Languages of the United Kingdom

Languages of United Kingdom	
Official language(s)	English[1] [2] (de facto, not de jure) Recognised regional languages[3]
Main language(s)	English >95%[4]
Minority language(s)	officially recognised Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Lowland Scots, Cornish, Irish, British Sign Language
Main immigrant language(s)	Arabic, Punjabi, Bengali, Saraiki, Urdu, Sylheti, Cantonese, Greek, Italian, French, Southwestern Caribbean Creole, Gujarati, Kashmiri, Polish, Russian
Main foreign language(s)	French (23%) German (9%) Spanish (8%)[5] (Statistics in brackets indicate claims of survey respondents, including those who consider their ability to speak to be basic)
Sign language(s)	BSL, Irish Sign Language NISL, Sign Supported English
Common keyboard layout(s)	British QWERTY

The *de facto* official language of the United Kingdom is English,[6] [7] which is spoken as the primary language of 95% of the UK population.[4] Welsh is the second most spoken language in the United Kingdom.[8]

Languages of the British Isles

The British Isles have 13 living native languages of which two have been revived in the last 100 years, Cornish and Manx. There are the Celtic languages of Wales, Ireland and Scotland along with the Romance languages of the Channel Islands. Finally there are the languages of the travelling communities of the British Isles.

The table below shows all indigenous languages spoken in the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland, Isle of Man and the Channel Islands.

Language	Type	Spoken in	No. of speakers
English	West Germanic	**England**: the whole country **Northern Ireland**: most parts of the country **Scotland**: most parts of the country **Wales**: the entire country a major second language in the **Isle of Man** and the **Channel Islands**	59.6 million
Irish (*Gaeilge*)	Celtic (Goidelic)	**Northern Ireland**: the northern, UK part of Ireland; also a minor language in parts of England	95,000 (based on 2004 data)[9]
Scots (*Scots*, *Lallans*)	West Germanic	**Scotland**: Scottish Lowlands, Caithness, Orkney, Shetland **Ulster**: Down, Antrim, Londonderry, Donegal	200,000 of various dialects of Scots[10]
Welsh (*Cymraeg*, *y Gymraeg*)	Celtic (Brythonic)	**Wales**: the whole country; also in parts of England near the Welsh border	611,000 (based on a 2004 survey conducted by Bwrdd yr Iaith Gymraeg)[11]
Angloromani	Mixed	England, Scotland, and Wales	195,000 (worldwide)

Scottish Gaelic (*Gàidhlig*)	Celtic (Goidelic)	**Scotland**: Barvas, Lewis and Harris, Tiree Skye, North Uist, South Uist, many other areas in the Highlands	58,552 (based on Scotland's 2001 Census)[12]
Jersey Legal French	French dialect	**Channel Islands**: Jersey	17,000
Cornish (*Kernowek*)	Celtic (Brythonic)	**England**: Cornwall	2,000 fluent[13]
Jèrriais	Norman	**Channel Islands**: Jersey, some speakers in Sark	2,874
Manx (*Gaelg*)	Celtic (Goidelic)	**Isle of Man**: though out the whole island	Some 1,689 people with Manx knowledge in 2001[14]
Guernésiais	Norman	**Channel Islands**: Guernsey	1,327
Sercquiais	Norman	**Channel Islands**: Sark	15 fluent (dozens more understand it)

Extinct

- Welsh Romani
- Auregnais
- Romany
- Norn
- Pictish
- Cumbric
- Yola

Statistics

(Note: Statistics may not fully indicate the language skills of the population. Some low ability learners/users record themselves as speakers of various languages, while some who are fluent or nearly fluent may choose not to, due to the stigma attached to some minority languages.)

Wales

Bilingual road sign in Cardiff.

The Welsh language is officially protected by the Welsh Language Act 1993 and the Government of Wales Act 1998, and since 1998 it has been common, for example, for almost all British Government Departments to provide both printed documentation and official websites in both English and Welsh. Both the English and Welsh languages have equal status in Wales according to law, and in December 2010, the Welsh Assembly unanimously approved legislation to make Welsh an official language in Wales, and additional measures to promote the language. The legislation will come into force in 2011.

