



# Opportunities for Linguists at the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games

*By Jane Collis*

## London and the U.K. will

play host to athletes and spectators from more than 220 countries for the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012. London will literally be “welcoming the world,” with all its richness of languages and cultures, thus mirroring the “superdiversity” it enjoys as the U.K.’s capital city.

The success of London’s Olympic bid was strengthened by the capital’s projection of itself as a global city that is able to reach out and connect with the world through the vibrant cultural and linguistic resources within its population. The London bid team’s decision to include 30 young Londoners speaking 28 first languages among the delegation that travelled to Singapore for the International Olympic Committee’s host city election in July 2005

gave a strong message to the world about how the U.K. will connect with people across the globe through the 2012 Games. London 2012 Chair Sebastian Coe said, “London is the most cosmopolitan city in the world, constantly renewing itself, and is now home to 200 ethnic communities who speak a total of 300 languages. We want to involve all of these people and communities in delivering our Games.”

## Language Service Opportunities

Language skills and services will be vital not only in ensuring a quality experience for athletes, visitors, and the Olympic family during the events, but in creating a legacy for communities and employers in the years after the Games.

Five years away from 2012, detailed planning for the role of linguists in supporting and delivering the

Olympic experience is not yet underway. Linguists must already recognize, however, that the Games offer a once-in-a-lifetime chance to promote the value of language and cultural skills, especially when London and all of the U.K. will be the focus of unprecedented international attention before, during, and after the Games. This will provide professional language service providers with a great opportunity to make the case for the importance of their profession.

Migration patterns have transformed London into an exceptionally multicultural city that is one of the most diverse in the world. The stereotypical view of a population of English-speaking monolinguals is misleading and outdated not just in London, but in the U.K. as a whole. Communities, agencies, and employers understand ➡

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the value of the language skills available in the population. In a recent survey, 94% of London businesses acknowledged that language skills are “very important to the London economy.”<sup>1</sup> Delivering the vision of successful Games enhanced by effective multilingual communications will require meticulous and timely planning across a complex array of settings and interfaces. However, there are precedents for language strategies established at previous Games that serve as a foundation on which to build a language service structure.

### Peaking in Time for the Games: Opportunities for Language Professionals

Planning for language services will need to be implemented in a wide range of activities over the coming years, culminating in the highly visible peak during the summer of 2012.

In the run-up to the Games, the reworking and translation of a range of official documentation will need to be undertaken, including updating existing sports glossaries and preparing new lexicons,<sup>2</sup> rule books, and official guides. Official communication with the International Olympic Committee, athletes, organizing committees, and officially accredited press representatives will require translation and interpreting expertise of the highest standards. At

the Games, that expertise will be needed during press conferences and when providing services for live updates, ceremonies, official accreditation, medical facilities, drug testing, security, transportation, procedures and disputes, and when providing information to the public.

Another early challenge organizers face is deciding which languages to prioritize in the delivery of services. The Olympic Movement has French and English as its two official languages, which are also featured in the Olympic Charter as “working languages” along with Arabic, German, Russian, and Spanish.

In the recent past, Games organizing committees have gone beyond the minimum requirement of two official languages, extending the range to include those of the host country (for example, English, French, and Greek for the 2004 Athens Games). There has also been a trend to support other “working languages” in order to provide assistance on a case-by-case basis and to meet the needs of the anticipated mix of the press and visitors. In London’s case, the languages spoken in its own communities will also merit consideration.

The following examples of language initiatives at previous Games give an indication of the scale of opportunities available for language professionals.

- At the 1992 Barcelona Games, 15 other languages were used in addition to the four official ones (Catalan, Spanish, English, and French).
- At the 1988 Seoul Games, 5,890 personnel with language skills were designated for duty assignments.
- At the 1996 Atlanta Games, 32 editions of the *Olympic Village* newspaper were translated into French.
- At the 2000 Sydney Games, the multilingual switchboard operated in over 50 languages, and over 1,400 volunteer interpreters worked inside the venues.

