

# Multi-linguism in companies in the worldwide market: Using the British strategy as an example

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## Abstract

In a world-wide context in which the English language tends to impose itself as an unquestionable *lingua franca* in the business world, the multi-lingual strategy that the British government promotes on a large scale, in close cooperation with business organisations and centres for linguistic services, gives us considerable food for a number of reasons, as much for its approach as for the models of organisation adopted.

And above all perhaps for the recognition, by the economic leaders and the government of the United Kingdom, of the importance of multilingualism despite the world-wide hegemony of the English language. This is a fact that contrasts with the scarce attention paid by Catalan companies to the management of multi-linguism gesture, who don't even seem to be interested in English- and with the as yet incipient interest shown by the Catalan government in this issue.<sup>1</sup>

## Summary

1. The first phase
2. The development phase
3. The adoption of a national multi-lingual strategy
4. Conclusions and suggestions

### 1. The first phase

Just as John Hall concludes<sup>2</sup>, the first studies on multilingual needs in British companies go back to the 70's, when the United Kingdom was preparing to join the EEC. Even then a lack of interest in developing multi-linguistic abilities within companies was detectable, which contrasted with the evidence that the most successful firms in international transactions were those which paid most attention to good management of multilingualism.

A short while after this initial phase, research from Stephen Hagen, one of the more constant specialists in the study of multi-linguism in British companies appeared on the scene. From his first work, *Languages in British Business* (1988)<sup>1</sup>, up until his most recent, *Language and Culture in British Business. Communication, Needs and Strategies*<sup>2</sup>, his publications throughout the 80s and 90s were those that in large part have attracted general interest in the strategic importance of the development of multilingual skills in the economy in the UK.

### 2. The development phase

After this initial phase, there is no doubt that the Nuffield Foundation Report, *Languages: the Next Generation*<sup>3</sup> effectively brought to our attention and rejected in a convincing way the claim that English, as a world-wide *lingua franca*, was sufficient for all international relations, so that there was no need to learn other languages (!) The opening statement in the executive summary of this report is quite clear: *English alone is not enough*.

A great number of different arguments are advanced to support to this affirmation, but we shall mention just some of them:

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<sup>1</sup> 1. Growing interest shown in this question has come almost exclusively from the Catalan Secretariat for Language Policy, having published two relevant articles to date, *Usos lingüístics a les grans empreses amb vocació internacional* presents a Catalunya, 2002 and *Els usos lingüístics a les empreses amb vocació internacional*. Proceedings of the Quebec International Colloquium, 9 and 10 June, 2003, and the web Multilingualism in company webs. Guidelines on multilingualism in company webs. It should be noted, however, that the approach taken to language use in Catalan companies focuses on the place occupied by Catalan and scarcely touches on multilingual needs.

<sup>2</sup> London, CILT (2005).

British youth find themselves at a disadvantage to the young people of other countries when considering work opportunities as they tend to have little knowledge of other languages.

The Government does not have a coherent approach to multilingualism: it would be enough to adopt a national strategy for developing multilingual abilities and a support system for this strategy, one that connected languages and the TIC.

Languages -along with linguistic, mathematical and technological competence- are keys to economic competitiveness, intercultural tolerance and social cohesion.

In concluding, the report posed some crucial questions:

What multilingual ability should the country aim for in the next 20 years to obtain the economic, strategic, social and cultural objectives and the aspirations of its citizens?

To what extent are politicians currently responding to these necessities?

What initiatives and strategic plans should be adopted in this situation?<sup>43</sup>

The first three chapters of the report present a critique of worldwide multilingualism. They stress, for instance, that globalisation is accompanied by an apparently opposite process of reinforcement of local loyalties, so that for example Welsh and Gaelic take on a new identity; at the same time, big cities are becoming more and more multilingual and multicultural owing to immigration, and as access to the Internet increases, the relative weight that English holds in relation to other languages is reduced.

It is true, the report adds, that English is firmly established as the worldwide *lingua franca*, being indispensable in many fields, but it would be a grave error to believe it is sufficient alone. There are other languages that extend throughout the world (Hindi / Urdu, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese....). In a predominately multilingual world, *monolingualism* implies inflexibility, insensitivity and arrogance.

The considerable multilingual ability seen in many other countries provides such speakers with a very notable competitive advantage over the British. The international relations of the United Kingdom in effect demand wide-ranging multilingual competence.

It is above all in the field of international commerce that the report calls for a great joint effort from the economic world and the British government to overcome the apparently limited linguistic ability in companies, the tourist sector and public services. At the same time, it underlines the importance of the languages in different communities. It values the revival in regional languages - Welsh, Gaelic, Irish - as being very positive, and suggests that the British government has much to learn from this bilingual experience and from the speakers. It is upon the richness of this historic diversity in languages, along with the diversity which has arrived with immigration, that the language strategy for Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is essentially based.

