

# HCIAS

Working Papers on Ibero-America

No. 14 | July 2024

## Spanish in Europe Today: Social Dynamics, Linguistic Spaces and Basis for Political Action

Óscar Loureda  
Universität Heidelberg



HC  
IAS

HEIDELBERG  
CENTER FOR  
IBERO-AMERICAN  
STUDIES



UNIVERSITÄTS-  
BIBLIOTHEK  
HEIDELBERG

# Spanish in Europe Today: Social Dynamics, Linguistic Spaces and Basis for Political Action\*

Óscar Loureda

Professor of Ibero-American Linguistics, Communication, and Translation Studies, Heidelberg Center for Ibero-American Studies (HCIAS), Heidelberg University, Germany

**Abstract:** The following pages quantify the Spanish-speaking population of Europe, describe its main features and show its most important dynamics, which are explained by the vitality of migratory flows and by the effects of the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language. A population study of Spanish speakers in Europe is presented, which allows us to approach the social and linguistic reality of Spanish on that continent and to plan policies in terms of culture, education and promotion of the language on an international level.

**Keywords:** Spanish language, Spanish-speaking migration, demolinguistics, Spanish as a heritage language, Spanish as a foreign language.

DOI: 10.48629/hcias.2024.1.106012

## 1. Introduction

Spanish is not a language exclusive to the Spanish-speaking states because it is clear that its knowledge and use have spread beyond their borders. This process of internationalisation is based on factors that have not been imposed, such as cultural prestige, language teaching, the intensification of supranational contacts, migratory flows and the population's virtual communication, all factors derived from a more interconnected society. These factors also include the interventions abroad of Spanish-speaking countries in areas such as culture, education and migration. Its evaluation must be based on knowledge of the realities in which Spanish is spoken.

The Spanish-speaking community in Europe is relatively unknown, which is partly due to the complexity of a continent made up of almost fifty fully recognised countries inhabited by more

than 710 million people and made up of diverse cultural, linguistic and social spaces. This paucity of knowledge contrasts with the growing research on Asia (Lynch 2019; Méndez Santos and Galindo Merino 2022) and the already extensive information on the United States, the other major space in which Spanish develops outside Ibero-America (Hernández and Moreno Fernández 2018). To correct this information deficit, this article quantifies the number of Spanish speakers in Europe and distinguishes different demographic and linguistic profiles within this group (§ 1), describes the educational and migratory dynamics behind the formation and expansion of the group (§§ 2–3) and, finally, makes recommendations for interventions abroad in culture, education and migration (§ 4).

## 2. The social and linguistic reality of Spanish in Europe

This working paper is a translation of Loureda, Óscar (2023): "El Español De Europa Hoy: Dinámicas Sociales, Espacios Lingüísticos y bases para la actuación política". In Román, Clara & González, José Javier (eds.): Informe sobre el estado de la cultura en España. La presencia cultural de España en Europa (pp.17-35). Fundación Alternativas.

**E-mail address**

**Óscar Loureda:** oscar.loureda@uni-heidelberg.de

To understand the context in which Spanish is used in European societies, there are several options.<sup>1</sup> One of them consists of quantifying the potential users of the Spanish language and explaining how this community has been formed. Both tasks are the subject of linguistic demography or demolinguistics. A demolinguistic study looks at the composition, structure and dynamics of a population characterised by the knowledge or use of a language or variety (Moreno Fernández 2014, 2023). Among many other possible applications, demolinguistic studies are essential for the analysis of how spaces of reception and circulation of cultures are created, how the study of a language progresses abroad and under what conditions intergenerational linguistic transmission by migrants speaking a given language takes place.

Quantifying, describing and explaining the social and linguistic reality of Spanish in Europe is no easy task. Linguistic information is often not part of censuses or official statistics and when it does exist it is often fragmentary. It is also not easy to conduct territory-wide studies or cross-country analyses due to the how much of the data is processed differently. The task is somewhat daunting if, in addition to quantifying speaker populations, the aim is to determine their communicative ability according to their socio-demographic profiles. The only way to fill out the difficult puzzle described above is to combine different kinds of statistical sources from different places to reconstruct a picture as close as possible to Spanish's true situation (Álvarez Mella, Blattner and Gómez-Pavón Durán 2023; Loureda, Álvarez Mella and Blattner 2021; Loureda, Gutiérrez, Álvarez Mella and Blattner 2022). Scientific grumbling about the lack of a European linguistic and language use census are not new, but remain unheeded (most recently in Adler 2020; Leeman 2023).

With the available data it is possible to estimate that the group of potential users of Spanish in

Europe is almost 90 million people, slightly less than 15% of the world's Spanish-speaking community, 596 million in round numbers (Instituto Cervantes 2022).<sup>2</sup> Within this group, two large groups can be discerned: those residing in Spain and those residing in other European countries, which is the specific topic studied by this paper.

Unlike the estimates for Spain—because there is some data on knowledge and use of the language in national and regional surveys (Spanish National Statistical Institute (INE) 2016, 2021)—calculating the potential users of Spanish in the rest of the continent is not a simple matter either from a demographic point of view or from the point of view of the possible assessment of the speakers' command of Spanish. According to recent figures, there are more than 42 million Spanish speakers in Europe, of which the majority, some 31 million, are non-native (Instituto Cervantes 2022, 9–10) and more than eight are still learning<sup>3</sup> (ibid, 14–15).

Among the 42 million Spanish speakers in Europe, there is a large group of 5.4 million people with a migrant background (Loureda, Gutiérrez, Álvarez Mella and Blattner 2022). As a result, at least 36.6 million European citizens have learnt Spanish as part of the education system and are able to communicate in Spanish with varying degrees of proficiency. This amount of people makes it worth considering Spanish-speaking migrations and the presence of Spanish in educational systems in detail and one-by-one.

The macro-structural data indicated above allows for an initial reflection. In Europe, the majority of native speakers are people with a migrant background, especially first-generation. It is clear that although they are the great demolinguistic driving force behind Spanish, the formal educational systems and their alternatives (language schools, schools for adults, Spanish language programmes abroad,

Region or country of residence	Potential users of Spanish	Native language	Limited Proficiency	Beginners
Spain	47,474,649	43,273,009	4,071,640	130,000
Rest of Europe	42,239,525	2,778,741	31,186,414	8,274,370
Total	89,714,174	46,051,750	35,258.054	8,404,370

Table 1. Europe and its Spanish speakers: place of residence and language proficiency (2022)  
Sources: prepared by the author based on national, Eurostat, UN and Instituto Cervantes data (2022)

assistantships, language academies, etc.) are not yet in a position to enable most students to achieve native proficiency in the language. The current dynamics are good for increasing the number of Spanish speakers, but they are not yet optimal for training Spanish speakers with a greater command of the language that will enable them to face the challenges of emerging professions. The goal of a significant number of European citizens acquiring advanced levels of Spanish is far from being realised due to the limited presence of Spanish in educational systems and the dire lack of coordination of the educational offering abroad (Fernández González, Fernández Vitores, Gutiérrez Rivilla and Serrano Avilés 2023; Lamo de Espinosa and Badillo 2021). This is supported by the following analysis.

### 3. Spanish-speaking migration in Europe

Among the Spanish speakers with a migrant background residing in Europe there are very different profiles: first-generation migrants, people from Spanish-speaking countries who have acquired European nationality, descendants of immigrants and European immigrants who have returned after a migration experience in Latin American countries. Their quantification can be seen in Table 2; the keys to interpret this data are given immediately below.

