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Celebrating International Mother Language Day

Did you know that the United Kingdom is home to many different languages and cultures, with around **300 languages thought to be spoken** in London today?¹

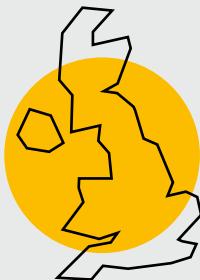
Or that, while over 90% of residents in England speak English as a main language, around 7%, have a **different mother tongue**?²

To celebrate International Mother Language Day this year, we're diving into the top five non-English languages spoken in the UK.⁴

Read on for your own jam-packed guide to words, histories and cultures from across the country, plus fun facts and activities to connect you with the power of languages.

4.1 million

people in England and Wales **do not speak English or Welsh** (in Wales) as their **main language!**³



We explore:

- Polish
- Urdu
- Romanian
- Portuguese
- Punjabi

And, not forgetting the UK's native non-English languages: **Welsh, Gaelic** and **Irish**.

¹ Official native languages | British Council | ² Language, England and Wales: Census 2021 | ³ Language, England and Wales: Census 2021 |

⁴ Languages in the UK – Statistics & Facts | Statista, 2024



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Polish

- Polish is the **second most commonly spoken language in the UK** after English – and has been since 2011⁵.
- **More than 610,000** people in England and Wales **speak Polish** as their main language.

- Large **Polish-speaking populations** can be found all around the world outside Poland, including in the United States, Australia, Brazil and Argentina.



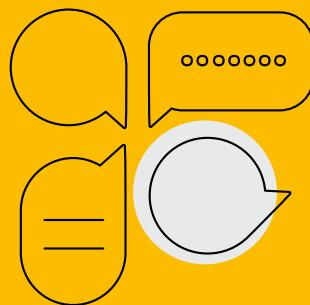
Language

Polish is the home language of Poland, a country bordered by Germany, the Czech Republic (Czechia), Slovakia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Russia and the Baltic Sea.

Its alphabet has 32 letters, some of which form combinations in words that speakers would never see together in the English language, including cz, rz, sz and szcz.

Since Polish is a Slavic language – meaning a language that relates to peoples of central, southeastern, and eastern Europe – speakers who can master it will find it's a helpful bridge to speaking related languages like Czech, Slovak, Croatian, Bulgarian and more.

It is estimated that an average Pole has an **active vocabulary of** approximately **30,000 words** and a **passive vocabulary of around 100,000.**



⁵ [Language in England and Wales: 2011](#)

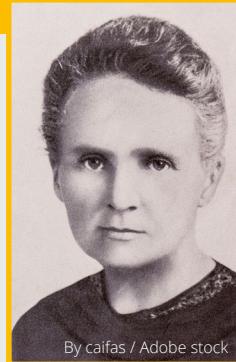
Polish continued

Culture

Polish holidays and festivals take place throughout the year and include, amongst others, Constitution Day on 3rd May and Independence Day on 11th November which has been celebrated since 1918. Holy Week, which takes place across Easter, includes the tradition of intricately decorating eggs.

Did you know?

In Poland, 23 March is *Topienie Marzanny*, when children and young people traditionally throw straw dolls – representing winter – into the river, as a way to welcome the coming of spring.



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Famous Polish speakers:

- Pioneering scientist **Marie Curie** – the first woman to win a Nobel Prize.
- Pianist **Fryderyk Chopin** – composer of the famous funeral march.
- Writer **Joseph Conrad** – who wrote the novella *Heart of Darkness*.
- Legendary mathematician and astronomer **Nicolaus Copernicus** – who calculated that the earth revolved around the sun.
- The movie-making siblings known as the **Warner Bros** – who emigrated to Canada during childhood.



Food

Traditional Polish cuisine includes hearty dishes such as *barszcz* (beetroot soup), *pierogi* (handheld dumplings) and *sauerkraut* (pickled cabbage). Christians in Poland are well-known for their huge Christmas feasts: twelve courses of savoury and sweet dishes served on 24 December.

Did you know?

The oldest sentence in the Polish language is 'Day, ut ia pobrusa, a ti poziwai', which was written in 1270. It translates roughly to 'Let me grind, and you take a rest'.

