

Professor Maria Arche speech

Thank you, Professor Bryan.

Thank you, Lord Boateng, for sponsoring this event.

My name is Maria Arche, I am a professor of linguistics and I am standing here today, representing the voice of many people, to “think language **first**” and give our **foremost attention** to language, as it is “the” gateway to fulfil our potential in life, access education, establish social relations and enjoy wellbeing.

The Manifesto Think Language First has three main properties:

1. It is the result of large-scale **consensus**;
2. It covers the full **diversity of language needs**; and
3. It brings attention to language in **late childhood and adolescence**.

1. Consensus.

The Manifesto is the result of an intense collaboration across disciplines, sectors and countries.

The text captures the input from more than 60 professionals and stake-holders from 10 countries, who worked together in a one-week workshop in Leiden for over 40 hours.

The group included:

- Linguists
- Speech and language therapists
- Health, education, criminal-justice professionals, and also
- Charities and parents associations

This **consensus** has paved the way to the substantial endorsement we bring with us today; not only from individuals, but from organizations, **over 60, and counting**, including the main British learned linguistics societies (such as the British Association of Applied Linguistics), the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists or the Association of Youth Offending Team Managers, to name just a few and to indicate the diversity of the support. **I consider we can safely take this strong endorsement as testimony to the value of this manifesto.**

2. The second feature of our Manifesto is that we highlight the **diversity** of language difficulties and challenges, and call for more research and support, so that we do not leave a single child behind due to lack of recognition of language difficulties. We include those who have combinations of developmental language disorders (note the alarming figure about 6 in every class of 30, as Professor Bryan just said); children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are twice as likely to experience language delay; multilingual children, vulnerable because of their lower proficiency in the school language or because their multilingualism blurs any language difficulty they may have; deaf children, of whom 95% are at risk of developing language difficulties, because they miss the first window of exposure to language, which linguists have proved to be essential.

3. Finally, our Manifesto is novel in emphasising the need of focus on language in **late childhood and adolescence**.

Why is this important? Well, do you remember tests such as, “I have a bag with 30 sweets and 5 friends. I’d like to give the same amount of sweets to each, how many sweets does each of my friends get?”

This is an example of a text kids encounter in school work. They need to **understand the language** to make **sense of the question** and find the answer. The element “each” is key to grasp the mathematical operation at hand (division, in this case). We have evidence from linguistics showing that full acquisition of “each” may not happen until around the age of 9 in typically developing children.

Imagine if we add some disorder or disadvantage. So, if we want to improve attainment across the curriculum, **we need to think language first**.

We need more research to understand what can constitute a language barrier; **we need** language evaluations sensitive to such barriers and **we need** to assess language at different points in the school journey.

To finish, the Manifesto Think Language First has an important international component. Bringing it to those who can do something to implement the right policies starts today, at the House of Lords in Westminster. But this is only the beginning. We aim to have the Manifesto endorsed and implemented across many countries, as the issues are common.

I thank Lord Boateng again, I invite you to read the Manifesto in full, and I now give the floor to my colleague Dr Alexandra Perovic, who is going to chair a panel of experts and professionals who are going to give us their views on the Manifesto.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Professor María J Arche.