



Association of  
Translation Companies

DEFINING STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE



# Language Services: The need to invest in the UK's international future





# Introduction

Language services will play an increasingly crucial role in enabling UK businesses' export strategies whilst remaining highly significant in enabling multilingual communication within British public services. In a post-Brexit Britain, this will be even more true.

Language services are essential for international commerce. British exporters make use of a wide range of translation and interpreting services to bring their products and services to foreign markets successfully, ultimately contributing to the UK's competitiveness in international markets.

While serving UK businesses, the country's 1,200 language service companies also ensure the justice system, police and National Health Service, among all other civil services, have access to the information they need, when they need it, and in whichever language they need it.

Skilled and competent professional translators and interpreters all across the country apply their expertise to complex, challenging and sensitive assignments.





In our linguistically diverse society, translation and interpreting services underpin the fair and equitable treatment of speakers of more than 300 different languages.

By its very nature, the language services industry needs mother tongue speakers of a wide range of different languages to provide the highest quality translation and interpreting services, with linguists recruited from outside the UK.

This report aims to develop the conversation on the needs for private and public sectors to invest in these critical services in the UK. It presents the wider economic case for language services in business and international trade, and highlights the role of translation and interpreting within the public sector. The UK's future lies in the relationships built both within and beyond its borders – investment in language and language services are an essential requirement.

**Raissa McNab**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
**Association of Translation Companies**



# The shape of the language services industry

**The UK's 1,200 language service companies, and the thousands of translators and interpreters they work with, provide critical translation and interpreting services to the UK's private and public sectors.**





## Language service companies

However, the UK's 1,200 language service companies provide translation and interpreting services to the UK's private and public sectors, along with technological solutions, language consultancy and language training.

Their revenues contribute £1.2 billion per annum to the economy and provide employment for over 12,000 staff.

**The added value language service companies generate to the UK's economy through the growth of international trade far surpasses the numerical data.**

They coordinate translation and interpreting projects in dozens of language combinations, and use sophisticated technological solutions to provide a complete set of services from the sourcing and scheduling of linguists and project management to the deployment of technology required for machine translation or video remote interpreting, among many others.

Language service companies employ multilingual project and account managers, and typically either have in-house translators or outsource linguistic assignments to freelance translators and interpreters.

## Translators and interpreters

Individual translators and interpreters typically work as in-house linguists in a language service company or in a freelance capacity for direct clients or language service companies.

Translators and interpreters are the backbone of the language services industry, and it is their skills and expertise in this demanding profession that enable the UK industry and society to communicate across geographical, cultural and language barriers.



## The need for mother tongue linguists

At the core of both translation and interpreting is a very high proficiency in both the linguist's source and target languages, and the ability to convey the meaning of a message in one language fluently in another.

The UK is a hugely diverse, multicultural society and it relies on skilled and qualified mother tongue linguists of diverse languages ranging from Acholi to Zulu, through French and Finnish.

Beyond the linguistic diversity of Britain, there is also an overwhelming international need for multilingual communication across industries and societies the world over, and translators and interpreters help respond to that need.

*“International awareness and capability are increasingly important not only for the UK’s success on the global stage but for the success of businesses, organisations and individuals. The ability to function in more than one language is increasingly being seen not just as enabling a basic transaction but as a crucial component of a set of skills, attributes and knowledge required for success in the world today.”*

*British Council<sup>1</sup>*





The UK's language industry benefits from the expertise of qualified and competent mother tongue linguists of both English and languages other than English, as the translation profession typically requires working into one's mother tongue only.

While native English-speaking translators work into English from a number of source languages, translators with native tongues other than English translate principally into their mother tongue.

In interpreting, the sheer number of language combinations the UK's public service needs access to is also well beyond the scope, variety and volume of work that native British interpreters are able to provide. The interpreting profession has an equal need of mother tongue speakers to cover this diverse range of languages, even if it, through its immediate communicational needs, works bi-directionally, into and out of the interpreter's mother tongue.

