

LINGUISTIC CAPITAL AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT: EARNINGS AND EMPLOYABILITY IN A GLOBALISED ECONOMY

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Abstract: *In the current study, “linguistic capital” is considered as an economic resource that determines career growth in the globalised labour market. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept and recent work on the commodification of language, we examine how foreign language proficiency and communication skills contribute to earnings and employment. By employing a mixed-method approach, we combine an analytical literature review with quantitative data obtained from a survey of employees from three environments: the Republic of Moldova, hybrid/nomadic and abroad. Descriptive statistics and comparative tables link the number and type of working languages, the internationalisation of companies and employer support for language learning with expected career achievements. The results show a systematic positive correlation between multilingualism, employment and income, with a stronger effect observed in international organisations and among respondents working outside Republic of Moldova. Employer practices (providing training, recognising tasks that require language skills) increase the perceived return on language capital, while sectoral and regional contexts lead to heterogeneous benefits. In addition to general language proficiency, business communication skills such as negotiation, report writing and intercultural pragmatics are particularly essential for career growth.*

Key Words: *linguistic capital, multilingualism, career development, earnings, employability*

Jel Classification: J24, J31, F6, I2

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary globalised context characterised by an increasingly permeable national borders and widespread interaction, linguistic capital has become an important factor influencing the career advancement of many individuals. Proficiency in multiple languages, the ability to navigate different cultures and an understanding of linguistic differences are not only competitive advantages for employees but also fundamental factors determining career growth. This paradigm is mainly emphasised in terms of its direct impact on salary levels, employment rates and opportunities for promotion. Therefore, the aim of the study is to analyse the role of linguistic capital as a determining factor in career advancement with a particular focus on its impact on wages and employment in a globalised world, and specifically, in the labour market. The research objectives consist in assessing the relationship between language proficiency including

multilingualism and income differences in European labour markets, and exploration of the importance of educational initiatives in promoting linguistic diversity and improving communication skills to facilitate equal access to opportunities.

To support the study and analytical-descriptive approach is employed integrating comparative methods and analysis of relevant statistical data sourced from academic literature and institutional databases. Furthermore, to explore the real-world implications of linguistic capital, a comparative survey was conducted among employees based in both the Republic of Moldova and abroad. The empirical component enables a contextualised analysis of how language proficiency correlates with employability and income in varying national and organizational settings. The current study aims to bridge theoretical insights with lived experience offering grounded understanding of how linguistic capital operates in the globalised economy.

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Theoretical foundations of linguistic capital

The concept of “linguistic capital” originated in anthropological discourse and was later adapted as a sociological construct by researchers such as Yoss and Solorzano (2005). This term refers to the linguistic resources, knowledge, and skills that people possess and that can be strategically employed to gain social, cultural, or economic advantages. Since language is a complex and dynamic construct, linguistic capital includes not only knowledge of the vocabulary or grammar of the dominant language, but also the ability to navigate across different linguistic registers, adapt to various communication styles, and interact effectively in different social contexts.

A pivotal contribution to this concept was made by Pierre Bourdieu (1991), who considered linguistic capital within the framework of his broader theory of symbolic capital, which is a component of cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, language functions as a form of power and legitimacy within specific social settings. The worth of linguistic capital is influenced by social conditions and varies depending on the context, as it is shaped by dominant institutions and existing power relations.

Bourdieu points out that communication through language is never neutral, since it always involves a form of symbolic control. Some languages or ways of speaking—especially those linked to authority or higher social status—are considered valuable, while others are looked down upon or marginalised. This symbolic ranking helps maintain social inequality, particularly in the job market, where language skills often decide who is included or excluded. Therefore, linguistic capital is crucial for gaining access to education and employment and strongly influences a person’s social development.

1.2. Language proficiency and labour market outcomes

Many research studies show that linguistic capital has clear economic benefits, especially when it comes to jobs, career advancement, and earnings. Chiswick and Miller (2002) view language proficiency as an essential form of human capital that improves productivity, communication, and workers’ ability to adapt to the labour market. Their research on immigrant groups in different countries shows a strong link between skill in the dominant language, higher income, and greater professional success. In particular, they found that immigrants in the United States who speak English well earn about 14% more than those with lower levels of proficiency.

