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MULTILINGUALISM AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN INTERNATIONAL MARKETS

MULTILINGVISMUL CA AVANTAJ COMPETITIV PE PIEȚELE INTERNAȚIONALE

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Abstract: *This article examines multilingualism as a strategic competitive advantage in international markets, moving beyond definitional frameworks to focus on its measurable economic and organisational impact. Drawing on the perspective of major global companies – Netflix, Booking.com, IKEA, and the strategic dominance of languages such as German, English, French, and Italian, it argues that multilingual capacity is not merely an administrative characteristic but a revenue-generating, relationship-building and market-access tool. The research draws on industry reports (CSA Research, McKinsey, Harvard Business Review), peer-reviewed literature (Tibrewal et al., 2024), and corporate case studies, exploring the critical distinction between translation, and localisation, the psychology of native-language consumer behaviour, and the paradox of artificial intelligence in language work. A comparative analysis of the German and Moldovan markets concludes the study. The article contends that, in international markets, the language a company chooses to operate in determines the breadth of its market reach.*
Keywords: multilingualism, international markets, competitive advantage, corporate language strategy, localisation, language policy.
JEL CLASSIFICATION: F23, M16, J24, L25

INTRODUCTION

Language does not stay in the classroom, as I found working with international students across my own English teaching practice, it determines what doors open, and for whom. While executives debate market entry modes, tariffs and logistics, they often forget to ask: what is the language that best suits our approach? Sometimes they realise this only when a deal has already been sealed and is in danger.

German, English, French and Italian serve as the working languages of four major economic zones. Germany anchors the EU's largest economy; France anchors Francophone markets across Africa, the Caribbean and Southeast Asia; English dominates global finance and technology. Italian runs through luxury goods, design and food. A company operating across all four does not merely communicate more widely, however it gains access to markets that remain closed to those without these capabilities.

This article examines how major international firms have navigated or struggled with multilingualism in their global operations, and what this means for competitiveness in international trade. It draws on real company cases, academic research and industry reports, and concludes by making the case that Moldova's multilingual profile is a genuine competitive advantage in international markets.

CONTENT

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on multilingualism in international business is consistent on one point: language is not a soft skill but a measurable economic variable. Tibrewal (2024) introduce the concept of "language operative capacity" and demonstrate that multilingual capacity correlates with business performance, particularly in cross-border negotiation and subsidiary integration, directly challenging the assumption that English alone is sufficient in global trade (Tibrewal et al., 2024).

Industry research supports these results. The CSA Research report "Can't Read, Won't Buy – B2C" (2020), based on 8,709 consumers across 29 countries, established that 76% of consumers

prefer to buy products with information in their native language, and 40% will never buy from websites in a language they do not understand. The numbers from McKinsey (2015) point in the same direction: linguistically diverse teams are 35% more likely to outperform their industry average financially, while the Harvard Business Review shows that multilingual capability is important for companies growing internationally (Kelly, 2015). Multilingual capability, it turns out, is not a communication perk but the foundation on which strategies are built, resources are allocated and markets are actually understood.

Hîrbu (2025) goes further, positioning multilingualism not just as a communication asset but as a pillar of EU identity, one that drives social cohesion, labour mobility and employment. In her analysis, linguistic capital is increasingly viewed as a strategic asset in the knowledge economy, relevant not only to individual careers but to the competitiveness of entire nations. For a country like Moldova, this translates directly into the ability to engage with stronger economies, operate across borders, and attract foreign investment. That is not a soft advantage, rather a national strategy.

2. THE BUSINESS CASE: LANGUAGE AS REVENUE

Language is not just communication, it is revenue. Companies that invest in localisation see revenue improvements of 40 to 50 percent (Kelly, 2015) and the global language services industry, valued at over €340 billion, grows at approximately 7% per year (IMARC Group, 2024). The numbers reflect something simple: 65% of consumers prefer content in their native language even when its quality is lower than the foreign-language alternative (CSA Research, 2020). People choose familiar over perfect, every time.

Netflix is perhaps the clearest proof that language strategy is revenue strategy. In Germany, France and Spain where 61%, 52% and 80% of viewers prefer dubbed over subtitled content (GWI / Statista, 2022), the platform made native-language dubbing its default delivery. The result: 120% annual growth in dubbed content viewership (Sánchez-Mompean, 2021) and 98 million new subscribers globally between 2019 and 2020 (Weglot, 2024). The German original series “Dark” for instance, contributed to a 19% subscriber increase across Europe in the year following its release (Deepdub team, 2021). One language decision. A disproportionate revenue impact.

3. CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY AND THE “BUY IN MY LANGUAGE” EFFECT

When a customer is addressed in their native language, the message bypasses cognitive friction and triggers something more personal; they feel understood, not targeted. The numbers confirm it: 72% of consumers are more likely to buy when product information is in their native language, and 75% are more likely to repurchase from the same brand if customer care is provided in their language (CSA Research / Bromberg Translations, 2020). A customer who does not understand simply abandons, not just the cart, but any possibility of familiarity or trust.

Booking.com turns this psychology into arithmetic. The platform processes 79 billion words of localised content per year, or around 200 million words daily across 45 languages and over 100 content types (Szajna, cited in DeepL, 2024), and approximately 70% of its revenue comes from non-English-speaking markets (Nimdzi Research, 2023). When the company ran an internal experiment disabling localised content for a portion of users across all 45 languages, conversion dropped significantly, and their own platform proved the “can’t read, won’t buy” principle against itself (DeepL, 2024). In 2024, Booking.com reported revenue of $23.7 billion, representing a 14% year-on-year increase (Booking Holdings, 2025). Behind that number is a simple decision: speak to people in their language, and they will trust you with their money.

