

Why English isn't enough: Debating language education and policy

NIGEL VINCENT

Professor Nigel Vincent FBA has just completed his term as the British Academy's Vice-President for Research and Higher Education Policy. A major aspect of his four years of office has been the development of a programme targeting deficits in both Languages and Quantitative Skills in UK education and research.

On 24 June 2014, there was a British Academy/*Guardian* Roundtable on 'Is English Still Enough for Anglophone Countries? An International Debate on Language Education and Policy'. The following article is an edited version of remarks made by Professor Vincent on that occasion, providing an overview of both the issues and the Academy's initiatives.

There was an item in the press a few months ago about a school in Peterborough. From a linguistic point of view Peterborough, almost exactly in the middle of England, is an interesting place. It is right on the edge of a large agricultural area – East Anglia and Lincolnshire – into which a large number of people have migrated in recent waves from eastern Europe, speaking languages like Romanian, Polish and Latvian. It also has a significant community from an earlier phase of immigration into this country from India and Pakistan, whose languages include Punjabi and Gujarati.

It was reported that this school was the first school in England where nobody was a native speaker of English. This tells you something about our mental attitude. Surely, the right thing to say about that school would be that it is the first school in England where every child is bilingual. It is a primary school, so that even if some pupils are not great at English when they enter the school, perhaps because they have been looked after by a grandparent who has spoken to them only in Polish or Punjabi, by the time they come out they will be perfectly fluent in English and as good as anybody else. This would be the positive and constructive way to look at this situation.

That story reveals a problem that we currently have in the United Kingdom: the issue of the command of languages has become identified, to some extent, with the issue of the sense of national identity and with issues

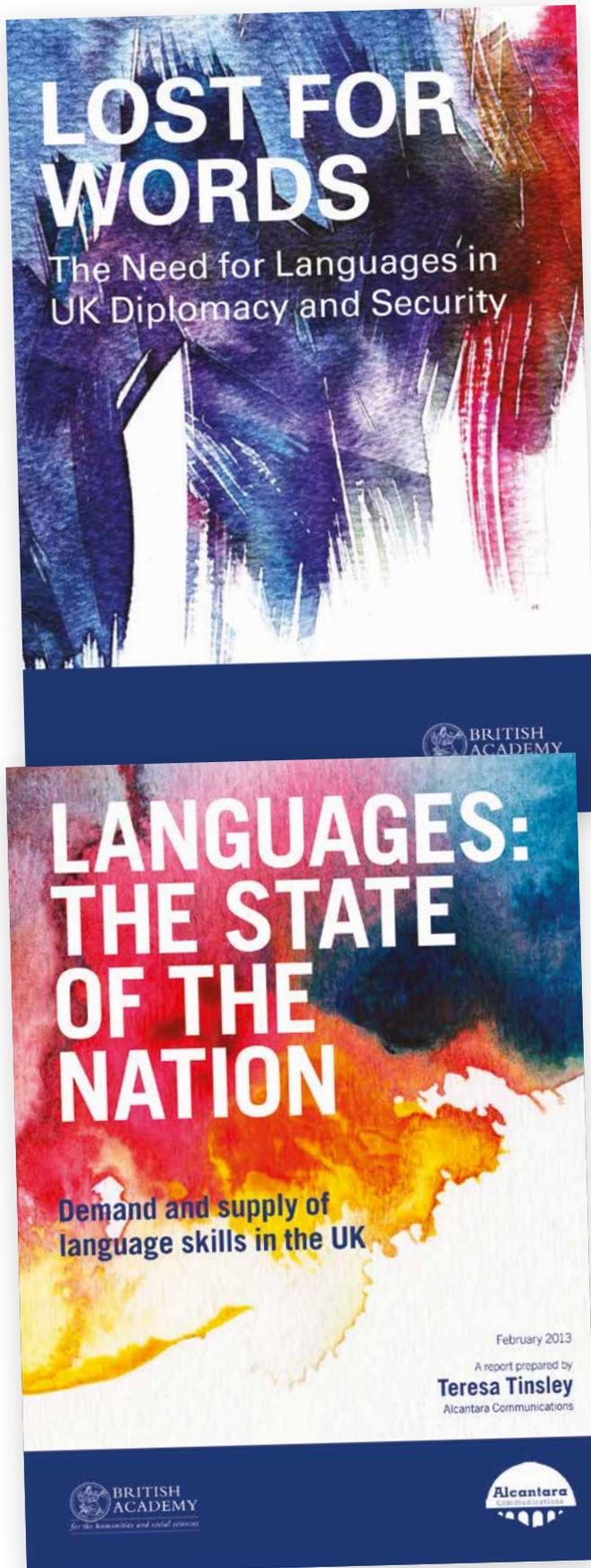
about immigration. For example, a recent survey posed the question: 'Can you be English if you don't speak English?' By tying together both the language and the nationality issues, such a question renders more difficult the public discussion of either.

British Academy analysis

The British Academy has taken a number of steps to investigate languages at the national level. Our report *Lost for Words* was launched in the House of Lords in November 2013. That looked at the need for languages specifically in relation to diplomacy, security, policing and the international context of world trouble spots. It diagnosed a gap in our national provision and identified the problems for which solutions are required.