### Translating into Action in London

London is home to professional associations of linguists and practitioners with international membership, links, and standing. The networks and expertise of the following organizations will be invaluable in meeting the challenges discussed above:

- **Association of Translation Companies** ([www.atc.org.uk](http://www.atc.org.uk));
- **Chartered Institute of Linguists** ([www.iol.org.uk](http://www.iol.org.uk));
- **Institute of Translation and Interpreting** ([www.iti.org.uk](http://www iti.org.uk)); and
- **International Association of Conference Interpreters** ([www.aiic.net](http://www.aiic.net)), through its contact point Conference Interpreters U.K. ([www.conferenceinterpreters.co.uk](http://www.conferenceinterpreters.co.uk)).

These organizations are well established, and the Games provide them with an incentive to simplify and promote access to their services for the benefit of a wide range of organizations beyond those directly involved with the planning of the Games—in key areas such as public services, transport, ➡

and tourism. In addition to the organizations just listed, the Regional Language Network (RLN) London is poised to help this vision of language access become a reality. RLN London works to create greater opportunities for London's businesses and people through improved access to language skills. It is funded by the London Development Agency and is part of the Regional Language Network program, which is supported by CILT, the National Centre for Languages, operating in the nine English regions and three home nations. RLN London works in close association with partners to promote the benefits of foreign languages and cultural skills for London's businesses, communities, and individuals.

### Public Services

The Games do not exist in a vacuum. Thousands of organizations and businesses will be involved in ensuring that the event runs smoothly and in supporting the visiting and resident public. With security and safety a high priority, the interface between Games organizers and public and emergency services will be of paramount importance, and multilingual support is an integral part of their planning. The police, health, emergency services, and local authorities in London and across the U.K. have a long track record of providing language support services to non-English speakers, and these services will be a high priority around the Games.

### Transportation

Languages will also have their role in ensuring that hundreds of thousands of spectators are able to make their way to the venues. Alongside the construction programs already underway at Olympic Park, London's transportation infrastructure is being transformed with the creation of a

new high-speed rail link to the main Games venues. The challenge of moving vast numbers of people visiting for the first time—many with little knowledge of English—presents opportunities for linguists to work in partnership to create signs, maps, and other graphic or audible methods to convey site locations and directions to

a £2-billion boost to Britain's international visitor economy. Games-related and Games-motivated tourism will mean over half a million extra visitors in London alone in 2012, but a "halo effect" of global media coverage means that most of the growth will be achieved in the four years following the Games. Therefore, there is a need

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travellers, and to deliver these in an accessible way that employs a range of technology-based solutions. Transportation for London already offers a multilingual journey planner and a range of other information in world and community languages on its website. Multilingual touch screens, helpdesks, and information podcasts could all help to provide information in different situations.

London already welcomes more than 11 million international visitors every year, many flying in via Heathrow, one of the five airports serving the city. BAA Heathrow, the airport operator, is piloting a customer-focused language training program for companies based at the airport. The initiative builds upon a survey (Heathrow Talking to the World<sup>3</sup>) that RLN London conducted across a range of key frontline work streams at the airport.

### Tourism

The Games are expected to deliver

to build up the U.K.'s capacity to communicate with people in their own languages and to upgrade the quality of services tourists receive so that the country can genuinely "welcome the world" for the long term. The U.K. will be encouraging the delivery of foreign language and cultural training for tourism information staff and for those in the hospitality and other service sectors. Language skills and cultural understanding for those in frontline roles have the power to build closer, more responsive customer relationships and to transform attitudes.

Signs again are positive that London will enjoy enhanced support for these changes, which will, in turn, lead to business for professional linguists. The Department for Culture, Media, and Sport has conducted a survey entitled "Welcome Legacy: Tourism for the 2012 Games." The February 2007 interim summary of responses made several references to the importance of languages for marketing purposes to enhance the U.K.'s

“welcome,” and to opportunities to harness linguistic diversity in the hospitality and tourism sector. The survey also mentioned the possibility of a visitor attraction focused on the languages of London.

