

The Sociolinguistic Situation in Spain: The Protection of Language and Nation*

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Abstract. This article analyses the influence of the processes of globalization and regionalism on the sociolinguistic situation of minority languages that obtain a special value as the sole and main depositories of the national culture. As national minorities begin to claim their linguistic rights, the international community addresses the problem at all levels: the EU level, national and regional. The article examines the linguistic situation in Spain, which preserves and promotes regional and minority languages better than almost any other European country, and that in Catalonia, where the most intense focus of linguistic tension in the EU is currently observed. Our analysis of the current state of co-official and minority languages in Spain shows that the struggle for these languages has been won. The country's linguistic policy has been fruitful, but, at the same time, it has produced a series of dangerous consequences for the stability and integrity of the Spanish state itself. Now Spain must undertake the difficult task of preserving itself. The progressive weakening of the strong ties that previously held the Spanish state together, the erosion of the concept of the sovereign national state, and the delegation of the leading public powers to a supranational structure have given a solid boost for nationalism and reactivated the Catalan independence movement. Therefore, today the State language policy, which is of special importance, must be highly balanced and guided by established long-term national interests.

Keywords: regionalism, multiculturalism, independence movement, language policy, minority and regional languages, the sociolinguistic situation in the EU, the co-official languages of Spain, the linguistic situation in Catalonia, and the Catalan conflict

In a globalized world, the problems arising around those languages that obtain a special value as the only and main repositories of the national culture become more acute. Globalization and the trend towards standardization and cosmopolitanism act as catalysts and have aggravated the problem of the self-identification of nations

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and nationalities. The progress of globalization and mass culture or the dominance of certain languages (considered more prestigious or important) thus do not appear to be putting an end to the linguistic wealth on the European continent. On the contrary, they have produced the opposite effect: these threats have fuelled the movement to protect, defend and promote minority languages. Linguistic and cultural diversity starts to be perceived as a symbol of ethnic distinction and gradually becomes a sign of isolation of a given region in the face of universalization processes. Globalization puts pressure on strong national identity, and paradoxically, regionalist movements of all kinds appear as a result. Regionalism comes to serve as an integral part of the globalist ideology, its other face, and it is gaining momentum in the construction of the incipient new global order. This phenomenon is constructed first and foremost from linguistic and sociocultural identity. The main ideas of regionalism are regional pride, overcoming the complex of provincialism, the struggle for increased political and economic autonomy, the formation of an image of the central power as the root of all evil, and the defense of the moral right to secede from the "centre" and gain independence (Shchipkov, 2017: 7). As such, regionalism is transformed into a new political technology based on the struggle for language, an element that acquires vital importance for guaranteeing the success of regionalist projects. National minorities demand their linguistic rights as native speakers of regional languages and, consequently, as representatives of a supposed ethnic identity.

In response to the legitimate demands of linguistic minorities, a new linguistic and regional regulation was adopted at the international level in the end of the 20th century. Despite the difficulty of "reaching a definition of the minority that enjoys the general consensus of all states" (Bautista Jiménez, 1995: 946), the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and other international organizations have drawn up and ratified such documents as the *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (1992) (Declaration on the Rights of Persons..., 1992) and the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* (1994) (Framework Convention..., 1994). In addition, non-institutional and non-governmental documents such as the *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights* (1996) (Universal Declaration..., 1996) and others have also been signed.

Although minorities exist all over the world, nowhere are they more prevalent than in Europe. The urge to protect, develop and promote minority languages as repositories of cultural wealth received the support of the European Union in its European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) approved in 1992 (European Charter for Regional..., 1992), the same year the EU was created. The Charter proclaims the facilitation and promotion of the use of minority and regional languages in private and public life, and more specifically in education, the legal system, administration, public services, and the media, as well as in the cultural, economic, and social spheres. Many regional and minority languages have enjoyed a veritable renaissance in the decades since the adoption of the Charter. However, at a certain point, the process of boosting the status of these languages started to encroach on the linguistic rights of

citizens who are native speakers of the dominant language and share territory with a national minority (Moral, 2015: 155). Additionally, regionalism started to be promoted as a political force and, to some degree, threaten the integrity of nation-states. This has led to contradictory linguistic situations being common today, which continue to cause misunderstandings, disagreements, and conflicts, and that can only be resolved through mutual respect and understanding. Consequently, the aspiration of the European Union to create equal conditions for the functioning of different types of speech/language, while commendable, is not useful for harmonizing the linguistic situation. On the contrary, it causes serious collateral damage to the European Union itself.