**Europe is a priority destination for Spanish-speaking migration.** There are 1.6 million people from Spanish-speaking Latin American countries living in Europe (excluding Spain). This is a significant group despite its apparently modest size: these Spanish speakers account for only 5% of the Old Continent’s migration, but Europe is their first global destination if they do not move to the United States or between countries in Ibero-America (Loureda, Gutiérrez, Álvarez Mella and Blattner 2022). One can reasonably assume that their proficiency, regardless of education level, is equivalent to that of a native speaker because they acquired Spanish as a child in interactions with their family and members of a community or through the various possibilities offered by national educational systems. The attribution of a native command of the Spanish language to these people is made regardless of whether Spanish is their mother tongue or even their main language of use, as in the case of bilingual migrants from autonomous communities in Spain or from non-monolingual countries in Latin America.

Although the differences have tended to narrow over the last five years, more than half of this Spanish-speaking migration in Europe comes from Spain: 54%, some 900,000 people. This is due not only to geographical proximity, which reduces the costs of the decision to move, but also to the ease of population movement and citizens’ rights, which minimises risks (Alonso

<b>Total</b>	<b>5,428,170</b>
Spanish-speaking immigrants	1,655,109
Descendants of Spanish-speaking immigrants	1,151,462
Spanish-speaking immigrants naturalised in Europe (excluding Spain)	786,599
European migrants returning from Spanish-speaking countries	1,835,000

Table 2. Spanish-speaking groups in Europe (2020)

Source: prepared by the author based on Eurostat (2023a) and INE (2022) data

and Gutiérrez 2010; García Delgado, Alonso and Jiménez 2012). The majority of Latin American migrants come from Peru, Colombia and Ecuador. Ninety per cent of transatlantic immigration comes from nine countries, including Mexico, Chile, Argentina, the Dominican Republic, Cuba and Venezuela. If we consider the relationship between origin and destination, we see that countries such as France, Germany and the United Kingdom show a high degree of diversity in the composition of the group of migrants, while others show a high concentration of origins, as is very evident in Italy, where 68% of Peruvian nationals in Europe, 73% of Ecuadorian nationals, 53% of Dominican nationals and 45% of Cuban nationals reside.

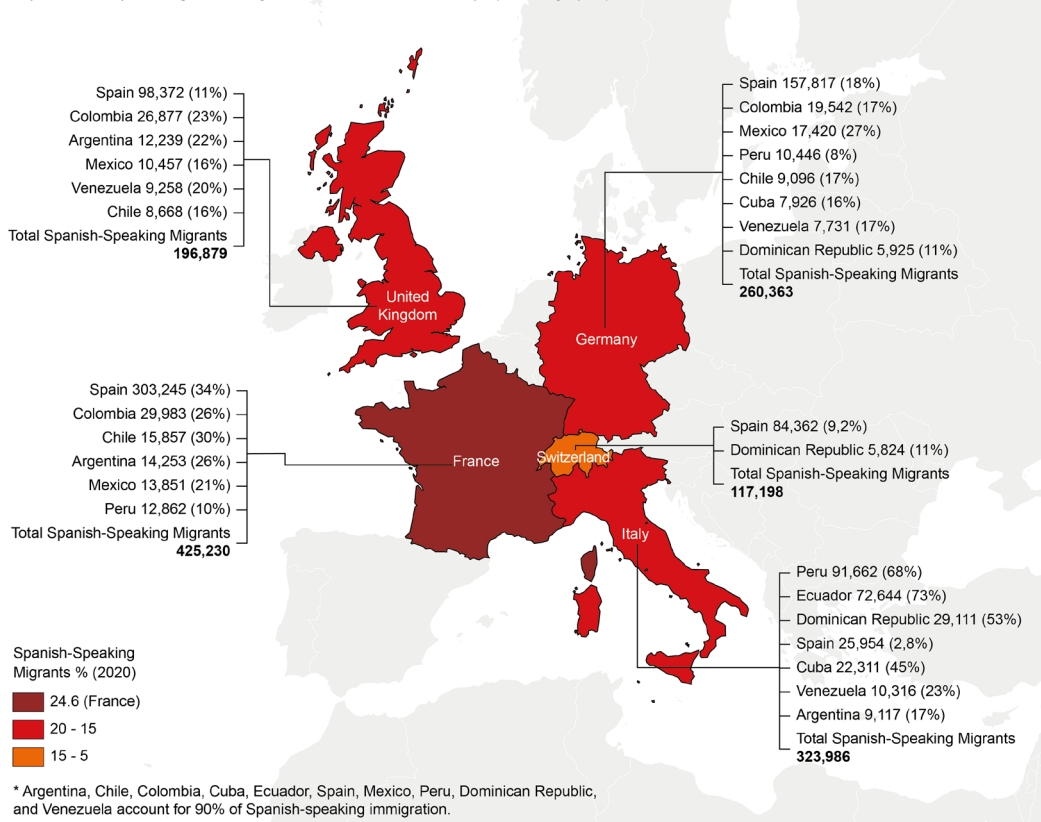
**Spanish-speaking migration in Europe presents a high territorial concentration** because three out of four people reside in the four biggest countries from a population, political and economic point of view: the main destination is France (26%), followed by Italy (20%), Germany (16%) and the United Kingdom (12%) (Bayona-i-Carrasco, Pujadas Rúbies and Avila Tàpies 2018; Loureda, Moreno Fernández, Álvarez Mella and Scheffler 2021). Switzerland is also a relevant destination (7% of migration), both currently and in the recent past (Kabatek, Henriques Pestana, Blattner and Defrance 2022). The importance of this concentration is even more significant when considering large urban centres: five cities with a population of more than 500,000 (Milan, London,

Paris, Berlin and Zurich) attract 30% of Spanish-speaking migration.

More than half of Spanish-speaking migrants live in countries where the official language is a Romance language. French is the language Spanish-speaking migrants are most likely to come into contact with (30%), followed by Italian (almost 20%). Germanic languages constitute the second area of contact: 17% of Spanish-speaking immigrants reside in the United Kingdom and 15% in Germany, to which we should be add 2.7% residing in German-speaking Switzerland (Loureda, Moreno Fernández, Álvarez Mella and Scheffler 2021; Kabatek, Henriques, Blattner and Defrance 2022). This means that the majority of Spanish-speaking immigrants live in places where they can use Spanish with other people who have the same linguistic origin or with large groups of population from their same country, can communicate in English or can communicate in languages from the same family as Spanish. This is not a large number of languages in contact, languages which are, moreover, present in the educational systems of Spanish-speaking countries, especially Spain. This context should be used as an opportunity for partnership policy measures to strengthen the Spanish language skills of the descendants of migration and the use of several languages in the first generation of migrants, which would facilitate their personal development and increase their professional options.

### Main Destinations of Spanish-Speaking Migrants by Country of Origin\*

In parentheses, percentage of the origin in relation to the total in Europe (excluding Spain)



Map 1: Concentration of Spanish-speaking migration in Europe (excluding Spain) and main origin-destination relationships

Source: prepared by the author based on national, Eurostat, UN and Instituto Cervantes data (2022)

**The Spanish-speaking migrant base is vital for the development of Spanish culture and language.** Spanish-speaking migration constitutes the immediate presence in Europe of the cultures and societies of origin, is responsible for its demographic growth and is a substratum that drives the study of Spanish among non-Spanish speakers. The latter can be seen in the fact that the main destinations of Spanish-speaking immigration to Europe coincide with the places with the most Spanish learners. According to estimates by the Instituto Cervantes (2022), 84% (7,080,306) of Spanish learners in Europe

in 2020 will be in France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, countries which, as indicated, account for 3/4 of Spanish-speaking immigrants. These reasons are sufficient to demand that the cultural and educational policies of Ibero-American countries support this group—and not just one part, the Spanish part—with specific and more coordinated actions.

