

# GCHQ's secret weapon

*The majority of data analysed by the British intelligence agency is in a foreign language, so its linguists are highly valued. Chris ██████ looks at the challenges they face.*

What do the initials GCHQ bring to mind? If they conjure up anything at all, it is likely to be a covert world of code breakers, technical supremos and expert mathematicians. Well, we certainly have more than our fair share of such skilled people at Government Communications Headquarters, but we are also the largest single employer of linguists in Her Majesty's Government. And we're not as covert as you might think. The world of languages at GCHQ is certainly very different to that depicted in shows such as *Spooks* and *The Whistleblower*.

GCHQ is one of the UK's three intelligence agencies, alongside the more widely known MI5 (the Security Service) and MI6 (the Secret Intelligence Service). It is based in Cheltenham and comes under the remit of the Foreign Secretary, so it is answerable to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office – a department traditionally seen as requiring a high level of language skills – and is therefore a foreign intelligence agency.

Our bread and butter business is known as signals intelligence ("Sigint"), which is the interception, filtering and analysis of the electronic signals that surround us. We employ in excess of 250 highly-skilled language analysts, most of whom are multilingual and work with less commonly taught languages. They routinely cover more than 40 languages and dialects, but have a potential capability in more than 70, including Arabic, Amharic, Korean and Kazakh.

The context in which language analysts' work at GCHQ is a well-defined one – defined by law and subject to a strict parliamentary oversight. GCHQ works to support national security, tackle serious organised crime and protect the economic wellbeing of the UK. So on any given day, a language analyst may be supporting

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military, counter-terrorism or weapons counter-proliferation operations, or helping to counter drugs trafficking and other serious crimes. It's quite a heady mix.

As exciting and fulfilling as the work is, we can't claim to have a licence to kill and an array of bewildering gadgets for every eventuality. It is, nonetheless, a very different – and very rewarding – way for linguists to use their languages on a professional basis. Because of their language capabilities, they will more often than not be the first people to spot vital intelligence that can make a real difference to government policy.

So what does a GCHQ language analyst actually do, and what language skills are required? Almost all have at least two foreign languages to degree level, but many have more, and we have some with more than ten languages. We employ very few translators of written material; our linguists are not fed texts for translation in a defined context and with strict instructions about what to translate. They are largely autonomous, yet key members of the intelligence production team.

Language analysts are expected to be not only language, but also subject and cultural experts. An Albanian linguist, for example, who can translate standard literary Albanian yet understand very little of the everyday spoken Albanian of Kosovo will not find a place at GCHQ.

While an Arabic language analyst must not only have a sound understanding of Modern Standard Arabic, but also a comprehensive (largely passive) capability in one or more spoken dialect, and be conversant with the tenets of Islam and the politics and social mores of one or more Arabic-speaking country. Transcription of vernacular, "street" language is the primary skill we require of our linguists, but we need this largely (but not exclusively) in terms of passive comprehension, rather than active use.

Written translation is also required, albeit to a much lesser extent and usually in support of the transcription work. However, it too revolves around informal registers, intriguingly transliterated dialect and often incoherent streams of consciousness, which the language analyst must piece together, analyse in an informed way through their in-depth knowledge of the spoken language, and translate in an appropriate style and register.

In all this, what the language analyst is also bringing to the table is the historical, social, religious and cultural viewpoint of the native speaker. Given that our strict UK nationality rules mean that we often cannot employ first-generation native speakers, this is a significant achievement. It is the equivalent of expecting a non-native English speaker to understand such subtleties as rhyming slang, the accents of *Taggart*, the jokes of *Little Britain*, and the play on words in tabloid headlines.

Our requirements are so specific that it is not realistic to expect a large number of "ready-made" linguists to beat a path to our door. Considering that our highest priority language requirements are for the languages of the Middle East, Asia and Africa, we frequently employ linguists with more commonly taught languages and then re-train them full-time in a new

## COVERT OPERATIONS

*An electronic signals intelligence exploitation apprentice (left) at the £330m headquarters of GCHQ in Cheltenham, nicknamed The Doughnut (right)*



language of higher priority and applicability to the organisation. If a linguist applies offering French, German, or Spanish and Portuguese, they are tested in those languages in the initial stages of recruitment, but if offered a job, they are likely to undertake ab initio training in, say Arabic, Farsi or Mandarin.

Our language courses are customised to our requirements, intended for linguists with an aptitude for learning new languages quickly and effectively, cover aspects of culture and history, and teach the specific transcription skills the job requires. As a linguist, I loved the prospect of being paid to learn an entirely new language, all day, every day for a year.

The courses are not like typical language classes. In our Albanian ab initio training course we effectively train linguists how to speak Albanian "badly". Knowing that in standard literary Albanian "what are you doing here at this time of the morning?" is *çka jeni duke bërë këtu në këtë orën e mëngjesit?* is fine. However, if what a Kosovar Albanian actually says is *ça jeni kah bani n'kt'on n'kt sahatin e sabahit?*, it doesn't help our purposes. We have found that linguists who learn spoken Kosovo Albanian first are able to hit the ground running when it comes to being fully employed on our Albanian work, whereas those who "convert" from literary Albanian find it an immense struggle.

Once linguists join the intelligence production team, they look and listen for

nuggets of intelligence that change the picture politically, militarily or in terms of combating serious crime. Through mentoring, coaching and further training, they hone their applied language skills, and perhaps even mentor others, represent their subject areas at meetings in Whitehall and other seats of power, and brief senior politicians and members of the military.

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More than 60 percent of the intelligence that GCHQ produces comes from foreign language material, so the contribution of our language analysts is genuinely and measurably huge. And, under GCHQ's Language Strategy of 2005, we have a bespoke career path for linguists, which enables language analysts to be promoted up to two pay grades above entry grade (and ultimately up to three). This recognises the value of applied language skill in terms of seniority, and ensures that linguists are not forced to abandon language work in their quest for promotion.

GCHQ is obviously affected by the parlous trend in the take-up of language learning in the UK. Faced with a shrinking pool of potential linguist recruits, we recently started sending language analysts into schools and universities. School children are visibly intrigued when they realise that we are interested in people who understand the foreign language equivalent of *cu l8er m8*, can read such "impenetrable" squiggles as 中国, or can swear like a trooper in Arabic or Russian.

It is disheartening when we offer youngsters examples of poor but commonly used grammar, such as "I could of done that" and a student asks blankly "what's wrong with that?" But at least it gets the message across that when people speak their language, they don't speak like a text book, they don't always speak in coherent sentences, and they get their grammar wrong.

The work of the language analyst is vital to GCHQ's intelligence production effort, and we would not be able to come close to meeting the growing requirements of the Government and the Armed Forces without them. In the words of the vernacular, 'nuff said.

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