Why should demolinguistic projections inform language policy choices?

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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 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 remain 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 and British economic power is likely to result in an increase in critical mass. Increasingly, a number of 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 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.

Language policy implications

In sum, the geopolitical developments should lead us to anticipate the use of several regional languages in additional to 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 speakers”, 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


References and further reading