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# The International Importance of Languages

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Topic: Analysis of the international weight of languages

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Summary: The goal is to present an update of the “international importance of language index” calculated and first proposed by Marqués de Tamarón, and applied later by Jaime Otero. This update is done first by bestowing special attention upon Spanish, and second, by applying a methodology equivalent to the one used 20 years ago by the aforementioned authors. In this way, it will be possible to appreciate how Spanish and other languages have evolved over the past two decades.

Keywords: languages, globalization, economy, translations, exportations, human development index, English, Spanish, Chinese

## Introduction

The importance of languages is a concept that unfailingly sparks debate, if not outright confrontation. And the thing is, let us state this from the outset, all languages are equally important from a linguistic and anthropological angle, such

that discussing their relative importance is deemed equivalent to invoking discriminatory differences among ethnicities, races or identities. Under the best of circumstances, evaluating the weight of any language within social, cultural, political or economic terms usually leads to ideological debates. According to Jon Blommaert (1999: 9-10), the debates are sets of texts and speeches where *ideological reproduction* takes place. Their origin often presupposes the existence of linguistic ideologies and their development implies the opposition of multiple actors or participants, generally considered *ideological agents*: politicians, social activists, professors or experts, and media outlets. These are the agents who are commonly involved in debates on the importance of languages, and who are accused of forcing the acceptance of some ideas that elevate one or two languages above the others. In fact, this paper is presented by the author in the performance of his duties as a professor and linguistic expert, who, while pursuing the objectivity of his data and arguments, accepts his likely responsibility as an ideological agent.

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The discourse regarding the relative importance of languages, framed not by impressionist analysis, but rather verifiable analysis, has been growing stronger as the phenomenon of globalization has impacted culture through the appearance of new communication technologies. These technologies have contributed toward widening the inequality gap and division of labor, among whose consequences one must include the advent of new migratory patterns. This has produced the emergence, especially in large metropolitan areas, of a phenomenon of linguistic super-diversity, as well as new forms of multimodal communication (Blommaert 2010). But at the same time, it has contributed to reinforcing and expanding the presence of international languages into increasingly diverse contexts, as well as appraising their utility in economic terms, as an essential part of global markets as instruments of communication, of course, but likewise as a “commodity” (McCallen 1989; Heller 2003). The sociolinguistics of globalization, built on a paradigm of “mobility” rather than

“distribution,” also makes room, beyond ideological debates, for quantifying the international importance of languages.

The goal herein is to present an update of the “international importance of language index” calculated and first proposed by Marqués de Tamarón in 1990, and applied by Jaime Otero in 1995. This update is done first by bestowing special attention upon Spanish, and second, by applying a methodology equivalent to the one used 20 years ago by the aforementioned authors. In this way, it will be possible to appreciate how Spanish has evolved – along with other major languages worldwide – over the past two decades, by applying the same quantitative analysis technique and enabling a longitudinal analysis, for the first time, of this matter. As a framework for this new study of the language-importance index, other considerations of a qualitative nature are presented regarding Spanish as an international language, along with the function of languages from a global standpoint.

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## The international weight of languages

The world’s languages – the 7,106 recorded by the *Ethnologue* project in 2014 – have established very distinct relationships among one another that can be explained by models or theories built on qualitative arguments that may be accompanied by quantification. Some of those models are ecological, ethnolinguistic, genetic, intergenerational, orbital and pyramidal. They are not the only theoretical models out there, but they are all prominent.

The *ecological model* proposes a map of the world’s linguistic diversity – by countries or other types of social groupings – in which the relative proportion of native languages is represented, along with the likelihood that two speakers chosen at random from a given group understand one another in the same language (Greenberg 1956; Lieberman 1964). Without any argument whatsoever

establishing prevalence among languages, Spanish would occupy a considerable ecological space shared with other languages, though with low linguistic diversity.

The *ethnolinguistic model* focuses on linguistic vitality, understanding it to be a combination of demographic, ethno-social, and psycho-social factors, where just as important as the number of speakers is the social environment in which a language exists, the attitude that the speakers have regarding it, and the way in which its status is perceived (Giles *et al.* 1977). Spanish, according to these criteria, would be among the world's languages having the greatest vitality.

The *genetic model* establishes a parallelism among the planet's genetic groups and large linguistic families (Cavalli-Sforza 1996), which is sufficiently consistent in large measure, but gets diluted when the life of languages has experienced severe social upheaval. This is the case, in particular, with international languages, such as Spanish, where the correlation between race and language breaks down completely.

The *intergenerational model* proposes the calculation of an intergenerational interruption index regarding the capacity of communities that speak a language to transmit it from parents to children. The calculation refers to each language's number of speakers and is correlated with a scale of intergenerational disruption that distributes languages on a scale from one to ten, from international to extinct (Lewis, Simons and Fennig 2013), and ranks Spanish on one end with the largest speaking population and smallest disruption in transmission among generations.

The *orbital model* lays out the world's languages in concentric orbits whose center has unfailingly been occupied by English. The orbits imply, among other aspects, that the speakers of one language are destined to learn the language(s) of the inner orbits (Calvet 2006). De Swaan establishes a similar hierarchy among languages, and according to him, English would be the hyper-center of the

system, immediately “surrounded” by two supercentral languages: Chinese and Spanish (De Swaan 2001).

