Multilingualism is integral to the human condition. Hinging on the concept of Creative Multilingualism — the idea that language diversity and creativity are mutually enriching — this timely and thought-provoking volume shows how the concept provides a matrix for experimentation with ideas, approaches and methods.

The book presents four years of joint research on multilingualism across disciplines, from the humanities through to the social and natural sciences. It is structured as a manifesto, comprising ten major statements which are unpacked through various case studies across ten chapters. They encompass areas including the rich relationship between language diversity and diversity of identity, thought and expression; the interaction between language diversity and biodiversity; the ‘prismatic’ unfolding of meaning in translation; the benefits of linguistic creativity in a classroom setting; and the ingenuity underpinning ‘conlangs’ (‘constructed languages’) designed to give imagined peoples a descriptive medium capable of expressing their cultural identity.

This book is a welcome contribution to the field of modern languages, highlighting the intricate relationship between multilingualism and creativity, and, crucially, reaching beyond an Anglo-centric view of the world. Intended to spark further research and discussion, this book appeals to young people interested in languages, language learning and cultural exchange. It will be a valuable resource for academics, educators, policy makers and parents of bilingual or multilingual children. Its accessible style also speaks to general readers interested in the role of language diversity in our everyday lives, and the untapped creative potential of multilingualism.

As with all Open Book publications, this complete book is available to read for free on the publisher’s website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com
Languages create connections with people

We can’t do work without languages — and they come in many forms.

We negotiate linguistic diversity every day in our own language. Building on this creatively forms an ideal starting point for developing the ‘transferable’ communication skills needed in any job, using any language. Moreover, it develops sensitivity towards linguistic expression, providing fertile ground for learning other languages and integrating language knowledge actively in one’s skills profile.

One secret for developing a career is to have choices so you can make the most of opportunities; that means never assuming a particular talent, skill or type of knowledge will not be useful, perhaps at a much later point. It might turn out to be the seed of exceptional expertise on which to build qualifications and the basis for career options. Or the unique factor that makes an application stand out from a crowd of competitors.

Wherever you work, the chances are that in the course of the day, you’ll need to use many different ways of speaking and writing. From ‘Good morning!’ to ‘Hi!’, from formal to informal, the day will involve continual adjustments as you talk and write to different people. Email greetings and sign-offs will vary, and you may imperceptibly evolve distinctive styles for different individuals. The language we use defines our functional, hierarchical and empathetic relationship with each person slightly differently — in ways that can really matter.

Ever been in a situation where someone else makes you feel inhibited, tense and a bit smaller than them? They may actually believe they’re more important than you, or they may be deploying strategies to make you think they’re more important. The effect will be made up of what
they say, their tone, how loudly they speak, their facial expression and their body language. All these factors are worth analyzing. Recognizing other people’s strategies of self-promotion firstly makes you less susceptible to feeling intimidated, and secondly allows you to extend your understanding of how communication works and all the different aspects of ourselves on which it draws.

The reason we refer to ‘body language’ is because it can be at least as powerful communicatively as verbal language. The Internet is packed with advice on body language in the workplace — why it’s important, how it’s used, how to read it, mistakes people make and body language tips for career success. Communication is a complex process that involves not just our speech organs but our whole being. Even without specific training on body language, you can see how gestures can gain linguistic significance in a wide variety of ways. We all use paralinguistics to support what we say, for example when we point in a particular direction, or show the size or shape of an object with our hands. In professional contexts, people may be trained in how to use gesture effectively. If you’re a politician, it will be a strategy used to help persuade people. If you’re an actor, it will be a key part of every speech and of silent responses as well. And the hands take on a central communicative role if you’re deaf, forming the medium through which your distinctive language is expressed, e.g. British Sign Language or Chinese Sign Language.

Beyond the words and body language involved in communication, everyone has soaked up a distinctive cultural heritage in the course of their lives. And as workplaces become more diverse in an increasingly globalized world, the cultural dynamics that play out in day-to-day work relations become more varied and multi-faceted. While diversity brings a wider range of ideas and approaches, it can also cause misunderstandings, distrust and overt or subliminal conflict. Workplaces and schools can be like microcosms of the political world. Whether in school, work or politics, the world needs people who are curious about others, open to embracing cultural difference and interested in making communication work for all the people involved in the conversation.

