



Response from the Chartered Institute of Linguists to the Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry:

'Soft power: A strategy for success?'

Introduction

The Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL) is the UK's Royal Chartered professional body for all linguists, and notably translators and interpreters. Serving over 5,000 members internationally, CIOL promotes the work of linguists, advocates for languages and language education, and sets professional standards through its qualifications, chartership and support for linguists' continuous professional development.

1. Summary

1.1 Languages need to be at the core of the UK's soft power and international influencing efforts

Notwithstanding the global reach of English, the UK must deploy professionally qualified linguists and people with advanced language skills if we want to build relationships and true influence worldwide in:

- Diplomacy, security and defence
- International business, trade and exports
- Conflict resolution and humanitarian operations
- Cultural exchange and education
- International organisations and global governance

1.2 The UK faces a serious national capability challenge in languages that limits our soft power potential

The deficit in the UK's language capability represents a strategic weakness:

- **Economic impact:** Language barriers cost the UK an estimated 3.5% of GDP
- **Lost Trade:** SMEs that use languages report 43% higher export/turnover ratios but most trade only in English or with Anglophone markets
- **Shortages of professional linguists:** The UK faces a very real risk of critical shortfalls in skilled linguists to support government, public services and business.

1.3 The UK's professional linguist community is an underutilised national asset

Professional linguists, translators and interpreters can be a vital part of the UK's soft power by:

- Enabling effective diplomatic and security relationships
- Facilitating international business and trade
- Supporting humanitarian interventions and conflict resolution
- Ensuring UK representation in international organisations
- Countering misinformation in foreign languages

2. Response to specific inquiry questions

2.1 Why is soft power important and how can it be measured?

Professional linguists and high levels of language skills are of clear value:

- **Economic impact:** RAND/University of Cambridge research estimated language barriers in just four languages (Arabic, Chinese, French and Spanish) cost up to £19 billion in lost exports annually.
- **International relations:** Effective deployment of professional linguists in diplomatic, military and intelligence contexts directly enhances the UK's influence and supports the UK's security.
- **Crisis response:** Interpreters and linguists in conflict zones are crucial to the UK's operational effectiveness and humanitarian efforts.

But the intangible measures are mutual respect and trust, as these are the cornerstone of long-term influence.

2.2 What should be the objective of soft power?

The UK's soft power objectives should recognise both the critical value of English and the central role of engagement in other languages:

- **Media:** The BBC World Service's effectiveness in 42 languages depends on skilled translators and linguists who can convey complex messages with cultural sensitivity. This unique capability should be protected through adequate ongoing funding.
- **Educational influence:** UK universities have educated more world leaders than any other country, with the British Council's English teaching and exams supporting international students worldwide and facilitating global educational partnerships. The British Council needs adequate ongoing funding and more support for its programmes.



- **Respectful cultural exchange:** Professional linguists, diplomats with high-level language skills and speakers of other languages enable more effective cultural diplomacy that reaches beyond elite English-speaking audiences to connect with broader populations.

2.3 How do FCDO arms-length bodies contribute to the UK's soft power?

- **British Council:** it represents outstanding value for money, earning 85% of its income independently. Its English teaching and IELTS qualifications, delivered with the University of Cambridge, are the global gold standards. The British Council's long-term support for languages in the UK has been a cornerstone of languages in the UK school system.
- **BBC World Service:** Professional linguists are at the heart of enabling the BBC to counter disinformation and provide trusted news in 42 languages, significantly enhancing UK influence. Proposed cuts could greatly damage this invaluable asset.

2.4 What role does soft power play in conflict resolution?

- **Professional interpreters:** Linguists are crucial to operational effectiveness and diplomatic efforts, the UK should support a UN resolution for the protection of interpreters in conflict zones.
- **Military language capability:** The British Army does an excellent job of language training and should be supported and recognised for its appreciation of practical language skills as mission-critical.
- **Humanitarian operations:** Effective humanitarian response requires professional linguists and professionals with languages who understand local contexts and can communicate sensitively in crisis and emergency situations.

2.5 How effective is the FCDO in leading HMG's soft power approach?

- **More could be done to capture and deploy HMG's total linguistic capability:** The FCDO does value languages, but CIOL would encourage a wider audit of language skills across domestic government departments to identify and deploy the considerable 'latent' language capability in UK Home, Heritage and Community languages alongside those gained at school and university.

2.6 How could HMG better support soft power sectors?

- **Languages for Export:** HMG's 2021 Export Strategy failed to mention language skills (unlike France's strategy, which included linguistic training



both for exporters and trading partners). Without attention to languages, export growth to non-Anglophone nations is bound to be impeded.

- **AI development:** languages must be central to HMG AI policy. Current AI systems perform poorly in non-English languages, especially 'low-resource' languages. The UK could show real international leadership by developing a 'language rich' AI policy and promoting AI applications that respect linguistic diversity drawing on the know-how in GCHQ, CIOL and elsewhere.
- **Wider Professional recognition of languages:** Enhanced status and career pathways for professional linguists in government service beyond FCDO, GCHQ and MoD could strengthen the UK's deployable soft power assets in education, trade, health and other domains.

3. Recommendations

1. **Create a National Languages Strategy** incorporating a realistic approach to development of language education and a pipeline of skilled linguists as a strategic asset for UK soft power.
2. **Secure sustainable futures** for the BBC World Service and British Council to maintain their reach and influence both for English in other world languages.
3. **Establish a government-wide register of linguists** to better deploy existing civil service capability in policy-making, delivery and emergency situations.
4. **Develop a 'language rich' AI policy** demonstrating and then showcasing UK leadership in and commitment to ethical, inclusive and plurilingual AI development.
5. **Support the protection of professional linguists** in conflict zones through a UN resolution for the protection of interpreters in conflict zones.
6. **Include the representation of professional linguists** on the Soft Power Council to inform strategy and implementation, with GCHQ the obvious choice.
7. **Recognise the UK's translators and interpreters** as potential soft power assets for the UK in international trade, security and humanitarian contexts and make more proactive use of them.

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