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## Foreign Language Education and Translation: Between Economic Returns and Cognitive Culture

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### Abstract

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#### Keywords:

Foreign Language  
Education,  
Translation,  
Language  
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Commodification,  
Global Market

The teaching of foreign languages and the practice of translation are increasingly significant in the context of human existence, particularly in the modern global economy. This study explores the intersection of language education and translation from an economic perspective, considering language as a vehicle for the exchange of intangible assets and currency as a medium for tangible assets. Just as translation involves transferring meaning across linguistic systems, currency exchange facilitates the transfer of goods and values across economic systems. Thus, foreign language acquisition parallels foreign currency trading, and translation mirrors the conversion of commodities. The main objective of this research is to investigate the complex relationships between language, translation, and economics. It raises key theoretical questions: What is the economic value of language and translation? Can language be considered a form of currency? How does language learning foster creative thinking? Is foreign language education an economic necessity in the modern era? Does translation influence economic systems? Using a comparative and analytical method, the study draws parallels between linguistic and economic systems, examining the mutual dynamics of market expansion and language spread. It also investigates how the rise of unified European languages coincided with the emergence of standardized currencies and common markets. Findings suggest that language has evolved into a marketable commodity, subject to regional and global

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economic forces. This research contributes to the interdisciplinary discourse linking language education, translation studies, and economic theory, offering new insights into how language functions as both a communicative tool and an economic asset in the knowledge-driven global market.

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#### Abstrak

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##### Kata Kunci:

Pendidikan Bahasa Asing,  
Penerjemahan,  
Ekonomi Bahasa,  
Komodifikasi Bahasa,  
Pasar Global

*Pengajaran bahasa asing dan praktik penerjemahan semakin menjadi hal yang signifikan dalam konteks eksistensi manusia, terutama dalam ekonomi global modern. Studi ini mengeksplorasi persimpangan antara pendidikan bahasa dan penerjemahan dari sudut pandang ekonomi, dengan mempertimbangkan bahasa sebagai sarana pertukaran aset tidak berwujud dan mata uang sebagai alat tukar aset berwujud. Sebagaimana penerjemahan mentransfer makna antar sistem linguistik, pertukaran mata uang memfasilitasi transfer barang dan nilai antar sistem ekonomi. Dengan demikian, perolehan bahasa asing sebanding dengan perdagangan mata uang asing, dan penerjemahan mencerminkan konversi komoditas. Tujuan utama penelitian ini adalah menyelidiki hubungan kompleks antara bahasa, penerjemahan, dan ekonomi. Studi ini mengangkat pertanyaan-pertanyaan teoretis penting: Apa nilai ekonomi dari bahasa dan penerjemahan? Dapatkah bahasa dianggap sebagai bentuk mata uang? Bagaimana pembelajaran bahasa mendorong pemikiran kreatif? Apakah pendidikan bahasa asing merupakan kebutuhan ekonomi mendesak di era modern? Apakah penerjemahan memengaruhi sistem ekonomi? Dengan menggunakan metode komparatif dan analitis, penelitian ini menarik paralel antara sistem linguistik dan sistem ekonomi, serta menelaah dinamika timbal balik dari ekspansi pasar dan penyebaran bahasa. Studi ini juga menelusuri bagaimana kemunculan bahasa-bahasa Eropa yang seragam beriringan dengan munculnya mata uang standar dan pasar bersama. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa bahasa telah berkembang menjadi komoditas yang dapat diperjualbelikan, tunduk pada kekuatan ekonomi regional dan global. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pada diskursus interdisipliner yang menghubungkan pendidikan bahasa, studi penerjemahan, dan teori ekonomi, serta menawarkan wawasan baru tentang bagaimana bahasa berfungsi sebagai alat komunikasi sekaligus aset ekonomi dalam pasar global berbasis pengetahuan.*

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## Introduction

Language, long viewed as a medium of communication and cultural expression, is increasingly being recognized as an economic asset with measurable value and impact. Economic analysis of language treats it not only as a social tool but also as an essential factor in economic and human development. Efficient use of language is considered foundational for achieving a knowledge economy, which in turn drives broader economic growth (Grin, 2003; Ginsburgh & Weber, 2011). As such, the economic implications of language encompass linguistic diversity, language policies, linguistic capital, national identity, and even individual income levels based on language proficiency (Coulmas, 1992).

