[38] Instead languages were pitched as a foreign policy asset in a bid to appeal to the political interest of painting a 'global Britain' as one that projects strength and influence on others. I return to this point when I discuss academia and advocacy in Chapter 7.

Language Is Not Zero-Sum

Media outlets are occasionally heartened when children of migrants are reported to outperform those who come from monolingual backgrounds. In 2018 the *Daily Mail* reported on a University of Oxford study of 14,000 pupils that found that teenagers who didn't speak English as their first language performed better than native speakers. The editors were so impressed that they made sure to emphasise in the headline that bilingual children 'outperform native Britons at EVERY age and year group'.[39] One of the things we learn from this is just how out of date the notion of 'native speaker' is.[40] In a world of mobility the claim to be an authentic user of language is no longer the exclusive property of those who can trace their languages to ancestry going back several generations. That's just one reason to distinguish between 'nation' and a 'common language'. Two years on, official figures from the Department for Education showed that 43.8 per cent of teenagers who spoke English as an additional language achieved strong passes in their English results compared to 43.2 per cent of those considered 'native'

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English speakers. Despite the modesty of the difference a media report called these 'astonishing new figures' and added that there was irony about them given that 'the debate around immigration and the ability of immigrants to speak English has raged since the Brexit referendum'.[41]

The surprise has to do with the expectation that a home language other than English is a handicap. In England the School Census, which every school has to complete periodically, records children's 'first language' in order to ascertain whether pupils should be classed as EAL (English as an Additional Language) and receive special support. But a child who is trilingual, with two separate home languages, but speaks fluent English with a local accent when entering school (and also happens to be blond, is not called Ahmed or Sanjit and does not overtly indicate belonging to any minority religion) will go unnoticed by the school as far as entering a language other than English is concerned. For this reason statistics dramatically under-report multilingualism among school pupils.

So far we have looked at overt hostility towards other languages and their speakers who happen to feel at home on British soil, and how such linguaphobia is deemed legitimate by politicians and policy makers while some even use it to propel anxiety; that, if anything, was the Brexit campaign's principal 'project fear'.[42] We've also noted the ambivalence of the post-Brexit pro-languages lobby. I suggest that this ambivalence derives from the absence of a clear understanding of what multilingualism actually means. In June 2016, the same month in which the EU referendum took place, a multi-site cluster of research networks was launched under the umbrella of the Open World Research Initiative (OWRI). Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council with a total budget of £16 million it was considered a major investment intended to inject vitality into the study of Modern Languages (mainly Western European languages; we'll get to that later, too, in Chapters 5 and 7). I was one of the scheme's lead researchers. Some of the observations that I discuss in this book emerged from the OWRI research. But work in this framework left me disappointed and frustrated, to some extent even traumatised both intellectually and personally, and that experience was one of the reasons I decided to leave my position at the university in 2020. I will return to the OWRI scheme in connection with academia, advocacy and the shaping of teaching and research in Chapter 7.

At the launch event of one of the scheme's projects I had a conversation with one of the other senior researchers, a distinguished Modern Languages professor at one of the country's most prestigious universities. We talked about what 'multilingualism' meant. I had little hesitation, having taken and taught courses and read and written books about the subject and having always felt able and keen to relate it to my personal biography and the biographies of people around me: multilingualism was for me quite naturally the personal

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immersion in or exposure to multiple languages as a routine fact of life. As an academic agenda it was the study of such immersion and exposure and the effects that it had on individuals' identities and experiences, on the shape and structure of their linguistic behaviour and language features and on the practice routines in institutional settings to which such experiences and the discussions around them gave rise. But the distinguished professorial colleague had a different view. To her multilingualism meant bringing together academic expertise in different languages under a shared organisational framework. A project was about multilingualism if it incorporated experts on French, Italian, German and so on. Multilingualism was not an everyday experience; rather it had to do with the accumulation of certified professional skills in what most people would regard as an elitist environment.

And so it became clear to me that in a society where public narratives and public policy have always been shaped and dominated by monolinguals, one cannot expect a view of multilingualism to be taken for granted. By contrast, while researching for this book I discovered a short slide presentation used by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority for staff training. It was prepared by a staff member of the National Health Service (NHS) who was based in one of the smaller boroughs in the region. The page that hosts it offers practitioners 'resources for working with multilingual families', and the presentation explains: 'Multilingualism is the ability to speak more than one language' – plain and simple.[43] Front-line practitioners get it because working with multilingual people is part of their everyday experience. This gap between the political class at national level (and the academic experts who train it, and aspire to advise it) and the repertoire of everyday experiences at local level is something that I take up in the following chapters (particularly Chapters 4 and 5).