Earlier, in February 2013, the British Academy had published another report entitled *Languages: The State of the Nation*, which sought to survey what the needs are in the UK – which languages? and at what levels? What emerged was that there was a great need both for languages that have not traditionally figured in the British secondary curriculum – such as Arabic, Chinese and Japanese – and also for the languages on our doorstep – the classic ones that were taught when I was at school. These latter include Spanish, French and German, where there has been a notable decline; the decline in German is particularly noticeable. And these needs exist within all kinds of business and industry – complementary to the need within the government, public service and security sectors – and at all levels. Languages skills are required at every professional level from top executives right the way through to people who answer the telephone – a conclusion which agrees with the findings of the Confederation of British Industry.

The question is often asked: Why should young British people worry about learning other languages if everyone else in the world places such an emphasis on the importance of developing a perfect command of English? But I think that is exactly the point. My wife is Danish and I spend a lot of time over there. I find it very difficult to learn Danish because they never let me speak! It's not just that they speak a bit of English; they by and large speak it almost perfectly – certainly well enough



To download copies of these two British Academy reports, and to find out more about the 'Born Global' project, go to www.britishacademy.ac.uk/languages

to conduct their professional business with clarity and precision, and without hesitation or confusion. The same goes for many other countries, not just in Europe but in the emerging economies. The issue then becomes: Why would an international business hire a monolingual English speaker when it can hire a bilingual, trilingual or quadrilingual German, Swede, Korean or Chinese? When it comes to international employment, by sitting on our linguistic laurels we disadvantage the United Kingdom. So I would turn the argument on its head: the fact that we have English *only*, whereas others have very good English *plus ...*, means that they are ahead of the game, and we need to catch up.

In short, we know what the problem is. The need now is for solutions. That is the aim of our current project – 'Born Global: Rethinking Language Policy for 21st Century Britain' – chaired by Richard Hardie (non-executive Chair of UBS Ltd).

Educational policy

When we turn to national educational policy, there are tensions that need to be explored, and concerns about the content of the school syllabus and the way in which that feeds through into both higher education and employment. For example, the recent move towards the development of the so-called English Baccalaureate has restored languages to their rightful place as one of the core subjects within the academic curriculum, and thus as a good stepping stone towards university admission. There is however a downside in that languages have tended to retrench back into the private sector of education, with the attendant risk of social stratification between those people who have a command of languages and those who do not. Some means of ensuring proper recognition for advanced qualifications in the many languages spoken in that school in Peterborough would certainly help to rebalance things.

One thing that militates against widening the curriculum is the British tradition of moving from eight, nine or ten GCSEs to only three A-levels in the last two years of secondary school. This is very unusual in the international context. Most educational systems require a broader spread of subjects, and have school-leaving examinations that are more like the International Baccalaureate – requiring a balanced portfolio in which there is room to continue languages together with other essential subjects such as maths, natural sciences, arts and humanities. In sum, we not only need languages to have a place at the heart of the curriculum, but we must find a way to ensure it is possible to continue to study them (and their associated cultures) throughout the school years.

Asset languages

In Britain we have large numbers of different communities who speak a whole range of languages. I have worked for many years in Manchester, where somewhere between 150 and 200 languages are spoken by long-term

residents of the city. And even a much smaller place like Peterborough runs to over 100. Moreover, many of these languages are, like Kurdish and regional varieties of Arabic, on the list of languages identified in *Lost for Words* as of strategic importance to the UK. Yet we have no developed system for accrediting this knowledge. There was until recently a qualification available under the rubric Asset Languages, so that, if you were a native speaker of say Urdu or Turkish, you could get a qualification outside of the national exam system and have something that you could build on in future work. Yet this has now been discontinued.

I raise this issue not only because it is an important one in the national context, but also because public responses here evince an interesting paradox. It is taken for granted that everybody who leaves school at the age of 16 must take a GCSE exam in English. It is, rightly, deemed unthinkable that school-leavers should not have a qualification in their native language. And yet one hears it said that we should not give people qualifications if they are, say, native speakers of Turkish or Bengali on the grounds that 'It would be too easy for them, because they already speak it.' Well, we already speak English but we still take an exam in it! What is important in developing qualifications for the huge variety of languages that fall under this heading – sometimes called

'heritage languages' – is that attention is paid to the local language contexts. I was recently reading an article by my fellow Italianist, Christina Tortora, who teaches at the City University of New York, in which she makes the very good point that people who are labelled heritage speakers of Italian are often in fact speakers of Sicilian, Venetian, Genoese or whatever regional dialect their parents spoke. Understanding the relation between the standard language and regionally or socially determined varieties should therefore be a key part of language education.

*

Let me conclude by underscoring the fact that all the issues I have mentioned here as being central to the national needs of the UK – the value of languages in business, diplomacy and security; the importance of giving languages a central place in the school curriculum; the need to ensure continuity of language learning from primary to secondary to tertiary education; the inseparability of studying language and culture – find their direct equivalents in the USA, as the recent report *Languages For All?* demonstrates. If the Anglophone countries do not find ways to meet these challenges, they risk falling further and further behind in the global race for excellence.



The British Academy has partnered with the *Guardian* to raise the profile of language learning in the UK and celebrate the many benefits of foreign language skills for individuals and society. A major fruit of this was a national Language Festival, held in November 2013. The Festival included the ceremony held at the Academy to award the second round of British Academy Schools Language Awards: pictured above are teachers and pupils from Oldham Sixth Form College receiving the national Award for showing exceptional innovation and determination; they are flanked by the actor Larry Lamb and Professor Marian Hobson FBA. The next Language Festival will be held in October-November 2014: more information can be found via www.theguardian.com/language-festival