Before the creation of the European Union, the European continent was made up of a set of fully independent states, each of which pursued its own domestic and foreign policies, always in accordance with its national interests, while enjoying full powers in all areas (primarily security, defense, economy, and fiscal and social policy). The policies adopted by each state, as well as the control they exercised, defined their relations with their neighbors and the rest of the world and cemented the state itself, making it more monolithic from within. From this point of view, each country represented a kind of cell that interacted with other elements of the world system without dissolving into it, maintaining its unity, its way of being, and its protective membrane – that is, its borders in every sense of the word.

However, with the creation of the European Union, a transcendental part of the powers exercised by states was delegated to this body, which has regulated the main spheres of activity of member states ever since. The common European government is responsible, to varying degrees, for managing foreign policy, security, defense, and economic development – the so-called space of security, freedom, justice, and other spheres of vital importance (Division of Power...). In this way, the external links between different countries became closer, but, at the same time, the ties that had previously ensured the internal unity of nation-states started to dissolve gradually.

The concept of the sovereign nation-state is blurred. The main public powers are delegated to a supranational structure. And the very idea of the historical viability of the existence of the state loses its reason to be. With this emasculation of the nation-state, language and the emerging linguistic situation become fundamental markers of the social health of each state since linguistic awareness is practically the only thing a national culture has left to protect its identity in an increasingly globalized world. The language problem is addressed at all levels: community, national and regional. According to the European Language Equality Network (ELEN), a non-governmental organization that promotes the equality of European languages (European Language Equality Network), a total of 84 languages are spoken in the 27 EU countries today, 24 of which are official languages. The remaining 60 languages are regional or minority (that is, discriminated against, according to the definition offered by ELEN (Hicks, 2016). The European Union pays great attention to protecting and promoting minority languages, adhering to its fundamental principles and proclaiming two key points in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, specifically that “the protection and

encouragement of regional or minority languages should not be to the detriment of the official languages and the need to learn them” (European Charter, 1992: 2), and “the protection and promotion of regional or minority languages in the different countries and regions of Europe represent an important contribution to the building of a Europe based on the principles of democracy and cultural diversity within the framework of national sovereignty and territorial integrity” (European Charter, 1992: 2). At the level of the European Union as a whole, these declarations are perceived as extremely positive, but let us take a look at the attempts to put them into practice at the national level.

In a multinational state, public power uses its authority, prestige, and influence to preserve an adequate coexistence in society and apply its own language policy based on the situation and status of all the languages present in each of its territories. Different mechanisms have been developed at the national level to ensure the peaceful coexistence of multiple languages and their respective cultures within the framework of the state. History offers us some examples, namely that of a *melting pot of cultures* (the United States), *internationalism* (the Soviet Union) and *multiculturalism* (European countries). These models, implemented in different countries, constitute another instrument of the organization of multinational societies (Gorenko, Bezgodov, 2018: 61). The multicultural model implemented by the European Union towards the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries represents an attempt to preserve the autonomy of national minority cultures integrated into a common culture and within the boundaries of a state. Multiculturalism emerged as an alternative to the American “melting pot” model (Ananyeva, 2016: 9), and its key goal is the preservation and peaceful coexistence of cultures and religions of the people living in the territory of each state, provided that they comply unconditionally with the laws of that state. However, marrying the two has proven to be problematic in practice. This is why there has been so much talk recently about a crisis of multiculturalism.

The nation-state established a hierarchy of language use. In the case of Spain, since the transition to the democratic state, the country has provided ample possibilities for the protection and promotion of the use of co-official and minority languages. According to the Statutes of Autonomy, Spain has five official regional languages (co-official at the level of the autonomies) that enjoy different administrative powers: Catalan, Valencian,¹ Aranese, Basque and Galician. Aragonese and Asturleonese, which lack official status, as well as other less prominent language modalities, also deserve mention here. Spain has the highest number of native speakers of minority languages among Western European countries (Euromosaic, 1996: 62), with almost 10 million speakers, according to the latest data (Catalan and the So-Called “Minority” Languages: 22). As such, it is not surprising that Spain was one of the first states to sign and ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Compared to other European countries, minority languages in Spain enjoy a privileged position in its language policy. Experts

¹ For more on the distinction between the notions of Catalan and Valencian, see G.V. Denisenko (Denisenko, 2017).

point to the following important milestones: “the constitutional organization of power and the deep political decentralization permitted by the 1978 Constitution and the Statutes of Autonomy of each autonomous community” (Pérez Medina, 2011: 106). The protection of these languages is easier thanks to the autonomous communities having important political powers, playing an essential role in daily administrative life, and having significant budgetary resources.