According to the 2001 census, about 20% of the population of Wales are able to speak Welsh, giving it around 600,000 speakers. However, there is some controversy over the actual number who speak Welsh; some statistics choose to include people who have studied Welsh to at least GCSE standard, not all of whom could be regarded as fluent speakers of the language. Conversely, some first-language speakers may choose not to report themselves as such; unlike Scottish Gaelic, which is sometimes viewed as a regional language even in Scotland itself, Welsh has long been strongly associated with nationalism. These phenomena, also seen with other minority languages outside

the UK, make it harder to establish an accurate and unbiased figure for how many people speak it fluently. Furthermore, no question about Welsh-language ability was asked in the 2001 census outside Wales, thereby ignoring a considerable population of Welsh speakers – particularly concentrated in neighbouring English counties and in London and other large cities.

Scotland

According to the 2001 census Scottish Gaelic has 58,652 speakers (roughly 1% of the population of Scotland). In total 92,400 people aged three and over in Scotland had some Gaelic language ability in 2001[15] According to a 1996 estimate of the General Register Office for Scotland 30% of the Scottish population speak Scots (approximately 1.5 million speakers).

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, about 7% of the population speak Irish according to the 2001 census (around 110,000 speakers) and 2% speak Ulster Scots, seen by some as a language distinct from English and by some as a dialect of English, according to the 1999 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (around 30,000 speakers). Alongside British Sign Language, Irish Sign Language is also used.

Bilingual sign (English and Scottish Gaelic) at Partick railway station, Glasgow

Cornwall

Cornish, a Celtic language related to Welsh, is spoken by roughly 3,500 people as a result of a revival initiated by Henry Jenner in 1903. Since 2002 the Cornish language has been recognised by the United Kingdom government as a UK official minority language under the Council of Europe's European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.[16]

British Sign Language

British Sign Language, often abbreviated to BSL, is the language of 125,000 Deaf adults, about 0.3%[17] of the total population of the United Kingdom. It is not exclusively the language of Deaf people;

Bilingual sign in Cornwall

many relatives of Deaf people and others can communicate in it fluently. Recognised to be a language by the UK Government on 18 March 2003,[18] BSL has the highest number of monolingual users of any indigenous minority language in the UK.

Second/Additional Languages

Throughout the UK, many citizens can speak, or at least understand, (to a degree where they could have a conversation with someone who speaks that language) a second or even a third language from Secondary School education, Primary school education or even from special private classes. 23% of the UK can speak/understand French, 9% can speak/understand German and 8% can speak/understand Spanish.[19]

In general, 38% of UK citizens report that they can speak at least one other language than English. 18% of British citizens claim to be able to speak up to two languages excluding English and 6% state they can speak three languages excluding English. 62% of British citizens can speak only English.[19] These figures include those who describe their level of ability in the foreign language as "basic".

Status

Certain nations and regions of the UK have frameworks for the promotion of their autochthonous languages.

- In Wales, the Welsh Language Act 1993 requires English and Welsh to be treated equally throughout the public sector. This was further enforced through the passing of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011[20]
- In Scotland, the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 gave the Scottish Gaelic language its first statutory basis; and the Western Isles region of Scotland has a policy to promote the language.
- In Northern Ireland, Irish and Ulster Scots enjoy limited use alongside English (mainly in publicly commissioned translations).

The UK government has ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in respect of:

- Cornish (in Cornwall)
- Irish and Ulster Scots (in Northern Ireland)
- Scots and Scottish Gaelic (in Scotland)
- Welsh (in Wales)

Under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (which is not legally enforceable, but which requires states to adopt appropriate legal provision for the use of regional and minority languages) the UK government has committed itself to the recognition of certain regional languages and the promotion of certain linguistic traditions. The UK has ratified[21] for the higher level of protection (Section III) provided for by the Charter in respect of Welsh, Scottish Gaelic and Irish. Cornish, Scots in Scotland and Northern Ireland (in the latter territory officially known as Ulster Scots or Ullans, but in the speech of users simply as Scottish or Scots) are protected by the lower level only (Section II). The UK government has also recognised British Sign Language as a language in its own right[22] of the United Kingdom.