Learning languages is uniquely valuable in sensitizing you to cultural difference, different ways of thinking and different ways of doing things. If you gain expertise in a language other than your own,
it can give you useful insights when mediating between cultures, and understanding how people in another part of the world tick. There are other, more specific benefits too: knowledge of another language can enrich personal relationships, open up job opportunities, allow you to trade more effectively in another country and fulfil important roles in international relations, cross-cultural conflict and global challenges.

This chapter explores the opportunities and benefits languages offer for our personal development, with specific information for school and university students thinking about careers and more generally for anyone who has an interest in the valuable and rewarding role of languages in the workplace.

Exploiting the Potential of Your Existing Language Life

Our knowledge and use of language are tied up with the way we think, what we do and how we relate to each other. Throughout our lives, language is intrinsically connected with our creativity, which itself offers immense potential for further development in ways that are highly relevant to jobs and careers. Fortunately, you can train your language learning skills by connecting consciously and creatively with the process of language learning you have been engaged in throughout your life.

Our knowledge of words is inseparable from the people and things that make up the world around us. Even abstract ideas tend to be metaphorical extensions of physical things or processes — consider ‘glass ceilings’, ‘networks’ or economic ‘growth’. It’s a useful life skill to develop a passion for dictionaries — big dictionaries of your native language, and bilingual dictionaries — and the creation of new words within your own language (see Chapter 10). Depending on your preferences, they can be online or hard copies — both lend themselves to browsing, which is never wasted time. Big monolingual dictionaries will give you a feeling for the extraordinarily nuanced meanings of day-to-day words — and it’s useful to get into the habit of checking every word you’re not a hundred percent sure of, including its spelling. This area of language learning is sometimes neglected or even discouraged in communication-oriented language teaching, on the grounds that words should always be learned within sentences and meaningful
contexts. However, this ignores the fact that individual words evolve in meaningful contexts and relationships and form part of a continuously evolving, living lexical system. Contexts come in many forms, and exploring the history and use of a single word can open up a fascinating world in which it gained its literal and metaphorical meanings. Finding out about that world can be a highly effective way of remembering them.

For English, the history or ‘etymology’ of words is given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) and some of its smaller versions. A word’s etymology encompasses time and place: it tells you how far back it goes and where it has come from. Take ‘club’ (the kind you hit people over the head with) — did you know this comes from Old Norse *klubba*, which migrated to the British Isles with the Vikings? Or consider ‘pyjamas’ — imported from Urdu and Persian *pāy-jāma* and recorded in English from 1801, with the plural ‘-s’ added in alignment with ‘breeches’ and ‘trousers’ when Asian and Middle Eastern trousers were adapted by Europeans for nightwear (the jacket being included in the meaning only later). An interest in the origin of words, the relationship between their various meanings and the bonds they create to form intriguing idioms will go a long way in sustaining an interest in foreign languages.

The words of your own language also introduce you to translation. For example, English often has two words with similar meanings but differing linguistic and cultural provenance, such as the words ‘beginning’ and ‘end’ with a Germanic origin, and their equivalents ‘commencement’ and ‘termination’ deriving from Latin and Old French. They’re synonyms, but we wouldn’t normally use them in the same context. We’re aware that the words with Germanic origin tend to sound more ordinary, so we would normally choose these in normal conversation; however, we would ‘translate’ them into the more formal equivalents in certain formal or administrative contexts. Moreover, it’s not rocket science for English speakers to work out what the German words ‘der Beginn’ and ‘das Ende’ mean, or how to translate the French words ‘le commencement’ and ‘la termination’. This gets you off to a good start if you’re learning one of those languages (see Chapter 3 in this volume for further tips).

Moreover, we know from our own language that words don’t necessarily have one-to-one synonyms. If asked to find a ‘plain English’ equivalent for ‘my provenance’, one might come up with ‘where I
come from’. To get a sense of the many different ways phrases can be translated into another language, the online dictionary and translation concordance Linguee is useful. Linguee provides access to a large ‘corpus’ of material — a collection of real-life text — and gives you pairs of sentences for a word or expression you type in, in two languages. It covers a wide range of European languages as well as Japanese and Chinese, and translators use it when looking for solutions to translating tricky phrases that have no obvious equivalent. For a research project that explores the multitude of ways in which a literary text may be translated, see the section on ‘Prismatic Jane Eyre’ in Chapter 6 in this volume (see also Reynolds et al. 2020).