**Spanish-speaking descendants tend to have a limited command of Spanish.** In Europe, at least 1.1 million descendants of Spanish-speaking immigrants can be assumed to exist,

a conservative estimate based on demographic birth data (Loureda, Gutiérrez, Alvarez Mella and Blattner 2022, Eurostat 2023a). When the acquired language, be it the family's or part of the family's language, is not the vehicular or predominant language in a given country, the phenomenon of heritage languages appears. This is not a special kind of language, but a way of acquiring and using a language from one's background in which oral interaction skills are equal to those of native speakers but in which written interaction skills do not develop or develop later in school contexts. The heritage language assumes different functions as an instrument of family communication, a mark of one's origins or as cultural identity, which coexists with the acquisition of the majority or vehicular language in the social environment in which it develops (Potowski 2018; Montrul and Polinsky 2021; Barley, Li and Preston 2022).

The group of speakers of Spanish as a heritage language is young because they are mostly descendants of migrants who arrived in Europe in the last ten years: in Germany, for example, 46% of second-generation descendants are under 18, a percentage that rises to 65% among descendants of Latin American immigration. These people usually learn Spanish at an early age, at home and in the family environment, and only study it at school as a foreign language, usually starting when they are 14 or 16 because Spanish, except in certain countries (France, some German states and Portugal, for example), is mostly the third or fourth foreign language of choice in secondary school. As a result, language skills develop late at best and with certain limitations.

There are specific educational projects to promote the learning of Spanish among migrants. These include Spanish sections, European schools and Aulas de Lengua y Cultura Españolas (Spanish Language and Culture Classrooms, or ALCE): Spanish sections are programmes that offer a

bilingual track in which Spanish is, in addition to being a subject, the vehicular language for certain subjects, especially in the humanities or social sciences; European schools, created jointly by Spain and the governments of EU member states, may include bilingual sections in which most subjects at the kindergarten and primary stages are taught in Spanish; and ALCE consist of complementary language and culture classes at different levels for descendants of Spanish emigrants.

The value of these actions is unquestionable, as is their obvious room for improvement. For example, the ALCE, specifically aimed at heritage speakers, are too limited. According to estimates by Loureda, Moreno Fernández, Álvarez Mella and Scheffler (2021) for Germany, the ALCE programme covers less than 15% of the population of Spanish-speaking migrant descent in the country; Kabatek, Henriques, Blattner and Defrance (2022) found that in Switzerland, the country with the largest presence of the programme in the world, there were under 4,500 students. Spanish sections around the world teach 15,000 students, a figure that can be better understood comparatively: similar programmes by France have 522 French schools in 139 countries teaching 370,000 students (France Diplomacy 2023).

In short, the offering for all Spanish speakers and their descendants in general is not differentiated from Spanish as a foreign language, and how it is distributed geographically is highly random and in many cases uncoordinated with local educational systems. It is also aimed exclusively at people of Spanish origin, excluding more than 45% of the potential target group and substantially limiting the growth of Spanish speakers in Europe, especially those with the greatest ability to use the language.

To correct the current weaknesses, Spanish language conservation policies are needed that

respond to the countries' migratory realities, which, incidentally, we are still largely ignorant of. A first way of approaching the situation of these speakers is to assume favourable and unfavourable spaces based on the combination of several criteria: the use of Spanish as a language to communicate within the family, the characteristics of the social and linguistic environments, the position of Spanish in the educational system and the existence of specific educational projects for descendants of migrants (Moreno-Fernández and Loureda 2023; Loureda, Moreno-Fernández and Álvarez Mella 2023; Álvarez Mella, Blattner and Gómez-Pavón Durán 2023). The most favourable space is provided by the positive combination of these criteria, as is paradigmatically the case in Germany (Loureda, Álvarez Mella and Blattner 2021, 73–77). Countries with comparable structures are assigned an intergenerational maintenance rate of 30%. The other countries, with more precarious educational programmes, with more limited communication spaces in Spanish and with small Spanish-speaking communities, are assigned lower maintenance and are therefore identified as spaces that are unfavourable for the preservation of Spanish (Map 2, below).

According to our estimates, in European countries favourable to the intergenerational preservation of Spanish, there are approximately 300,000 descendants of immigrants with a native command of Spanish; in those that are unfavourable, around 31,000. The remaining 800,000-plus people with a Spanish-speaking migrant background are assigned a limited proficiency in Spanish. This is not positive, per se, as it means that two out of three people with a Spanish-speaking migrant background are at risk of losing the language.

In light of the data, it seems clear that there is a need to develop specific policies for this large part of the population by creating new measures but above all by better coordinating

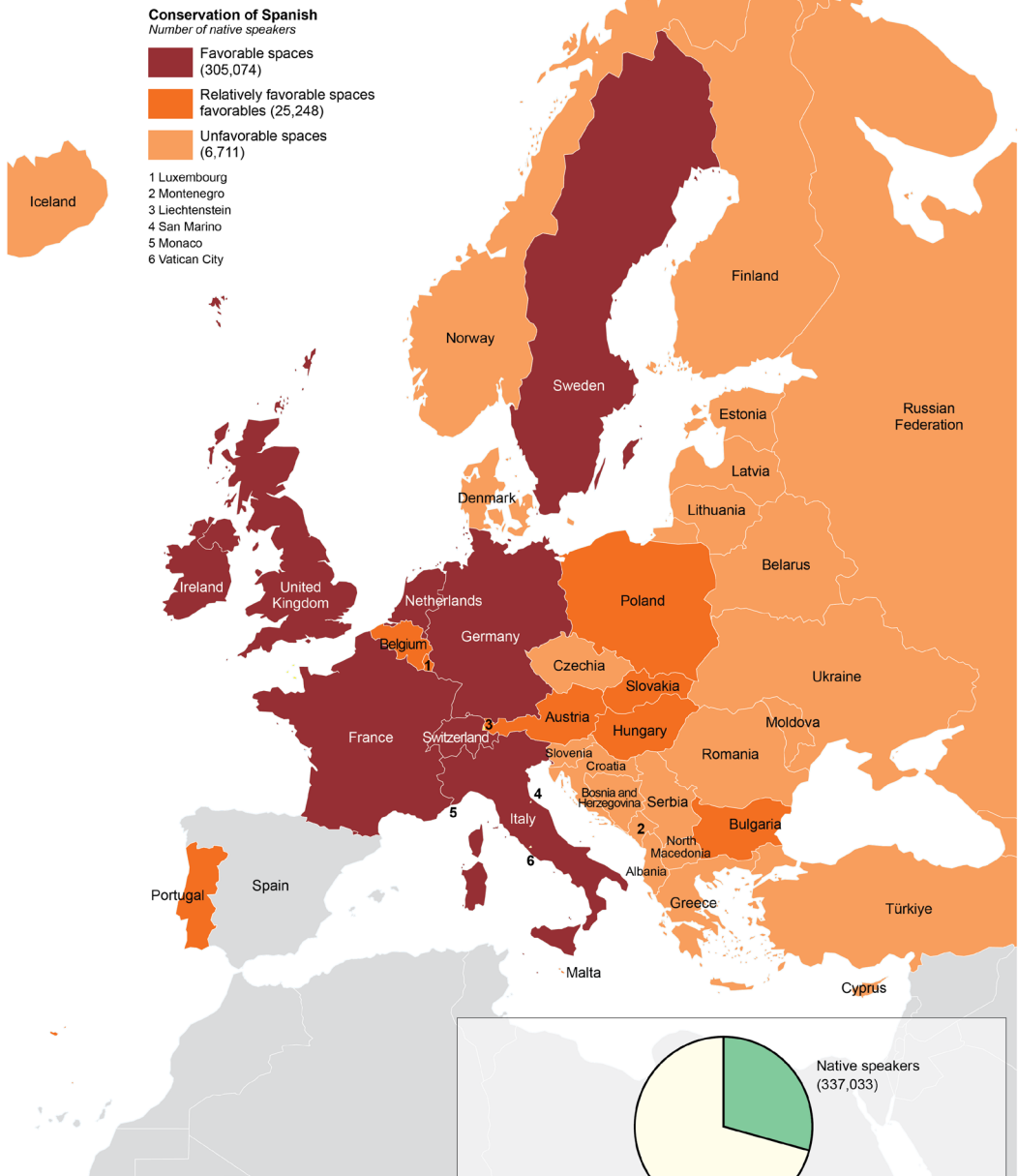
and planning those already in existence, which have great potential. These policies must be by all for all: reaching out to the descendants of all Spanish-speaking people in Europe through actions taken by most Ibero-American countries. Measures must be organised flexibly according to the location. In this regard, the fact that this population is relatively concentrated is key. This concentration makes it easier for people with a migratory background to maintain the language: the size and density of the Spanish-speaking population in these places, as well as the symmetry of their relationships, traceable to a common origin or shared socio-demographic characteristics, are factors that create linguistic and social environments in which the language is used. For this reason, the necessary proposals should be aimed primarily at these urban destinations that are the most important centres of social, cultural and economic exchanges in today's Spanish-speaking migrations. These are located, as seen above, in Italy, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Switzerland. Other countries that should attract strategic action are Portugal and the Netherlands, as well as Belgium, Sweden, Poland and Austria.