Romanian



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➤ **More than 470,000** people in England and Wales **speak Romanian** as a main language, making it the **largest increasing** non-English language in the country since 2011.

➤ Romanian is **not only the official language of Romania, but Moldova too**, where it is called 'limbă moldovenească'.
➤ Around the world, approximately **25 million people speak Romanian** as their mother tongue.

Language

Romanian is officially classified as a Daco-Romance language, a term that refers back to a land called Dacia, which included present-day Romania, plus parts of Moldova, Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, Slovakia and Ukraine. Dacia was eventually conquered by the Roman Empire, or 'romanised', causing the language to be adapted.

Romanian uses a version of the Latin alphabet, featuring 31 letters in total.

Today, Romanian is spoken in parts of Ukraine and Hungary, while similar dialects are also spoken in Bulgaria, Greece and parts of the region formerly known as Yugoslavia, which today includes Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia and other territories.

Did you know?

The letters Q, W and Y weren't officially added to Romanian until 1982, and are only used in foreign words.

Romanian continued

Culture

Romania is a religious country, with 99% of the country identifying as Christian, and a significant minority identifying as Muslim. As well as coming together for religious festivals throughout the year, Romanians celebrate Great Union Day on 1 December, to mark the unification of Transylvania, Bassarabia, and Bukovina in 1918, and Mărțișor (1 March), the traditional celebration of the beginning of spring which sees men offering women charms or other decorative objects tied with red and white ribbons.

Did you know?

One of the most popular regions for tourists visiting Romania is Transylvania, an area made famous by the legend of Vlad the Impaler, which inspired Bram Stoker's Dracula.

Famous Romanian speakers:

- Scientist **Emil Racovita** – the first biologist to reach Antarctica.
- Performer **Angela Gheorghiu** – the world-famous soprano singer.
- Gymnast **Nadia Comaneci** – the first person to achieve a score of 10 in Olympic gymnastics.
- Tennis player **Simona Halep** – former world number one and Wimbledon champion.
- Playwright **Eugène Ionesco** – a pioneer of absurdist and surreal theatre.

Food

Romanian food reflects its multicultural history, including influences from neighbouring Balkan countries like Serbia and Croatia, as well as Turkey, Russia, Italy and others. Popular dishes include *ciorba* (a rich soup), *salata de vinete* (aubergine salad) and *papanasi* (sweet cheese doughnuts).



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Did you know?

Romania's national anthem was originally a poem called 'Un Răsunet', by Andrei Mureșanu. Composed in 1848 and meaning 'an echo', it was officially adopted in 1990 at the end of the country's anti-communist revolution.



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Punjabi



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- Punjabi is spoken by almost **300,000 people** in England and Wales today.
- The origins of the Punjabi language **date back thousands of years**.
- It is the **10th most spoken language** in the world and the native language of approximately 150 million people.

Language

Punjabi originates from the Punjab region, which spans an area across modern-day India and Pakistan. In Pakistan, it is the most widely spoken language. In India, it is an official state language and the eleventh in the list of top spoken languages in the country.

Punjabi speakers use two different alphabets: *Shahmuki* in Pakistan and *Gurmukhi* in India, with the tone of some words spoken carrying different meanings.

There are large Punjabi communities all around the world, including Canada, the United States, Australia and the Middle East.

Did you know?

The Punjabi language **has its own set of numerals**. These are different to the symbols used in English of 1, 2, 3, etc.

A magnifying glass focusing on the number 1 in a sequence of binary digits. The sequence is 1010110, 101000, 0101101, and 001010. The number 1 is circled in teal, and the magnifying glass is also teal.

Punjabi continued

Culture

Did you know?

The word 'Punjab' comes from the Persian phrases for 'five' and 'waters', and references the five rivers that run through the region.

Figures suggest around three-quarters of Punjabi speakers are Muslim – with the highest proportions in Pakistan – while India's Punjabi population are largely Sikh and Hindu. Also in India are a minority of Punjabi Buddhists. As it's spoken by such a diverse population, learning Punjabi can unlock multiple cultures and connections.