Similarly, Dustmann and Fabbri (2003), in their research of the UK labour market, found that English language proficiency significantly improves migrants’ income and employment prospects. Their analysis revealed an 18 - 20% wage growth for migrants with high proficiency in English, as well as a higher likelihood of finding employment in skilled and highly paid positions. Thus, language functions not only as a means of communication, but also as a guarantee of socio-economic mobility.

More recent European data confirm these conclusions. According to OECD (2023), over 50% of high-skilled job vacancies in the EU explicitly require knowledge of at least one foreign language, with roles demanding English often associated with higher salaries. Meanwhile, Liwiński (2019) found that in Poland, foreign language proficiency carries an average wage premium of 11%, rising to 32% for Spanish, 22% for French, and 15% for Italian – highlighting the influence of market demand and language rarity.

However, the importance attributed to linguistic capital still depends largely on context. It varies depending on the sector, region and national labour market, and is closely linked to the prestige and perceived usefulness of specific languages. For example, while English often serves as the standard *lingua franca* in global business and professional settings, other languages may have particular economic value depending on the industry and geographical context.

Recent research has also started to consider the relationship between language and factors such as migration status, ethnicity, and class, showing how linguistic capital interacts with broader structures of inequality. In this respect, language proficiency is not simply a skill to be acquired, but a form of cultural and symbolic power that must be recognised, legitimised and strategically used in the labour market.

1.3. Linguistic capital in a globalised economy

Globalisation has profoundly changed the value and functions of language in the world of work. As Heller (2003) argues, in the context of the global economy, language is increasingly becoming a commodity – it is being reformatted into a skill or asset that can enhance competitiveness, mobility and brand recognition. In particular, English has come to dominate as the “default capital” in many multinational industries. Expanding on this idea, Heller and Duchêne (2012) demonstrate how multilingualism is frequently used in late capitalism. Language skills are valued not for their cultural richness, but for their ability to generate profit or assist in achieving specific corporate goals. In these circumstances, access to elite linguistic capital, such as native-level English proficiency or multilingual certificates, is stratified along socio-economic lines, reinforcing pre-existing inequalities.

More recent research has further deepened our understanding of the concept of “linguistic capital” as both an asset and a source of inequality. For instance, Lo and Li (2022) explore how multilingualism functions in transnational workspaces, emphasising that it is increasingly perceived not simply as communicative competence but as “soft capital” that facilitates cultural mediation, interpersonal trust, and market expansion.

Thus, while globalisation while expanding the market for language skills, simultaneously reinforced inequalities in their distribution and recognition. Linguistic capital becomes both an opportunity and a constraint – a source of mobility and inclusion for some, and a marker of exclusion for others. Therefore, it should be viewed not simply as a neutral economic asset, but as a socially determined and politically significant resource. This perspective is particularly relevant for countries with transition economies like Moldova, where professionals seeking international careers

often invest heavily in linguistic capital to compete in the global marketplace. However, disparities in access to quality education, exposure, and institutional support can exacerbate internal divisions and limit the inclusiveness of language-based mobility strategies.

1.4. Recent studies and EU-focused perspectives

In the context of the European integration of the Republic of Moldova, linguistic capital intersects with political and cultural dimensions. According to Hirbu (2025), multilingualism and intercultural dialogue are fundamental pillars of EU identity, serving not only as instruments of cohesion but also as mechanisms for increasing labour mobility and employability. The analysis of EU language policy suggests that multilingual competence is increasingly considered as strategic asset in the knowledge economy, aligning with broader goals of innovation and competitiveness.

In the UK context, Williams and Cooke (2021) examined how employers in London’s financial and technological sectors prioritise multilingual graduates for positions involving international coordination. Their findings confirm that while English remains indispensable, linguistic competence in additional languages (e.g., Mandarin, German, Arabic) significantly improves employability and career advancement opportunities, although this value is often linked to short-term market performance rather than long-term capital.

Furthermore, Anderson and Alarcón (2023), examining changes in the UK labour market after Brexit, observe a growing demand for knowledge of European languages in areas like trade, diplomacy, and logistics. They also highlight rising concerns about unequal access to foreign language education in the UK. Students from wealthier families continue to be overrepresented in advanced language courses, which further strengthens existing patterns of educational and professional advantage.

1.5. Language education and social mobility

Language education plays a major role in building institutionalised linguistic capital, linking individual language skills to wider social and economic progress. Having access to quality teaching, recognised language certificates, and immersive learning experiences helps people turn their language abilities into real opportunities for upward mobility. As Park (2011) points out, the global job market increasingly seeks workers with strong language skills who can meet corporate demands such as having a neutral accent, switching between languages, and communicating effectively across cultures.