**Spanish-speaking migrants are a linguistically diverse group, their communicative practices will change in future generations and they will contribute to the formation of the Spanish language of the future.** The composition of migration and the host society, as well as their relationships, influence the spaces in which Spanish is spoken and the language itself used in communication. The grouping of migrants and naturalised persons according to their macro-dialectal areas of origin can be seen in Figure 1. The data indicates the existence of a relatively diverse set in terms of the variety of Spanish used by its speakers (Moreno-Fernández 2007; Moreno-Fernández and Ueda 2018).

This linguistic situation is a dynamic one in relation to various factors. The reality invites



## Second-generation Spanish speakers in Europe (excluding Spain) (2020)



Map 2: Second-generation Spanish speakers in Europe (excluding Spain) (2020)  
Source: prepared by the author based on national, Eurostat (2023a) and UN (2019) data.

us to consider a horizon of greater variational diversification because immigrants from Latin American countries have increased in the last decade (Álvarez Mella 2019; Loureda, Gutiérrez, Álvarez Mella and Blattner 2022). It is therefore likely that European Spanish will not coincide with a specific variety and that it will be built on a complex base, with contributions from the languages spoken in the host countries, as has happened in other places and with other languages (e.g., English or French). In short, Spanish will contribute to the construction of Europe because it is a language spoken by more than 12% of its population, but Europe will also, in all probability, contribute to the construction of the future of the Spanish language. For this reason, the adoption of a pan-Hispanic language and education policy as well as the integration of language institutions and experts under a Spanish language research centre in Europe is to be aimed for.

#### 4. Learning Spanish in Europe

Apart from migratory movements and their effects, learning Spanish as a foreign language is the great multiplier of the Spanish-speaking community in Europe. The different stages of the educational systems, the offering of extracurricular classes, the cultural initiatives and the institutions dedicated to promoting Spanish abroad are the main instruments used to grow Spanish language learning. As a whole, they make up an offering that is highly sensitive to the situations in each country, which is why multi-local action is necessary, combining common state policy objectives with specific actions in the regions.

The situation of Spanish in European education has its ups and downs. On the positive side, the Eurobarometer 2018 data (European Commission 2018) shows that 35% of young Europeans mention Spanish as the first of the

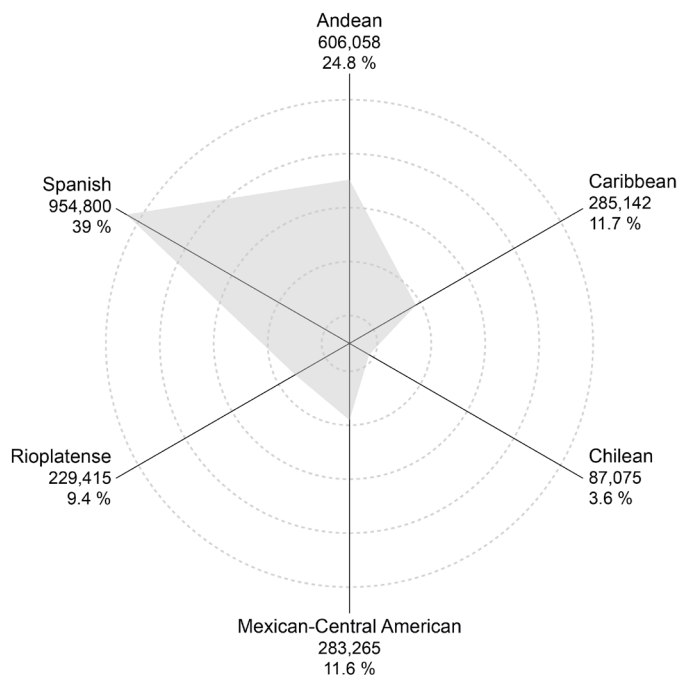


Figure 1: Migrant and naturalised dialect macro-zones, 2020.  
 Source: prepared by the author based on Eurostat data (2023a)

foreign languages they would like to learn, but this same data reveals that Spanish is the main language that is still not yet spoken or mostly spoken with limited proficiency. This context should favour the creation of a policy of alliances with European countries for cultural and linguistic exchange that strengthens the study of Spanish in Europe and, in reciprocity, opens up the offering of foreign languages in Spain and in Latin American countries, especially in areas with significant contact between populations. This would be dually beneficial in that the high demand for Spanish abroad would be better fulfilled and, at the same time, the deficits in foreign language skills, particularly in Spain, shown by opinion polls and education indicators would be corrected (Eurostat 2023b).

**The study of Spanish has grown significantly in Europe but this growth's quality will be of insufficient without clear support policies.**

Almost 39 million people speak Spanish as a foreign language after having learned it to varying degrees. In this century, the number of speakers who have learned Spanish has grown by more than 63% since 2000, from 23.6 million to 38.6 million (estimate based on Eurobarometer data from 2000 and 2012). The data also indicates that slight progress has been made in the acquisition of the language at higher levels for several reasons: the existence and extension of professions directly or indirectly related to the language (translation, teaching, mediation, publishing, content creation for digital communication, etc.), the expansion of the presence of Spanish in cultural markets (Álvarez Mella 2021, Instituto Cervantes 2022), the improvements in teacher training and the progress made in offerings in higher education. Despite this dynamic, less than 25% of these people attain advanced proficiency in Spanish, which means that three out of four speakers of Spanish in Europe have intermediate or basic skills.