Finally, the *pyramidal model* of David Graddol (1997) organizes the world’s languages into a pyramid supported by vernacular and local languages, and passing through national and regional languages, it places at its peak the so-called “major languages.” In 1995, the top of the pyramid was occupied by English and French; according to Graddol, in 2050, the top hierarchical languages will be English, Hindi/Urdu, Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, and Spanish.

As stated above, these models do not represent all the ways of understanding relationships among the world’s languages. For instance, there is a procedure that catalogs them sequentially by awarding them an ISO code of “standardization,” which identifies each language as if it were a product, service, or system, ensuring its “quality, safety and efficacy” and “facilitating international trade” (www.iso.org). This organization’s standards are presented this way, having awarded Spanish the following codes: ISO 639-1: es; ISO 639-2: spa; ISO 639-3: spa; but it likewise awards codes, as individual languages, to varieties of different types, some nonexistent in natural use, like Caló (ISO 639-3: rmq) or Quinqui (ISO 639-3: quq), and some clearly inserted into another language of which it is a variety, such as Extremaduran (ISO 639-3: ext), with respect to Spanish. This reference to ISO codes is merely to show that the repertoire of interpretations of the international idiomatic panorama is very broad and in one way or another, these varying interpretations always end up affecting the valuation of the international importance of languages.

Analyzing the international importance of languages by developing a specific index is yet another way of interpreting the global *idiomatic* system; a form of interpretation that attempts to provide arguments aimed at international policies and utility within the context of international relations, global cultural politics, diplomacy, and technology. This requires viewing linguistic domains as

homogenized entities and inserting a quantifying criterion regarding other qualitative or “imponderable” aspects, by respecting the descriptions given by Marqués de Tamarón in 1992, like the associated identities, the sociology of languages, their social history, their status and institutionalization, their teaching, migrations, diglossia, linguistic contacts, or projected and perceived images (Breton 1975; 1995). In contrast to cultural alternatives, the international importance of languages is debated by using states as units for statistical analysis and referring factors to each of them – or their possible groupings – that are capable of bestowing importance, being fully aware that some are prioritized while others are ignored.

There are essentially two difficulties raised when reflecting on the importance of languages, though they are related: defining the concept of “international language” and specifying the factors that condition or determine their importance. A language may be classified as international by the mere fact that it is spoken in more than one country or state, but this question is not so easily sorted. Were it so, Romanian would be as international as English and, Russian as Chinese, so the analysis appears to require further refinement. In order to do so, one may distinguish among the languages that are “used” in multiple countries or that have “official status” in more than one: the problem is that if we talk about use, this would be the reality where two speakers interact in any language or where there are groups of speakers of one language who do not always constitute socio-linguistically stable communities. These conceptual obstacles, amplified by the difficulty of projecting them onto specific realities, are the ones that lead to speaking of the internationality of a language only if its official status has been recognized.

However, the second aforementioned problem makes quantification a tricky task. What are the factors that determine the international importance of a language? Bernard Comrie (1987) treated as “objective criteria” the number of speakers, the official nature in independent states, its use within each country, and its

literary tradition. Ethnolinguistics has resorted to demographic, status, and institutional variables to establish the differences among languages (Giles *et al.* 1977). The British Council, for its part, used ten indicators to determine which languages were the most important for the future of the United Kingdom: exports from the country, business languages, the government's trading priorities, emerging markets, diplomatic and security priorities, the people's linguistic preferences, the choice as a tourist destination, the government's educational priorities, the level of English in other countries, and use on the Internet (Tinsley *et al.* 2013).

The challenge of selecting criteria was accepted by Marqués de Tamarón in 1990 and 1992, who likewise formed them into an equation. We shall take it in parts. The criteria or components proposed by Tamarón were as follows:

*Number of native speakers.* Speakers constitute the social foundation of languages, and native speakers are the mechanism for its generational transmission. The number of native speakers can be determined based on information available in many censuses, without equating the number of speakers with the number of residents in each country, although this is done at times (Moreno-Fernández and Otero 1998). One of the pitfalls of this factor is finding comparable statistics, from a methodological standpoint, for all the languages. Moreover, it would also make a lot of sense to count speakers who use a language as their second or as a foreign one, given that information would be obtained that is directly related to its international utility (Bréton 1979), though it is much tougher to gain access to those statistics.

*Number of countries.* This component includes countries that bestow an official or co-official character on a language. It is one of the factors usually considered fundamental when establishing a language's level of internationality, determining its weight as an instrument of communication for a linguistic-cultural block, and

measuring its potential strength in international organizations (Marqués de Tamarón 1992).

*Human development index.* The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) publishes a complex index each year consisting of three factors: each country's national income, life expectancy at birth, and the level of education of its inhabitants, based on a scale of literacy and average years of schooling. This human development index (HDI) is calculated for all the world's countries in sufficiently comparable conditions.

*Export volume.* Exports are an economic factor directly correlated with a country's income. There are international figures that make information from all countries comparable. We assume that an exporting country has a greater capacity to influence other territories and capture more of their attention, both for purely economic reasons as well as value of any sort –cultural, social, material– that the export might involve.

*Number of translations.* In general, more developed countries create the works that end up triggering greater interest in other countries. As such, those translations have influence in the realm of humanities, as well as social or scientific and technological fields. The intellectual output of the most influential countries is usually translated from the original language to many of the world's other languages. The tally of these translations is done at UNESCO by taking titles translated into account.

*Official status at the UN.* A language's official status in the United Nations system is an indicator of its diplomatic and institutional weight. Although the analysis can be further refined, distinguishing among official languages and working languages, it is likewise true that despite the official status of Spanish, French, Arabic, Russian and Chinese, English is the language of diplomacy par excellence.