**The need for mother tongue linguists recruited from outside of the UK will continue to gain importance, as the well-reported decline in language learning in the UK accelerates.**

The British Council's Languages for the Future report<sup>2</sup> outlines the urgency for the UK to become a major international trading partner beyond Europe, while at the same time highlighting the importance of its continuing interconnectedness with its European neighbours.

The report discusses at length the challenges faced by the UK in domestic language learning and language capabilities:

*“Among the skills and capabilities the UK will need, an understanding of other cultures and languages will continue to be important for successful international relationships at all levels. Both within and beyond Europe, we will need to reach out beyond English, not only to maintain and improve our economic position but to build trust, deepen international influence and cultural relationships, and to keep our country safe.”*

There is a strong case for language capabilities and language learning at all levels of society. Language service companies and mother tongue translators and interpreters support that case, and facilitate global communication at a professional level.

It is in this landscape which the Association of Translation Companies (ATC) is positioned as a leading voice within the language services sector. ATC prides itself on a forward-thinking stance dedicated to maintaining the highest industry standards while supporting its members to thrive and grow in the competitive global economy.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/languages\\_for\\_the\\_future\\_2017.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/languages_for_the_future_2017.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/languages\\_for\\_the\\_future\\_2017.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/languages_for_the_future_2017.pdf)









# A skilled profession

**The UK has a hugely diverse, multicultural society, which relies on skilled and qualified mother tongue linguists of diverse languages ranging from Acholi to Zulu.**







The work of a translator or interpreter requires a high degree of competence, linguistic skills, knowledge of varied domains and text or interpreting types, proficiency in translation and interpreting techniques and technologies, and an ability to work in an extremely stressful, demanding, fast-paced professional environment.

Most translators and interpreters are degree-level qualified in translation, interpreting, modern languages, communication or linguistics, either from their native countries or the UK.

**UK universities training future generations of professional translators and interpreters offer a total of 85 master's degree courses in translation or interpreting, both to domestic and foreign students.<sup>3</sup>**

Increasingly, universities collaborate with language industry companies and industry associations to provide students with a well-rounded education preparing them for a career in language services.

Many translators and interpreters are also members of professional associations such as the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI), whose full membership carries stringent entry criteria.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mastersportal.com/search/#q=ci-30|di-310|lv-master>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.iti.org.uk/>



## Qualifications for the public sector

Much of the UK's public sector interpreting work requires formal BA or MA level or equivalent qualifications from the interpreters engaged in this sensitive work.

Complementing the BA or MA degree courses in translation and interpreting in the UK, the Chartered Institute of Linguists' CIOL Qualifications sets and awards professional qualifications which are recognised, and in many cases required, by UK government departments.

These include a Diploma in Translation and two interpreting Diplomas, the DPSI (Diploma in Public Service Interpreting) and the DPI (Diploma in Police Interpreting).<sup>5</sup>

The UK's National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI), an independent voluntary regulator of professional interpreters specialising in public service, maintains a public register of professional, qualified and accountable interpreters.<sup>6</sup>

## ISO standards certification

International standards specifically relating to the language services industry set the bar on the qualification and skills requirements and quality expectations on translation and interpreting services provided.

**Language industry ISO standards provide the criteria upon which the professionalism of language service providers can be objectively assured, for the benefit of stakeholders across the board.<sup>7</sup>**

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ciol.org.uk/ciol-qualifications>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.nrpsi.org.uk/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://atc.org.uk/iso-certification-service/standards/>

# The economic case for languages

Language service companies play a pivotal role in facilitating UK companies' export strategies, supporting an ever more international business market.