**Spanish learning in European educational systems is highly concentrated in a few countries.** A total of 87% of graduates from educational systems offering Spanish are in France, Germany and Italy (Eurostat 2023a). This means that there is ample room for policy to extend the presence and choice of Spanish in European educational systems: this should be a policy priority. Access to the study of Spanish depends on a number of factors: the age at which the language is offered, the number of years Spanish can be studied, the conditions of eligibility of Spanish in relation to other languages, the availability of the Spanish offering according to different types of schools and orientation (vocational or general) and the curricular structure in which the language offering operates (for example, whether it can be studied in all tracks or only in some, such as humanities, with fewer students in most countries). The only possibility of increasing Spanish studies and adapting them to the demand detected is to carry out multilateral negotiations so that countries encourage the study of Spanish.

**The offering of Spanish in European education is very limited.** In 2019, almost 130,000 children were learning Spanish in European primary education (Spain excluded). Although in less than 10 years there has been a growth of almost 40% in enrolments—which undoubtedly favours later access to the language up to advanced levels—the enrolment quota is not even 1% of the student community. For the sake of comparison, suffice to say that this share is three times lower than French's, five times lower than German's and miles from English's, which is the choice of nine out of ten primary school pupils (Eurostat 2023b).

At this stage of education, Spanish's presence is not similar in all countries. The highest number of enrolments are in Sweden (48% of the total), France (17%) and Italy (11.3%). Its geographic distribution does not coincide with

that of Spanish-speaking immigration in Europe; it depends on the country's language education policy favouring the maintenance of immigrant and heritage languages. This argument is supported by the observation that the countries with the highest increase in enrolments are those where studying foreign languages has been made more flexible at an early stage and where a second language has been introduced before the age of 10 (Sweden, Malta, the Netherlands, Finland, Poland and Bulgaria).

In primary education, the option of choosing Spanish as a foreign language is limited to very few countries, which in addition, with the exception of France, have a limited migratory relationship with the Spanish-speaking world. This means that the migrant-descendant population, a natural target of primary school Spanish, is largely neglected. In countries with more Spanish-speaking migration (Italy, Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland), Spanish for young children is offered through Spanish initiatives (ALCE, International Schools) and for the most part are private and not public. The capacity of these projects to meet the real needs of migrants is limited, all the more so because they only target descendants of Spanish nationals. In countries with less migration, the situation is even worse because public intervention is anecdotal (Méndez Santos and Galindo Merino 2018).

**Spanish in secondary education in Europe is improving its position but is showing the first signs of slowing down.** Secondary school is the most favourable educational stage for studying Spanish in Europe; it is also the one that needs the most political support due to the unequal conditions for study across the continent.

There are currently more than 7.3 million students between the ages of eight and 18 studying Spanish. This number has increased by almost 30% since 2000. A full 90% of Spanish

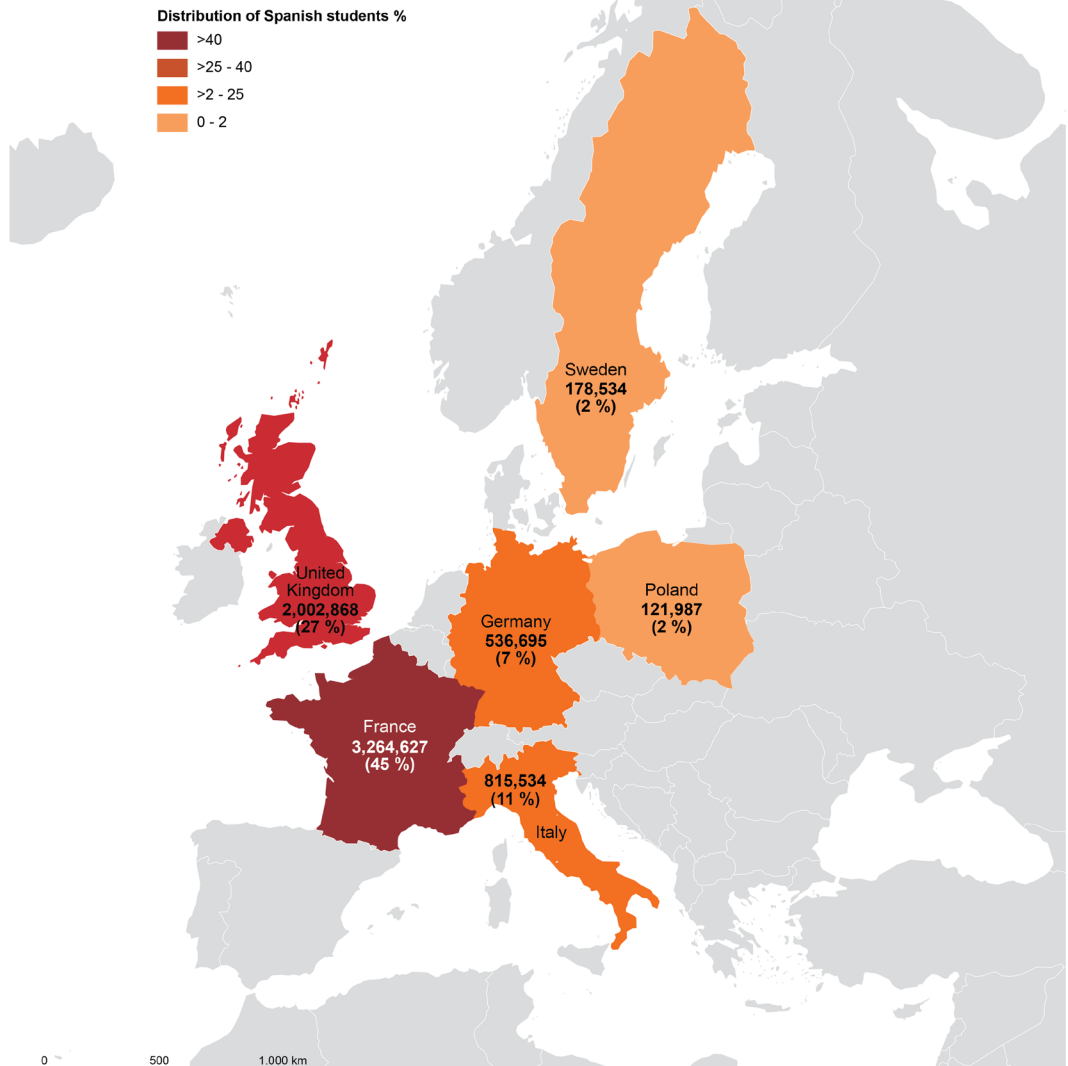
enrolments are in the four largest Western European countries: France (45%), the UK (27%), Italy (11%) and Germany (7%).

Spanish is the fourth most studied language, with 10.5% of enrolments, behind English (60.7%), French (13.9%) and very close to the figures for German (10.7%). These four languages account for more than 95% of foreign language enrolments in secondary education. Trends indicate that in a very short while Spanish will become the third most studied language on the continent, overtaking German: between 2013 and 2019 the number of Spanish learners leapt up by 29% while the number of German learners decreased by 1.4%.

This data needs to be considered in more detail to avoid drawing triumphalist conclusions. The number of Spanish students is higher in lower secondary education than in upper (= baccalaureate): 2.9 million students in lower secondary education and 2.4 million in upper. It should be noted that these 2.9 million early-stage Spanish enrolments occur in a context with 28.7 million total foreign language enrolments (less than 10%) and that in the final stages of secondary school, the 2.4 million enrolments reach 12% of the total (20.3 million students, not including UK data). Spanish's position could be improved in the early stages and policies should be put in place to ensure that Spanish is offered as an option among the second foreign languages. In Germany, for example, the states that offer Spanish as a second foreign language have higher enrolment figures than the national average, and even in some large urban areas Spanish is right behind English in enrolments.

