UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Why should demolinguistic projections inform language policy choices?

Marácz, L.

Publication date
2018
Document Version
Proof
Published in
The MIME vademecum

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Marácz, L. (2018). Why should demolinguistic projections inform language policy choices? In F. Grin (Ed.), *The MIME vademecum: Mobility and Inclusion in Multilingual Europe* (pp. 42-43). MIME Project.

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (https://dare.uva.nl)

Download date:17 Nov 2026

7 Why should demolinguistic projections inform language policy choices?

László Marácz Universiteit van Amsterdam

In large parts of European academic and public discourse, it is apparently taken for granted that one lingua franca must dominate and that it will be English. apart from the problematic features of any form of linguistic hegemony (no matter which language dominates), the changing geopolitical power constellations do not necessarily favour this scenario – including the further expansion of global English. The hegemonic position of the English language proceeds from the expanding influence of English-speaking countries in the twentieth century (Phillipson, 2009). In the 21st century, however, this political and economic dominance is expected to decrease, and it is not obvious that the role of English will remained unchallenged .

What does research tell us?

The twentieth century has favoured the political and commercial expansion of English-speaking countries. Commentators have argued that the position of English will be challenged due to the fact that the global domination of the US has passed its peak in the beginning of the twenty-first century (Maurais and Morris, 2003; Ostler, 2006). Ostler (2010) also suggests that the development of language technologies, in particular automatic translation, will erode the relevance of a global lingua franca. This will open the possibility for other languages of wider communication to gain global lingua franca status or at least to maintain their position as an important factor in lingua franca communication on a regional level, including the territory of the European Union (EU).

The progressive shift in the balance of geopolitical power is likely to result in an increase in the influence on world affairs of certain states or consortia of states. The EU's democratic weight is declining, but it remains a first-rate economic player. Other groups of states, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation or the Eurasian Union are likely to acquire more clout. The growing influence of these organisations in world affairs also implies that their languages and their concepts of language policy will probably gain importance in the long run.

Illustration and evidence

A number of languages of wider communication already compete with global English for the status of (regional) lingua franca. In former parts of the Soviet Union, Russian is still being used as a regional lingua franca. A country like Kazakhstan within the former Soviet and current Russian orbit has adopted an official trilingual language policy promoting equally prominent status for Kazakh, English and Russian. The two official languages of the Shanghai Military Cooperation covering the territory of the eastern part of the Eurasian continent are Russian and Mandarin Chinese. With almost 900 million, Mandarin Chinese has the most mother tongue speakers by far (roughly three times as much as English at present). French remains the main *lingua franca* across most former French colonial states on the African continent, with demographic projections placing the number of speakers of French between 370 and 770 million by 2060; and Spanish as a lingua franca plays a vital communicative role across the American continent, including, as a result of migration and demolinguistic evolution, in the United States. Some other important languages of wider communication, like Hindi, Malay and Portuguese might also be added to the list of regional competitors of global English.

	Language	Total speakers (m)	Mother tongue speakers (m)	Lingua franca speakers (m)
1	**English**	1143	331	812
2	**Mandarin Chinese**	1051	873	178
3	**Spanish**	389	329	60
4	**Arabic**	346	206	140
5	**Hindi**	302	182	120
6	**Russian**	254	144	110
7	**Bengali**	250	181	69
8	**Malay**	202	55	147
9	**Portuguese**	193	178	15
10	**Urdu**	154	61	93
11	**Japanese**	126	125	1
12	**French**	118	68	50
13	**German**	118	90	28
14	**Persian**	109	36	73
15	**Javanese**	85	85	0

Ranking of languages by total number of speakers (adapted from Ostler, 2017: 227)

Policy implications

In sum, the global geopolitical developments should lead us to anticipate the use of several different regional or global *lingua francas*, including English, but also a number of other languages, including Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi, Russian, Bengali, Malay, Portuguese, Urdu, Japanese, French, German, Persian, and Javanese. In the table above, these languages are arranged by total number of speakers, it being clear that the number of "lingua franca speakers", and hence of "total speaker", are very rough estimates.

Apart from the numbers of the different categories of speakers, the geographical distribution and concentration of competing languages also matters, as does their prestige and status. The complex interplay of political, economic and demographic factors that shape language dynamics suggests that a wide range of languages should be taken into account in a forward-looking language policy for Europe. EU member states could make more space for the languages referred to above in school curricula, taking care in particular not to narrow down their language education policy to the teaching of a mother tongue plus English only. This more open orientation ties in with the recommendation made in COM (2008 / 566: 7) that the teaching of languages of wider communication is relevant to boost competitiveness and to improve opportunities in global business spheres.

References and further reading

Maurais, J. & Morris, M. A. (2003). *Languages in a globalising World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ostler, Nicholas (2006). *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World*. London: Harper Perennial.

Ostler, N. (2010). *The Last Lingua Franca: English Until the Return of Babel*. New York: Walker.

Phillipson, R. (2009). *Linguistic Imperialism Continued*. New York: Routledge.

European Commission (February 2006). Europeans and their Languages, Special Eurobarometer 243 ▯ ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs_243_en.pdf

European Commission (June 2012). Europeans and their Languages, Special Eurobarometer 386 ▯ ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs_386_en.pdf

Commission of the European Communities (2003). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 2003 - *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004 - 2006*. COM (2003) 449 final.

Commission of the European Communities (2008). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment. COM (2008) 566 final. Brussels: 18.9.2008.