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Sociolinguistic Perspective

Andrew Lynch, University of Miami

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SPAIN’S MINORITIZED LANGUAGES IN BRIEF SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

ANDREW LYNCH

Since 1978, when Article 3 of the democratic Constitution officialized the “other languages of Spain in their respective Autonomous Communities” and guaranteed them “special respect and protection,” Basque, Galician, and Catalan have undergone a significant process of institutional expansion. Laws of linguistic normalization passed in the respective Autonomous Communities during the early 1980s thrust each of these languages into public life, concomitantly disconfiguring their diglossic relationship to Castilian, a vestige of Franco’s staunch one language-one nation ideology. Today one could affirm that the theoretical premise of bilingualism and diglossia (Fishman) – whereby one language serves public, formal functions and another is restricted to private, informal domains – no longer characterizes the sociolinguistic landscape of Spain. Linguistic normalization has been a bit of a double-edged sword, however. Growing literacy rates in Basque, Galician, and Catalan appear not to correlate with increased social use of these languages. In what follows, I will briefly consider the challenges of sociolinguistic continuity in each case.

In the Basque context, normalization has perhaps created the sort of diglossia that Ferguson originally described, involving two or more varieties of the “same” language,¹ because of the relative artificiality of Batua – the standardized variety of Euskera which is taught in schools and used in formal communication – and the dialectal differences found

1 Ferguson’s concept of diglossia was based principally on the sociolinguistic reality of the Arab world, where Standard Arabic and vernacular varieties are kept strictly domain-separate in everyday life.
throughout Euskal Herria. Indeed, the great diversity of Basque prompted the founder of the Basque Nationalist Party, Sabino Arana Goiri (1865-1903), to argue for a different standard variety in each of six historical provinces that would conform a unified Basque Country: Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, Araba, Nafarroa, Lapurdi, Zuberoa (Hualde & Zuazo 148). Serious debate about standardization did not begin until the founding of the Basque Academy, or Euskaltzaindia, in 1918. Interrupted by the Civil War in 1936 and Franco’s declaration of Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa as “provincias traídas” – backdrop for his prohibitive language policies to come, the debate would go unresolved for five more decades. Unlike Catalan or Galician, Basque had not hitherto functioned as a formal language or in any official capacity, and had been a language of very sparse literary production (Olaziregi). When Batua was finally agreed upon for normalization by the Basque Academy in 1968, it was “nobody’s spoken language,” as Hualde & Zuazo affirm (152).

This apparently remains true today. A matched guise study carried out by Echeverria in eleven secondary schools in Donostia (San Sebastián) in 2005 documented more positive attitudes toward the local vernacular Basque (region of Goierri) than toward Batua or standard Castilian, a tendency that held true even for those students who came from Castilian-speaking homes and were enrolled in schools where Castilian was the language of instruction. Echeverria observed a strong correlation between exposure to vernacular Basque beyond the school setting and attitudes toward Basque and Castilian general. She concluded that if Basque is to prosper as a language of interaction among the general population, local varieties must be recognized in academic settings and more emphasis placed on the vernacular for purposes of instruction. After an official evaluation revealed inadequate levels of Basque proficiency among two-thirds of students graduating bilingual

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2 Cenoz & Perales identify six different varieties of the language: Bizkaiera, Gipuzkera, Nafarrera in Spain, and three others spoken in the French Basque Country. Echeverria observes eight varieties, not including Batua.

3 It is noteworthy that some Basque nationalists remain opposed to the unified standard Batua today.

4 Ramón Menéndez Pidal would declare the same during an invited lecture on Basque language unification given to the Basque Academy in Bilbao in 1920: “Fácil relativamente es hacer un libro para uso de unos cuantos escritores, una combinación del guipuzcoano y el labortano y proveerla de perfecciones de otros dialectos; pero esa creo no llegará nunca a ser la lengua de un pueblo” (qtd. in Hualde & Zuazo 150).
programs and one-third of those exiting all-Basque programs in 2005, the government called for language policy reform to make Basque the sole vehicular language of schooling (Azumendi). In sum, the normalization of Basque has produced, in educational terms, a bilingual majority who, for everyday social purposes, interact largely in Castilian and, to a lesser extent, in another variety of Basque. Data from Eustat for 2006 confirm this tendency: only 19% of the population of Euskadi claimed Euskera as a first language and 5% both Euskera and Castilian as first languages; only 31% claimed to be functionally bilingual; 45% claimed to speak principally Euskera at home; 47% claimed the same for interactions with friends; 48% with coworkers.