In this book I explore some of the channels that can help uncover multilingual experiences. I examine pathways to a discourse in which multilingualism is understood as the reality of millions of people as they run their everyday affairs, not just confined to a set of skills that are part of a training package to create the perfectly moulded civil servant and advance the national interest on the board game of international power. I ask whether there is a role for academic expertise in redefining multilingualism in such a way and putting it on the agenda of enquiry, public engagement and public policy, and what we need to do to alter the way we claim and reclaim knowledge in order to serve such a role. I explore whether there is an environment where our reflections in defence of multilingual practices and identities can resonate naturally.

Year on year statistics indicate that in larger cities in the UK as well as in other Western European countries, upwards of 40 per cent of school-age children come from multilingual backgrounds;[44] that means they speak or are exposed to more than one language in their home or neighbourhood.

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The figure increases considerably if we take a rather loose definition of 'language', one that many sociolinguists prefer, which identifies as 'language' any pattern of linguistic routine that has distinctive features and is considered by users to be a particular form of speech, whether it is written down or used in prayer or in broadcasting or just recalled in certain domestic settings in the occasional phrase when expressing compassion, bewilderment or dismay. Knowing a language in that sense does not necessarily mean passing a formal language examination and obtaining a certificate. In metropolitan centres of the so-called new world observations about the high proportion of multilingual people were made a long time ago.[45] As studies give more attention to other parts of the world we learn that the picture is a similar one. Among specialists and enthusiasts it's almost a cliché to say that we live in a world where life experience, especially in cities, is more often multilingual than not. But if we go back to the various citations at the beginning of this chapter we are reminded that it is not obvious or accepted by all that the reality in Britain is one in which young people in large urban centres – tomorrow's generation of leaders and managers in every walk of life – are likely to be multilingual, to come from multilingual backgrounds or to have grown up surrounded by multilingual people.

When he was first elected as Member of Parliament for the Manchester constituency of Gorton in 2017, Afzal Khan, Manchester's first Muslim MP, born in Pakistan, took his oath of office in Parliament in two languages, English and Urdu. He did this again when he was re-elected in 2019 and again when MPs renewed their oath after King Charles III succeeded Queen Elizabeth II to the throne in September 2022. Khan had been a supporter of putting multilingualism on the agenda and had made a number of public gestures in this regard. In a Twitter statement on 21 September 2022 he said: 'Today I made history by pledging allegiance to King Charles in both English, and my mother tongue, Urdu. A moving and personal way to honour my late mother and heritage, whilst ushering in a new era and celebrating the Commonwealth.'[46] These two brief sentences address several themes – from the individual to the community and on to the grand collective: the personal and emotional perspective on 'mother tongue', the importance of community heritage and the Crown's proclaimed mission to be acting on behalf of a pluralistic and international community. Yet Khan's social media post attracted dozens of abusive responses so intense that Twitter had to delete most of them from the platform. The one that was allowed to remain just weeks later said: 'Should only be allowed in English and if you can't do that should not be an MP.' This 'English first' declamation not only ignored the content of the post – Khan took the oath 'in *both* English, *and* my mother tongue, Urdu' – but it assumed that if a language is added then English is necessarily erased; there is, in such a mindset, no place for multilingualism. Language is seen instead as a zero-sum equation.

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A Citizenship Deficiency

Ironically the country that the 'English first' campaigners want to reclaim as monolingual has as its emblem a coat of arms that carries a slogan in French: *Dieu et mon droit*, meaning 'God and my right', is believed to have been adopted as a royal motto by King Richard I in the twelfth century. It is now visible on every courthouse, police van and British passport. I haven't heard any calls to anglicise it. Another curiosity is the practice used when a bill that has passed its third reading in the House of Commons is transferred to the House of Lords for consideration. It is accompanied by a text in Old French starting with *Soit baillé aux Seigneurs* ('Let it be sent to the Lords'). Once the upper chamber has considered the bill it is returned to the Commons with the phrase *A ceste bille les Seigneurs sont assentus* ('To this bill the Lords have assented').[47] A multilingual legacy once imposed on Britain through a cultural invasion in the eleventh century (the last one the country has had to endure) lives on in the ceremonial symbols of political sovereignty.

