Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies

Angela Gayton

University of Cambridge

Abstract: This paper provides an overview of the MEITS (Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies) project, led by the University of Cambridge and its partner institutions: University of Edinburgh, University of Nottingham, and Queen's University Belfast. It is funded under the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Open World Research Initiative (OWRI). The project commenced on July 1st, 2016, and is due to run until 30th June, 2020: at this early stage, the MEITS team is seeking to make relevant stakeholders aware of the rationale and need for the project, the varied array of methodological approaches, and the planned real-world impact. Of particular interest to this readership is that the project is a response to the decline of foreign language learning in the United Kingdom (and other Anglophone countries), attitudes towards and beliefs about multilingualism generally, and wider questions of language policy in the United Kingdom and beyond.

Keywords: multilingualism; language learning; attitudes; impact

Introduction

Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies (MEITS) is a flagship research project which seeks to revitalise language learning, and positively impact language policy in the United Kingdom, through an interdisciplinary demonstration of the vital role of multilingualism at both the individual and societal levels. MEITS is part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)'s Open World Research Initiative (OWRI), a substantial programme of funding focused specifically on modern languages. In addition to MEITS, OWRI supports three other major research projects, and each of these four brings together partners from both within and outside the higher education system. MEITS is led by the University of Cambridge (Principal Investigator Wendy Ayres-Bennett) and is partnered by three UK Higher Education Institutions (University of Edinburgh, University of Nottingham, and Queen's University Belfast), as well as four international higher education establishments (the Universities of Bergen, Girona, Peking and the Chinese University of Hong Kong), and over thirty non-academic partners. Underpinning MEITS is a shared belief that the importance of languages reaches far beyond interaction: languages in fact play a crucial role in national security, diplomacy, conflict resolution, community and social cohesion, migration, and identity. A recent report entitled "The Value of Languages" supports this idea of languages being fundamental in so many realms, and seeks to make recommendations for the development of a UK languages strategy which acknowledges the immense role that languages play both economically and socially (The Value of Languages, 2015). Given the myriad domains in which linguistic and cultural competence play a central part, the MEITS team takes the stance that language learning, and multilingualism and

multiculturalism generally, is something to be encouraged, supported and indeed valued, a stance likely shared by much of this journal's readership.

However, it is in numerous contexts, and by many different stakeholders, that multilingualism has been perceived not as an opportunity, but as something divisive, or unusual, that needs to be overcome. Safford and Drury (2013), for example, reflect on perceptions of bilingualism as a problem rather than a resource in United Kingdom educational contexts. De Britos (2016) and Kim (2016) also deal with the issue of young people's multilingual repertoires failing to be valued in educational and other settings. They highlight the tendency for there to be an emphasis on the apparent obstacle of children's multilingual resources to them developing competence in a dominant language. It is fair to say that this stance on multilingualism is prevalent particularly in Anglophone countries such as the United Kingdom, where English, often perceived as the global language of communication, is spoken by many as a mother tongue – foreign language learning in such contexts is seen as being in decline (for recent discussion with specific reference to the Scottish context, see Scott, 2015). Similarly, it has been noted that the learning of foreign languages other than English may well be facing similar difficulties in non-Anglophone settings (Gayton, 2016; Henry, 2015; Kramsch, 2014). This suggests that multilingualism may often be devalued in a range of contexts worldwide. This is by no means a new phenomenon, as shown by Templeton's (2007) discussion of language policy (specifically in European countries) needing to address the preconception that "English is enough".

Discourses on individual and societal development of multilingual competence in Anglophone settings have tended to focus on "utilitarian" needs (for example, pragmatic communicative rationale for accessing greater educational and employment opportunities). However, there is growing evidence that this may be insufficient, or sometimes even irrelevant. Lanvers et al. (2016: 2) propose that for highly competent or mother-tongue speakers of the de facto global language of English, attempting to stimulate language learning motivation based on these practical arguments is likely to be ineffective:

> *[…] of all possible rationales for language learning, an emphasis on instrumental benefits is the most vulnerable to the force of the global spread of English, tempting the response that 'English is enough'.*

One example of this is Fischer's (2013) interview study with representatives from the financial services sector in Scotland. She concluded that the beliefs and actions of employers were somewhat discordant – while participants claimed that languages are in theory seen as important, recruitment decisions in practice do not seem driven by whether a candidate possesses multilingual competence. This is not to claim that pragmatic arguments have no place in reversing the decline of language learning (there is excellent work being done in this domain by projects such as "Born Global", which aim to put forward a strong "business case" for developing multilingualism: http://www.britac.ac.uk/born-global), only that these arguments alone are perhaps not enough.