Translation is an immensely rich resource for language learning. Indeed, you may have grown up translating and interpreting in the home — for a relative who doesn’t speak the official language of the country, or for a family member who is deaf. Certainly, though, forms of translation are part of all our daily lives. We translate whenever we talk to someone who doesn’t know as much as we do about something — we spell out acronyms as full terms, choose ‘plain English’ rather than the jargon we might use at work or school, translate dialect or slang into standard language and polite words when talking in formal contexts. You can build on all these skills when using translation in your language learning.

Making the Most of the Many Languages Around You

The United Kingdom has the largest number of community languages in Europe, and more than 300 languages are now spoken in UK schools (BBC 2014). Some people may see them as a hindrance to integration and an impediment for the development of English language skills. Yet in many schools they are recognized and embraced as a tremendous personal opportunity and career benefit both for their speakers and for other students in the classroom. There are formal qualifications available for languages beyond the French, Spanish and German ‘mainstream’ qualifications, and many community schools do outstanding work supporting learners who speak a language beyond English at home.

The figure of over 300 gives an inkling of the linguistic riches out there in an Anglophone country that often sees itself as ‘monoglot’.
Moreover, this number is increasing as globalization changes the languages landscape, bringing forth new varieties, and fusions between different languages. Take Hinglish — while not recognized as an official language in India or the UK, it’s nevertheless being taken seriously enough for Portsmouth College (UK) to have included it among their Modern Business Language and Culture courses.

Individuals who know a language other than English have access to an immensely valuable resource — one that deserves to be nurtured, developed and shared with others. It is a skill in its own right that opens up special communication channels to other people who speak the same language, and pathways to other parts of the world. Moreover, knowing a second language makes it easier to learn a third because linguistic difference becomes easier to appreciate, so it can set you on a path to becoming a highly competent linguist.

It’s never too late to start learning a language, whether you know one or more. And it’s never too early to expand your repertoire. An example is Mukahang Limbu (see Language Lives, ‘Connecting to People’, in Chapter 6 in this volume), who came to England from Nepal when he was six, made the most of his contact with Hindi and Urdu to learn to converse in them, taught himself basic Korean, Japanese and Mandarin, learned German at school, improved his English to the point of winning creative-writing prizes, and is now studying English and Modern Languages. Another example is George Hodgson (see Language Lives, ‘The Careers Potential of Swear Words’, below), who started out as an English monoglot in a London school but joined in when his classmates spoke Bengali, took GCSE exams in French, German and Latin, and went on to be British Ambassador in Senegal, using his French daily.

Keeping our ears and minds open to the languages spoken around us pays dividends, all the more so if we take the trouble to learn one or more of them. It’s not predictable how or when it might bring a particular career benefit, but it will certainly stimulate your neural networks since cognition and language are interconnected. Studies of bilingual children indicate that they have enhanced creative abilities by comparison with monolingual children (see Cushen & Wiley 2011; Leikin 2013). A research project based on the concept of a ‘Healthy Linguistic Diet’ (see also Chapter 8 in this volume) has demonstrated that multilingualism is cognitively advantageous across the lifespan. It is
associated with slower cognitive ageing, delayed onset of dementia and better recovery from stroke. Moreover, cognitive benefits are observable among language learners of all ages, and evident also among learners who have not yet reached proficiency (Bak and Mehmedbegovic 2017).

Taking an interest in other languages stimulates curiosity about how languages, communication and other cultures work, and fosters willingness to take on something new. Moreover, learning a language enhances your openness to language learning and strengthens the skills it takes to do so. Every bit of another language you learn increases your confidence that it’s possible to learn more. This means it becomes less daunting to go to places where the native language is different to your own, making it seem more feasible to learn some of that language. It can enable you to develop a career in a field such as business or intelligence in which the employer will give you training in an unusual language where there is a shortage of expertise. And it’s likely to make you more willing to take the plunge if a job opportunity abroad offers itself, while also equipping you to demonstrate that you’re the right person for the job.

### Language Lives

**The Careers Potential of Swear Words**

George Hodgson

The first foreign language I really engaged with was Bengali. Most of the kids at my primary school in Tower Hamlets in East London were of Bangladeshi heritage. In the classroom, we sang Bengali songs. In the playground, we delighted in Bengali swear words. I’d be too embarrassed to own up to recalling the lyrics of a song about a frog, let alone the insults, but I will admit to still remembering how to count from one to ten.