Spanish today is studied later, for fewer years (fewer hours) and by students in specific tracks (humanities) or who take Spanish to meet their foreign language requirements (as an elective, for instance). This is a quantitative and, above all, qualitative ceiling for the acquisition of advanced

### Distribution of 95% of Spanish students in European secondary education



Map 3: Concentration of Spanish students in Europe (2020)  
 Source: prepared by the author based on Eurostat data (2023b)

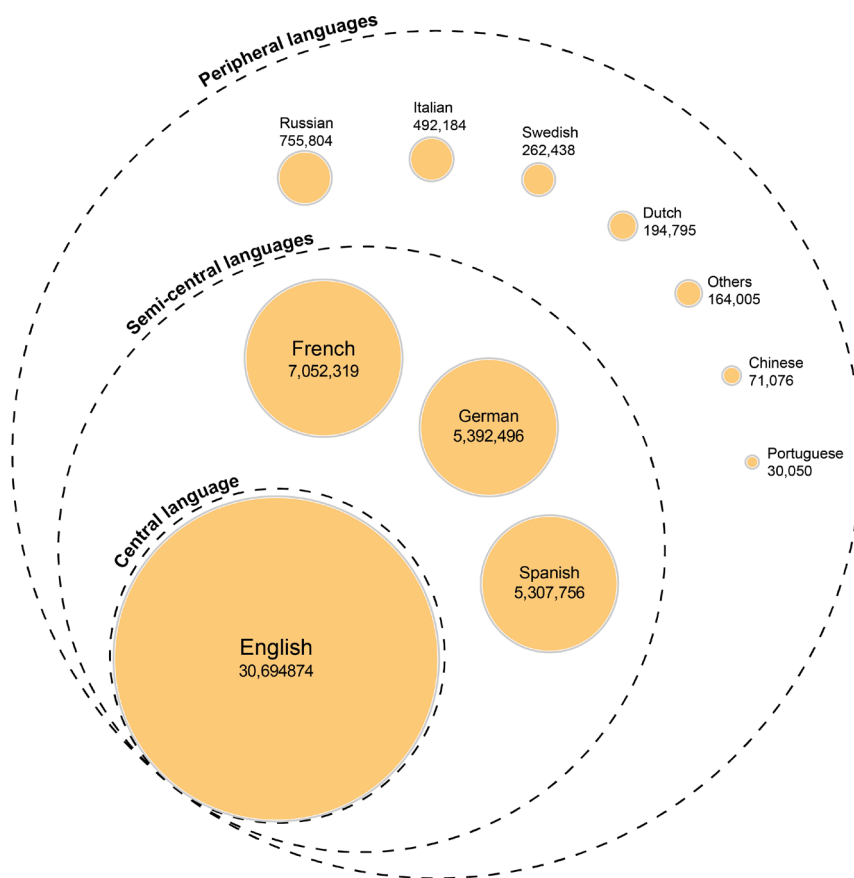


Figure 2: Spanish in comparison with other foreign languages  
 Source: prepared by the author based on Eurostat data (2023b)

knowledge. Students who leave secondary education and enter the labour market mostly do so after studying Spanish for a maximum of four years, which means that they do not achieve intermediate levels of proficiency in Spanish or only do so through personal investment. Failure to correct this situation means having more Spanish speakers but with a rather limited command of the language.

Studying Spanish is growing even in contexts where the school population is falling or holding steady, as opposed to other languages that are more sensitive to demographics. This education data has a double positive reading: even if the

number of enrolments in a country decreases, Spanish declines less than other languages and if a state registers an increase in language enrolments, Spanish absorbs a large share of this new space (e.g., in Germany, one of the countries with the most Spanish enrolments, with 20%). This means that Spanish has established itself in secondary education, strengthening its position in overall numbers and taking a larger share of enrolments in contexts where the school population varies, which is an indication of a dynamic of its own based on high motivation to study the language (the Eurobarometer data concurs with this diagnosis).

**The strategy to consolidate Spanish in secondary education must take into account that the sands are shifting.** More spaces have opened up for foreign languages in the educational system and Spanish is coming out strong. However, it must prepare for other school contexts with more languages, with more learning modalities, with less school population—unless there are compensatory migratory flows—but with more Spanish students. How schools are organised will have to adapt to these circumstances and this requires a large-scale effort, politically, economically and in negotiations.

In the near future there will be more non-national languages on offer due to migratory contacts and the development of cultural contacts. Languages will be offered not only as foreign languages but also as heritage languages to facilitate, in migration contexts, the integration of the different realities of people's origin and destination. Spanish is still mostly a foreign language in the educational system with low representation in bilingual projects that work towards the enhancement of cultural and linguistic heritage. Structures aimed at heritage speakers and at the development of the limited skills of the majority of speakers must be strengthened (§ 2).

**Spanish does not have an adequate position in European educational systems although it is in growing demand.** It is clear that all foreign languages not created equal when it comes to choice. Some languages are strongly consolidated in educational systems by bilateral agreements (e.g. between Germany and France) or by cultural substrata, the result of past and present political relations (e.g. the presence of Russian in large areas of Eastern Europe, German in the Balkans or French in Romania). Among the languages left by the wayside by these agreements or traditions is Spanish. Existing programmes (e.g. the lectorado (assistantship) programme<sup>4</sup> or the auxiliares de conversación

(conversation tutors) programme,<sup>5</sup> both run by Spain) have a limited impact on speaker training because of their lack of coordination and patchy planning as programmes. The data indicates that there is a disruption of home language learning between childhood (around age 6) and adolescence (around age 14) and that this disruption is only bridged by individuals and families making major compensatory efforts. For this reason, it makes sense to take actions aimed at strengthening the offering in primary education, especially in migratory contexts, and to favour continuing study of Spanish, extending the possibility of choosing Spanish among the second foreign languages.

**The offering in secondary school is insufficient.** This fact can be seen in the large number of enrolments in Spanish courses offered in the non-formal educational, or extracurricular, space, both to learn Spanish and to build on previous skills: in Germany 20 per cent of people who study Spanish do so at language schools and in Switzerland that percentage is 48. It is therefore reasonable to organise an extracurricular training offering that meets society's demand, by strengthening and coordinating programmes and content, or by integrating the Instituto Cervantes' activity with universities' to support from the institutional level Spanish in at least three ways: the ongoing training of Spanish language teachers and updating of curricula, the certification of acquired knowledge and the creation of structures to improve the quality of teaching at schools.

**The situation of Spanish in universities is hard to decipher.** It is very difficult to obtain a current view of how Spanish is studied in European universities to also be able to compare across countries. The limited existing data indicates modest growth in the number of students, which reflects a process of transformation in the profile of graduates: the number of enrolments is decreasing in language and literature studies,

mainly directed towards teacher training, and increasing in interdisciplinary programmes (area studies on the social and cultural realities of Ibero-America) or professionalising programmes (communication studies in Spanish or Spanish with other social science disciplines). In other countries, especially in Western Europe, the study of Spanish for teaching and translation is quite vibrant and compensates for the lack of secondary education with professional training in Spanish and with courses in Spanish as a foreign language.