Language policy in the UK is an aggregate of several different strands. The devolved governments in Wales and Scotland have provisions to protect and promote their indigenous regional languages (Welsh, and Gaelic and Scots, respectively). The Welsh Language Act of 1993 requires public bodies and large businesses in Wales to implement a Welsh language policy. The Welsh Language Commissioner promotes a 'Bilingual plus 1' education policy where schools teach Welsh and an additional foreign language. Scotland adopted the Gaelic Language Act in 2005. The Bòrd na Gàidhlig enables public bodies to prepare Gaelic Language plans. Scotland, too, promotes the study of two languages through the education system. In Northern Ireland the study of languages is compulsory at Key Stage 3 (ages eleven to fourteen). But the system of political power sharing introduced after the Good Friday Agreement of 1997 stalled in 2018, in part due to controversies around proposals for an Irish Language Act.

The UK is signatory to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, a Council of Europe initiative. It has registered Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Irish, Scots, Ulster Scots, Cornish and Manx as languages that are eligible for protection. Like most other signatories it only acknowledges 'indigenous' regional languages. These remain undefined but as a rule exclude the languages of populations who immigrated into the country during the past few centuries. Romani has been spoken in Britain since the sixteenth century but is excluded from consideration in the UK, although it is recognised under the Charter by upwards of seventeen different countries.[48] The extent of recognition and support afforded to the various regional languages is not equal. The BBC maintains dedicated channels in Welsh and Scottish Gaelic. Various UK government websites have versions in Welsh (but not in the other regional

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languages). These include vehicle registration and driving tests, tax and benefits, pensions, passport applications, land registration, job seeking, power of attorney and information on courts and tribunals. A dedicated government portal provides links to online services in Welsh,[49] and the government has issued guidance notes pertaining to communications in Wales (where the Welsh Language Act requires English and Welsh to be treated equally) and to communications with Welsh speakers residing in other parts of the UK.[50]

In England education policies regulate the position of Modern Foreign Languages in the school curriculum along with a limited offer of accredited extra-curricular examinations in other languages. Foreign languages – mainly French, German and Spanish – are taught in Key Stages 2 and 3 (ages seven to fourteen) but are not obligatory at the higher stages. For so-called community languages – we will come to the distinction later, in Chapter 5 – state examinations at the level of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exist through a government agreement with private exam boards from 2016. These languages can be accredited if schools are in a position to procure qualified examiners and act as exam centres.

Britain's language policy often assumes a gatekeeping function. Citizenship language tests link naturalisation to English proficiency. Government grants support local authorities to provide instruction in English as a second or other language (ESOL), which local authorities normally devolve to charities and private contractors.[51] The government relies on language analysis for the determination of origin (LADO) to verify claims for political asylum of applicants from certain countries (I discuss this in detail in Chapter 7).[52] The Department for Education collects data on pupils' 'first languages' through the School Census, as mentioned, primarily in order to assess and anticipate learning difficulties. In 2011 a question on language was introduced into the national Census. It asks 'What is your main language?' but only gives respondents a choice between English (or Welsh) and indicating a single language linked to a self-assessment of their proficiency in English (I discuss this too in Chapter 7). Both survey tools address multilingualism as a potential deficit linked to weaker proficiency in English and by implication to weaker ability to 'integrate' and thus to carry out the role of citizen. One could say that multilingualism is considered to be a citizenship deficiency.

In the wake of an EU directive first issued in 2010 the UK was required to provide translation and interpretation in judicial procedures for individuals who needed such support.[53] The Justice Department signed a series of contracts with providers of interpreting and translation services, some of which became controversial due to poor quality and were even the subject of a parliamentary enquiry.[54] Only some government departments issue translations of selective information into immigrant languages. The government's Health and Safety Executive maintains a portal with links to translations of

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information leaflets into various languages. In addition to Welsh, for which translation is a statutory requirement in accordance with the Welsh Language Act, nineteen languages appear. These are mainly Eastern European, South Asian and Middle Eastern languages, as well as Chinese, and can be regarded as broadly representative of the principal languages of immigrant populations in the UK.[55] There is, however, no obvious mechanism according to which languages are selected for translation. Nor is there an obvious policy that determines what kind of information is to be translated.