A similar situation is observed in Galicia. Loredo Gutiérrez et al. affirm that: “At the present moment, when the transmission of Galician to the next generation is falling . . . schools have to attain a higher importance as an environment in which to learn Galician” (44). The success of language education in Galicia appears incontestable: 83% of the Galician population in 2008 claimed to be able to read Galician well or very well, and 58% claimed the same for writing ability (Instituto Galego de Estatística). But data regarding everyday language use paint a somewhat different picture: only about 40% of the population in 2008 claimed to speak Galician always with their friends; 33% claimed to speak the language always with their physicians; 28% claimed to speak it always with their childrens’ schoolteachers. Less than half of parents (49%) claimed to speak Galician always with their children, and only 34% claimed to watch television most or all of the time in Galician. About one in five people (18.5%) who lived in cities of more than 50,000 inhabitants claimed to have little or no ability to speak the language.

Among the more urban and younger population, use of Galician in everyday interaction is less frequent than among rural and older speakers. Among the former, the standard variety is often viewed more positively than traditional, vernacular varieties. For example, nearly 77% of the young people surveyed by Soto Andián & Vidal Meixón in Pontevedra in 2005 indicated that they “strongly agree” that schooling in Galician must be strengthened (191), and those from semi-urban areas expressed some disdain for local varieties of Galician or a “traditional Galician accent” (188). A matched guise study carried out with 400 adolescents showed a similar tendency: speakers who expressed themselves in varieties marked by vernacular Galician traits were perceived as being
less physically attractive and less equipped for social and professional success (Loredo Gutiérrez et al. 50). Other qualitative studies reveal the emergence of two distinct social categories of Galician speakers: “coarse” and “nationalist,” the former associated with rural speakers whose speech is phonetically more traditional and the latter linked to “new” urban speakers of the language who have no Galician accent (Loredo Gutiérrez et al.). Based on these studies, Loredo Gutiérrez et al. concluded that Galician among young people is tied to symbolic rather than pragmatic or instrumental motives, hence its use is in decline (50). Although the normalization of Galego has served to diminish Castilian-Galician diglossia since the 1970s, the young bilingual population it has produced with respect to formal registers and abilities tend to view standard language as more valuable or desirable than the local, traditional varieties that are used in everyday language practice. As in the Basque Country, there is an important mismatch between the imposed, prestigious standard variety used only in formal settings and the local varieties of the language that are used in informal social interaction. And so, a novel sort of diglossia emerges in Galicia involving the standard or “high” variety on one hand and the vernacular or “low” varieties on the other, with non-traditional or “new” Galician varieties being favored by urbanism and nationalism, especially among the younger population. The potential repercussions of the extrinsic pressure of both standard Portuguese and Castilian must also be considered in terms of ideological iconization and erasure – the former involving standardization and hence achievement of symbolic status for particular linguistic traits which serve to distinguish Galician from Portuguese or Castilian, the latter implying intentional or incidental diminution of Galician forms or variants that do not correspond well with the Portuguese or Castilian standard by giving these no official recognition or censuring them outright. Fernández Rodríguez explained that: “Para los reintegra-

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5 Silverstein’s observations on the sociological effect of standardization are relevant in both the Basque and Galician contexts: “When a linguistic community has its norm informed by standardization, it is no longer just a group of people who can communicate by presupposing a determinate denotational code (a ‘grammar’ in the usual sense). Under standardization, speakers’ usage of the denotational code furthermore reflects a sociologically differentiated allegiance, or at least orientation, to a norm informed by standardization” (121).

6 Irvine & Gal describe ‘iconization’ as follows: “Linguistic features that index social groups or activities appear to be iconic representations of them, as if a linguistic feature
cionistas, las diferencias actuales no son lo suficientemente grandes como para prescindir del estándar portugués. Creen que entre el portugués y el castellano no hay sitio para un nuevo estándar, a no ser que ese nuevo estándar se aproxime peligrosamente al castellano, con lo que terminaría por ser absorbido por éste” (98). This polemic is not mere intellectual posturing. As Silverstein correctly affirms, the standard that informs the language community’s norm “becomes the very emblem of the existence of that community” (122).