At secondary school, I studied French, German and Latin up to GCSE. There was neither singing nor swearing. But we had great teachers, with a passion for languages and for sharing them — even with under-appreciative teenagers. I became more appreciative when, some years later, my rusty French was enough to strike up a conversation with an attractive French girl, now my wife.

As British Ambassador in Dakar, I speak more French on any given day than I do English. Without it, I just wouldn’t be as effective in my job. That, quite simply, is why language skills are a priority for the Foreign and
Commonwealth Office (FCO). A blog by my colleague Danny Pruce in Manila on ‘Learning Languages’ (2017) offers a nice insight into studying Tagalog full-time at the FCO’s in-house language centre... a far more serious undertaking than French.

Here in Senegal, I’ve been impressed by the language skills of the young British volunteers that I’ve met, working with great organizations like the International Citizen Service or Project Trust in local communities, and living with host families. Many of them learn Wolof: it’s far more widely spoken than French, and Senegal’s real lingua franca.

Equally impressive are the language skills of ordinary Senegalese people. For a majority in Senegal, multilingualism is a way of life. The same is not quite true in the United Kingdom. That said, there are of course millions of people in the UK who are multilingual — speakers of recognized minority languages like Welsh or Gaelic, or of languages that have come to the UK more recently, like Polish or Punjabi... or indeed Bengali. There are over a million bilingual pupils at school in Britain.

The British Council’s paper *Languages for the Future* (2017) is well worth a read. As the British Council argues in its summary, ‘in a new era of cooperation with Europe and with the rest of the world, investment in upgrading the UK’s ability to understand and engage with people internationally is critical’. I couldn’t agree more.

George Hodgson was British Ambassador to Senegal and non-resident Ambassador to Cabo Verde and Guinea-Bissau from 2015 to 2019. He previously served in Washington, Kabul, Islamabad, Brussels and London, and was Head of the Ebola Taskforce, Africa Directorate, in 2014 to 2015.

![Fig. 1 George Hodgson. Reproduced with his kind permission. Photograph by Maimouna Dembele (2018).](image)
Getting into a New Language — and Its Cultural World

Every language we learn takes us into an exciting new world — if we let it. The difficulty for English native speakers who live in an Anglophone country is that English has become like an invisible bubble that makes it seem as if there really is no other language that is necessary or useful. This can be demoralizing for learners because it removes a wide range of incentives which learners in other countries have when they learn English, keeping them motivated along the way, and providing them with well-polished skills to learn further languages.

Equipping yourself with the ability to learn languages isn’t easy if you didn’t learn them at school, or if language learning at school left you feeling that you were no good at them. Often that will be because of unrealistic expectations, and under-estimation of the awesome complexity of language. Did you know that a child will on average have spent some 9000 hours learning its native language by the age of five (Klein 1986: 9) — a learning process which generally carries on in ideal ‘immersive’ conditions that can’t normally be replicated in a country where the language isn’t routinely spoken.

The most effective way to learn a foreign language will mostly be to enrol on a good ‘live’ course. But there are also other ways of dipping your toe in the water, and in any case it’s worth reflecting on some basic principles. We’ve come up with some tips below.

**Proceed from what you know.** To get a real sense of the complexity of learning a language, think of your own language and look at it through the eyes of a foreigner — its grammar, its immense vocabulary, its wonderfully illogical idioms, its pronunciation, its spelling, its idiosyncratic stylistic conventions. This will also help you with learning a foreign language because you will be able to compare it with the language you already know. How many hours do you think you’ve spent learning your native language, in ideal conditions? What does that mean for learning another language, later in life and alongside many other commitments? It’s essential to be realistic, but also good to set yourself a challenge.

**Research the challenge.** As with climbing a mountain, you need to familiarize yourself with the terrain, the climate and the pitfalls (both obvious and hidden). It’s also wise to consider how challenging the
language of your choice is likely to be. Generally speaking, a language that is historically relatively close to your own will be easier than one from a completely different language family. And a language with an unfamiliar script, or use of different tones, will be even more taxing. That’s not a reason to avoid it — but it will take much longer to progress to speaking it, and it will almost certainly require support from a teacher. Try out the language of your choice — climb up a foothill and see whether you still fancy that mountain. It won’t be wasted time.

**Assess the necessary resources.** If you just want to learn the basics in a language and get some words, phrases and a bit of rudimentary grammar under your belt, a free app-based course like those offered by Duolingo can do a good job — so long as you set aside regular time for learning, which is essential for making progress however you approach the task. But don’t expect to progress far on your own — it’s generally more effective to learn with a teacher, and difficult to sustain the momentum without one. Assuming you can quickly learn to speak a language on your own with an off-the-peg course is rather like setting off up that mountain in shorts and trainers.