There is a tendency to give priority for translation to themes that are associated with 'cultural violence' where certain immigrant populations are deemed to pose a potential risk to themselves and to the most vulnerable members of their own communities, particularly women and girls and young people. At the same time no multilingual information is available, for example, on immigration or citizenship procedures, or on where or how to access English language courses. Even the written application forms for political asylum introduced by the government in early 2023 are in English only.[56] The Justice Department's Domestic Homicide Review provides leaflets in twelve languages including South Asian, West Asian and Middle Eastern languages, Somali and French (associated with immigrants from Africa).[57] Translations of the government's Statement Opposing Female Genital Mutilations appeared in the languages of African and Muslim populations including Amharic, Tigrinya, Somali, Swahili, French, Arabic, Farsi, Malay, Turkish and Urdu.[58] Translations of the UK government's Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CONTEST) from 2018 were made available in Arabic and Urdu only.[59] Posters on forced marriage were translated into Somali, Arabic, Urdu and Farsi but appear to have been withdrawn from government websites in or around 2021. In all these cases information was also published in Welsh due to the statutory requirement to provide government documents in this language.

Improvised Responses

In other areas the government does not seem to provide translations. The option to take a driving test in languages other than English, Welsh or British Sign Language was withdrawn in April 2014.[60] The UK tax office (HMRC) informs on its website: 'If English isn't your first language you can get a friend or family member to interpret phone calls to HMRC for you.'[61] Payment of TV licences is an exception. Here a website provides information in more than twenty-five different languages including languages of Western and Eastern Europe such as Greek, Portuguese and Albanian, various South and East Asian languages such as Gujarati and Vietnamese, as well as Somali and Gaelic.[62] Some charities that operate on a national level publish information in a variety of languages. They include the Alzheimer's Society, which

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has information in Arabic, Chinese and a number of South Asian languages in addition to Welsh, the Refugee Council and the Sexual Health Company, though translations often appear for a while on the websites but are later withdrawn.

The NHS and Public Health England sporadically publish information in other languages on screening tests, malaria vaccination, babies and other issues and maintain a central portal with links to health information in various languages.[63] This, however, is a repository, and there is no indication of any targeted provision or policy to provide translations, although printed leaflets and posters in different languages on a variety of topics are disseminated across health care outlets including hospitals and General Practice surgeries (I discuss interpreter provisions in the health care system in more detail in Chapter 4).

After the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 government agencies were slow to produce guidance notes in immigrant languages, relying instead on voluntary sector initiatives. Afzal Khan MP raised the matter in Parliament on 11 March 2020, calling on the government to disseminate information in community languages. On 13 March Doctors of the World UK published translations of NHS information leaflets into forty-four languages including Wolof, Krio, Oromo, Hausa and Yiddish.[64] Khan used his social media accounts to disseminate translations by private individuals and joined forces with one of Manchester's charities, Europia, to produce video advice in various European languages. It wasn't until late March 2020 that Public Health England added guidance on social distancing for vulnerable people in a number of languages (Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Polish, Portuguese, Panjabi and Urdu, in addition to Welsh).[65] Meanwhile, various local authorities took action. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough councils produced video information in thirty-one different languages while Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham were among several local authorities to provide web links to the Doctors of the World translations.

An official UK government Covid-19 information leaflet was finally published in a small number of languages on 7 April 2020; they included Romani, Romanian, Bengali, Gujarati, Polish, Panjabi, Russian, Somali and Urdu. Conspicuously missing was Arabic, while Romani, an oral language that most speakers would have difficulties reading, was prioritised for the first time. The choice of languages appears to have been haphazard, based perhaps on the immediate availability of translators. Covid-19 is an interesting test case because the prospect that residents with a low level of English might become carriers of the disease posed a potential risk not just to them but also to the entire population.[66] But while politicians on the one hand overstate low levels of English, there is no domestic language policy in place to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the relatively small population that might struggle with

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English. It is no coincidence that the initiative was taken primarily at local level. As with the general appreciation of what 'multilingualism' means, front-line practitioners at local level are more in touch with local communities. They have more of a feel and concern for their wellbeing and needs, and they have the connections, the incentive and the initiative to contract or obtain access to translated material.