But, in some cases, language education policies maintain existing social inequalities. These policies usually favour dominant national or global languages in school curricula, while pushing regional, minority, or indigenous languages to the margins. This limits both the growth and recognition of linguistic capital among students from disadvantaged or underrepresented groups, thereby continuing cycles of social and economic exclusion.

II. ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONNAIRE DATA ON LINGUISTIC CAPITAL AND ITS IMPACT ON INCOME AND EMPLOYABILITY

To ground the aforementioned theoretical findings, quantitative research was conducted on the impact of linguistic capital on the respondents’ income and employability. The questioner, addressed to both domestic and foreign employees, explores how language skills influence professional opportunities, employability, and income in a globalised context. Thus, throughout

both close and open questions asked, was analysed the linkages between these three variables: linguistic capital – income – employability.

As a result, the performed survey was based on 41 individuals that conduct their primary professional activity in the Republic of Moldova, 16 respondents – in a hybrid, nomadic work pattern (both inside and outside of Moldova), and 23 of them declared that are activating internationally, in another countries expecting Moldova. Moreover, a large percentage of them (43,3%) conduct their professional activity in the sector of Education & Academia, being followed by the Business & Finance sector with 20% of the respondents. In 3rd place, could be observed the Government & Public Administration field with a popularity of 13,3% and next, with 6,7% comes IT & Technology and in the same position, with the same ponder is Horeca & Entertainment field placed. The remaining (10%) of the answers came from employees of Arts, Culture & Media, Engineering and Healthcare fields.

Pursuing further, to the question “How many languages are you proficient in for professional use”, were collected the following results that are presented in **Figure 1**, and from which can be concluded that the largest share is held by employees who can speak fluently two languages in a professional environment, and only 13,3% self-reported that are able to communicate only in one foreign language. These results represent a positive indicator that could have been influenced by the globalised nature of the labor market, increased emphasis on multilingualism in education, and the growing demand for language proficiency as a competitive advantage in international business contexts and mobility.

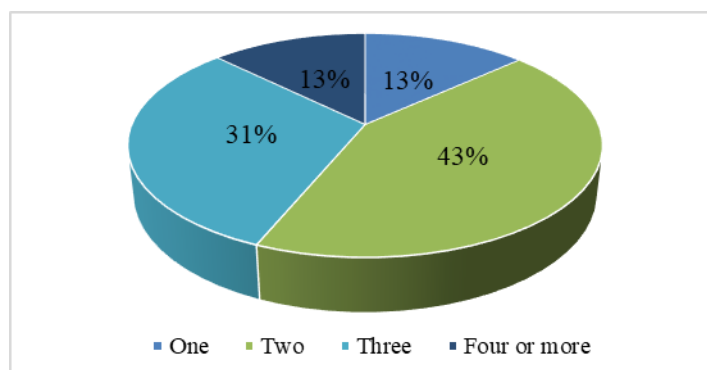


Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by number of languages used in professional contexts

Source: Elaborated by the authors

Analysing **Figure 2** regarding which foreign languages are mostly used by respondents for professional use (despite their mother tongue), it can be observed that the most popular are English, German and French, followed by Russian and Romanian. This distribution spotlights the global dominance of English as an international business language, and the presence of Russian and Romanian in this framework is mainly determined by the regional context and the multilingual demands of certain professional environments.