Languages create added value in economic transactions through communication, act as raw materials in cultural industries, and function as partially public economic goods. Learning a language involves financial, temporal, and cognitive investment, akin to acquiring a long-term yielding asset (Grin, 2003). Furthermore, language is part of both human and social capital, holding properties like cost, return, utility, and exchangeability—just like any other economic commodity. The stronger a language's global reach, the more competitive its associated economy becomes (Ammon, 2006).

Previous research has discussed various dimensions of language economics. However, little attention has been paid to drawing direct theoretical and structural comparisons between **linguistic systems and economic systems**, especially regarding the **dual function of translation and foreign language learning as tools of economic exchange**. This study addresses this gap by asking critical questions: Can language be considered a currency? What is the economic role of translation? Is foreign language learning an urgent economic necessity?

The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which positions language and translation not only as communicative practices but also as market-driven commodities. By exploring the parallels between **linguistic**

**markets** and **monetary systems**, this study sheds light on how languages expand regionally and globally, just as currencies and trade markets do. It also investigates how the fate of a language is tied to the vitality of its economic base—a phenomenon observable in the decline of Latin and the rise of English, Mandarin, and other dominant languages in global commerce.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive-analytical method to examine the relationship between language and economics from both Arab and Western perspectives. Primary and secondary data were collected from a wide range of Arabic and foreign-language sources, including books, academic journal articles, newspapers, and official reports relevant to the topic of language economics, linguistic planning, and the economic impact of language on development. A documentation technique was used to identify, categorize, and analyze content based on key themes such as the economic value of language, language policy, and linguistic investment in the global context.

A comparative analysis approach was applied to contrast the views of Arab and Western scholars regarding the strategic value of language. Each reference was critically examined using theories from linguistic economics and sociolinguistics to explore how language is perceived as an economic resource. Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation, while interpretation was conducted contextually to capture the cultural and social dimensions underlying these concepts. The findings aim to contribute both theoretically and practically to the interdisciplinary understanding between linguistics and economics.

## Result and Discussion

### The Relationship between Language, Translation, and Economy

The connection between language, translation, and economy is both intrinsic and multifaceted. Language, as a uniquely human faculty, has evolved alongside human civilization. Despite differing opinions among linguists on the origin of language, its developmental trajectory is undeniable. Fakhr al-Din Qabawa (2004) observed that this development has followed two contradictory paths: expansion through the creation of new vocabulary to express novel concepts, and abbreviation driven by the human tendency toward linguistic efficiency.

Today, with nearly 7,000 languages in active use globally, the link between economy and language becomes more evident. Economic trade balance compares a nation's imports and exports; similarly, languages that import more terms than they export – due to their inability to generate relevant terminology – are analogous to economies with trade deficits. Such languages become consumers rather than producers of knowledge. Consequently, a language that fails to innovate lexically often reflects an economically lagging society.

This economic-linguistic link is further emphasized in a World Bank report analyzing development in over 60 countries. It concluded that sustainable economic growth in developing nations is not solely dependent on financial aid but on enhancing knowledge levels among citizens. Language is central in this endeavor, acting as the vessel for ideas and enabling cognitive advancement. Thus, economic and linguistic development are mutually reinforcing, especially in the current knowledge economy era.

Translation, within this context, functions as a key enabler in global economic relations. In a world increasingly shaped by globalization, translation facilitates communication between businesses and their international stakeholders – suppliers, partners, and consumers. It serves as a bridge for exchanging knowledge, culture, and innovation, strengthening economic and

diplomatic relations. Moreover, translation helps overcome cultural gaps, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation, which ultimately enhances political and economic harmony.

This is not a modern phenomenon. In the Islamic Golden Age, the Arab-Islamic civilization translated scientific and philosophical texts from Greek, Persian, and Syriac into Arabic, establishing a knowledge-based economy. These linguistic interactions helped integrate foreign knowledge systems into the Islamic world, promoting scientific and economic progress. Consequently, Arabic became a significant contributor to global civilization through its linguistic dynamism.

Historically, Arabs recognized the role of language in commerce. Arabic was ever-present in marketplaces and trade hubs, earning the moniker "daughter of the market." Poets and sages showcased their linguistic prowess in these public forums, spreading the Arabic language across continents through land and sea trade caravans. Arab merchants often learned the languages of trading partners to facilitate transactions. This multilingualism contributed to Arabic's richness, evident in the multitude of synonyms for "wealth" and "currency."