The above discussion indicates the need for continuing work on awareness-raising and paradigm-shifting in the way multilingualism is valued. Within this, we argue for the importance of a broader, multifaceted approach to promoting heightened motivation and interest, moving beyond a focus on the purely pragmatic and utilitarian, towards, for example, cultural and literary engagement; reflections on identity; establishing social cohesion; and issues relating to health and wellbeing.

The MEITS project is an interdisciplinary, integrated, collaborative response to this.

The project – main aims and methodologies

MEITS encompasses six intersecting strands, each tackling from a unique angle pertinent issues related to multilingualism. The overarching research questions are as follows:

- What is the relationship between the multilingual individual and the multilingual society?
- What are the opportunities and challenges presented by multilingualism?
- What is the relationship between multilingualism, diversity and identity?
- What is the relationship between multilingualism and language learning?
- How can we influence attitudes towards multilingualism?
- How can we re-energise Modern Languages research?

Through collaborative and interdisciplinary efforts, Strands 1-6 will all feed into answering these. However, each individual strand contributes specific areas of expertise:
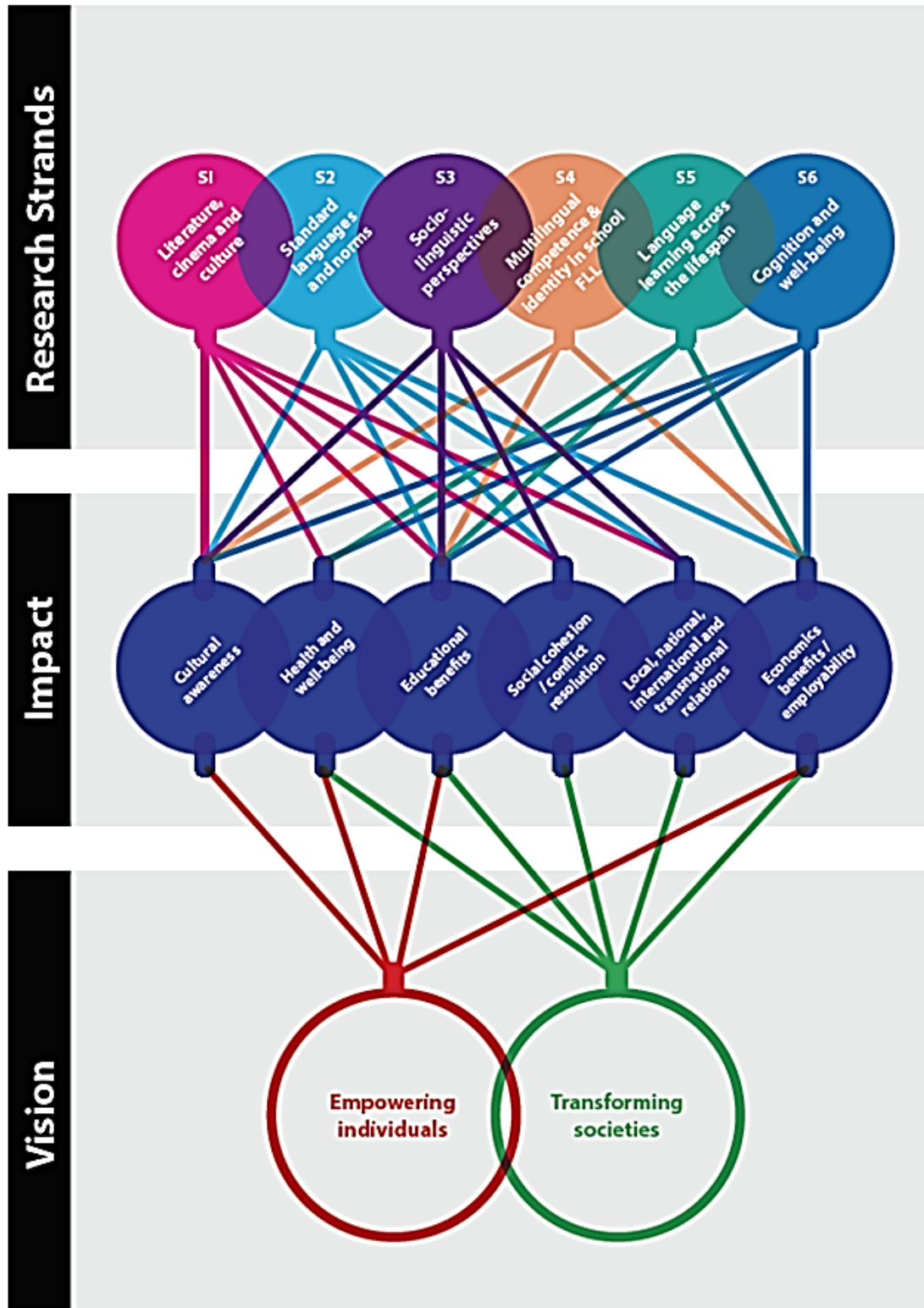
Figure 1: MEITS' strands, impact and vision