Food

The local cuisine of Punjab is heavily influenced by the agriculture and farming lifestyle. You can find many Punjabi dishes, including biryani, rogan josh, saag, tandoori chicken and butter chicken in your local Indian restaurant. According to the archaeologist Professor Vasant Shinde, the earliest evidence of a dish similar to tandoori chicken can be found in the Harappan civilization and dates back to 3000 BC!



Did you know?

Many Punjabi artists are internationally renowned in part thanks to a music scene known for genres like Bhangra and Punjabi pop.





Urdu

- Around **270,000 people speak Urdu** in England and Wales.
- Urdu is the **official state language of Pakistan**, and also one of 22 languages **officially recognised** in India's constitution.
- Nearly **70 million people worldwide speak Urdu** as a first language, while as many as **100 million people speak it** as a second language.

Language

The Urdu alphabet has 39 basic letters and 13 extra characters and is written from right to left instead of the left-to-right style used for writing English. It shares foundations of vocabulary and grammar with Hindi, meaning that Urdu and Hindi speakers can more easily understand each other than speakers of other languages.

Did you know?

Dots have an important role to play in the Urdu alphabet: how a dot is placed can change one letter into another.

The language originated within a region of northwestern India and has links to the Mughal Empire. Today there are large Urdu-speaking communities in the United Arab Emirates and the United States, as well as the UK.

Urdu continued

Culture

Urdu speakers can be found throughout South Asia, and a majority of them are Muslim. Alongside a rich calendar of religious festivities, Urdu culture is known for its poetic traditions: especially *ghazal*, a key genre within Urdu literature.

Did you know?

The word 'Urdu' originally came from the Turkish word 'Ordu,' meaning 'army' or 'camp.'

Famous Urdu speakers:

- **Shah Rukh Khan** – The “King of Bollywood”.
- **Riz Ahmed** – a British actor of Pakistani descent.
- **Wasim Akram** – legendary cricketer.
- **Zayn Malik** – One Direction singer. His debut solo album included a song, Mind of Mine, sung in Urdu.
- **Aamir Khan** – actor.

Food

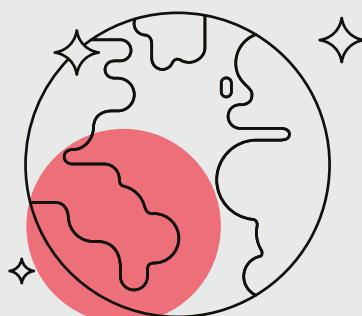
Pakistani cuisine is a blend of regional cooking styles and flavours from across South, Central and West Asia. With its vast ethnic and cultural diversity, climates, geographical environments and availability of different produce, it leads to a wide variety of different foods, famous for its Moghul-inspired cuisine: pulao, biryanis, kababs, and kormas.



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Portuguese

- More than **215,000** **people** in England and Wales **speak Portuguese** as their main language.
- Standard Portuguese as we know it today was **developed in the 16th century**.
- There are **two main versions** of Portuguese: **European Portuguese** and **Brazilian Portuguese**, each with differences in pronunciation, verbs and word order.



Language

Portuguese is spoken far and wide around the world, and is the official language in as many as nine countries: that's Portugal, Brazil, Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Timor-Leste, Equatorial Guinea, Cape Verde, and São Tomé & Príncipe. Portuguese is also the official language of the Chinese territory of Macau.

The Portuguese alphabet has the same 26 letters as English, though this was not officially the case until very recently.

In 1822, Brazil declared its independence from Portugal. Due to their geographical distance – almost 5,000 miles apart – Brazilian and European Portuguese evolved to be quite different however in 1990, both countries signed the Orthographic Agreement to establish a single orthography (an accepted way of spelling and writing words) for both countries.

Did you know?

Before 2009, the letters K, W and Y did not exist in Portuguese writing, as they were seen as foreign letters.

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Portuguese continued

Culture

People or nations that use Portuguese as their mother tongue are known as Lusophone, which refers to the large empire Portugal built throughout the world, most prolifically between the 15th and 17th centuries. Portuguese is the second most commonly spoken language in Latin America after Spanish, and so covers a highly diverse spectrum of people.