**Don’t set the bar too high.** This can be the biggest problem of all in learning a language. In fact, if you see yourself as untalented in language learning because you didn’t get very far at school, a key factor may be that the demands were too high and the exams too difficult, or perhaps you expected too much of yourself in the available conditions. There’s often an expectation that you’ll zoom ahead, and if you’re good at languages, you’ll be fluent in a few years’ time and able to converse like a native speaker. The reality is that unless you speak the language in the home or live in a country where it’s spoken, you’ll probably never reach full fluency or native-speaker competence. Does that mean it’s not worth doing? Of course not. We don’t think it’s only worth learning the violin, IT skills or playing football if we can expect to become like Yehudi Menuhin, Bill Gates or Lionel Messi. Start out with straightforward goals, see how you get on, and value the modest achievements alongside all those transferable skills. Try out a free app or a subscription course to see what works for you. If you fall in love with the language, you can really devote yourself to learning it thoroughly and live and work in the country. You’ll then get really good at it — and together with your native language skills, you’ll become an awesome linguist.
Spend time on words. They’re a lot more straightforward to learn on your own than the grammar of a language, and they will get you a long way in understanding the gist of even difficult texts. Find out how they’re formed in the language you’re learning. If you’re learning a noun, see if there’s a related verb and adjective and learn them as well. Spend time on studying how they’re translated in a bilingual dictionary, in a range of sample contexts. Put them individually on cards with the translation on the back — writing them out neatly helps with remembering them, and you can then keep testing yourself and saying them out loud. Try using an app such as those offered by Memrise.

Make sure you devote plenty of time to the fun stuff. Unless you’re doing an intensive taught course, which provides a strong motivational framework for learning, it’s unlikely that a diet of just learning grammar, vocabulary and practical uses of them will keep you going for the time it takes to learn a language well. Give the language a rich cultural context right from the start. Connect the nuts and bolts with the things that really interest you. The Internet can provide virtually infinite material that you can read in translation as well as in the original. It’s the people who make the language interesting — their customs, history, films, theatre, politics, sport, food. Whatever turns you on.

Learn with materials that interest you — but above all materials that aren’t too difficult. Watch films in the language with subtitles — first in English, then in the other language. But start easy. The material in course books may be rather dull in terms of content, but it will be graded so it’s suitable for the stage you’re at. Read really simple children’s books with a strong plot, or watch a dubbed Disney film in the language you’re learning. Read a translation of a book you already know. See if you can’t get chatting to someone in the language you’re learning who shares your personal interest in a sport or cultural activity, stamps or spiders. Spend time surfing the net, reading the news both in your native language and in the language you’re learning. Read about something that interests you in both languages and draw out relevant vocabulary in the foreign language so you can gradually build on it.

Allow scope for your creativity. Some of the greatest poems are short and simple. Creative writing doesn’t depend on knowing complex language. It can be a wonderful project to write a diary in the language you’re learning — if you write it only for your own eyes, you don’t need
Language Lives

Transferably Creative

Jessica Benhamou

I’ve been working in film and TV journalism since graduating in 2012 with a BA in Modern Languages. Highlights include working on Netflix’s *The Crown* and BBC’s *Panorama*. In 2017, a short film I produced, *Juliet Remembered*, screened at the Oxford International Film Festival.

My ability to speak and write in French has allowed me to travel and opened doors to more opportunities — I’ve worked in Paris at France24, in Tel Aviv for i24news on their French channel and as a live-translator for Sky News. But beyond being able to work in French, other linguistic and analytical skills have been highly transferable for my creative work as a writer and producer.

Translation requires a precision and attention to language that I use all the time as a writer. Translation is a precarious balancing act where the writer tries to faithfully preserve the sense, style, tone and message of an original sentence in the most succinct way. Writing requires a person to be a wordsmith, and a screenwriter has to be particularly economical like a translator.

Studying a foreign language teaches you how to listen. A linguist knows how to detect subtle intonations, rhythm, irony and comic timing in a foreign language. This has helped me in post-production where the film comes together layer by layer. First you have the visual edit, followed by the sound design, music, colour grade and special effects.