A number of bodies have been established to oversee the promotion of the regional languages: in Scotland, Bòrd na Gàidhlig oversees Scottish Gaelic. Foras na Gaeilge has an all-Ireland remit as a cross-border language body, and Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch is intended to fulfil a similar function for Ulster Scots, although hitherto it has mainly concerned itself with culture. In Wales, the Welsh Language Board (Bwrdd yr Iaith Gymraeg) has a statutory role in agreeing Welsh language plans with official bodies. The Cornish Language Partnership is a body that represents the major Cornish language and cultural groups and local government's language needs. It receives funding from the UK government and the European Union, and is the regulator of the language's Standard Written Form, agreed in 2008.

In Northern Ireland, the department responsible for culture displays official administrative identity in English, Irish and Ulster Scots

Controversies

Language vs dialect

There are no universally accepted criteria for distinguishing *languages* from *dialects*, although a number of paradigms exist, which render sometimes contradictory results. The exact distinction is therefore a subjective one, dependent on the user's frame of reference. (See Dialect)

Scottish Gaelic and Irish are generally viewed as being languages in their own right rather than dialects of a single tongue but are sometimes mutually intelligible to a limited degree – especially between southern dialects of Scottish and northern dialects of Irish (programmes in each form of Gaelic are broadcast on BBC Radio nan Gaidheal and RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta), but the relationship of Scots and English is less clear, since there is usually partial mutual intelligibility.

Since there is a very high level of mutual intelligibility between contemporary speakers of Scots in Scotland and in Ulster (Ulster Scots), and a common written form was current well into the 20th century, the two varieties have usually been considered as dialects of a single tongue rather than languages in their own right; the written forms have diverged in the 21st century. The government of the United Kingdom "recognises that Scots and Ulster Scots meet the Charter's definition of a regional or minority language".[21] Whether this implies recognition of one regional or minority language or two is a question of interpretation. Ulster Scots is defined in legislation (The North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) Northern Ireland Order 1999) as: *the variety of the Scots language which has traditionally been used in parts of Northern Ireland and in Donegal in Ireland.*[23]

While in continental Europe closely related languages and dialects may get official recognition and support, in the UK there is a tendency to view closely related vernaculars as a single language. Even British Sign Language is mistakenly thought of as a form of 'English' by some, rather than being language in its own right, with a distinct grammar and vocabulary. The boundaries not always being clear cut can lead to problems in estimating numbers of speakers.

Hostility

In Northern Ireland, the use of Irish and Ulster Scots is sometimes viewed as politically loaded, despite both having been used by all communities in the past. According to the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 1999, the ratio of Unionist to Nationalist users of Ulster Scots is 2:1. About 1% of Catholics claim to speak it, while 2% of Protestants claim to speak it. The disparity in the ratios as determined by political and faith community, despite the very large overlap between the two, reflects the very low numbers of respondents.[24] Across the two communities 0% speak it as their main language at home.[25] A 2:1 ratio would not differ markedly from that among the general population in those areas of Northern Ireland where Scots is spoken.

Often the use of the Irish language in Northern Ireland has met with the considerable suspicion of Unionists, who have associated it with the largely Catholic Republic of Ireland, and more recently, with the republican movement in Northern Ireland itself. Catholic areas of Belfast have street signs in Irish similar to those in the Republic. However, Protestants who view the Irish language as having high symbolic value but low communicative value may feel that they are not welcome in those areas as a result. Approximately 14% of the population speak Irish,[26] however only 1% speak it as their main language at home.[25] Under the St Andrews Agreement, the British government committed itself to introducing an Irish Language Act, and it was hoped that a consultation period ending on 2 March 2007 could see Irish becoming an official language, having equal validity with English, recognised as an indigenous language, or aspire to become an official language in the future.[27]

Some resent Scottish Gaelic being promoted in the Lowlands, although it was once spoken everywhere in Scotland except the extreme south-east (that part of Scotland which was originally Northumbria) and the extreme north-east (part of Caithness).