Thus, the equation that combines these six components is formulated as follows: the international importance of a language index (LI) is equal to the sum of the product of each component (In) by a specific, predetermined weighted factor (Wn), divided by the sum of the weighting factors (Wn), which always has to be 1. The LI will always be a number between 0 and 1, where the closer it is to 1, the more international importance is attributed to a language.

$$IL = \frac{\sum (In \times Wn)}{\sum Wn}$$

The weighting factor by which each of the equation's six components is multiplied is different, depending on the weight given within the importance index as a whole. This weighting is always a fraction of the unit: the larger that fraction, the more weight the component will have on the final index. In his first proposal in the 1990s, Marqués de Tamarón (1992) set the following weighting factors: *number of speakers*: 0.26; *HDI*: 0.21; *number of countries*: 0.19; *exports*: 0.15; *translations*: 0.12; *official status at the UN*: 0.07. This shows that the equation assigned decreasing weight to its components in the order presented above, with the most determining one (nearly four times so) being the total number of native speakers of a language, compared to being official at the United Nations; the human development index and the number of countries, which give a language official status, are also given considerable weight.

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We trust that it has been made clear that these components or criteria, as well as their weighting, have not been presented – nor did Marqués de Tamarón do so, nor do we want to do so in these pages – as the only ones with merit. Nor are they the ones that provide the greatest methodological guarantees: as Francis Bacon (1605) said, if a man will begin with certainties, he shall end with doubt. The proposed criteria, though, should not be disdained, and if reasonably applied, may shed a certain amount of clarifying light. Obviously there are other factors

tied to the importance of languages. In the case of Spanish, it is evident that over the past two decades, teaching the language in schools has expanded greatly worldwide, to the point of displacing a major language like French in the academic curriculum of many educational systems. This increase in academic demand has implied a proportional requirement to train Spanish teachers and a need for school certifications. And this is due in large part to the progressive improvement of the image of Spanish and Spanish-speaking culture worldwide, associated with the values of creation, dynamism or utility, and based on the six main characteristics proposed by Moreno-Fernández and Otero (1998): relative homogeneity, offering a moderate or weak risk of fragmentation; the potency of the culture in which it is expressed; its official and standardized nature in a wide territory; the compact geography of its domain, which prevents it from being displaced by other languages; its expansive dynamics, especially in demographic terms; and the high degree of internal power of communication of domain along with the low level of diversity (Moreno-Fernández and Otero 2008a; 2008b), which are especially significant when compared to those of other international languages.

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## The international dimension of Spanish

Tamarón's proposal for calculating the international importance of languages in 1990 was revised – or refined – by him in 1992 and 1993, but it did not take on its definitive form until 1995, when Jaime Otero Roth published a paper titled “A new look at the international importance of languages index.” Although it should be noted that he did so under Tamarón's supervision and within a publication that he coordinated, which, for its part, was a major milestone in the study of Spanish as an international language. The joint paper was called *El peso de la lengua española en el mundo* (1995). Otero presents his “new look at the index” as an attempt to reflect in the “most faithful and impartial” way possible on the balance of forces among ten languages, in the understanding that the model

might be applied to any of the world's languages to determine its position in comparison to any other.

The languages that Jaime Otero selected for the analysis of their importance were the same ones that Marqués de Tamarón had chosen; in alphabetical order: Chinese, English, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Russian, Spanish and Swedish. In discussing “major” languages, it seemed unnecessary to justify them when these ten languages were chosen: they are all spoken in important countries that have well-known cultural and historical track records, with clear economic capacity and a stable language community, and in some cases, one with extraordinary breadth. As such, it is much more complicated to explain or justify when other languages do not appear, accepting that a limit has to be placed at some point in order not to make the analysis unmanageable. Among the glaring absences, from an external, impressionist perception, one could point to Portuguese, Arabic, and Swahili, along with Malay, Korean, Indonesian, Bengali, Telugu and Wu. One might be able to argue that Telugu and Wu are only spoken in one region of both countries (India and China), despite each of them having more than 75 million speakers. Bengali, with its 250 million speakers, is only official in one country (Bangladesh), though it is also official in two regions of India. Indonesian, with its 150 million speakers (as a first and second language), and its privileged position of use on Twitter, could also be said only to be official in Indonesia. And Swahili, one might say, being official in three countries (Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania) and the lingua franca in another half dozen, is the native language of fewer than 10 million speakers. Any of the data offered for these languages could be used as an argument to include them in a comparative analysis and even replace certain languages that were considered. As it stands, the important thing on this point is that those in charge of the study of the international importance of languages in the 1990s were fully aware of the contradictions and weaknesses of their decisions, without getting into the evolution that some of these languages have experienced over the past two decades.

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Due to Otero's study being based, in terms of its essential framework, on the theoretical and methodological decisions previously proposed by Tamarón, it is more interesting for our present purposes to comment on some of its technical aspects, to the extent that they are considered in the calculations shown herein. Thus, for the number of speakers in countries where the languages are official, Otero uses data provided by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in its *Britannica Book of the Year* (BBY) for 1995, but adopting the following specific criteria: 1) speakers of a language are counted in territories dependent on others, whenever it is also considered official, as in the case of Puerto Rico in relation to the United States, or, at the time, Hong Kong in relation to the United Kingdom; 2) speakers are counted for the mixed varieties derived from each language, whenever they are official, as in the case of Haitian creole, in relation to French; 3) speakers are not counted for a language in countries where it is not official, as would be the case of English speakers in Spain, or Spanish speakers in the United States; and 4) speakers are counted who may be bilingual with another language, as occurs with the Catalans, the Basque, the Galicians, the Valencians, the Balearic, or the Navarrans in Spain, or the Welsh, Scots, and Irish in the United Kingdom.