The lack of data is an expected consequence of the lack of state dialogue, which hampers possible action. Fernández González, Fernández Vítóres, Gutiérrez Rivilla and Serrano Avilés (2023) express this idea with extreme clarity: 'The competence of Spanish institutions in tertiary education abroad—especially in the field of Spanish as a foreign language and its presence in universities—lacks structured dialogue and effective tools for action. Consequently, it is either addressed from angles distant from formal university education (through the AECID assistantships at different universities or, in several cases, the Cervantes Classrooms also located at several universities) or it simply lacks capacity and room to manoeuvre. The university level remains the most fragmented and unstructured level of Spanish as a second language intervention from the Spanish state abroad' (manuscript, 9). Their recommendation, with which we fully agree, is that 'it would make sense for the current Ministry of Universities to have competence in actions related to projecting the presence of Spanish teaching in foreign universities that do not yet offer it and even to support and improve undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in Hispanic Studies and/or increase the offering of Spanish in other courses or degrees in foreign universities. To the extent that the scope of the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training is practically limited to

primary and secondary education, there are no instruments to create university departments of Spanish in countries without a Hispanic tradition or professors; in other words, at the university level Spain lacks the tools to take Spanish where it is not already. It is only able to support it when it already exists' (ibid).

**Foreign interventions in the teaching of Spanish languages and cultures needs to be better coordinated and adapted to national contexts.** Educational action in relation to Spanish depends mainly on the Spanish government and is supported by programmes in which Spanish is the language of instruction (the Spanish sections or the European schools) or the language of learning for heritage speakers (the Spanish Language and Culture Classrooms, ALCE). The activity of these and other initiatives reveals that they are parallel programmes, run by different ministries and with operational weaknesses (see also Fernández González, Fernández Vítóres, Gutiérrez Rivilla and Serrano Avilés 2023).

The presence and distribution of European schools and Spanish sections does not seem to depend only on the needs of Spanish migration in each country but also on other factors such as the availability of resources, the existence of local support, personal initiative, etc. In Germany and Belgium, for example, the European schools compensate for the low presence of Spanish sections. There are many more schools, programmes and students than in other comparable countries, so their demand and possibilities for preserving Spanish find their first point of support there (Table 3):

In non-formal, or extracurricular, education Spanish is better positioned thanks to the combined presence of different national (language and private schools) and international (Instituto Cervantes) actors, as well as exchange and mobility programmes. This is supported



by the development of new forms of access to language skills, such as online courses and language learning apps, where Spanish occupies a growing share of the market. According to a report by Duolingo, a language learning platform with more than 500 million users, Spanish is the second most used language, even the first in 34 countries, most of which where English is the Educational action in relation to Spanish depends mainly on the Spanish government and is supported by programmes in which Spanish is the language of instruction (the Spanish sections or the European schools) or the language of learning for heritage speakers (the Spanish Language and Culture Classrooms, ALCE). The activity of these and other initiatives reveals that they are parallel programmes, run by different ministries and with operational weaknesses (see also Fernández González, Fernández Vítóres, Gutiérrez Rivilla and Serrano Avilés 2023).

The presence and distribution of European schools and Spanish sections does not seem to depend only on the needs of Spanish migration in each country but also on other official language.<sup>6</sup>

The Instituto Cervantes meets part of the demand for Spanish courses at its 35 branches in 22

European countries, just over half of which are in Germany (5), France (4), Italy (4), the United Kingdom (3) and Poland (2). The concentration of this instrument of foreign educational action is consistent with the distribution of Spanish pupils in secondary education described above (see Map 3).

**5. Keys to Spanish in Europe and recommendations**

There are currently 42 million speakers of Spanish in Europe, a fact whose social and linguistic analysis has been presented in this article. The arguments should invite neither optimism nor pessimism, but rather action through state policies. More planned political, cultural and educational action is needed to extend the study of Spanish and to favour the integration of Spanish-speaking migrants. This action should consider different needs:

- that of strategically coordinating all Spanish-speaking countries to act in accordance with the historical unity of their linguistic space and the natural diversity of its parts;

Bilingual sections			Spanish sections and degree-issuing schools			European schools		
Countries	Schools	Students	Countries	Schools	Students	Countries	Schools	Students
Bulgaria	14	5,346	France	30	3,607	Belgium	5	2,950
Poland	14	5,836	Italy	11	2,306	Germany	3	1,023
Romania	10	3,718	The Netherlands	3	693	Luxembourg	2	912
Russia	9	6,874	Germany	1	431	Italy	1	362
Hungary	7	1,773	Andorra	1	595	The Netherlands	1	129
Slovakia	7	2,273	Portugal	1	1,052			
Czech Rep.	6	1,853	The United Kingdom	1	401			

Table 3. Spanish sections, bilingual and European Schools (2020) (prepared by the author)  
Source: Spanish National Statistical Institute (INE) (2023)

- that this area should be more closely associated with other linguistic areas, creating a “two-way” dynamic based on interventions to promote the language, culture and European countries;
- that of respecting the plurality of the linguistic and cultural reality of the Ibero-American countries, supporting, without contradicting the above, the position of Spanish as a common tongue;
- that of implementing migration and education policies by taking advantage of transnational networks and institutions;
- and that of targeting and adapting promotion and coordination actions to the specific profiles of each group of speakers: native speakers, limited proficiency learners and beginners.

There are other possible instruments, but one that seems fitting is the “New Language Economy” project within the strategic projects for economic recovery and transformation (or PERTE), as it could be an opportunity to take advantage of the potential of Spanish and Spain’s other co-official languages as a lever for economic growth and international competitiveness.

The recommendations are based on data that seem to indicate that the focus of the future of Spanish should not be on the number of speakers, but on promoting a better command of Spanish. The acquisition of advanced levels of Spanish by a large number of Europeans is a goal that is far from being realised due to the limited presence of Spanish in educational systems and the dire lack of coordination of the educational offering abroad. Supporting descendants of Ibero-American migrants in the preservation of their Spain is also an urgent task.

Spanish in Europe depends on migratory flows and, above all, on the teaching of Spanish. Both processes interweave and recreate the Spanish-

speaking world socially and linguistically. The Spanish language is becoming increasingly everyone’s due to the confluence of several events that are occurring on the European continent, although they are not exclusive to it: the coexistence of different linguistic varieties of Spanish in the same spaces—not only physical but also virtual—, the gradual diversity of Spanish-speaking immigration, the development of Spanish as a foreign language and the intergenerational transmission of a more delocalised language.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> On Spanish in Europe there is some approximate data in the Instituto Cervantes yearbooks (<https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/anuario/default.htm>) and partial information, especially on Spanish language teaching (Méndez Santos and Galindo Merino 2018 and 2022). Recently, various research studies have been published in the Observatorio Nebrija del Español (Nebrija Spanish Research Centre) (<https://www.nebrija.com/catedras/observatorio-nebrija-espanol/>) and in the collection of monographs on the situation of Spanish in European countries ([https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/espanol\\_europa/](https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/espanol_europa/)).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the document, approximate figures are provided for ease of reading. The exact data can be found in the graphs, figures and tables in the text as well as in the sources cited, all of which are publicly available.

<sup>3</sup> A Spanish speaker is considered to be a person who knows or uses the Spanish language in any of its varieties and who resides in the countries of Europe. Speakers can be classified according to their degree of language proficiency. Proficiency is understood as the ability to use a language in a manner appropriate to its form and communicative context, manifesting itself at the different levels along which the language learning process occurs. The maximum level of proficiency is that of a native speaker. Anything else means that one has a lower capacity to communicate, a limited command of a language or variety, although this may differ considerably (Moreno Fernández and Otero Roth 2006).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aecid.es/ES/becas-y-lecturados/preguntas-frecuentes/lectorados-para-espa%C3%B1oles>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/mc/accion-exterior/conoce-nuestra-red/auxiliares-conversacion.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://blog.duolingo.com/2022-duolingo-language-report/>.