Two areas with mostly Norse-derived placenames (and some Pictish), the Northern Isles (Shetland and Orkney) were ceded to Scotland in lieu of an unpaid dowry in 1472, and never spoke Gaelic; its traditional vernacular Norn, a derivative of Old Norse mutually intelligible with Icelandic and Faroese, died out in the 18th century after large-scale immigration by Lowland Scots speakers. To this day, many Shetlanders and Orcadians maintain a separate identity, albeit through the Shetlandic and Orcadian dialects of Lowland Scots, rather than their former national tongue. Norn was also spoken at one point in Caithness, apparently dying out much earlier than Shetland and Orkney. However, the Norse speaking population were entirely assimilated by the Gaelic speaking population in the Western Isles; to what degree this happened in Caithness is a matter of controversy, although Gaelic was spoken in parts of the county until the 20th century.

Non-recognition

Scots within Scotland and the regional varieties of English within England receive little or no official recognition. The dialects of northern England share some features with Scots that those of southern England do not. The regional dialects of England were once extremely varied, as is recorded in Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* and the Survey of English Dialects, but they have died out over time so that regional differences are now largely in pronunciation rather than in grammar or vocabulary.

Public funding of minority languages continues to produce mixed reactions, and there is sometimes resistance to their teaching in schools. Partly as a result, proficiency in languages other than "Standard" English can vary widely.

Languages and dialects in the United Kingdom

Native

Anglic

Further information: Anglic languages

- English (British English)
  - English English (as spoken in England)
    - Northern English
      - Cumbrian
      - Geordie
      - Lancastrian (Lanky)
      - Mackem
      - Mancunian
      - Yorkshirien/Tyke
      - Scouse (Liverpool)
    - East Midlands English
    - West Midlands English
      - Black Country (Yam Yam)
      - Brummie (spoken in Birmingham)
      - Potteries (North Staffordshire)
      - Cheshirian dialect
    - Southern English English
      - East Anglian
      - Estuary English
      - London
        - Cockney

- Jafaican
- West Country dialects (Bristol, Devon, Dorset, Somerset; also parts of Gloucestershire and Herefordshire)
  - Cornish English
- Scottish English
  - Highland English
- Welsh English
- Hiberno English
  - Mid Ulster English
- Sign Supported English (a sign language based on English, not BSL)
- Scots [28]
  - Insular Scots
    - Shetlandic
    - Orcadian
  - Northern Scots
    - Doric
  - Central Scots
    - Glaswegian
  - Southern Scots
  - Ulster Scots[28]

Insular Celtic

Further information: Insular Celtic languages

- Brythonic languages
  - Cornish[29]
  - Welsh[30]
- Goidelic languages
  - Irish[30]
    - Ulster
  - Scottish Gaelic[30]
    - Southern dialect
    - Northern dialect
  - Galwegian
- Shelta (strongly influenced by English)

Romany

- Romany
- Angloromani
- Welsh Romani

Sign languages

- British Sign Language
  - Makaton
- Irish Sign Language
- Sign Supported English

Immigrant languages

Communities migrating to the UK in recent decades have brought many more languages to the country. Surveys started in 1979 by the Inner London Education Authority discovered over 100 languages being spoken domestically by the families of the inner city's school children.

South Asians in the United Kingdom speak dozens of different languages, and it is difficult to determine how many people speak each language alongside English. The largest subgroup of British Asians are those of Punjabi origin (representing approximately two thirds of direct migrants from South Asia to the UK), from both India and Pakistan, they number over 2 million in the UK and are the largest Punjabi community outside of South Asia.[31] The Punjabi language is currently the second most spoken language in the UK.[32] Many Black Britons speak English as their first language. Their ancestors mostly came from the West Indies, particularly Jamaica, and generally also spoke English-based creole languages,[33] hence there are significant numbers of Caribbean creole speakers (see below for Ethnologue figures). With over 300,000 French-born people in the UK, plus the general popularity of the language, French is understood by 23% of the country's population. A large proportion of the Black British population, especially African-born immigrants speak French as a first or second language.