The two following chapters –the fourth and fifth- deal with language learning at different levels of education, with specific proposals in each one. The sixth and last chapter presents the national multilingual strategy considered necessary in detail.

### 3. The adoption of a national multi-lingual strategy

The British government took into account in general terms the proposals of the Nuffield report. 2002 saw the publication of the document *Languages for All: Languages for Life. A Strategy for England*<sup>4</sup>, explicitly constituting an answer to the demands and questions raised in the Nuffield report, discussed above.

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<sup>3</sup> Should we not look for answers ourselves to these same questions, in Catalonia?

<sup>4</sup> Consultable on line at: <<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/languagesstrategy/pdf/DfESLanguagesStrategy.pdf>> (September 2005).

This national strategy for multilingualism is focused on language learning, but is particularly notable for stressing the essential part multilingualism plays in the competitiveness of the British economy. Furthermore, it proposes as an objective the spreading of regional support strategies for multilingualism in companies, based on regional questionnaires, the latter having the task of identifying language in the economic sector. These questionnaires, administered by regional development agencies, provided evidence that 20% of British companies had missed opportunities to do business owing to lack of multilingual ability. Accordingly, between 2001 and 2004, a Regional Languages Network was set up, with the principle aim of developing multilingualism in companies which operate internationally<sup>5</sup>.

Within this territorial structure, CILT. – until recently the *Centre for Information on Language Teaching*—has now become *The National Centre for Languages*<sup>5</sup>, with much more wide-ranging functions, as a nucleus of an extensive multilingual support network in British society, more especially in the economic world<sup>6</sup>.

One of the sections within CILT is specifically devoted to *Business + Employment*<sup>6</sup> and has a subsection dealing with corporate language planning (*Corporate language planning*)<sup>7</sup> with a wide range of orientations and resources for the design and application of multilingual strategies in companies.

From the point of view of raising awareness in companies, the recent project *Talking World Class. The Impact of Language Skills on the UK economy*<sup>7</sup> appears to me as being particularly well thought-out, an excellent compendium of arguments in favour of superior business ventures aided by multilingual capacity.

In a more practical vein, what is evidently of great use is the handy manual *Improving your Business Communications*<sup>8</sup>, by *Trade Partners UK*, a book which makes identification of multilingual needs in companies easier. It makes clear why it is better to deal with customers in their own language, it explains what a good international communication strategy should be, it gives information on language support services that companies can use, and recommends undertaking the analysis of multilingual needs (*Export Communications Review*), carried out by the Chamber of Commerce, as a first step.<sup>9</sup> It also offers orientation and guidance on the ideal way of using translation/ interpretation services and the language and intercultural education needed by their staff

Overall, then, the manual offers companies complete, efficient and easily accessible guidance and support.

#### 4. Conclusions and suggestions

From all this one can conclude that the globalisation of the economy demands the adoption of similar politics in all contexts, and especially in a society like that of Catalonia, where satisfactory organising of multi-lingual management is indispensable, it is very important to ensure that use of the Catalan language is implicated in local communications in a normal, integrated and simultaneous manner.

Looking at it from this point of view, the British experience exhibits a range of features which give us an extremely illustrative - almost model example:

The first step being the carrying out of a macro-sociological study that identifies the multilingual needs of the economy as a whole.

It establishes an ideal framework of cooperation between public authorities, business organisations and linguistic services. In this scheme, what are particularly notable are the public subsidies, which respect the work of language service professionals and in no case enter in competition with them.

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<sup>5</sup> To gain an idea of this, visit their home page : <<http://www.cilt.org.uk/>> (accessible September 2005).

<sup>6</sup> <<http://www.cilt.org.uk/employment/index.htm>> (accessible from September 2005).

<sup>7</sup> <<http://www.cilt.org.uk/employment/corp.htm>> (accessible from September 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Consultable on line: <[http://www.cilt.org.uk/employment/improving\\_your\\_business\\_communications.rtf](http://www.cilt.org.uk/employment/improving_your_business_communications.rtf)> o <<https://www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk/ukti/fileDownload/guide.pdf?cid=359933>> (accès el setembre de 2005).

It presents a system, articulated by sectors and territories, of planning, management and the offer of informational and support services, which enable the adaptation of multilingual strategies, adapting them to specific characteristics of each setting and each company or corporation.

It establishes a close relationship between the major objectives of the economy and language and educational policy, which points to the enormous importance of languages in the new world economy, both at personal and organisation or community level.

In my opinion, Catalan society has most of the necessary resources and infrastructures at its disposal to be able to implement a policy of this kind, not just as part of a policy of language normalisation, but rather as a principal line of action at government level involving almost all departments: this is a strategy which is important to the nation as a whole—despite the fact that in this essay we have stressed the importance it has in economic terms— it demands a commitment in educational, cultural, economic, social, and territorial policies, amongst others. hopefully, the British example will encourage us to promote our own national multilingual strategy here in Catalonia. We would all benefit.

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