Multilingualism on the Rise

In late 2022 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) published data on languages from the national Census 2021 for England and Wales.[67] It showed an increase of 22 per cent over a decade in the number of people who declared a 'main language' other than English: the figure in 2021 was 5.1 million, up from 4.2 million in 2011, or 8.9 per cent of the population, up from 7.7 per cent. Numbers are still almost certainly under-reported since each respondent was only allowed the option of entering one single language as a 'main language' (see Chapter 7). The number of individuals who alternate among languages at home or even at work therefore remains obscure. But for the first time, figures were published on the use of different 'main languages' across generations in the same household, within partnerships or between other household relationships such as between friends. Not surprisingly the percentage of declared 'main languages' other than English is particularly high in cities and tends to be concentrated in particular locations: Leicester had 30 per cent, most London boroughs between 20 and 30 per cent, Luton 28 per cent, Reading and Boston around 20 per cent each, Manchester 18 per cent, Birmingham and Southampton 15 per cent each. It is also in these locations that most households with multiple languages were recorded. In London boroughs an average of around 20 per cent of households in which a 'main language' other than English was recorded also reported to have multiple languages within the same household. The figure in Luton was 18.2 per cent, in Leicester 17.6 per cent, in Birmingham 13.3 per cent, in Manchester 12.1 per cent and in Bradford and Peterborough around 11 per cent. Unfortunately information about the language combinations was not published. Altogether multiple languages were established for 6 per cent of households in the country, representing 1.5 million people.

The increase in reported 'main languages' does not necessarily reflect an increase in immigration. It can point to a rise in awareness and in people using their Census statement as a declaration of identity. It is quite possible that some respondents saw this as a counter-statement to the Brexit debate and the 'English first' proclamations that accompanied it. It is also likely that many young people who had not yet filled in a Census form in 2011 were now considered in the statistics and that at least some people changed their

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statement. I know several people who ticked 'English' back in 2011, thinking that the 'main language' was the one used during most hours of the day as the language of work, study and shopping; but by 2021 their pride in the language they used at home had taken over (I return to the Census question in Chapter 7).

However measured, multilingualism is on the rise in Britain. Brexit banned seasonal workers from the EU from coming to the UK, but that resulted in recruitment being diverted to other countries, such as Indonesia.[68] The 'English first' isolationist politics have not eradicated or even reduced multilingualism. If nearly 10 per cent of the population declare a language other than English as their 'main language', and if among those between 10 and 20 per cent report living in households where more than one language is used, then we can assume that the real figures are considerably higher. Multilingualism is the reality among a large number of people, quite possibly the majority of those who live in larger cities – even in the country that calls its language 'the language of the world'.

Notes

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20 www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/language/bulletins/languageenglandandwales/census2021
21 Jaworska & Themistocleous (2018).
22 For example *The Guardian* on 4 July 2019: www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jul/04/foreign-language-learning-more-vital-than-ever-in-post-brexit-world
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27 Department for Education announcement in November 2022 about investment in Modern Foreign Languages:
www.gov.uk/government/news/millions-invested-in-language-lessons
28 Original link, since removed: http://geographical.co.uk/opinion/item/3042-why-foreign-language-skills-post-brexit-will-be-vital
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32 Cf. Bhattacharyya et al. (2021); Daley (2021); Mitchell (2021); Sanghera (2021).
33 https://nationalrecoverylanguages.weebly.com/downloads.html
34 www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/language-trends-2019.pdf
35 Goodhart (2017).
36 www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/HEPI_A-Languages-Crisis_Report-123-FINAL.pdf; www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/modern-foreign-languages-are-not-in-crisis-its-worse-than-that
37 www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/2597/Towards-a-national-languages-strategy-July-2020_R0FHmzB.pdf
38 The only reference to domestic multilingualism that I found was a casual remark on page 9 of the report that discussed the need for a campaign to promote language awareness. Using the conditional mood the paper says: ‘The campaign would advocate greater recognition and utilisation of ‘community’, ‘home’, or ‘heritage’ languages, and of ‘indigenous’ languages of the UK beyond English (such as Welsh, Gaelic, Irish, Ulster Scots and Cornish), by articulating their value to society.’
39 www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6276017/Bilingual-pupils-English-second-language-outperform-native-Britons-study-finds.html
40 See Wiese et al. (2022).
41 https://evolvepolitics.com/children-of-immigrants-are-now-better-at-english-than-native-english-speaking-kids-new-gcse-figures-show
42 The term was actually introduced by the Leave campaign to describe the Remainer suggestion that Brexit would bring harm to the UK’s economy, level of skills and diplomatic standing, efficiency of services as well as social cohesion; expert assessments in late 2022 agree pretty much unanimously that this has indeed been the case.

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45 For example Clyne & Kipp (2006); García & Fishman (1997).
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51 Rampton et al. (2020); Tipton (2019).
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66 Cf. Piller (2020); Piller et al. (2020).
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