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The human development index (HDI) has few problems being integrated into an analysis of the importance of languages, since it deals with figures provided by an external source with updated and sufficiently homogenous data. Apart from having served as the inspiration for calculating the language importance index (LI), the HDI is the basis of a hypothesis arguing that, for an equal number of speakers, languages spoken by people who have higher incomes, education levels, and longer life expectancies at birth will have greater international projection. However, Jaime Otero correctly points out that the HDI is a double-edged sword for English and French, in particular, when the HDI is taken into account for all the countries in which both languages are official, the index's average drops considerably, regardless of how high it may be in specific nations, like the United States or France, respectively. On the other hand, many of the

countries that contribute to the drop in the HDI's average do not have a significant Anglophone or Francophone population, since it usually is not the majority (think of countries in Africa or the Asia-Pacific region, for instance), though it usually is in higher-income sectors in those same countries. These paradoxes led Otero to include the HDI of countries in which English or French, in addition to being official, were standard or national.

The recognition of a language as official in a country or territory is not as simple a matter as it might appear, given the complex circumstances, which can be legal, political, social and even linguistic. Some countries do not have a declaration of official status for their language(s), like the United States; others establish a type of legal status for the languages, like the Philippines. A language can be official, national, historic, heritage, etc., as a country dictates; moreover, the recognized status need not affect a country's inhabitants to the same degree or in the same way. In order to get around such intricate casuistry, Otero gives equal treatment to language labels that in practice function as official, national and standard.

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Exports are taken into account, as Tamarón (1992, 1993) did, as economic indicators, but with the awareness that these were not mere commercial exchanges, but rather mechanisms of cultural influence and foreign projection of an image. In this way, the greater a country's export volume, the smaller its trade balance will indeed be; but the power of expanding its language and projecting its culture will likewise be greater. This analytical criterion is not headache-free, like the fact that the influential capacity of some countries, such as Taiwan, does not correlate directly with its considerable volume of exports, at the same time that it seems to obviate the fact that much of the exports are produced and negotiated directly in English in the Western hemisphere and in the East. Once again, qualitative elements are sacrificed on behalf of objectified quantification.

In terms of translations, Otero takes into account data provided by UNESCO on editorial production, assuming that the desire to translate from one language

implies the quality or interest of the translated work, as well as a certain power of influence over the readers. However, there are also nuances in this field, given that, on the one hand, only those translations of editorial titles are counted, but not other types of texts or products, such as manuals, games or professional documents. On the other hand, English may have a much higher rate of translation than shown, and if it does not, it is because it is presumed to be a language already known in many geographical areas, like the Nordic countries, or in certain social or professional environments. Finally, there is the fact that some governments encourage or directly subsidize the translation of works created in the country for international projection, even though there is no real or justified demand.

Lastly, the criterion of official status at the UN refers to an institutional status that seeks to reflect the importance of a language in the realm of diplomacy. Of course, there are other possibilities in the analysis, like preparing a classification of languages by their greater or lesser presence, not in a system of organizations like the United Nations, but in the set of international organizations, even distinguishing among those that have global or regional reach. Again, the set of specific circumstances would be very rich, since it would also include the possibility of differentiating among the official, work, or “pivot” nature of languages, among all that and the informational use of languages among the organizations’ representatives and employees, and all of them with their citizens. The complexity here also requires setting a limit, which Tamarón and Otero decided to establish, in binary form, on the official status at the UN.

In the study that Jaime Otero completed, as part of his “new look” at the international importance of language index, the use of weighted coefficients applied to each of the quantifying criteria was decisive. First, let us recall the weights that Marqués de Tamarón used, giving greater weight, in this order, to the number of speakers, the HDI, and the number of countries. Otero respects this general criterion, but sets it for all the components at the same amount: 0.25. The resulting criteria are also adjusted, in this case nearly exactly, to the

preceding proposal, with the weights finally set at 0.11 for translations and 0.07 for official status at the UN. Thus, the quantities corresponding to each of the six criteria for each analyzed language are multiplied by a specific factor, weighing the result of the sum according to the weight that is intended to be given to each criterion in the formula set, and definitely for the overall consideration of the international importance of languages.

The sums and multiplications that application of the formula proposed by Marqués de Tamarón provided Jaime Otero with a table where languages were ordered according to the international importance index in 1995 (1995 LI). The table displays in columns, not only the ten languages being studied, but each of the analytical criteria, with the amounts for each language and the result of the LI calculation for each of them, with an indication of the weighted coefficient applied in each case.