### **“Education, Education, Education”**

Those were the words of former Prime Minister Tony Blair over 10 years ago in his campaign for office. While in office, Blair demonstrated his own skills in French when presenting to the International Olympic Committee in Singapore for the London bid, and when congratulating new French President Nicolas Sarkozy<sup>4</sup> on his appointment. The Games have the potential to give a fresh impetus for language learning in all sectors. The recent review on the Department for Children, Schools and Families’ language policy<sup>5</sup> by Lord Dearing highlights the importance of the Games in motivating language learners in the nation’s schools. Greater opportunities for international

In higher education, a £4.5-million program called “Routes into Languages” will encourage participation in language learning and raise the profile of university language departments across the U.K.. Institutions are also becoming involved in early research on providing language support for the Games. A £40,000 award was recently made to the University of Westminster to investigate languages

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links, for innovative projects combining sports and languages, for developing “ambassadors” with language skills, and for increasing the focus on vocational language programs could reap rewards for language learners and teachers in schools and colleges.

and international events. This project aims to make a connection between the formal support services at the Games—provided by professional bodies of translators and interpreters—and the work being done in the general community, including both London’s residents and international visitors.

## **Regional Language Network London**

If you would like to learn more about RLN London’s work as it gears up for the 2012 Games, visit [www.rln-london.com/olympics](http://www.rln-london.com/olympics) and subscribe to the quarterly online newsletter at [www.rln-london.com/newsletter](http://www.rln-london.com/newsletter).

### **Creating a Legacy for Businesses and Communities**

Agencies are already placing emphasis on languages in their plans to create momentum for, and to benefit from, the Games. For 2012, the London Development Agency (LDA) and the Learning and Skills Council London Employment and Skills Taskforce has created an action plan to maximize the employment and skills benefits of the Games. Languages and cultural skills are prominent as a feature of training for volunteers and those in paid employment involved in the Games, and RLN London is funded as part of this plan. A new customer service gold standard for key sectors such as hospitality, tourism, and passenger transport, with languages and cultural skills as a key element, is to be developed.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has launched an Olympics business prospectus in conjunction with other leading business organizations. The prospectus champions the formation of a business club for 2012, and proposes five distinct business-led initiatives aimed at securing huge long-term benefits for London’s economic competitiveness, including the development of language skills.



## Opportunities for Linguists at the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games Continued

There is recent best practice in providing language services during other major sporting events. For example, Germany was praised

help with everything from car parking to media work.

RLN London's funding from the LDA means that it can start—in a small

skills of professionals, nurture the linguists of the future, and generate enthusiasm for language learning at all levels. And with five years to go, there is a good chance this can happen.

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during the 2006 World Cup for the welcome it gave foreign fans by expressly recruiting volunteers with language skills. There is great potential for the 2012 Games Volunteer Program to harness the language skills of London's communities to make visitors feel at home. Up to 70,000 volunteers may be needed to

way—to create a legacy for the U.K.'s businesses and communities. RLN London hopes to bring many others on board along the way in order to benefit anyone working with languages in London, and to share the work and progress with networks across the U.K. and further afield. The Games have enormous potential to showcase the

### Notes

1. CBI Survey (January 2007), [www.rln-london.com/pdf/press\\_release\\_cbilondonsurvey.pdf](http://www.rln-london.com/pdf/press_release_cbilondonsurvey.pdf).
2. At the time of this writing, it has been suggested that skateboarding may be introduced as a new discipline for the 2012 Games.
3. The report can be downloaded from [www.rln-london.com/pdf/talkingtotheworld.pdf](http://www.rln-london.com/pdf/talkingtotheworld.pdf).
4. [www.youtube.com/v/P6Cu9187tCY](http://www.youtube.com/v/P6Cu9187tCY).
5. [www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank/index.cfm?id=11124](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank/index.cfm?id=11124).

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## Attention Translators and Interpreters in Arizona

If you are interested in being a part of the Arizona Translators and Interpreters Association, please subscribe to the mailing list at [aztia-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:aztia-subscribe@yahoogroups.com).