The Bengali speaking community in the UK consists of those largely of Bangladeshi origin mainly from the Sylhet region (predominantly Muslim), and small numbers of Indians from the West Bengal region (mainly Hindu). There are around 400,000 Bengali speakers, 300,000 of whom speak Sylheti,[34] which is either considered a dialect of Bengali or a separate language. West Bengals mainly speak the standard Bengali language, whereas Bangladeshis mainly speak Sylheti which does not have a written form, however children may have received medium education on standard Bengali at school. Sylheti is

Sign in English and Punjabi at Southall railway station, Southall, Middlesex

Bilingual street signs in Chinatown, Liverpool, Merseyside

'Brick Lane' street sign in English and Bengali, Tower Hamlets, London

not recognised as a language in Bangladesh, and there some debate to whether it should be recognised as a separate language from Bengali. The Bengali speaking community in the UK is highly concentrated in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.[35]

Most common immigrant languages

According to Ethnologue, the ten most common foreign languages used by Britons as a first language are as follows (with the number of mother-tongue speakers in brackets). Please note, these figures are not to date, and therefore are likely to differ (especially considering the migration from Central Europe and Eastern Europe to the UK in recent years).[36]

1. Punjabi (574,000)
2. Bengali (400,000)
3. Urdu (400,000)
4. Sylheti (300,000)
5. Cantonese (300,000)
6. Greek (200,000)
7. Italian (200,000)
8. Southwestern Caribbean Creole (170,000)
9. Gujarati (140,000)
10. Kashmiri (115,000)

Historic languages of Great Britain

Further information: Settlement of the British Isles

- Insular Celtic languages (since the Iron Age)
  - Brythonic languages
    - Welsh
    - British
    - Cumbric
    - Southwestern Brythonic (hypothetical)
    - Breton (post-Norman conquest)
    - Cornish (extinct by 19th century, but revival since 1904)
  - Goidelic languages
    - Galwegian Gaelic (Galloway)
  - Ivernic (hypothetical)
  - Pictish (hypothetical)
- Anglic (since the Migration period)
  - Old English
  - Middle English
    - Yola language
    - AB language
  - Early Modern English
- Old Norse (since the Viking Age)
  - Norn
- Anglo-Norman (since the Norman Conquest)

Some UK placenames (e.g. Tardebigge) show evidence of a pre-Celtic language.

Norman French and Latin

Norman French is still used in the Houses of Parliament for certain official business between the clerks of the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and on other official occasions such as the dissolution of Parliament.

Latin is also used to a limited degree in certain official mottos, for example *Nemo Me Impune Lacessit*, legal terminology (*habeas corpus*), and various ceremonial contexts. Latin abbreviations can also be seen on British coins. The use of Latin has declined greatly in recent years. At one time, Latin and Greek were commonly taught in British schools (and were required for entrance to the ancient universities until 1919, for Greek, and the 1960s, for Latin[37]), and A-Levels and Highers are still available in both subjects.

The signs at Wallsend Metro station are in English and Latin as a tribute to Wallsend's role as one of the outposts of the Roman empire.

Languages of the Channel Islands and Isle of Man

The Isle of Man and the Bailiwicks of Guernsey and Jersey are not part of the UK, but are closely associated with it.

For the insular forms of English, see Manx English (Anglo-Manx), Guernsey English and Jersey English. Forms of French are, or have been, used as an official language in the Channel Islands, e.g. Jersey Legal French.

The indigenous languages of the Crown dependencies are recognised as regional languages by the British and Irish governments within the framework of the British-Irish Council.

- Guernésiais (Guernsey, a form of the Norman language)
- Jèrriais (Jersey, Norman)
- Manx (Isle of Man, Goidelic, Celtic)

    The UK government has ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages on behalf of the Manx government.

The Sercquiais (Sark) dialect is descended from Jèrriais, but is not recognised under this framework. Auregnais, the Norman dialect of Alderney, is now extinct.

Languages of British Overseas Territories

British Overseas Territories are possessions of the United Kingdom, but do not form part of the United Kingdom itself. Most of these contain a large degree of English, either as a root language, or in codeswitching, e.g. Llanito. Languages of these territories include:

- Llanito or Yanito (Gibraltar)
- Cayman Creole (Cayman Islands)
- Turks-Caicos Creole (Turks and Caicos Islands)
- Pitkern (Pitcairn Islands)

Forms of English:

- Bermudian English (Bermuda)
- Falkland Islands English

External links

- Sounds Familiar? [38] — Listen to examples of regional accents and dialects across the UK on the British Library's 'Sounds Familiar' website (uses Windows Media Player for content)

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Article Sources and Contributors

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