One of the key aims of the MEITS project is to establish precedents for innovative methodological approaches in a range of research areas under the banner of multilingualism. While each strand could be said to be located within a specific theoretical and empirical paradigm, spanning literature and culture within the arts and humanities realm in Strand 1, to experimental approaches within a cognitive neuroscience framework in Strand 6, the aim is above all to encourage cross-pollination of theories and techniques from one to the other. Ultimately, we are seeking to facilitate a more integrated exploration of myriad issues relating to multilingualism, both as the phenomenon relates to the individual, and to wider society.

Methodological approaches taken across the strands include document analysis of cultural texts; corpus linguistics techniques; self-report methods such as questionnaires and interviews; classroom intervention strategies; and linguistic and cognitive experimental methods.
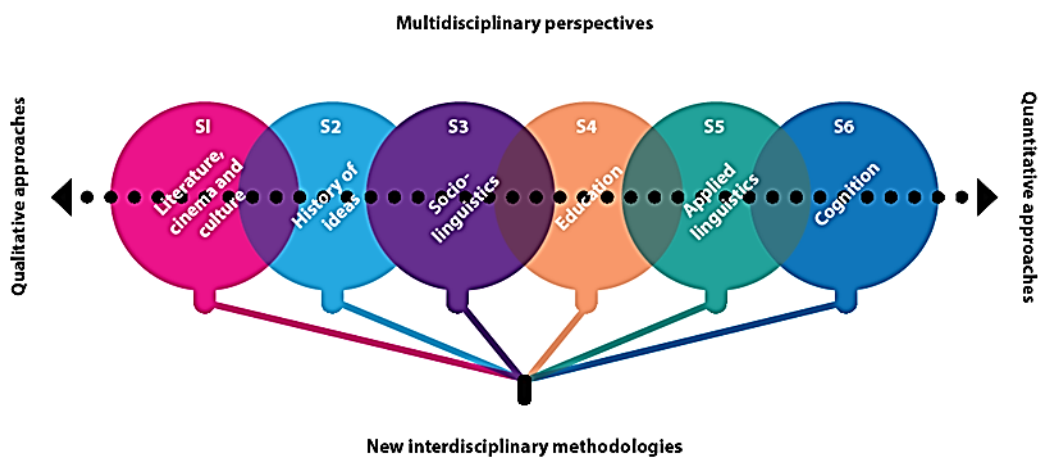

Figure 2: MEITS' methodological approaches

The Strands in Detail

Strand 1 – Arts of identity: literature, cinema, culture and citizenship in a globalizing Europe

Using as its starting point an understanding of multilingualism as a cultural phenomenon, Strand 1 is primarily concerned with the exploration of cultural texts and events such as narratives, fiction, poetry, theatre and cinema in a globalising Europe. In focus are two distinct and instructive contexts in the western and eastern reaches of Europe: Catalonia and Ukraine. Despite inherent differences, these regions share the instrumentalisation of language for the renegotiation or secession of national identities. Specific research questions investigate how and why language is politicised in multilingual contexts and the role of culture in this process, by undertaking analyses of texts and contexts.

As reported in the Scottish Languages Review, the interconnectivity between multilingualism and culture has long been appreciated within language learning practices: one example is Liebke (2012), who reports on pupils' creation of a newspaper-style publication, dealing with an array of German-language cultural content. Furthermore, Bécavin (2014) provides concrete activities detailing how art, drama and music may effectively be incorporated into language learning for the pedagogical benefit and indeed enjoyment of pupils.