Fig. 2 Jessica Benhamou. Reproduced with her kind permission. Photograph by Brittany Ashworth, CC BY.
to worry about making mistakes. Above all, though, try your hand at translation. This will immeasurably help your language learning, your understanding of how the language works, and how it differs from your own language. This can keep you going for a long time and run along any other learning you do. Any story, book or other text that exists in your native language and the language you’re learning can be used to develop your translation skills, in both directions. You can translate the one and use the other to compare with what you have produced — even just ten minutes a day is worth doing. You may not always be able to figure out why you didn’t get it right — you either have to decide that the value is in the doing rather than achieving perfection, or you will need to ask a teacher. You can also compare the original, the published translation and your translation with Google Translate... And you can get to know great works of literature, reading the original alongside a translation, or perhaps getting two different translations that will allow you to experience how translation is always a creative activity.

**Get together with other learners.** Organize regular get-togethers where you only speak in the language. Meet up to discuss a film, do cooking in the language, or just chat. If there’s no-one close-by, talk

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Beyond the linguistic component, a Modern Languages student learns about other cultures and other ways of thinking. Studying foreign works has allowed me to diversify my pool of resources. And reading widely and critically for my degree has prepared me for the volume of script reading I have to do now. I can quickly assess the potential of a story or why a script is not working. Writing essays as part of my course taught me about the importance of structure and momentum. Both the script and the edit in post-production have to be tightly reigned in, but also keep moving resolutely towards a conclusion.

Finally, a Modern Languages degree teaches you about the power of imagination — to empathize with the lives of others. The desire to learn about other cultures surely attracts individuals with a curious, adventurous nature, who are looking to engage meaningfully with the world around them.

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by skype and social media. Or find a native speaker of the language who would like to learn your language so you can spend half your time teaching and half your time learning.

**Go to the country.** Go to a country where the language is spoken, especially if you’re beginning to lose motivation. Immerse yourself in the culture. There’s nothing like it to make learning the language seem worthwhile. Don’t feel offended if people talk back in English — just keep going, trying out your knowledge of their language. Go beyond the tourist centres, ideally on your own — you’ll find that speaking English isn’t nearly as global as it’s made out to be.

All the above is highly relevant for personal development and for career purposes. The language itself may prove useful, and you can look out for jobs that will give you an opportunity to use it; learning a language trains many intellectual skills you need for purposes of work; extending your cultural range and knowledge of people will enrich your working relationships; and opening yourself up to another culture, way of doing things and way of thinking is a habit that will be invaluable for any career and new job.

**Creating a Career out of Languages**

Careers sometimes seem rather like a set of ready-made pigeonholes that offer clearly defined and delineated options. An alternative way of looking at a career is as a highly individual pathway, created from personal interests, strengths and values in response to career options and opportunities. There is no right or wrong pathway, and given the rapid speed with which careers are changing, the most important skills of all are likely to be flexibility, a willingness to move outside your comfort zone, enthusiasm for thinking outside the box — and the resilience to carry on learning.

Learning languages is an ideal training ground, whatever career you end up with. It makes sense to integrate languages in your career vision from the start, because they will always expand your options, whether you realize your original vision or end up doing something quite different. The skill of knowing the language may or may not make you more employable for the job you want to do, but even if it makes little difference in itself, the transferable skills you will have acquired can enhance your overall profile and interview performance.
A study commissioned by the British Academy with the title *Born Global* established that employers particularly value the following ‘transferable skills’ developed by graduates in languages (2016: 3–4):

- ‘rigorous thinking, problem-solving and resilience’,
- ‘analytical, inter-cultural communication skills and global mindset’.

The study further established the following:

- Seven out of ten companies surveyed believe that future executives will need foreign language skills and international experience,
- 71% of mainly senior business people in UK companies said their language skills had given them a competitive edge in applying for jobs, and 67% said that language skills enabled them to apply for a wider range of jobs than would have been open to them otherwise.

Careers built specifically on language skills include those of translator, interpreter and teacher. For all of these, a knowledge of languages needs to be coupled with other skills, and choices need to be made about the specific work environment that is typical for jobs in these areas.

**Translators** work with written texts, translating them from one language into another. A professional translator will translate into their native language, normally from one or perhaps two other languages. They will specialize in certain types of text and certain fields — for example business documentation, legal texts, medical material or literature. Within those, they may specialize further, since you can’t translate a text properly unless you understand what it’s saying, and the more technical the text, the more important specialist knowledge becomes. Training will normally consist of a degree — generally in languages — and a further professional qualification.

