

Dialogues

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‘Translating Cultures’, translating research

by [Charles Forsdick](#)

In this article, Charles Forsdick, AHRC Theme Leadership Fellow for ‘Translating Cultures’, presents the policy issues revealed and addressed by research carried out under the theme, and highlights the challenges and potential of ‘translating’ academic research to policymakers.

The Arts and Humanities Research Council’s [‘Translating Cultures’ theme](#) emerged from a 2009 consultation exercise across the subject communities represented by the AHRC. The thematic approach to research funding has numerous benefits in the area of languages and cultures: it encourages cross-disciplinary working and permits an aggregation effect, meaning that a connected community of researchers can emerge with diverse interests and approaches, but united nevertheless by a shared commitment to addressing similar sets of questions. The enhanced visibility that these connections allow means that the translational aspects of research become more evident, and the possibilities of linking findings to policy more apparent.

All of these elements can be seen in the portfolio of around 120 projects that now constitute ‘Translating Cultures’. When the theme was launched, the rationale was clear: in a world increasingly characterized by globalized and transnational connections, the need for understanding and communication across and within diverse cultures was more urgent than ever. What was not apparent at the start of the theme, however, were the shifts – cultural, social and political – that we have witnessed over the past five years or so, relating to the crisis of political will relating to trans-Mediterranean migration, the outcome of the UK referendum in June 2016, the election of Donald Trump several months later, and the continued rise of extremism in Europe and elsewhere. All of these developments have brought with them pressing policy issues that are of interest to ‘Translating Cultures’, ranging from the [legitimization of linguaphobia](#) (evident in the increase in hate crimes against those who speak languages other than English in the public sphere) to a growing awareness of the [role of language in social cohesion and refugee integration](#).

Knowledge transfer as translation

It is, as a result, no surprise that research conducted under the ‘Translating Cultures’ umbrella has revealed the significant policy dimensions of language-led research. This has been the case from the beginning of the theme, when initial projects encompassed key policy areas such as [cultural diplomacy](#), the language skills and [intercultural competence required by SMEs](#) and [international NGOs](#), as well as questions of [contemporary migration](#) and [international dispute resolution](#). Policy engagement was always a key intention, not least because one of the ‘cultures’ on which the theme intended to focus was the academic one, with ‘translating’ in this context seen as essential to public

engagement, [science communication](#) and other forms of knowledge transfer. ‘Translating Culture’ underlines the ways that [applying ‘translation’ to understand the dynamics of engagement](#) between academia and external communities and organizations allows a focus on the actual processes involved in the transfer of the findings of research. This encourages attention to the vehicles on which this communication depends (blogs are almost certainly more effective, for instance, than refereed journal articles in initiating contact between researchers and policymakers), but also highlights the transformations necessary in scholarship for it effectively to reach new audiences.

‘Linguistic Indifference’

The translation of the results of ‘translating cultures’ has been evident across a variety of fields, and traces of their transformative potential in policy are multiple. At the heart of this work have been the findings of one of the theme’s large grants, [‘Researching Multilingually at the Borders of Language, the Body, Law and the State’](#), whose aim has been the cultivation of a multilingual sensitivity that challenges the [unmarked monolingual assumptions](#) of numerous academic disciplines and non-academic sectors. The project has contributed significantly to recent research that presents [monolingualism as an ideological construct](#) as opposed to a natural human condition. The term ‘linguistic indifference’ has been deployed to describe the alinguistic attitudes in a number of fields, and ‘Translating Cultures’ has sought to challenge these with an active linguistic awareness or sensitivity. Such an approach is essential for a range of policy fields, and highlights the traditional restriction of language to the fields of education and diplomacy. It is becoming increasingly apparent – and is likely to be even more evident post-Brexit – that linguistic concerns impact on every policy area, ranging from local government and communities to health, from international business and enterprise to the creative economy.

Languages in public policy – both international and domestic

The place of languages in public policy emerged in a collaboration between the [Institute for Government](#), an independent think tank which aims to improve government effectiveness through research and analysis, and two AHRC themes, [‘Care for the Future’](#) and ‘Translating Cultures’. A series of workshops brought together AHRC-funded researchers and policy makers to discuss potential interaction in areas including foreign policy and overseas aid as well as social cohesion. The emphasis was on the domestic as well as the international, and discussions revealed the extent to which policymaking is enriched by careful attention to linguistic diversity and intercultural knowledge. In certain fields, these benefits are already evident, as the relaunch in 2013 of the [Foreign and Commonwealth Office language training programme](#) – now part of its Diplomatic Academy – made clear. The FCO’s drive to enhance diplomatic skills includes an active commitment to high-level language acquisition, stressing the complementarity of intercultural and linguistic knowledge.