Strand 2 – Standard languages, norms and variation: comparative perspectives in multilingual contexts

Strand 2 seeks to establish a comparative perspective of standard languages, norms and variation in multilingual contexts. There will be an investigation of the nature of standard languages in both speech and writing; old and new media; and individual and group identities. Also explored is how standard languages may enhance social cohesion and democratic citizenship, and in line with Strand 1, the extent to which a standard language can be a vehicle for cultural expression. Specific research questions in this strand focus on defining the nature of a standard language, the interaction between standard languages and minoritised languages, and the implications of each for language education in practice.

Medwell et al. (2012: 40) is an example of recent work published in this journal which touches upon similar issues: these authors have discussed the role that standard language ideologies may play in teacher recruitment processes.

Strand 3 – Sociolinguistic perspectives on multilingualism: identity, diversity and social cohesion

Strand 3 addresses the complex issues of diversity and identity at individual and societal levels, with specific consideration given to the domains of politics and education in both Ireland and France. These contexts provide a comparative perspective on issues such as multiculturalism, regional identities, social cohesion and peace-building – Ireland has an official language that is both minoritised and dialectal, whilst France possesses a unitary official language, which is strongly standardised, and is in a dominant position in relation to a wealth of regional and heritage languages in the country. The relationship between national identity as a shifting and dynamic construct, and multilingualism, is explored in terms of its potential for positive impact on social cohesion.

Previous Scottish Languages Review work has paralleled these themes: Gieselbrecht (2009) has discussed the value of celebrating multilingual and multicultural diversity in education contexts, in order to reflect increasingly "pluralistic" societies across Europe. Furthermore, Debaene (2008) has addressed the emergent diversity in the Irish context specifically, with reference to the Polish diaspora in that setting, and how it has brought into question understood notions of 'official' languages.

Strand 4 – The influence of multilingual identity on foreign language learning

Strand 4 is also concerned with identity, specifically, the transformative potential of multilingual identity within foreign language learning practices in formal secondary education. The main goal is to work towards a nuanced understanding of the relationship between young people's multilingual identity, and attainment and motivation. To this end, two broad groups of pupils will be compared: monolingual (English-L1) pupils in the process of becoming multilingual by undertaking formal foreign language study; and multilingual pupils (for example, those who may speak another language at home), further diversifying their linguistic repertoire through formal foreign language learning. Part of the work of Strand 4 is actually to operationalise these key terms "monolingual" and "multilingual", to better understand the nuances within each, and pupils' own self-ascriptions. Specific questions in this strand compare the foreign language progression of these two groups, as well as the multilingual identity development of each.

Strand 4's aims converge with those of the "Mother Tongue Other Tongue" multilingualism schools project (de Britos, 2016) reported on in the Scottish Languages Review, in raising awareness of the importance of valuing children's multifaceted linguistic and cultural backgrounds and repertoires that they bring with them to the classroom setting.

Strand 5 – Language learning across the lifespan: the role of age, language-specific factors & learning experience on language acquisition

Strand 5 shares a focus on foreign language learning with Strand 4, but considers instead how best language learners may remain motivated and engaged at various stages throughout the life span. The well-known debate of whether it is best to start language learning as early as possible is critically considered, specifically in settings where learners are receiving only quite minimal input (as opposed to immersion settings, for example). This strand investigates whether young adults may actually make more successful language learners in such contexts, given cognitive maturational processes that take place during adolescence. In addition to age, linguistic typology also comes under scrutiny, to explore how a language learner's attainment is impacted by the linguistic closeness of their mother tongue and the target language. The specific type of learning experience is a further variable considered, as the linguistic achievements of heritage speakers will be compared with those of adult second language learners.

The areas of focus in Strand 5 are similar to those explored in empirical work reported on in this publication by Kempe and Brooks (2011), namely taking a cognitive perspective to understanding degrees of success in language learning, by contributing to an understanding of the multifaceted aspects in which learners may prove to be effective, rather than a simplistic approach of believing there to be 'good' and 'bad' language learners.

Strand 6 – Multilingualism and cognition: implications for motivation, health and well-being

Issues relating to health and wellbeing at both ends of the age spectrum are foregrounded in Strand 6. At the younger end is a comparison of monolingual and bilingual children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), to ascertain whether cognitive benefits of bilingualism identified in typically-developing children also hold for those with autism. At the opposite end is an exploration of the potential for language learning in later adulthood to stave off cognitive decline.

The work of Strand 6 parallels recent coverage of language learning and wellbeing issues in this journal. For example, Shanks (2014) presents a parent's perspective of raising children in a bilingual household, comparing typical and atypical development. In an earlier edition, van Wengen (2013) discusses the varied benefits of language learning for children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in terms of their self-esteem, encouraging an intrinsic pleasure in learning processes, and developing an openness to new perspectives.