**References**

- Adler, A. 2020. Counting languages: How to do it and what to avoid. A German perspective.
- Alonso Rodríguez, J. A. and R. Gutiérrez. 2010. Lengua y emigración: España y el español en las migraciones internacionales. Madrid: Fundación Telefónica, Editorial Ariel.
- Álvarez Mella, H. 2021. 'Industria cultural e internacionalización en español'. In *El español lengua internacional: proyección y economía*, edited by J. L. García Delgado, 129–144. Pamplona: Universidad Nebrija, Civitas and Thompson Reuters.
- Álvarez Mella, H. 2019. 'Hispanos en Europa: cuestiones de educación'. *Archiletras científica: revista de investigación de lengua y letras* 2: 315–331.
- Álvarez Mella, H., C. Blattner, and A. Gómez-Pavón Durán. 2023. 'Family expectations towards Spanish language maintenance and heritage language programs in Germany'. *Journal of World Languages* 9, no 1: 47–67.
- Bayley, R., Li, X., and D. R. Preston (eds.). 2022. *Variation in Second and Heritage Languages*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Bayona-I-Carrasco, J., I. Pujadas Rúbies and R. Avila Tàpies. 2018. 'Europa como nuevo destino de las migraciones latinoamericanas y caribeñas', *Biblio3W. Revista Bibliográfica de Geografía y Ciencias Sociales* 23.
- European Commission. 2018. 'Flash Eurobarometer 466: The European Education Area', version v1.00. [http://data.europa.eu/88u/dataset/S2186\\_466\\_ENG](http://data.europa.eu/88u/dataset/S2186_466_ENG) Eurostat. 2023a. Population. Database code: migr\_pop1ctz
- Eurostat. 2023b. Languages. Language learning. Database code: educ\_uae\_lang
- Fernández González, J., D. Fernández Vítors, R. Gutiérrez Rivilla and J. Serrano Avilés. 2023. 'A vueltas con el español en el mundo. Reflexiones sobre la definición de una estrategia global para su difusión', Madrid: Fundación Nebrija. <https://www.nebrija.com/catedras/observatorio-nebrija-espanol/pdf/estrategia-global-de-difusion.pdf>
- García Delgado, J. L., J. A. Alonso and J. C. Jiménez. 2012. *Valor económico del español*. Madrid, Barcelona: Fundación Telefónica, Editorial Ariel.
- Hernández, R., and F. Moreno-Fernández. 2018. 'Mapa hispano de los Estados Unidos 2018'. *Informes del Observatorio/Observatorio Reports* 44: 10.
- INE. 2016. 'Encuesta sobre la participación de la población adulta en las actividades de aprendizaje 2016'.
- INE. 2021. 'Encuesta sobre la participación de la población adulta en las actividades de aprendizaje 2021'.
- INE. 2022. 'Datos demográficos'.
- Instituto Cervantes. 2022. 'El español: una lengua viva. Informe 2022'. In *El español en el mundo 2022*. Anuario del Instituto Cervantes. Madrid: Instituto Cervantes and McGraw Hill.
- Kabatek, J., Y. Henriques Pestana, C. Blattner and C. Defrance. 2022. *Demolingüística del español en Suiza, con un anexo sobre el español en Lichtenstein*. Madrid: Instituto Cervantes.
- Lamo de Espinosa, E. and Á. Badillo. 2021. 'El español en la babel de la globalización'. In *El español lengua internacional: proyección y economía*, edited by J. L. García Delgado, 189–202. Pamplona: Universidad Nebrija, Civitas and Thompson Reuters.
- Leeman, J. 2023. '(In)visible identities and inequities: The construction of Latinidad in European censuses'. In *Language practices and processes among Latin Americans in Europe*, edited by R. Marquez Reiter and A.

- Patiño-Santos, 1–24. London: Routledge.
- Loureda, Ó., H. Álvarez Mella and C. Blattner. 2021. 'La Europa hispanohablante: una mirada demolingüística'. In *El español lengua internacional: proyección y economía*, edited by J. L. García Delgado, 65–83. Pamplona: Universidad Nebrija, Civitas and Thompson Reuters.
- Loureda, Ó., R. Gutiérrez, H. Álvarez Mella and C. Blattner. 2022. 'La migración hispanohablante en Europa: perfiles demolingüísticos e integración social'. Working Document. Observatorio Nebrija del Español.
- Loureda Lamas, Ó., F. Moreno-Fernández and H. Álvarez Mella. 2023. 'Spanish as a heritage language in Europe: a demolinguistic perspective'. *Journal of World Languages* 9, no 1: 27–46. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jwl-2022-0059>.
- Loureda, Ó., F. Moreno-Fernández, H. Álvarez Mella and D. Scheffler. 2022. *El español en la Alemania pre-covid19*. Madrid: Instituto Cervantes.
- Loureda, Ó., F. Moreno-Fernández, H. Álvarez Mella and D. Scheffler. 2021. *Demolingüística del español en Alemania*. Madrid: Instituto Cervantes, Heidelberg University and Zurich University.
- Lynch, A. (ed.). 2019. *The Routledge handbook of Spanish in the global city*. New York: Routledge.
- Méndez Santos, M. C. and M. M. Galindo Merino (eds.). 2022. *Atlas del ELE. Geolingüística de la enseñanza del español en el mundo. Volumen II. Asia oriental., II*. Madrid: EnClaveELE.
- Méndez Santos, M. C. and M. M. Galindo Merino. (eds.). 2018. *Atlas de ELE. Volumen I. Europa oriental: Geolingüística de la enseñanza del español en el mundo*. Madrid: EnClaveELE.
- Montrul, S., and M. Polinsky (eds.). 2021. *The Cambridge handbook of Heritage Languages and Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108766340.001.
- Moreno-Fernández, F. 2023. *Language Demography*. London: Routledge.
- Moreno Fernández, F. 2014. Fundamentos de demografía lingüística a propósito de la lengua española. *Revista Internacional de Lingüística Iberoamericana* 12, no 2 (24): 19–38.
- Moreno Fernández, F. 2007. *Qué español enseñar*. Second edition. Madrid: Arco/Libros.
- Moreno-Fernández, F. and Ó. Lamas. 2023. Heritage languages and socialization: an introduction. *Journal of World Languages* 9, no 1: 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jwl-2022-0051>.
- Moreno-Fernández, F. and J. Otero Roth. 2006. *Demografía de la lengua española*. Madrid: Instituto Complutense de Estudios Internacionales.
- Moreno Fernández, F. and H. Ueda. 2018. 'Cohesion and particularity in the Spanish Dialect Continuum'. *Open Linguistics* 2: 722–742.
- Potowski, K. (ed.). 2018. *The Routledge Handbook of Spanish as a Heritage Language*. New York: Routledge.
- UN. 2019. Banco de datos de la División de Población del Departamento de Asuntos Económicos y Sociales. <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/index.asp>.

As an interdisciplinary scientific institution, the Heidelberg Center for Ibero-American Studies (HCIAS) is committed to the dissemination and transfer of knowledge on the social, cultural, ecological, and communicative complexity of Ibero- America. HCIAS Working Papers publish peer-reviewed works from differing perspectives and research fields such as Geography, Communication Studies, Political Sciences, Sociology, Linguistics, Theology, and Cultural Studies. The published contributions present the findings of ongoing research which aim to provide a better understanding of Ibero-American societies within a global and polycentric framework, and point to new theoretical and methodological perspectives.



UNIVERSITÄT  
HEIDELBERG  
ZUKUNFT  
SEIT 1386

e-ISSN 2749-5132