The most prominent era showcasing the economic power of language was during the Industrial Revolution. In Britain, a critical issue was the linguistic barrier faced by non-English-speaking laborers operating machinery. This led to the emergence of "English for Specific Purposes" (ESP), a specialized linguistic framework aimed at equipping workers with the necessary vocabulary. Lexicographers produced targeted dictionaries and manuals to meet the practical needs of industrial communication. This initiative not only enhanced productivity but also demonstrated language's adaptability and market value.

Today, the elasticity of language in adapting to technical domains makes it fertile ground for theoretical linguistic studies and market application. Despite their high development cost, dictionaries are among the most profitable

and long-lasting publishing products. They promote linguistic unification and turn a language's vocabulary into a tangible asset. The Oxford English Dictionary exemplifies this, serving as a historical record and economic asset that continues to enrich English linguistics.

Translation, like language learning, is a long-term investment. Each translation adds value to the target language by expanding its expressive range and cultural depth. The volume and quality of translations into a language can serve as indicators of its intellectual and economic vitality. Translation can be seen through an economic lens—as an exchange of commodities. Just as currency exchanges enable economic transactions, translation facilitates intellectual and cultural exchanges. Translators, like currency exchangers, act as intermediaries who reformulate content across linguistic systems, preserving meaning while adapting form.

Karl Marx once noted the parallel between translators and money changers: both convert value from one form to another. Yet translation is far from mechanical; it is an interpretive and artistic process due to the non-symmetrical nature of languages. This reinforces the idea that language and economy are deeply intertwined. Language has cost, value, and utility—key economic properties—and serves as a foundational component of both human and social capital.

In sum, the relationship between language, translation, and economy is dynamic and interdependent. Linguistic strength and adaptability can enhance a nation's economic competitiveness. Language is not only a medium of communication but also a strategic resource that contributes to innovation, commerce, and cultural influence. As globalization intensifies, the ability of a language to serve economic functions will determine its survival, spread, and stature in the world stage.

## **The Role of Language Learning in Developing Creative Thinking**

Learning new languages contributes significantly to the enhancement of creative and critical thinking. Acquiring a foreign language engages the brain in processes of understanding, memorizing, and contextualizing different grammatical structures and vocabularies. This, in turn, boosts brain function and intelligence (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2007). The learner begins to see the world through different linguistic lenses, fostering unique perspectives and novel approaches to problem-solving.

Translation further stimulates creativity by forcing learners to go beyond literal interpretations. Idiomatic expressions and culturally-bound phrases cannot always be translated word-for-word; rather, they demand ingenuity and flexibility in selecting the most accurate rendering (Grosjean, 2010). This necessity enhances not only language fluency but also adaptive thinking.

Language learning is often an enjoyable and engaging process filled with cultural humor, stories, and verbal expressions unique to each tongue. These elements bring joy and laughter to the learning process, reinforcing creative engagement. Additionally, in moments of lexical uncertainty, learners rely on body language and gestures to convey meaning—further broadening their expressive repertoire and improvisational skills (Cook, 2008).

On the cognitive side, learning new languages enhances memory by introducing new vocabulary and sentence structures, training the brain to retain and recall diverse information. This mental exercise contributes to stronger memory performance and more dynamic thought processes (Bialystok et al., 2012).

Moreover, mastering multiple languages equips individuals with the tools to absorb cultural knowledge, increasing their perseverance and determination to succeed. This exposure also cultivates mental flexibility—the ability to shift perspectives, think in various modes, and adapt to new situations. These skills are central to creativity and innovation (Gabrieli, 2009).

Neurological studies further confirm the cognitive advantages of multilingualism. Functional MRI scans of multilingual individuals performing word recognition tasks revealed elevated focus levels—comparable to the effects of concentration-enhancing medications (Li et al., 2014). Similarly, research by the American Academy of Neurology indicates that multilingual speakers develop denser neural pathways, enhancing information processing across brain regions.

Learning a new language also prepares learners to acquire additional languages with greater ease. For instance, knowledge of Italian facilitates the learning of Spanish or French due to shared Latin roots and thousands of cognates.

Language learning has also been shown to delay symptoms of dementia. Cognitive flexibility achieved through multilingualism helps the brain maintain function by developing alternative neural pathways—a phenomenon known as "cognitive reserve" (Bialystok, 2011).

A notable study from the University of Pennsylvania tracked brain activity in adult English speakers who were learning Mandarin over six weeks. Participants who engaged in language classes showed marked structural and functional changes in the brain compared to a control group. Their brain networks became more integrated, flexible, and efficient. High-performing individuals in these courses even displayed better-developed networks before the training began, suggesting a preexisting cognitive adaptability.