Translators need to be highly attuned to the changing needs of a job in which machine translation is increasingly being used to deal with more routine texts. The translator’s work is more and more about editing, and gearing the text to the target market. The higher the proportion of work that is done by translation software tools, the more the work carried out by human translators will demand problem-solving skills and a creative ability to find appropriate equivalents where automatically
generated solutions are unsuitable. There will always be a need for translators, and literary translation will remain a job for human beings. But few people can make a living from translating literature, and the competition for other work can be fierce, with employment by agencies often being poorly paid. Freelance work needs an excellent business sense, willingness to spend long hours at a computer working to tight deadlines, and an imaginative approach to customer relations. Options include setting up your own agency, or working for the United Nations or the European Union, both of which require an excellent knowledge of at least two relevant languages beyond the translator’s native language.

**Interpreters** transpose the spoken word from one language into another either in *consecutive* interpreting (when the interpreter waits until the speaker has delivered a segment of speech and then renders the message in the target language) or *simultaneous* interpreting (in which the interpreter provides the target-language version continuously alongside the speaker’s version). It demands intense concentration and extensive training. Interpreters need an outstanding command of their native language and at least one other language, they need an excellent memory, they need to be good at thinking on their feet, and they need to enjoy performing under high pressure.

By contrast with translation, where you can consult dictionaries and other sources as you work, interpreting involves preparing the vocabulary and relevant knowledge of the subject for each assignment in advance of the event. While conference interpreters generally work in booths and take it in turns, smaller-scale assignments might consist of interpreting in meetings between politicians, between patients and doctors or health officials, or between parties in a legal dispute or immigration tribunal. The work here consists in creating understanding between the parties. As with translation, artificial intelligence is changing the landscape, so adaptability is key. Many interpreters work for organizations such as the EU, the UN and government agencies, while others are freelance, usually specializing in a particular field or range of fields.

**Foreign language teachers** need a deep knowledge of the language they’re teaching, including the ability to explain its grammar, and ideally a good knowledge of the learner’s first language. The nature of the work will depend on the age group of the learners and the setting and purpose of the instruction — primary or secondary school? Higher
education? A language school? A company? This will affect the type of syllabus, the level of learner motivation, and the nature of the job.

The received wisdom is often that native speakers of the target language are the best teachers, or even the only truly valuable teachers. This isn’t necessarily the case, especially at school level, where first-hand appreciation of the learners’ main difficulties can be even more important than a knowledge of all the nuances of the target language.

A key role — perhaps the key role — of a teacher is to keep the learner motivated and encouraged. Enthusiasm, imagination, creativity and empathy are therefore invaluable attributes of a language teacher — and
teachers who generate a lasting love of languages in their students fulfil an invaluable job.

Beyond the above career options, the opportunities opened up by a degree in languages are infinite, as is evident from the huge variety of employment areas university graduates in Modern Languages go into. The range also gives an inkling of what you can do with a high level of competence in languages that you’ve learned in other ways. The infographic (Fig. 3) shows the distribution of employment sectors.

Taking a creative approach to developing a career involving languages can help you draw confidently on your very own experience. Choosing a career is a living process. Learning a language can help with creating a personal vision, injecting a spirit of adventure — and trusting in serendipity.

Works Cited


Creative Multilingualism. 2020. https://www.creativeml.ox.ac.uk


OED. 2020. www.oed.com


**Find Out More**


Information provided by The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services on different types of career requiring a high level of languages competence and also other types of career where languages are an important adjunct.


This book offers advice on career planning and choices, writing a CV and preparing for an interview. See also the author’s fortnightly column ‘Dear Jonathan’ in the *Financial Times* (https://www.ft.com/dear-jonathan), and the FT Career Starters videos: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjdvCHWVtE4&list=PLqIpf04KBv61XrP8rtadMI5YpVxZt7Wkc

Responses from Oxford graduates in Modern Languages about the varied paths their careers have taken, from teaching, interpreting and food writing to producing TV commercials and running a venture capital fund. The responses were compiled by the Russian department but the variety of career paths is typical for other languages, too.


A short film consisting of comments from people in a variety of careers on the ways in which languages play a — sometimes surprising — part. More extended videos of the interviews give a deeper insight into the role languages have played in their careers.

Credits

Permission for Creative Multilingualism to publish their contribution was kindly granted by the following:

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