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**UNIVERSITÄT
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Berner Zirkel für Sprachwissenschaft

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Unitobler, Lerchenweg 36, 3012 Bern

18:15 h, Raum F-113

Philosophisch-historische Fakultät

Departement für Sprach- und
Literaturwissenschaften I

Institut für Sprachwissenschaft

Literacy in Contact and in Context – Tales from my travels along the Old Silk Routes

Brendan Weekes, University of Hong Kong and UNESCO

Abstract

The UN General Assembly has declared 2019 as the Year of Endangered Languages. According to UNESCO, at least 2500+ spoken languages are currently vulnerable or extinct. A mere ten (Chinese, English, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi, Portuguese, Bengali, Russian, Japanese and French) are "linguistic hegemony" - each having at least 100 million speakers and accounting for over 51 percent of the global population. Half of these are written with an alphabet and half are not. For the non-alphabetic group, native speakers read and write in the logographic (e.g. Chinese) or the syllabic writing systems (e.g. Devanagari) or both (e.g. Japanese). In the other nearly 6000 languages that are spoken by less than one million people, Latin, Arabic and Chinese writing systems dominate. In the 21st century, education and globalisation will deliver more multi-literate speakers. Growth in multi-literacy brings new (and not so new) questions to the foreground. As 'Digital citizenship' becomes a norm multi-literacy will be necessary for economic opportunities but will create new barriers too. Neglecting diversity in writing systems could lead to inequalities in the Global South when speakers of a minority language are forced to become literate in a non-native language. I will outline the constraints of multi-literacy and implications for trade in Eurasia including the East, North, South, West and the Southeast of Asia and consequences for multilingual nations globally including reports on visits for UNESCO to Brazil, Japan, Russia, and Zambia.

BIO: Prof. Weekes has been working on issues in bi-literacy since his PhD in the early 1990s and is now an expert in "cross-scriptalism" research. This work has

had a focus on psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic studies of bi-literacy across scripts. He is the Principal Investigator (PI) of projects supported by the Research Grants Council (RGC) in Hong Kong and by the Chinese Government (State Key Laboratory) and he has secured resources from international bodies (NSF) to support his work which extends to studies on bi-literate bilingual speakers in Brazil, Cyprus, Greece, India, Italy, Mongolia, Russia, Switzerland, Turkey and the UK. Weekes has developed a conceptual model of multi-literacy based on neural methodologies developed in Australia, China, Cyprus, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Israel, Italy, Singapore, Slovakia and Turkey. His model has implications for understanding multi-literacy in context and in contact specifically for the "One Belt One Road and String of Pearls initiatives". He currently holds a number of Honorary positions at the Universities of Beijing, Cambridge, and Melbourne. He is an Associate Investigator with CoEDL funded by the Australian Research Council and has a speaking role with UNESCO in the Year of the Indigenous Language (2019). He is Foundation Professor in Communication Science at the University of Hong Kong and will be a Prestigious Fellow in Humanities and Social Sciences funded by the RGC (Hong Kong) throughout 2020.