<i>Language</i> <i>s</i>	<i>Speakers</i> <i>(millions)</i>	<i>HDI</i>	<i>Countri</i> <i>es</i>	<i>Exports</i> <i>(millions)</i>	<i>Translation</i> <i>s</i>	<i>UN</i>	<i>1995</i> <i>LI</i>
<i>English</i>	489,966,300	0.940	50	1,136,894	32,219	1	0.526
<i>French</i>	98,802,000	0.932	27	319,059	6,732	1	0.417
<i>Spanish</i>	323,180,000	0.822	20	158,507	933	1	0.388
<i>Russian</i>	151,494,000	0.849	2	66,800	6,595	1	0.386
<i>Chinese</i>	790,135,000	0.596	3	173,076	216	1	0.358
<i>German</i>	89,401,000	0.922	6	447,802	5,077	0	0.344
<i>Japanese</i>	123,830,000	0.937	1	360,911	235	0	0.342
<i>Italian</i>	54,414,500	0.912	3	183,809	1,725	0	0.324
<i>Swedish</i>	8,199,000	0.929	2	54,120	1,193	0	0.320
<i>Hindi</i>	354,270,000	0.439	1	20,328	45	0	0.185
<i>Total</i>	2,483,691,800		114	2,921,306	54,970	5	
<b>Weight</b>	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.9	0.9	0.07	

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Table 1.- International importance of languages index (1995) noting criteria, the corresponding amounts, and weighted coefficients. Source: Jaime Otero (1995).

The table shows that English clearly stands out due to its international importance when compared to the other languages examined, although Otero noted that perhaps not as far as one might expect. English has prevailed in all

items analyzed, except in the number of speakers. Spanish, French and Russian are short distances from one another, while Hindi is clearly left behind, despite its demographic mass, as a major international language. Other aspects worthy of comment are the discrete position of Chinese, perhaps penalized by its volume of exports at the time, as well as translations and the international preeminence of French, which had prolonged to the end of the 20th century a status of international renown from the 19th century.

### A new look at the importance of language index

The analytical proposal of both Marqués de Tamarón and Jaime Otero, with its lights and shadows, served to interpret the international language order in terms of ten of its most prominent languages, and to place each linguistic domain at distinct levels of significance from a political, demographic, and economic point of view. Now, 20 years after Otero's analysis, and 25 years after the first reflections by Tamarón, it is natural to ask oneself how the balance of weights has evolved among these languages, and in which place each of them is now located, in accordance with the demographic, economic and educational transformation of the linguistic domains in question. To respond to this curiosity, the possibility is now posed of repeating the LI analysis: the objective is to apply the same methodology used by Jaime Otero in 1995 in order to observe, on the one hand, the evolution of these languages, and on the other, to prove the utility of the analytical procedure in its longitudinal application.

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By proposing this “new look at the language importance index” – recall that Otero referred to it as such in his work in reference to the studies done by Tamarón – we are being respectful of the procedure described above. However, there is one point in which we have taken the liberty of incorporating elements previously ignored, without betraying the methodological foundations: that of selecting the languages to be studied. Tamarón and Otero analyzed the same ten languages

mentioned above, leaving aside others, such as Arabic or Portuguese. The reason argued for disregarding the first one is its dialectalization, and this is in fact a notable point, because the varieties of Arabic present difficulties for their inter-comprehension, like, moreover, happens with Chinese, even beyond the cases of clearly independent languages, like Wu or Cantonese. The reason for not paying attention to Portuguese was less solid or justifiable, since it was less clearly considered already to be “represented by Spanish.” The inclusion of Swedish and Italian was based on their significant number of translations and their elevated HDI, whereas demography was the basis for including Hindi (apart from Urdu), despite few translations and its limited degree of economic and educational development.

In the 2014 update of the international importance of languages index, we have expanded the number of languages to 14 by including Arabic, Portuguese, Malay (Bahasa Melayu), and Korean. Arabic, despite its dialectalization, is treated as a whole, though without losing sight of the major difficulties for treating it as a homogenous language community that values not only its cultural components, but its demographic growth and the interest that it has sparked as a foreign language. Portuguese deserves to be included in the analysis for the simple fact of being the language of a major international community that is demographically significant and exists on four continents, not to mention its historic and cultural values. Malay has been included primarily due to the level of human development, and economic development in particular, of the countries where it is official; even though dialectalization is one of this language’s traits – or, if you prefer, set of varieties – it has not impeded the growth of its presence on social networks and other communication outlets. With respect to Korean, it is clear that its international reach is limited, but the power of its exports, along with its human development index cannot be disregarded in an analysis such as this. As such, our language headcount is broader than the one used in 1995, without this being to the detriment or benefit of any of the other languages analyzed.

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In order to make all methodological and technical processes addressed very clear, a few additional comments must be made about the sources from which the figures used in this new analysis were taken. For number of speakers, numbers were used from an encyclopedia: *Nationalencyklopedin* ([www.ne.se](http://www.ne.se)) organized and financed by the Swedish government. The data provided by this source do not differ very much from those found in another current, oft-consulted source: *Ethnologue* (Lewis, Simons and Fennig 2013), the access to and reliability of which was much more precarious back in 1995. It is true that encyclopedias present some methodological limitations as demolinguistic ends, such as the lack, in the recounts, of criteria originating from the field of linguistics, the sociology of language, or demolinguistics itself. In fact, in other papers (Moreno-Fernández 2015), we have pointed out the convenience of working with language-specific censuses. It is an issue that it is tough to get minimally comparable information for a significant number of languages, given that in the specific analyses of each of them, non-coincidental criteria are usually applied. Encyclopedias, on language matters, do not always respond to absolute rigorous demands, but they are normally valuable in terms of the breadth and scope of these data. The Swedish encyclopedia's materials offer certain guarantees that are sufficiently reliable for our purposes, and additionally can be easily consulted through *Wikipedia*, making it uncomplicated to access information that is relatively broad and up to date. The fact we have not used the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* this time around, as Otero had, does not misrepresent in any way the comparability of the indices obtained, nor does it distort the fact that the number of speakers is rounded off to millions. Given the material impossibility of individually counting the speakers of a language, for multiple reasons, rounding off is a symptom of the greater importance that proportional volumes have over absolute units for this analysis. The tens or hundreds of thousands subsumed in the rounding off would not alter the final indices in a significant way. On the other hand, finally, it should be noted that the figures in this component seek to reflect speakers of a mother tongue or native language, not their second language, and for this reason, the numbers regarding English or

French are lower than in 1995, given that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* did not sufficiently break down this data.