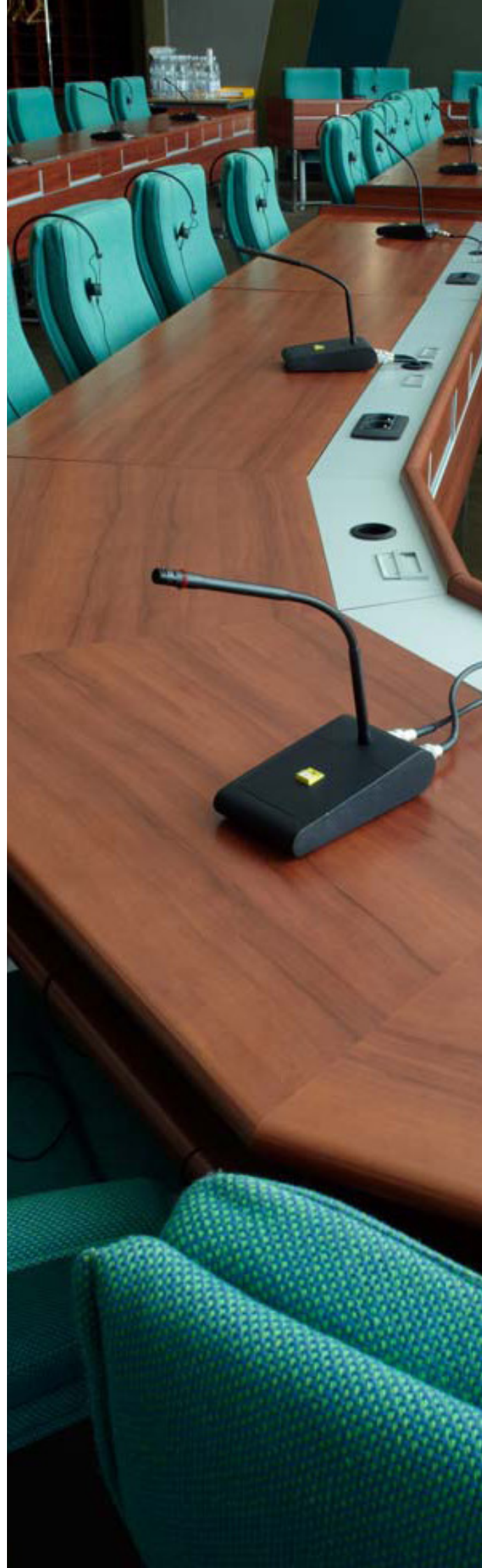
There is an overwhelming body of research and survey evidence supporting the economic case for language learning and language capabilities in business, translation and interpreting, with a clear link to increased global competitiveness.

International business communication in the target market's own language is necessary to bring results but is often challenging for companies newly engaged in exporting activities.

The Department of International Trade's Exporting is Great campaign showcases export success stories and provides a wealth of resources to UK businesses looking to kickstart their export activities as part of the priority to build a global Britain and Northern Ireland. Translation of websites earns a specific mention.<sup>8</sup>

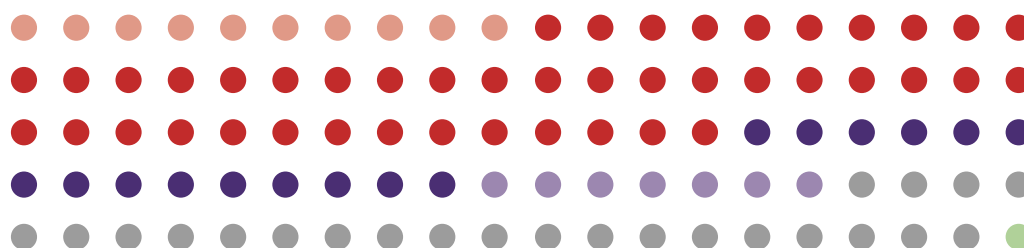
The DIT's national survey of registered businesses 2017 measures UK businesses' self-reported exporting behaviours, plans and attitudes, alongside insights into their perceptions around barriers to exporting. One of the main knowledge barriers reported by 59% of respondents amongst the £500k+ business population was found to be understanding overseas clients in terms of their language or culture.<sup>9</sup>

In many cases, UK companies trade internationally in multiple markets, with a high dependence on language support. The Institute of Directors' Going Global Trends in Trade showed a notably low number of internationally active IoD members (10%) selling to just one market, even when the EU was explicitly treated as one market for the purposes of the survey. In contrast, 30% of the respondents sell to over 11 markets.<sup>10</sup>