4. COMPETITIVE DIFFERENTIATION: GERMANY AND MOLDOVA

Germany, with a GDP of approximately €4.1 trillion, yet only 56% of its population speaks English fluently; a fact that most foreign firms entering the market underestimate. CSA Research (2020) ranked it first among 29 countries for native-language preference; 57% of German online consumers buy exclusively from German-language websites, and companies that localise to Germany,

see about 25% higher conversion rates. The Mittelstand, the small and medium-sized enterprises that form the backbone of the German economy, strongly favours local-language partners. A foreign firm that enters without the language, builds no real connection with local people, and without that connection, the customer base stays shallow. It is not just a communication gap; it is a failure to understand the values and preferences of the market before stepping into it.

Moldova is a different kind of case, not a large economy with language as an added advantage, but a small one where language is the advantage. Its trilingual workforce, Romanian, Russian and English, combined with an IT and outsourcing sector growing at 40% per year, makes it a natural gateway between EU and Eastern European markets. What statistics do not capture is what multilingualism actually does for a Moldovan professional: it opens negotiations that would otherwise stay closed, builds relationships that cross borders, and earns a credibility that a weak economy alone cannot buy. When a Moldovan walks into a room and speaks the language of the person across the table, the dynamic shifts, the unspoken reaction is recognition, not surprise. Moldova does not compete on size, yet it competes on linguistic intelligence.

5. LOCALISATION VERSUS TRANSLATION: THE HIDDEN DISTINCTION

Translation converts words. Localisation converts cultures, and the difference between the two can determine whether a brand is welcomed or ignored in a new market. A translated text preserves the original structure but sounds foreign; it carries the skeleton of the message without the soul. Localisation, by contrast, adjusts humour, idioms, colours, dates, currencies, and values to fit how people in that market actually think and feel. IKEA's country-specific catalogues do exactly this; depicting not just furniture but the way families in each country actually live (IKEA, 2024). In the Philippines, stores are built around family-oriented layouts, compact furniture, warm woody tones and local cuisine, because family is the centre of daily life there. In Germany, the aesthetic is cleaner and more minimal, the food offering reflects national tastes, and the entire experience speaks to a culture that values order and simplicity. Same brand, but a completely different world. According to Sharabi (2025), citing CSA Research, localised campaigns achieve conversion rates up to six times higher than non-localised ones.

Poor translation does not just confuse, it damages. Pepsi's slogan "Pepsi brings you back to life" became, in China, "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave". Ford's "Every car has a high-quality body" became, in Belgium, "Every car has a high-quality corpse". KFC's "Finger-lickin' good" became, in China, "Eat your fingers off". In each case, the translation was technically possible but culturally empty, because the words were just placed near each other, with no understanding of the message they were supposed to carry.

6. MULTILINGUAL TEAMS AS STRATEGIC ASSETS

Multilingualism does not stop at the marketing department, it lives inside the organisation, in every negotiation, every client call, every room where trust is being built or lost. Negotiations conducted in both parties' languages are 30% more likely to close, and teams with three or more languages show 35% more creative problem-solving (Hunt et al., 2015). The reason is not complicated: real negotiation depends on nuance, and nuance lives in language. A wrong word in Japan or Saudi Arabia does not just create awkwardness, it ends deals permanently. Meanwhile, 78% of executives say multilingual staff are harder to replace and command 10 – 15% higher salaries, not because of what they speak, but because of what they understand. Higher capability demands higher compensation, because a multilingual employee operates at a different level of cultural and strategic awareness, and the market reflects that, therefore their paycheck should match that.

As AI handles routine translation, the advantage shifts decisively to humans who bring cultural fluency, relationship trust and strategic language judgement. AI can translate a sentence; it cannot build trust, read a room, or know when silence carries more weight than any word could. Research confirms that AI-generated translations perform unequally across languages, carry algorithmic bias and lack genuine cross-cultural understanding (Tibrewal et al., 2024). The future belongs not to those who can speak every language, but to those who understand the culture behind every word.

CONCLUSIONS

Across every case examined in this article, the pattern is the same: language is not a cultural courtesy, on the contrary, it is a commercial decision with measurable consequences. Netflix chose dubbing and gained 98 million subscribers. Booking.com built a multilingual platform and turned it into $23.7 billion in annual revenue. Companies that ignored the distinction between translation and localisation paid for it in brand damage and lost sales. The data does not lie. The real question was never whether language matters in international business; it is how deeply the languages you possess shape the strategies you can actually execute.

Three practical recommendations emerge from this. The languages a company chooses to operate in, defines the boundaries of its addressable market, and that decision should be made deliberately, not by default. Localisation should always be preferred to translation, especially in high-context markets such as Germany, Japan or the Arab world, where cultural adaptation is not optional. And multilingual employees should be recognised as strategic assets, not translators, and integrated into negotiation, account management and product design from the start.

Moldavians are, above all, strategic. We see our weaknesses clearly and we move to address them. Not with capital or scale, because those are not always available, but with knowledge, language and the ability to operate across borders. A trilingual professional from Chișinău sitting across the table from a partner in Berlin or Paris is not at a disadvantage. They are exactly where their skills were built to take them. The potential of this country does not live in its resources. It lives in the people who learned three languages before they were twenty and used them to access economic zones that larger, wealthier nations take for granted.

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