Food

Traditional Portuguese cuisine has influenced global culinary traditions with dishes such as bacalhau (salted cod) and pastéis de nata (custard tarts), both gaining popularity beyond Portuguese-speaking countries.



By tbralnina / Adobe stock

Famous Portuguese speakers:

- **Shakira** – world-famous singer and dancer.
- **Cristiano Ronaldo** – world-famous footballer.
- **Paulo Regs** – visual artist, the first artist-in-resident at the London National Gallery.
- **Nelly Furtado** – singer-songwriter.
- **Jose Mourinho** – football manager.

Music

With Portuguese being the official language of so many countries around the world, Portuguese has contributed significantly to the global music industry. From traditional fado, popular music, rock, pop, hip-hop and electronic music, to contemporary fusions that mix various styles.



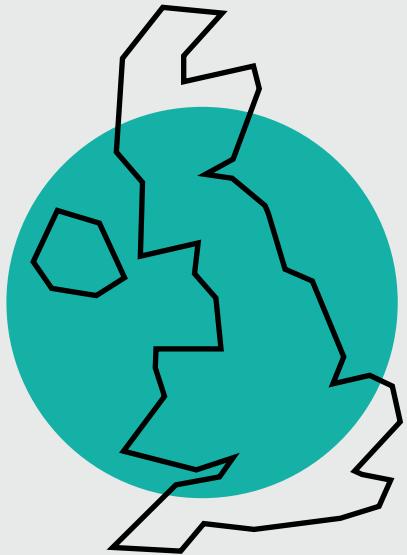
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Did you know?

Only 5% of Portuguese speakers worldwide live in Portugal! Most live in Brazil. In fact, São Paulo, Brazil has the most Portuguese language speakers in one place in the entire world!

Languages of the United Kingdom

While the official language of the United Kingdom is English, it is also **home to a number of languages** that **reflect its history and local identities**:



English

British English is a language with variations in accents, dialects and vocabulary across different regions with Scottish English, Welsh English and Northern and Southern dialects giving each area of the UK different distinct sounds, words, phrases and even sentence structures that are unique to that area of the UK.

Celtic

The UK is home to several Celtic languages that have existed for centuries and continue to be spoken and celebrated:

Welsh (Cymraeg): This is considered to be one of the oldest living languages in Europe and is widely spoken in Wales. In Wales, they have road signs in both English and Welsh, a dedicated TV channel and many schools teach it. In 2022, there were approximately 900,600 people who could speak Welsh in Wales – equivalent to 29.5% of the population.

Scottish Gaelic (Gàidhlig): This is spoken particularly in the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland and is currently being revived in the form of media outlets and Gaelic-medium schools. Gaelic speakers in Scotland were less numerous than Welsh speakers in Wales. Approximately 58,003 people or 1.7% of the Scottish population spoke Gaelic.

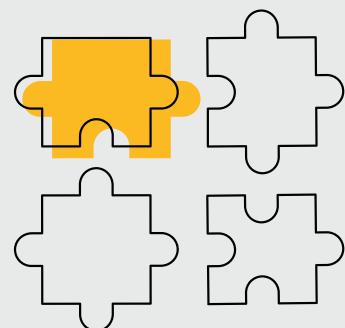
Irish Gaelic (Gaeilge): In Northern Ireland, Irish is spoken by a small group of people and is taught in some schools. Approximately 11% of people speak or understand Irish.

Cornish (Kernewek): Unbeknown to many, Cornwall has its own language. Despite almost disappearing, local organisations and schools are trying to keep the language alive.



Key phrases

Can you **match these key phrases** to their English translations and **work out how to pronounce** each word?



Polish

Polish	English	Pronunciation
Ille to kosztuje?		
Gdzie jest toaleta?		
Proszę		
Dziękuję		
Nie rozumiem		
Przepraszam		
Gdzie jest najbliższa stacja metra?		
Przepraszam		
Tak		
Cześć		



Please Yes Where is the nearest Metro? Sorry How much does this cost?