## How many non-UK markets does your (primary) organisation sell to and/or operate in?<sup>11</sup>

\*for the purposes of this question, please treat the EU as one market



**10%** 1 market

**44%** 2-5 markets

**15%** 6-10 markets

**7%** 11-15 markets

**23%** More than 15 markets

**1%** Don't know

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.great.gov.uk/>

<sup>9</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/714999/DIT\\_National\\_Survey\\_500k\\_Small\\_and\\_Medium\\_08062018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/714999/DIT_National_Survey_500k_Small_and_Medium_08062018.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.iod.com/Portals/0/PDFs/Campaigns%20and%20Reports/Europe%20and%20trade/Going-global.pdf?ver=2018-04-04-164140-840>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/languages\\_for\\_the\\_future\\_2017.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/languages_for_the_future_2017.pdf)



The IoD survey also reveals that 18% of respondents are concerned about the language barrier and/or unfamiliarity with informal or cultural business practices abroad.

The British Council's Languages for the Future report (2013 & 2017) considers the outlook for the supply and demand for language competence in the years ahead and looks at the linguistic dimension of a variety of economic, geopolitical, cultural and educational factors.

**The Languages for the Future report argues that, 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.<sup>12</sup>**

An SME survey in 2014 by the British Academy's Born Global project revealed 83% of SMEs did not use languages other than English but 52% agreed additional foreign languages would be helpful to extend business opportunities in the future.

Further research initiated and co-funded by the Association of Translation Companies is underway in the form of a PhD project on the role of languages in the internationalisation of UK SMEs. The research aims to establish the impact of languages in facilitating SME growth through exports and the role of languages in business-to-business marketing and customer-company relationships. The project is due for completion in 2020.

**The potential of languages and language services to support UK businesses' export strategies will only increase in the future. Business needs to be aware of the potential of language to support growth strategies and consider its use as 'UK business as usual'.**

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/languages\\_for\\_the\\_future\\_2017.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/languages_for_the_future_2017.pdf)





# Providing a public service

**Without translation and interpreting professionals, British public services including the NHS, justice system and police forces, would be unable to function.**



More than 300 languages are spoken in the UK today and in some boroughs, such as Tower Hamlets in London, over 30% of the population use a language other than English as their main language.<sup>13</sup>

The public sector's translation and interpreting requirements are served primarily by framework contracts with language service companies, who fulfil these contracts with the aid of translators and interpreters working with a large number of language pairs and specialisations, in a wide range of settings. Typically, public service translators and interpreters need to be UK security-cleared to work with confidential assignments.

Most interpreting assignments are carried out face-to-face, on-site, which adds a layer of geographical complexity to the potential availability of interpreters at a certain location, in a given language pair, often at short notice due to tight time requirements of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, for example.

## **Crown Commercial Service**

As the main supply route for all public sector customers including NHS trusts, local councils, charities and government departments, the Crown Commercial Service provides interpreting, translation and transcription services across 250 languages and dialects for all public sectors, through contracts with language service companies.<sup>14</sup>

## **Ministry of Justice**

Ministry of Justice framework contract commissioning bodies range from all law enforcement agencies in England and Wales to the Crown Prosecution services, and operators of private prisons. The primary translation and interpreting framework contract covers 41 standard languages, 7 special services (such as video remote interpreting), and 152 rare languages.<sup>15</sup>



## A case in point: Transnational Organised Crime and Translation

Recent research on the effects of transnational organised crime has revealed how an increasingly diverse linguistic landscape is forcing police officers to investigate and combat organised crime networks whose members communicate across multiple languages.<sup>16</sup>

It is clear the police have a pronounced need for translators and interpreters to enable them to investigate serious crimes such as trafficking in drugs, counterfeit medicines and people, or child sexual exploitation. This involves significant challenges, including cost, number of languages, quality and the limited supply of qualified linguists.

In the Transnational Organised Crime and Translation (TOCAT) project, researchers, the police and translation providers have made an unprecedented effort to work together to understand and face up to these challenges.

Lead researcher on the project, Professor Jo Drugan of the University of East Anglia, found that police, the Home Office and other government agencies already face severe challenges in investigating, prosecuting and preventing serious crimes due to the lack of suitable linguists.