Planned impact

Our planned impact represents the interdisciplinary collaboration between these six intersected strands. It is crucial to emphasise that the impact will consist of more than just the sum of its parts – it is the fluid, collaborative, and cross-institutional nature of this project that will enable us to address major issues facing modern languages that are relevant to all strands, for example the way modern languages are valued in different contexts; the role of multilingualism in cultural production; exerting influence on policy makers and other stakeholders, and indeed the general public; and establishing innovative methodologies. We can broadly categorise the planned impact as follows:

Links with the community

Ensuring that the wider community is able to benefit from MEITS research is fundamental to our approach. One overarching goal is the creation of "pop-up languages museums" in each of the MEITS partner cities (i.e. Belfast, Cambridge, Edinburgh and Nottingham). Through these museums, members of the public of all ages will have the chance to engage with issues surrounding multilingualism and multiculturalism in an interactive way.

Other examples of such initiatives include language exploration and creative writing workshops promoting multilingual identities and language learning run in partnership with the Cambridge Ethnic Communities Forum (CECF), IDEAL (a team that supports schools to enhance the education and welfare of Black and minority ethnic [BME] and English as an additional language [EAL] pupils and families ensuring inclusion and equality) and the Nottingham Writers' Studio. Furthermore, Polygon Arts will work with a number of multilingual communities over a period of 6-9 months, using drama workshops as an ethnographic space of encounter, creativity and dialogue; these will result in a performance targeted at local families.

Building on Strand 6's research, we will seek to improve the provision of evidence-based information and guidance for bilingual families with ASD children. To this end, a handbook for families will be produced. Furthermore, in terms of impact at the older end of the age spectrum, the findings on bilingualism and cognitive decline support the existing work of research and information centre Bilingualism Matters (www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk): in conjunction with this channel and with partners such as Age UK and the University of the Third Age, knowledge will be disseminated to the public via publications, talks and conferences.

Links with partners outside the higher education domain

An important tenet of our work is making connections with a broad range of stakeholders. For example, the research being conducted on standard/non-standard languages and language norms will be complemented by collaboration with commercial bilingual dictionary publishers, and organisations involved in language learning and language testing. Furthermore, our interest in social cohesion and conflict resolution in the French and Irish contexts specifically has already led to collaboration with a number of partners external to the higher education sector, particularly on the question of the position of the highly politicized Irish language in Northern Ireland.

Facilitating pedagogical impact

Establishing partnerships with schools is an important part of MEITS' work, and its lasting impact, and this will take a number of different forms. For example, continuing professional development (CPD) mini-conferences will be organised by research staff at the University of Cambridge for teachers in the surrounding areas, which focus on raising awareness of pertinent issues relating to multilingualism, identity and attainment, including opportunities for training, as well as forums for sharing best practice. Furthermore, we anticipate being able to make recommendations about appropriate, beneficial and rationale-driven ways to incorporate learners' mother tongue into foreign language teaching, as well as to inform age-appropriate teaching practices, which build on an understanding of learners' relative stages of cognitive development and motivation.

Facilitating policy impact

Policy is a key part of the MEITS project, and it has been agreed that MEITS will lead on policy across the four OWRI projects. We will be working with policymakers in Whitehall and beyond and will have three 'Policy Fellows' working with us over the course of the project. In addition, Professor Janice Carruthers (Queen's University Belfast), in her new role as the AHRC's Modern Languages Leadership Fellow and a MEITS Deputy Principal Investigator, will be particularly focussing her research on language policies and practices in the devolved administrations of the United Kingdom: to this end, she is working with University Council for Modern Languages Scotland (UCMLS), and hopes to collaborate with SCILT. Finally, as a way of interacting with policy development, the Languages, Society and Policy journal will be officially launched later in 2017. The aim of this journal is to showcase interdisciplinary research excellence which is accessible to

different stakeholders, in order to facilitate the provision of policy advice to a range of domains which are underpinned by the crucial role of language, such as education, health and business.

Moving forward

As this work progresses, and the impact of this innovative, multidisciplinary and wide-reaching project becomes established, the MEITS team looks forward to providing updates to the Scottish Languages Review that will be of interest to the readership, with the aim of informing policy, practice, and indeed beliefs as they relate to multilingualism.

Acknowledgements

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