The human development indices are ones published in 2014, referring to complete data from 2013, which are accessible in publications from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In terms of the number of countries, the official recognition of each of the languages has been taken into account, but with the nuances pointed out by Jaime Otero in his study: that is, excluding dependent countries or territories that, despite the official nature, do not have sufficient stability as a language community due to member origin. In any event, this does not cause a difference in the number of territories that might greatly affect the final result of the importance index. Less in doubt are the amounts used in the export column, provided in millions of dollars and compiled directly in *The World Factbook* (CIA 2014). As such, all we had to do is add up the figures for the countries that speak each of the languages. Translations, however, are obtained directly by the languages of origin through a statistical tool on the UNESCO website called the “Index Translationum.” This index, created in 1932, provides a repertoire of the works translated around the world, along with an international bibliography of translations. The total translations equal the works published from 1979 to 2013, thus it is a cumulative number that provides an overview of the circumstances that might temporarily favor or limit translations from a language. Table 2 shows all the figures explained along with the LI for the year 2014.

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<b>Languages</b>	<b>Speakers (millions)</b>	<b>HDI</b>	<b>Countries</b>	<b>Exports (millions)</b>	<b>Translations</b>	<b>UN</b>	<b>2014 LI</b>
<i>English</i>	360	0.667	46	4516567	1264943	1	0.418
<i>Chinese</i>	955	0.764	3	2759500	14065	1	0.352
<i>Spanish</i>	470	0.732	21	1294041	54535	1	0.332
<i>Arabic</i>	295	0.639	24	1902330	12407	1	0.302
<i>Russian</i>	155	0.788	2	530700	103587	1	0.289
<i>French</i>	74	0.536	27	1820359	225745	1	0.273
<i>German</i>	89	0.897	6	2288390	208060	0	0.261
<i>Malay</i>	77	0.842	3	828491	217	0	0.259
<i>Korean</i>	76	0.812	2	663562	4701	0	0.245
<i>Japanese</i>	125	0.911	1	792900	29241	0	0.244
<i>Italian</i>	60	0.897	2	783700	69538	0	0.24
<i>Swedish</i>	9	0.904	2	250300	39852	0	0.233
<i>Portuguese</i>	215	0.554	8	859826	11566	0	0.172
<i>Hindi</i>	310	0.554	1	309100	1512	0	0.165
<b>Total</b>	<b>3270</b>		<b>148</b>	<b>19599766</b>	<b>2039969</b>		
<b>Weight</b>	<b>0.25</b>	<b>0.25</b>	<b>0.25</b>	<b>0.09</b>	<b>0.09</b>	<b>0.07</b>	

Table 2.- International importance of languages index (2014) showing criteria, the corresponding figures, and weighting coefficients. Prepared by the autor

The indices calculated using 2014 data reveal a few facts worth mentioning. In the first place, the languages studied constitute the communication instrument of nearly 46 percent of humanity, assuming, along with the United States Census Bureau, that since March of 2012, there are more than seven billion human beings. We are thus working with a very representative group of the world's languages. On the other hand, attention is being paid to the languages of 148 countries, a data point equal to more than 75 percent of the 195 countries or states that today have attained international recognition. Furthermore, our list includes the official languages of practically all the world's largest exporting countries, meaning that very few countries with export capacity have been left out. The translations column includes the world's eight most translated countries from recent decades: English, French, German, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Swedish and Japanese.

The LI shows the English language's global leadership, followed at a distance of less than one tenth by Chinese and Spanish. This ranking seems to reflect the

subjective perception internationally that the most significant languages in the world at this time, are in fact English, Chinese, and Spanish, as can be seen through foreign-language programs at numerous educational centers, where Chinese has grown strikingly over the past few years, though the number of foreign students has yet to exceed Spanish or French. In 2010, for instance, Chinese was only the eighth language by students enrolled in foreign languages at universities in the United States (Furman, Goldberg, Lusin 2010). On the other hand, both French and Portuguese – languages of culture and important international tradition – have been penalized by the discrete human development index of its speaking communities, as well as by demographic limitations, in the specific case of French. The set of romance languages analyzed covers a total of 824 million native speakers, to which nearly 25 million Romanian speakers could be added, which would bring this aggregate close, without taking into account second-language speakers, to the one billion speakers of Latin languages that Philippe Rossillon (1983) announced for the year 2000. However, the tiny distance among the eight languages in question should be noted, those with medium indices, between 0.28 and 0.23 are separated by five-tenths of a point, and they keep quite a distance from the last two languages in this analysis: Portuguese and Hindi. This last language, which is spoken of as one of the possible languages of the future (though its conjunction with Urdu is controversial), has a relatively poor outlook because it does not do well in five of the six criteria analyzed. The economy, education, and culture of India would have to improve a lot for Hindi, its main (albeit not only language, and which is also in competition with English), to become a language of international importance.