*“In sensitive contexts like police raids, the need is urgent and the potential consequences if we get it wrong are grave. We should learn from previous terrible mistakes, such as the failure to translate urgent warnings in time to prevent the 9/11 attacks. If the police can’t source qualified linguists, the impact on all our safety and security is a real concern.”*

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough\\_statistics/Ward\\_profiles/Census-2011/RB-Census2011-Language-in-Tower-Hamlets-2013-02.pdf](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Ward_profiles/Census-2011/RB-Census2011-Language-in-Tower-Hamlets-2013-02.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> <https://ccs-agreements.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/contracts/rm1092>

<sup>15</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/764085/language-interpreter-translation-services-statistics-guide.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/764085/language-interpreter-translation-services-statistics-guide.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.paccsresearch.org.uk/transnational-organised-crime-and-translation/>







# The impact of Brexit

**There is a critical need to ensure the route to mother tongue translators and interpreters remains accessible post-Brexit.**

The Government's White Paper on Immigration outlines the future of immigration through an extension of the existing Tier 2 visa scheme.<sup>17</sup>

Its expected effect on many sectors relying on recruitment from outside of the UK has been widely reported and discussed, and the language services sector will, without doubt, also be challenged.

Private and public language services by their very nature have, and will continue to have, a need for skilled and qualified native speakers of different languages; i.e. linguists recruited from their own countries both across the EU and the rest of the world.

**However, there are currently no prioritised pathways within the immigration system to ensure the UK's continued access to skilled and qualified mother tongue linguists.**

Translators and interpreters have not been recognised as an occupation in shortage, and the planned immigration salary thresholds are prohibitive for these professions. While they are highly skilled, the remuneration of translators and interpreters does not reflect the level of skills and qualifications required of them when compared with other professions.

For language service companies, and consequently their customers in private and public sectors, that will present a significant challenge when trying to recruit mother tongue linguists into the UK. The overall cost of visa sponsorship will also present issues.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-uks-future-skills-based-immigration-system>

## **Safeguarding the profession post-Brexit**

To find a resolution to the current situation, the ATC is actively engaging in the UK Government's consultation for a future immigration system. Along with other stakeholders, the association is acting as the voice of the UK language service providers, and is presenting evidence on the importance of the language services industry and the professions of translator and interpreter in the UK to support its view that mother tongue linguists require priority treatment within the immigration system.

There is a critical need to safeguard UK industry's and the public sector's continued access to mother tongue translators and interpreters in the years ahead, and to ensure that the route to these skilled roles remains accessible post-Brexit. The UK's language service providers should not be put at a disadvantage to their non-UK competitors.

**Translators and interpreters are in a unique position within the UK labour market. The language services industry intrinsically requires migrants, and these needs cannot be offset through domestic training, but require separate recognition and consideration from all other professions.**

Over and above expected post-Brexit skills shortages of translators and interpreters in the UK, the ATC is also engaged, together with other language industry stakeholders, in raising the profile of, and the remuneration for, these services so critical to the UK's public and private sectors.



# Conclusion

The UK depends on language service providers today to support business and public services but we must consider what is required to take advantage of future opportunities.

Translators and interpreters, and the language service companies that manage the assignments they work on, are critical cogs in the UK's multilingual future.

They help grow the UK economy by promoting British industry abroad, and they serve the public sector by enabling it to fulfil its statutory requirements towards multilingual communication.

The language service industry's impact on the prospects of the UK's international trade, and the support the industry lends to the UK society, cannot be understated.

We must take steps to safeguard the UK's continued access to mother tongue translators and interpreters in the years ahead.



# Association of Translation Companies

The Association of Translation Companies (ATC) is a professional membership association representing the interests of its language service company members in the UK and internationally. It is the leading voice for companies operating in the UK's language services industry.<sup>18</sup>

The ATC provides authoritative advice about matters relating to multilingual communication, and working with legislators and other stakeholders, lobbies on behalf of its members, promoting the value of language skills, translation and interpreting.

The ATC is also at the forefront of the development of international standards for translation and interpreting.

ATC membership is recognised at government and international levels as the mark of quality-managed translation services.

The ATC is also a founding member of the European Union of Association of Translation Companies, a pan-European grouping of translation company associations.

<sup>18</sup> <https://atc.org.uk/>



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