Unlike Galicia or the Basque Country, Catalonia represents a long-standing, centralized nation in sociolinguistic and cultural terms, i.e. all roads lead to Barcelona. Indeed, the variety labeled as Central in Catalan dialectology corresponds to Barcelona, historically the most prestigious modality and the one taken as the baseline by the Institut d’Estudis Catalans for purposes of normalization. The great social prestige of Català in Catalonia is owed not only to historical factors but also to the extraordinary political emphasis placed on its normalization by the Generalitat de Catalunya, governed continuously by nationalist parties since the late 1970s. Comparing Catalonia to Valencia, Pradilla argued that the weaker sociolinguistic situation of Valencià in the latter community is indicative of “the failure of its autonomous government to face its responsibilities regarding the linguistic policy that needs to be put into practice,” in reference to the implicitly pro-Castilian posture of the ruling Partido Popular (67). Although Català has been propelled through a relatively fast process of deminoritization thanks to fervent political and cultural promotion, the language still faces obstacles related to social use. Data of the Institut d’Estadística de Catalunya for 2007 showed that 81% of the population aged 15-29 years knew how to read Catalan and 76% knew how to write it, in comparison to 61% and 29% somehow depicted or displayed a social group’s inherent nature or essence. . . By picking out qualities supposedly shared by the social image and the linguistic image, the ideological representation – itself a sign – binds them together in a linkage that appears to be inherent” (37-38). Through the process of “erasure,” on the other hand, ideology “renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible. Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away. . .Because a linguistic ideology is a totalizing vision, elements that do not fit its interpretive structure – that cannot be seen to fit – must be either ignored or transformed” (38).

7 A separate standard exists for Valencià, regulated by the Acadèmia Valenciana de la Lengua, which considers this variety as a separate language than Català on political grounds.
of the population aged 75-84 years respectively, meaning that normalization in the educational domain has been remarkably successful from a cross-generational perspective. However, only 35% of the population aged 15 years and older in 2008 reported using mostly or only Catalan at home; 33% reported the same for interactions with friends; 33% mostly used the language with coworkers. Catalanians in 2008 claimed to spend 41% of their television viewing time watching programming in Catalan; they read newspapers or magazines in Catalan only 36% of the time (Institut d’Estadística de Catalunya).

Clearly, Catalan does not appear to be on equal footing with Castilian in terms of everyday use, perhaps partly due to the language’s strong association with ethnic identity. Woolard explains that, at the end of the 1980s, local social practice in Barcelona was to speak the language only with other co-nationals. In other words, speaking Catalan was reserved only for those already known to be Català or who looked or sounded like a Català (“Double talk” 70-71). Any trace of a Castilian or foreign accent in Catalan would prompt the interlocutor to switch to Castilian.8 This norm had important societal repercussions due to the substantial urban immigrant population in Catalonia. Woolard (“La autoridad lingüística”) suggests that linguistic anonymity9 – the dissociation of language from a particular ethnic or local identity, i.e. Nagel’s “view

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8 By way of example, Woolard, a native US English speaker who speaks both Catalan and Castilian as second languages, related the following anecdote in her 1989 book Double Talk: “...I accompanied a married couple on a visit to a Catalan-speaking dressmaker. Although I speak Castilian with each member of the couple individually, their own relationship is conducted in Catalan, and we often speak Catalan together when in a Catalan-speaking group. Thus the dressmaker was puzzled by our numerous language switches, although I consistently addressed her directly in Catalan. She switched to Castilian with me when she heard me speaking Castilian to the wife, and was confused by my Catalan responses. Finally, she asked the couple, whom she knew well, ‘What is she, Catalan or Castilian?’ When it was explained that I was a foreigner, a native speaker of neither language, the dressmaker settled into Catalan with me. She commented that she had thought I might be ‘one of those Castilians who is trying to learn Catalan’, and offered this as justification for speaking Castilian to me” (74).