These changes were measured using fMRI techniques to assess connectivity between brain regions involved in learning. The findings included increased gray matter density (associated with memory and motor function) and enhanced white matter integrity (facilitating communication between brain regions).

The Journal of Neurolinguistics concluded that learning a new language triggers neuroplastic changes in both young and older learners. These changes

occur swiftly and are influenced by age, proficiency level, and linguistic complexity.

### **The Economic Importance of Foreign Language Learning**

The acquisition of foreign languages is no longer a luxury or an optional skill – it has become an economic, educational, and strategic necessity in the age of globalization and digital transformation. Language acts as a vital tool for communication and knowledge exchange, making it essential for intellectual openness and cultural connectivity, particularly within the Arab and Islamic worlds seeking a more prominent role in global advancement.

Foreign languages function as gateways to international markets. They empower individuals and nations to forge productive partnerships, strengthen cross-cultural understanding, and expand opportunities for trade and investment. Various countries – such as the United Kingdom, the United States, China, and Turkey – have implemented national language strategies to serve their economic and geopolitical interests. In these cases, language is seen not only as a cultural asset but also as a driver of national development, security, and competitiveness.

The educational impact of language learning is equally significant. Language fosters critical thinking, mental agility, and analytical skills. From an economic perspective, language can be viewed as a form of human capital – something that requires investment but offers long-term returns. A language has cost, value, and utility, and its vocabulary becomes an asset in the knowledge economy.

This economic-linguistic relationship becomes especially evident when a nation's educational and economic systems align with efforts to modernize and globalize language use. Countries that invest in language education are not merely promoting multilingualism; they are also enhancing their workforce's ability to participate in global trade and innovation.

Ultimately, the strength of a language in today's world hinges on its capacity to fulfill economic functions. As languages are increasingly measured by their ability to generate value, foster innovation, and facilitate international cooperation, their economic importance becomes a central factor in their survival and global influence.

## Conclusion

At the end of this study, I would like to emphasize the importance of treating language and linguistic content as an economic asset. The accumulation of knowledge in a language is equivalent to the accumulation of intangible assets, and the circulation of that knowledge mirrors the exchange of goods in the market. Governments must prioritize language economics and approach language-related issues as investment opportunities and vital economic drivers, supported by sound language planning and policy. Furthermore, there should be greater attention to exporting language-based programs and technologies, as well as developing advanced programming languages capable of keeping pace with global linguistic innovations.

For us as Arabs, it is crucial to recognize that our economic renaissance depends on our success in reviving the Arabic language as a language of science and technology, and in making scientific knowledge available in our native tongue. This includes the Arabization of education—particularly in higher education across all fields—and ensuring that the Arabic language keeps pace with modern linguistic technologies by leveraging artificial intelligence. We must also raise awareness about the importance of early acquisition of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) by our children and habituate them to using their mother tongue from an early age so that it becomes an integral part of their cognitive framework.

Moreover, it is necessary to overcome regulatory and environmental obstacles that hinder the creation of attractive language investment environments. The use of Standard Arabic should be encouraged in workplaces,

public institutions, and higher education. More research should be conducted to identify shortcomings and learn from successful cases of linguistic investment. It is important to note that the responsibility of advancing the economic dimension of the Arabic language does not fall on a single entity—it is a collective responsibility. Our language needs us to unlock its treasures more than it needs conferences and symposiums that remain within the realm of discussion without practical implementation.

The findings of this study indicate that the global economy is increasingly shifting toward knowledge-based models. In such economies, information becomes highly valuable, and the role of intangible or cognitive assets grows significantly. A key manifestation of this shift is the emergence of the so-called "information society." Some even refer to this global transition as the "information revolution."

Since language is the vessel of scientific knowledge, the role of scientific and technical language in enhancing workforce productivity—especially when delivered in the mother tongue—grows ever more crucial in knowledge economies. Scientific translation, in this regard, is a powerful means to enrich the scientific and technical language of the workforce and thus a key factor in both economic and social development.

As we know, economic growth provides solutions to many of today's pressing economic challenges by creating job opportunities, diversifying economic activities, and increasing individual income—i.e., boosting gross domestic product (GDP). This underscores the vital role language plays in empowering the labor force and the importance of language education and scientific translation in improving national economies. In this context, one of the indicators of the current Arab world's economic shortcomings is the fact that the Arab labor force suffers from low levels of knowledge and is largely monolingual.

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