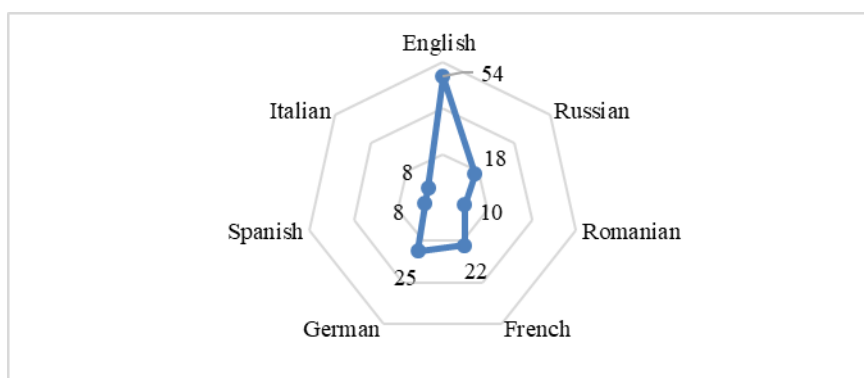


Figure 2: Frequency of foreign language use among respondents

Source: Elaborated by the authors

The career advancement opportunities determined by linguistic capital are highly influenced by the field of activity, but also by the area of employees' activity. As a result, in the framework of this aspect, it could be highlighted (table 1) that the employers outside of the country value the linguistic capital more and as a result, it is easier for workers to advance on their career path. Therefore, individuals seeking career progression should explore international job opportunities, while Moldovan employers must consider the linguistic asset more and maximize its capitalization.

Table 1: Distribution of career advancement opportunities by location of professional activity

Chances of career advancement	Area of professional activity	In Moldova	Outside of Moldova	Hybrid/nomadic work pattern	Total
Very high		5	11	10	26
High		18	3	11	32
Low		11	2	1	14
Very low/none		7	-	1	8
Total		41	16	23	80

Source: Elaborated by the authors

Analogously, the employees that took part in the survey assessed the extent to which their employers provide additional resources and opportunities for language improvement. Around 56% of them communicated that their employers provide enough chances and resources for improving their linguistic capabilities. Contrariwise, only a ponder of 23.3 percentage points of respondents rated their employer's provision of language resources as low (1/5 and 2/5), suggesting that most employers offer at least some support in this area. This spotlights a general positive trend in employer-supported language enhancement initiatives.

Table 2 presents the relationship between the extent to which the business is operating internationally and the self-reported contribution of foreign languages to the current job position. Thus, could be picked the fact that employees who activate in companies with an extensive international activity, consider that their language assets contributed significantly to their current job position and vice versa. As a result, there is a clear direct link between the extent of a company's internationalization and the perceived contribution of foreign languages to current job positions.

Table 2: Correlation between degree of company internationalisation and foreign language relevance in job context

Extent to which the company is internationalised	Contribution of languages to the current job position	Significantly	Moderately	Slightly	Total
Extensively		14	3	2	19
To some extent		9	19	6	34
Very low/none		1	14	12	27
Total		24	36	20	80

Source: Elaborated by the authors

The final part of the survey asked employees about their views on how language proficiency and multilingualism affect employability and income in today’s globalised world. Most respondents agreed that these skills have a clear positive impact and that linguistic capital should be better utilised. However, they also noted that the importance of language skills varies depending on the industry and the region of employment.

In the modern workplace, the ability to share ideas and gain knowledge is a major strength. Employees who are adaptable, can communicate clearly, and understand others tend to have more career opportunities and advantages. Language proficiency and multilingualism are key factors that enhance employability and boost earnings. They provide concrete financial benefits, open pathways to international and leadership positions, and offer protection against the effects of automation.

As global business continues to grow, the importance of language skills is expected to rise even further. Being multilingual is increasingly seen as a valuable advantage in the global job market, giving candidates a distinct competitive edge.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study demonstrates that linguistic capital is not only a social but also an economic asset. Our data, obtained using mixed methods – a combination of comparative statistics and employee surveys – confirm the hypothesis that multilingual and professionally proficient employees have a higher chance of getting a job, signing a contract, and advancing their career in competitive sectors. However, the effect on linguistic capital is heterogeneous. The return on language skills varies depending on the sector, region, and degree of internationalisation of the company. Respondents working outside Moldova or in organisations with extensive international activities reported stronger career growth and an increase in the contribution of foreign languages to their current work. In contrast, in domestic market-oriented environments, the effect was weaker but still positive.

The employer’s policy on language skills, education and certifications are extremely important. Most respondents reported that their employers provide them with opportunities to develop their language skills, but the level of support varies depending on the organisation. In companies where training is co-financed and where multilingualism is taken into account in job descriptions and employee performance reviews, the return on language capital is significantly higher. The combination of an international lingua franca (e.g. English) with a second/third

language that is required in the market increases resilience and mobility, while the combination of general language proficiency with business communication skills (e.g. negotiation, report writing, intercultural pragmatics) is particularly important for increasing income and career advancement.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that in the current global economy, linguistic capital is an actionable asset. When education systems, employers, and policymakers coordinate their actions to expand access to and recognition of authentic communicative performance, language skills lead to increased productivity, fairer opportunities and inclusive growth.

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