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A comparison of the indices obtained in 1995 and 2014 also reveals processes of great interest. One of them is the shortening gap between the language of greatest importance, English, and the second language, as well as, by extension, the other languages analyzed, including Hindi, which is also catching up. This drop in English's relative amounts should come as no surprise, however, since it has been accompanied by an improvement in the other languages' indices.

Firstly, because the amounts for each of English’s components have also leveled off and shrunk proportionally (though not in absolute numbers), from demography to the human development index. In the case of the HDI, the Anglophone world has been hurt by the growing gap between rich countries and poor ones, which ends up negatively impacting the Anglophone community as a whole, as likewise occurs with the Francophone community. Secondly, because this decline in the primacy or distinction of English is also seen elsewhere, like the evolution of languages on the Internet and social networks. In 2008, 28.9 percent of Internet users used English and 14.7 percent used Chinese. By 2012, the proportion of users in English was 26.8 percent and 24.2 percent in Chinese (Cervantes Institute 2012). It can be assumed that this all leads, on one hand, to a proportional shift in spaces that more countries will progressively fill, using different languages. On the other hand, there is a rebalancing of the relative regional weight that two languages in particular have been acquiring: Spanish for the Western hemisphere, and Chinese for the Eastern hemisphere. To the extent that certain communication needs are met by these general or regional languages, as international ones, it is not as necessary for these needs to be met by English.

<i>Languages</i>	<i>1995 LI</i>	<i>2014 LI</i>
<i>English</i>	0.526	0.425
<i>Chinese</i>	0.358	0.356
<i>Spanish</i>	0.388	0.335
<i>Arabic</i>	-	0.301
<i>Russian</i>	0.386	0.292
<i>French</i>	0.417	0.276
<i>German</i>	0.344	0.262
<i>Malay</i>	-	0.259
<i>Korean</i>	-	0.245
<i>Japanese</i>	0.342	0.244
<i>Italian</i>	0.324	0.24
<i>Swedish</i>	0.32	0.23
<i>Portuguese</i>	-	0.175
<i>Hindi</i>	0.185	0.165

Table 3.- Comparison of the LI from 1995 and 2014.

A comparative analysis of the LI from 1995 and 2014 yields other data that cannot be overlooked. One of them is the presence of Arabic among the languages of greatest international importance; its strong dialectalization merits repeating, but it by no means keeps it from demonstrating its weight as a linguistic/cultural entity, backed by the Muslim religion. As such, the languages of greatest international importance would line up nicely with those officially recognized in the United Nations system. Another relevant element is the weight of Korean, especially in comparison to Japanese, though both languages have a similar profile as ones used in very limited territories, but with a major capacity for exports and good HDI.

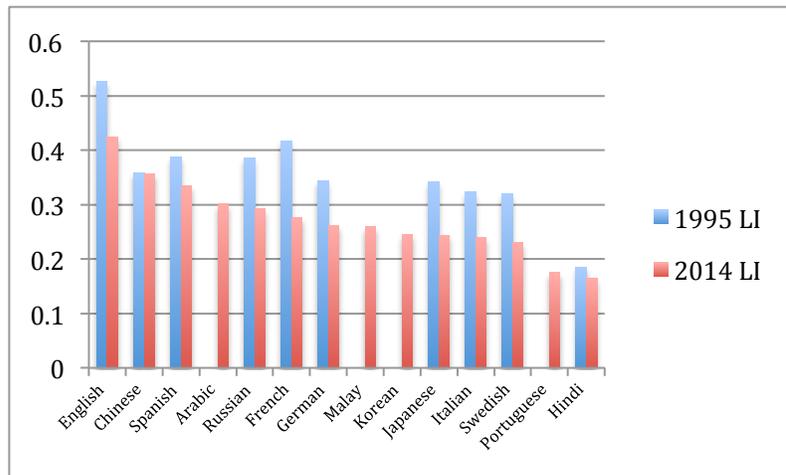


Chart 1.- Comparison of the LI from 1995 and 2014. Prepared by the author.

However, there is one fact that stands out among the rest in relation to the major languages of culture: French falling from second to sixth due to the drop in its importance index. French, the language of diplomacy, a standard bearer in the world's educational systems, the official and working language of numerous international bodies, the official language of over 25 countries, one of the two major trans-European languages (along with German), and still outstanding due to the number of translations with it as a language of origin, has seen how its international weight has fallen over the past 20 years. These criteria seem to point to economic reasons and the human development of the Francophone

countries as the basis of this fade internationally (Massart-Piérard 2007). However, the fact cannot be ignored that communication needs, when covered by certain languages, are not as imperative in the rest. As such, we interpret that the rise of Chinese, Spanish, and Arabic are contributing to the displacement of French, which is losing presence in politics, education and international relations.

## The revised index

The comment just made about French might lead more than one reader to pose the following question: How is it possible that a language like Chinese, official in only three countries (China, Taiwan and Singapore), has so much more international importance than French, which is official in 27 countries, in addition to being a standard-bearer and used as a second, foreign language in so many other places? If we do not wish to resort to arguments of a political, or in general, qualitative nature, we might argue that the problem resides in the mechanism used for the LI calculation. Something must be wrong in the formula or its components for the result to seemingly contravene the logic of internationality. However, given that the quantitative analysis of the importance of languages is what underlies this study, we might assume that the problem is not so much in the mathematical artifice itself, but in the way in which its components are treated.

