



On the economic importance of the Spanish language

Based on several indicators and available data, the author demonstrates the potentiality of the Spanish language for a sustainable economic development.

The Spanish language has become the second most spoken language in the world in terms of number of native speakers, behind Mandarin Chinese; and is one of the most geographically extended¹. According to data from the Instituto Cervantes, today there are about 441 million people worldwide speak Spanish 377 million of which are Spanish speakers from countries where Spanish is the official language and 64 million are Spanish speakers from countries where it is not. Only in the European context, (UE-27), 75 million people are said to use Spanish, 60% of which are native and the remaining 40% use it as a second language, among which students of Spanish as a second language and non native speakers. In the USA, it is estimated that there are about 46 million Spanish speakers and it is also estimated that this number will reach 132 by the year 2050.

Since the beginning of the 20th century the Spanish language has quickly expanded and will surely continue during the 21st century thanks to social, cultural, historic, economic and technological factors. Beyond quantitative demographic data, language is a powerful international communication tool that promotes professional mobility, employment opportunities of those who speak and study it and business relations. This is the reason why, the Brazilian government for example, has passed the so-called Law on Spanish in 2005, that obliges state secondary education continuation schools in the country to teach Spanish as a subject. Also in China, it has been identified a fast and significant demand, which in these moments is not adequately satisfied, a demand that substantially transcends the scope of state-approved education and affects several sectors of the civil society. Another tendency that is being observed at international level is the revival of the Spanish language by third generations in Spanish

¹ It is official language in Spain and 19 Latin American and Caribbean countries; and it is the native language (total or partially) in some areas of the USA as well as in countries like the Philippines, Equatorial Guinea, Northern areas of Morocco or in the Spanish-Jewish community.





speaking countries (the Philippines, the North of Morocco) as well as in countries with a strong tradition of reception of immigrants from Spanish speaking countries. In short, there is an increase of Hispanics² but also of “Hispanic productivity”³ which, in part is due to the fast increase of the political and economic power of Spain in the world⁴.

On the other hand, language is the main tool for disseminating culture and its creation. Culture benefits from the fact that Spanish language is a universal language since it increases the number of speakers (thus that of the audience) and that of the authors⁵. Cultural products are created with language but it also allows the translation of such products from their original language, thus promoting the internationalization of the culture. The market of translation from Spanish is shaped by works created in other languages and on demand in Spanish speaking countries as well as the translation of works created in Spanish and consumed in Spanish speaking countries.

If language promotes the dissemination of our culture, teaching and ICT favor the expansion of the knowledge of Spanish while being clearly economic growth sectors. According to data from the Instituto Cervantes, about 14 million people learn Spanish worldwide and some 180.000 students visit Spain year to learn and practice the language. And there are about 83 countries where Spanish is studied without being the official language. The business of teaching Spanish as a foreign language in our country generates a balance of about 370 million Euros turnover and about 6,000 jobs which double in summer⁶. A potentiality the rest of the education system should take advantage of in order to attract foreign students for our complete educational offer, something which is partly happening. Spain is the EU country member that receives most students from the Erasmus program, 17% of the total and, for the first time, some of our business schools are among the world’s 25 best schools⁷.

Beyond our borders, Spanish teaching (as a second language) is also booming. In the EU, Spanish is taught mainly in senior high school (level 3 of the ISCE⁸). In most countries, the percentage of Spanish

² As “afición al estudio de las lenguas, literaturas o cultura hispánicas” (definition by the RAE).

³ Learning Spanish for practical reasons.

⁴ Spanish appears as an official language in the main forums and international organizations (UN, UNESCO, EU, MERCASUR, others).

⁵ Manuel Santos Redondo (coord.), “Economía de las industrias culturales en español”, Ariel y Fundación Telefónica, 2011.

⁶ ICEX (2007) “La internacionalización de las industrias culturales españolas”.

⁷ The Global MBA Rankings 2011 includes IE, Iese y Esade Business Schools among the 25 best schools worldwide. This issue favors the immersion of foreign students who come to study at these Business Schools in the Spanish culture and language.

⁸ International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED-97)





students is below 20%, being 15,4% the European average in secondary schools But, some countries are well above this average, like France, where 62,4% of secondary school students have chosen Spanish as a second language, Sweden with 40,6% and Denmark with 27,9%. In the United States, the number of students registered for Spanish language at universities has grown sharply in the last years, going from 656,590 registered students in 1998 to 822, 985 in 2006 (which accounts for a 25% increase)⁹.

Another powerful instrument for the dissemination of our language and culture is the TIC. Digital revolution is changing the way culture is consumed and is permitting, taking advantage of the expansion of Spanish, to export culture, education and knowledge from our corporations and universities. Spanish language is the third mostly used language on the Internet with 164, 9 million users (this accounts for 7.8% of the total Internet users worldwide)¹⁰. The number of Internet users in Spanish has grown by 807.4% between the year 2000 and 2011 although the penetration ratio of the Internet among all Spanish speakers still stands at 39%.

All these figures demonstrate the ability of the Spanish language to create wealth and its nature as a first-rate strategic asset. This evidence has led several authors to try and approach the economic value of the Spanish language. But, el estimate of the value of the Spanish language is complex since there are many factors and many production branches that depend on language to develop their activity.

The weight of the language is clearly apparent in industrial cultures but it also contributes to other activities which are normally not included in the directory of cultural industries like education, computer science, tourism, telecommunications or R&D. According to Girón and Cañada (2009)¹¹, the economic value of the Spanish language accounts for about 15.6% of the GDP, with a 40% growth between 2001 and 2007 and generates about 3.5 million jobs.

⁹ Data from the Instituto Cervantes

¹⁰ Ahead and far away are the English language with 565.0 million speakers and Chinese with 509.9 million.

¹¹ Girón, Francisco Javier and Cañada, Agustín (2009), "Las cuentas del español". Ariel-Fundación Telefónica, Madrid





Contribution of Spanish to the GDP and employment

Year	% of GDP	GDP in mill. €	% employmt.	Employt. (thousands)
2000	14.6	63,842.4	15.0	2,571.0
2001	14.8	69,675.9	15.1	2,681.9
2002	15.0	75,614.9	15.2	2,759.8
2003	15.1	81,812.0	15.4	2,870.8
2004	15.2	88,389.0	15.6	3,017.6
2005	15.3	96,024.2	15.8	3,181.5
2006	15.4	104,413.6	16.0	3,351.7
2007	15.6	112,968.3	16.2	3,489.4

Source: Fundación Ideas based on data from Girón and Cañada (2009)

In short, the prospects of the Spanish language are promising considering two main undisputable assets: the strength and prominent role of Spain as a tourist destination and its appealing cultural potentiality as well as that of the ICT. All this will contribute to the development of the language and the productive activities related to it and will represent an important potentiality to increase production and employment in a sector relevant for the recovery of the economic growth and the change of productive model we need in Spain.