Where is the toilet? Thank you Excuse me Hello I don't understand

Key phrases continued

Romanian

Romanian	English	Pronunciation
Mulțumesc!		
Bună		
Ce mai faci?		
Îmi pare rău		
Cât costă?		
Nu înțeleg		
Da		
Pot să repeti, te rog?		
Extraordinar		
Nu		



Please say that again? Wow I'm sorry No Hello

How much is this? Thank you How are you? Yes I don't understand

Punjabi

Punjabi	English	Pronunciation
ਤੁਹਾਡਾ ਧੰਨਵਾਦ		
ਸਤ ਸ਼੍ਰੀ ਅਕਾਲ		
ਸੇਰਾ ਨਾਮ ਹੈ...		
ਮੁਆਫ ਕਰਨਾ		
ਇਹ ਕਿਥੀ ਲਈ ਹੈ?		
ਮੈਂ ਸਾਕਾਹਾਰੀ ਹਾਂ		
ਮੈਨੂੰ ਸਮਝ ਨਹੀਂ ਆਈ		
ਕੀ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਮੇਰੀ ਮਦਦ ਕਰੋਗੇ?		
ਇਹ ਕਿਨਾ ਹੈ?		
ਨੂੰਡਾਕਟਰ ਦੀ ਲੋੜ ਹੈ		



I need a doctor Can you help me? Sorry Hello How much is this?

I don't understand I am a vegetarian My name is... Thank you

Key phrases continued

Urdu

Urdu	English	Pronunciation
ولیہ		
انابرہم سے ارب		
ہی رکش		
؟ نیہ سے تکس رک ددم ی دیم مرک ہارب پ آ ای ک		
نیہن		
؟ سے ہ اک سے نت ک ہی		
؟ سے ہ ای ک نیم سے ناہک		
ترذع م		
یئوہ ی شوخ رک لم سے س پ آ		
لہیج		



Can you help me, please? Sorry Nice to meet you No Hello

What is available to eat? How much is this? Yes Thanks Please

Portuguese

Portuguese	English	Pronunciation
Olá		
Boa tarde		
O meu nome é...		
Muito prazer		
Adeus		
Sim		
Desculpe		
Onde é...		
Mais devagar, por favor		
Obrigado		



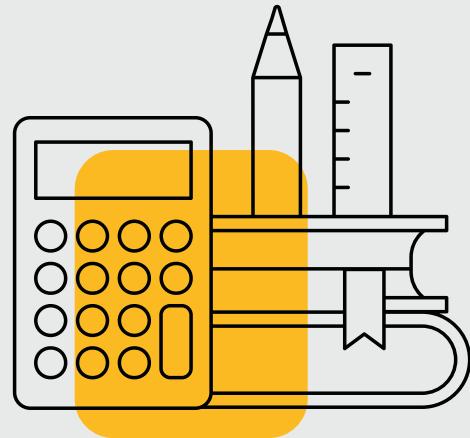
Slower, please Yes Goodbye My name is... Good afternoon

Thank you Hello Pleased to meet you Sorry/Excuse me Where is...

Other activities

From the list below, **pick a task for students to complete** in class or as homework.

Challenge them to get creative in how they present their findings. It could be a poster, a factsheet or presentation, or even a poem or performance – the options are endless!



Activity 1:

Differences to me and my culture

Pick one of the languages above and research its language and culture further. Compare and contrast it to your own language and culture and share your findings with the class.

Activity 2: Where am I?

In pairs or small groups, take two countries who speak the same language, explore a country and culture each and then come together to identify similarities and differences between the two. You could present this as a booklet of information a PowerPoint presentation, or even a poem or short performance to share with the class.

Activity 3: Connecting cultures

Can you find a language or culture that has similarities in language or celebrations? Create a colourful poster or presentation that brings the language or culture to life.

Activity 4: Take your pick

Although we've identified the top five non-English spoken languages, there are many other languages spoken in the UK. Pick one different language and explore the language, the home country and its culture further. You could present this in fact sheets, mini interview sessions or make your own vlog or podcast!

Activity 5: The wonders of the UK

The UK is made up of four different nations each with its own flag, flower, cuisine, culture, language and more! Displaying your findings in a report, book, poster or presentation, see what fun and unusual facts you can find.