Often less evident, however, has been the importance of language in a domestic context, although the [2011 census in England and Wales](#) provided for the first time extremely detailed linguistic data providing textured information on language use, especially in ‘superdiverse’ urban areas where more than fifty languages are spoken. ‘Translating Cultures’ projects have engaged with the increased visibility of languages in the public sphere, underlining the extent to which it is not possible to consider the multicultural or the multi-ethnic without addressing the multilingual. Central to this work has been [‘Translation and Translanguaging’](#), a large grant investigating processes of linguistic and cultural transformations in superdiverse wards in four UK cities (Birmingham, Cardiff, Leeds and London). The project seeks to understand how people in everyday contexts communicate multilingually across diverse languages and cultures, and presents contemporary cities as ‘translation zones’, spaces where everyday life depends on processes of translation and negotiation in which

speakers are not limited to using languages separately, but instead ‘translanguage’ as they seek to make themselves mutually comprehensible. The project’s commitment to working in [markets](#), libraries, museums, [sports centres](#) and other public spaces has revealed the need for a more nuanced understanding of language usage, and a recognition that modes of communication have rapidly evolved. The policy challenges relating to an increasingly multilingual United Kingdom are numerous, and reflected in a number of other ‘Translating Cultures’ projects. These go far beyond the educational sphere, and range from a study of [child language brokering](#) or ‘[paraprofessional translators in the multilingual workplace](#)’ to a focus on the important [role of professionalized court interpreting](#) in the delivery of an equitable justice system.

Language Policy across government

The ‘Translating Cultures’ collaboration with the Institute for Government led to a [final report](#) that revealed that demand for history and intercultural learning among policymakers was strong. In certain areas, such as communities and local government, the specific need to understand multilingualism is high, and the place of translation in service delivery is increasingly prominent and no longer restricted to obvious sectors such as education and health. What has been clear elsewhere, not least in the work of the large ‘translating cultures’ grants, is that the potential for language-focused policy impact is arguably greater outside Whitehall and in particular in the devolved administrations, where not only is educational strategy around language acquisition more developed, but also the place of minoritized or ‘heritage’ languages more politically prominent. Languages have long been the object of policy, albeit an often relatively neglected one, the focus of educational provision or the vehicles of equitable service provision. A recent shift has seen linguistic diversity increasingly forming (and informing) the context of policymaking, making it clear that although monolingualism may previously have been the unmarked case in many policy spheres, such linguistic insensitivity is – in the twenty-first century – increasingly detached from our post-monolingual age.

One of the ‘Translating Cultures’ initiatives that exemplifies the challenge relating to linguistic indifference relates not to domestic policy agendas, but to wider issues of international development. ‘[Listening Zones](#)’ is a programme of research based around the observation that [language issues do not tend to have a high profile within the international development context](#), and that a number of NGOs active in these contexts have failed to develop language policies and have as a result not taken sufficient account of the multilingual frames in which they operate. In a context in which language policies are often not in place, and funding for translation and interpreting tends to be limited, ‘Listening Zones’ has explored the role that languages and intercultural knowledge play in enhancing the policies and practices of development NGOs. It has sought to raise awareness of the place of languages and power relations in the development process, and to stress the importance of language provision, including working with translators and interpreters. The project has also revealed a key contribution of Arts and Humanities researchers for those delivering projects funded by the [Global Challenges Research Fund](#), among whom there are a number of ‘Translating Cultures’ projects. Part of the criticality those in this area have to offer relates to scrutiny of the ‘equal’ in the concept of ‘equal partnerships’, revealing not least the extent to which much policy and practice in the field of development has lacked sensitivity to language and, prone to Anglonormativity, has paid little attention to the multilingual realities that serve as the context of its delivery.

The legacy of ‘Translating Cultures’ in the policy sphere

As ‘Translating Cultures’ draws to a conclusion, its legacies are evident across a range of policy sectors, notably those of museums and heritage, the creative economy, diplomacy and international development, and migration and the asylum process:

- the theme has revealed the ways in which translation and the challenges of multilingualism are increasingly evident across the range of areas of public life outlined above;
- central to such an observation is the recognition that language should be understood as a social category, avoiding the pitfalls associated with being linguistically indifferent or treating monolingualism as an unmarked case, and encouraging greater linguistic sensitivity;
- bilingualism, multilingualism and linguistic superdiversity are increasingly evident in twenty-first century UK society, meaning that awareness of linguistic variability is as important in domestic as in international policymaking;
- understanding academic engagement and the transfer of research findings in the policy sphere in the light of 'translation' rather than 'impact' allows a clearer grasp of the dynamics of the process.

About the author

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