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If one accepts that the components considered for calculating importance are useful, then perhaps what ought to be modified, in order to respond to this question, is the relative weight given to each criterion; that is, the amounts used as weighting factors or coefficients. Recall that the number of speakers, HDI and number of countries respectively were given a weight of 0.25; while exports and translations were multiplied by 0.9, and official status at the UN by 0.07. If these proportions were to be modified, we see what happens if more relative weight is given to the number of countries where each language is official and the weight

for the number of speakers is not changed. It is assumed that Chinese would be penalized for not being official in more than three countries and the importance of being official would be recognized in many more. Thus, we reassigned the following coefficients: number of speakers: 0.15 and number of countries: 0.35, while maintaining the rest of the weights. The result is shown in Table 4 below.

<i>Languages</i>	<i>Modified 2014 LI</i>
<i>English</i>	0.438
<i>Spanish</i>	0.333
<i>Chinese</i>	0.325
<i>Arabic</i>	0.309
<i>French</i>	0.289
<i>Russian</i>	0.285
<i>German</i>	0.262
<i>Japanese</i>	0.24
<i>Italian</i>	0.238
<i>Swedish</i>	0.234
<i>Malay</i>	0.224
<i>Korean</i>	0.214
<i>Portuguese</i>	0.173
<i>Hindi</i>	0.156

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Table 4.- Modified 2014 IL. Weights: number of speakers: 0.15; HDI: 0.25; number of countries: 0.35; exports: 0.9; translations; 0.9; official status at the UN: 0.07.

First of all, it should be made clear that the weights assigned are interrelated, in the sense that modifying one of them necessarily modifies the rest, all, some or at least one of them. Thus they are not independent attributions, given that the LI calculation provides a unit index. Once this is taken into consideration, one finds that the new result, the new look at the international index of languages, shows: 1) an increase in English's distance from the rest of the languages; 2) French passing Russian; 3) a drop in Malay and Korean; and 4) perhaps most striking, Spanish moving into second place in international importance, after English, while Mandarin Chinese would occupy third. This is likely the most generalized subjective perception around the world: a Google search of the terms "*lenguas del futuro*" and "languages for the future" provides dozens of results in which

English, Chinese, Arabic, and of course, Spanish, repeatedly appear, with sporadic mentions of French, mainly on Anglophone pages, as relevant languages. With a similar focus, the British Council, in its study of languages needed for the future of the United Kingdom, placed in the first four spots of its particular ranking, given English, by default, and in this order: Spanish, Arabic, French and Chinese (Tinsley *et al.*, 2013).

## Conclusion

Analyzing the international importance of languages has enabled us to repeat a methodology proposed over two decades ago and to test it in a longitudinal study. The result can be deemed satisfactory, given that the criteria used and the way in which they are combined remained sufficiently consistent, and do not present any contradictions with other quantitative indicators nor inconsistencies with qualitative elements of contemporary reality. This soundness does not hide the methodology's weaknesses, nor exempt it from the responsibility of considering factors or variables other than those used in this study. The mere fact of respecting a methodology's essence, even with the required updates, and applying it to new data, bestows fortitude and interest on those studies done in the past and the work done herein.

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The related data and their political assessment as a whole, from a diachronic and synchronic perspective, enable one to conclude that in the present, and at least the immediate future, the trans-European languages are English, French, and German, along with Russian, *de facto*, in the medium term; the trans-American languages are English and Spanish; the African languages are English and French; the trans-Asiatic languages are English and Chinese; and the international languages quintessentially are English, Mandarin Chinese, and Spanish, for business, education, international relations, and popular culture, along with French. And this leads to the conclusion that English is the only

language that seems to merit classification as global (Maurais and Morris, 2003), as its historic transformation has been anticipating for some decades now, though its reach has not always been produced in such an amiable, natural way as defended by historian David Northrup (2013). The fact is that whether voluntarily, spontaneously, or by force, English has expanded its dominion over the globe; not as native knowledge, where Spanish and Chinese outpace it, but rather in its use as a second, foreign language.

On the other hand, our quantitative study shows that the first six languages in international importance are precisely those that enjoy official status within the United Nations system. Perhaps for that reason, the fact that Spanish is not recognized as a working language in the UN is even more striking, whereas French is, which ranks fifth or sixth on our scales, when in addition there is a significant external demand for information and services in Spanish, as David Fernández Vítóres (2014) showed in his analysis of Spanish in the United Nations system.

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In terms of the parallels between the English-speaking world and the Spanish-speaking one, there are multiple, relevant points of contact: they are two international linguistic realms with major communities who inherited decolonization processes and have a considerable capacity to promote their cultural patterns, and a remarkable acceptance of their languages for learning and use in very diverse communicative environments (Rodríguez-Ponga 1998; Moreno-Fernández 2011). The coexistence of English and Spanish can be interpreted from an eco-linguistic approach or satellite model, where English would occupy a hypercentral position with Spanish in its a secondary orbit, coexisting with dozens of central and peripheral languages. Using this interpretation, Spanish speakers have to develop an awareness of their international responsibility, for the repercussions their actions may have on the Western linguistic ecosystem, especially within a scenario of progressive international consolidation of those that seem destined to become the five major

international languages over the next few decades: presently, English, Spanish and Mandarin Chinese; and in the medium term, Arabic and Hindi.

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Dedicated to Jaime Otero,  
who left us too soon.

Francisco Moreno-Fernández  
Cervantes Institute at Harvard University