9 The concept of linguistic anonymity that Woolard relies upon is also implicit in Benedict Anderson’s arguments regarding the origin and spread of nationalism. In his critique of Anderson’s treatise, Silverstein wrote that: “The condition of Anderson’s ‘nationalism’ seems to be one of a cultural consciousness of self- and other-placement in a dimensionalized space of uniform and interchangeable membership in an (extensionally) aggregated, (intentionally) collective order – the order in which it is possible to imagine everyone’s individuated self in relation to an ideal one ‘from nowhere in particular’ within it” (120).
from nowhere” – is now perhaps the most significant hurdle in the process of normalization: “Los que residen en Cataluña y que se acercan al catalán como segunda lengua no siempre lo perciben como una voz pública y anónima, como un vehículo de objetividad libre de perspectiva. . . El valor indicial de la lengua catalana para identificar ‘catalanes catalanes’, ‘catalanes de verdad’, restringe su uso como segunda lengua entre los jóvenes de Barcelona, especialmente los de clase trabajadora” (135-139). The Generalitat confronted this obstacle with a public ad campaign launched in 2005 to encourage greater use of the language among the population in general, and among non-Catalans (i.e. immigrants) in particular. In a series of television spots, the campaign’s spokesperson “la Queta” – a wind-up toy set of teeth – energetically urged everyone to “Dóna corda al català” and to speak it “amb llibertat,” singing in a foreign-accented Catalan “Parla sense vergonya.” The Generalitat states that the campaign’s objective was to “fomentar els usos interpersonals i informals de la llengua catalana del jovent d’entre 18 i 29 anys, franja d’edat amb uns coneixements de català més alts però que menys el fa servir.” The 2009 campaign, “Encomana el català,” encouraged the Catalan-speaking population to avoid code-switching to Castilian: “té com a principal objectiu sensibilitzar la població que sap parlar català perquè mantingui la llengua en aquells contextos en què la sol canviar, per exemple amb persones que l’entenen però no la parlen o en contextos multilingües. I és que, segons les dades estadístiques oficials, més del 70% de les persones canvien de llengua quan algú els respon en castellà” (Generalitat de Catalunya).

One might suppose that the prominence of Castilian, i.e. Spanish, in the global economy and communication networks – the third-most used language on the Internet following English and Chinese according to Internet World Stats – will be detrimental to the future of Spain’s other languages. But the impact of “glocal” phenomena must not be underestimated (Robertson). Citing Telefónica’s change of heart in 1998 to provide customer services in Catalan following a local government call for bids, Pujolar explained that:

The privatization of the company had meant that it was no longer bound by regulations affecting state services. . . Although the regulatory powers of Catalan authorities could still impose some conditions of operation to the company, there was a new criterion emerging, namely that of the market significance of language. . . For the global or international company, language is no longer a natural, taken-for-granted medium of opera-
tion and organization, but a component of markets that has an economic significance, while their value as national symbols and as resources for social identification and differentiation become secondary. This situation effectively erodes the capacity of nation-states to control public linguistic practices, define their conditions of social legitimacy and, as a result, to maintain the procedures for the enactment and reproduction of the national speech community. (75)

Global information networks and mass media will also likely have a significant impact on national speech communities in the twenty-first century, constituting public spaces that transcend the nation-state government and its institutions as information and communication technologies (so-called ICTs) supersede the role of print capitalism attributed by Anderson to the construction of nations over the past two centuries. The emergence of the “network state,” according to Castells, will reflect the complex transnational interaction of nation-state authorities, international organizations (e.g. the European Union or UNESCO), and NGOs in conjunction with local and regional governments. If nations are imagined communities, as Anderson argued, transnational flows are going to alter their status – and mere existence – in fundamental ways in the global era. As these flows erode the historical hegemony of the nation-state (Mac Giolla Chríost), speakers of traditionally minoritized languages may find themselves empowered by the capacity to imagine their communities beyond territorial borders or nation-state institutions. On the other hand, they may succumb to the force of high-currency global languages such as Spanish and English. In either case, a careful balance must be struck between accommodation and resistance, between the centripetal and centrifugal forces inherent in the Bakhtinian concept of language systems. Neither politics nor policies can ensure the future. As Pou Pujolràs affirmed in reference to Catalan, “it must be recognized from the very beginning that if the language’s social use declines, as is the case we are dealing with, laws are only one more remedy for its solution, a remedy amongst others and probably not the most important one” (2).
WORKS CITED