The 1978 Spanish Constitution proclaims linguistic plurality and declares that “the wealth of the different language modalities of Spain is a cultural heritage which shall be the object of special respect and protection” (The Spanish Constitution, 1978). The Constitution also recognizes Spanish as a common language and establishes its co-official status with the other languages in the territories where they coexist. In this context, the governments of bilingual communities have complete competence in terms of language policy in their territories. However, there are areas where co-official languages cannot fulfill their functions fully. In fact, the co-official languages only function on a par with the State language within the borders of their respective Autonomous Communities. All these factors, in addition to the external threats to the standardized use of such languages (for example, new communications networks that typically use the most widely spoken languages, the new information society, and accelerated immigration), “create a wide range of language situations of different complexity worthy of investigation” (Gorenko G., Gorenko A., 2016: 585).²

Once the various Statutes of Autonomy were approved, the Spanish state started to delegate certain competencies to the Autonomous Communities, including education, linguistic standardization, the use of the official and co-official languages in different fields and areas, and the teaching of co-official languages. This last point is of great importance because, as we all know, school teaching can either kill a language or revitalize it. The transfer of regulatory functions in the sphere of language policy to the Autonomous Communities is particularly significant, as it favored minority languages spoken in Spain. The status of these languages in society increased as a result, and currently, only Basque (Euskera) appears in the UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, designated as “vulnerable” (Gorenko G., Gorenko A., 2016: 35), meaning that “Most, but not all, children or families of a particular community speak their parental language as their first language, but this may be restricted to specific social domains (such as the home, where children interact with their parents and grandparents)” (Moseley, 2010: 12). Galician and Catalan are considered to be “safe,” that is: “all generations speak the language. The intergenerational transmission of the language is uninterrupted” (Moseley, 2010: 11). These languages are thus not included in the *Atlas*.

² The complicated linguistic panorama of Spain has been the subject of multiple studies carried out at MGIMO University in Moscow that examine the issue from different angles: historical, political, sociological, culturological and sociolinguistic (Astakhova, 2017; Volkova, Dementyev, 2007; Gorenko, Bezgodov, 2018; Grinina, 2017; Denisenko, 2014; 2016; 2017; Khenkin, 2015; 2016; 2017; Gorenko G., Gorenko A., 2016).

For its part, Catalan is noted to be “the safest minority language in Europe” (Moseley, 2010: 39).³ Asturleonese and Aragonese, which are not co-official languages, are “endangered” since, according to the *Atlas*, “the language is no longer being learned as the mother tongue by children in the home. The youngest speakers are thus of the parental generation. At this stage, parents may still speak their language to their children, but their children do not typically respond in the language” (Moseley, 2010: 12). In general, Spain is seen as one of the European countries that best applies the principles of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, “assuming, in each and every one of the areas to which it refers, the highest possible level of obligations, despite the fact that the Charter provided for much lower levels of commitment” (Paths for Catalonia's integration, 2014: 118), and thus cannot be accused of linguistic discrimination. There is no such thing as a minority language in Spain, as all languages are respected by law. To compare, France, which has always followed a centralist model, has almost 20 languages listed in the *Atlas*, most of which are defined as “severely endangered,” with one already “extinct” (Moseley, 2010). Judging by the above, we can say that the fight for languages has been won in Spain and that its language policy has been successful from the perspective of preserving minority languages. However, it is also true that this policy has produced a series of dangerous consequences for the stability and integrity of the state itself. Spain now faces the difficult task of preserving its statehood.

Analysing the problem at the regional level, especially in Catalonia (the region with the most acute linguistic tension in the European Union), we can see that the application of the Catalan language policy and the well-documented introduction of the language immersion programme to make Catalan the lingua franca in all schools of the Autonomous Community, which has produced impressive results in terms of the promotion, normalization and increased use of the language (Language in Catalan Schools, 2015: 42–43), ultimately runs counter to the principles of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, since the programme has been carried out to the detriment of the official language and, as a further consequence, has turned Catalan into an instrument for promoting Catalan nationalism, which represents a serious threat to Spanish territorial integrity today. The progressive weakening of the strong ties that had previously held the Spanish state together has given a strong impetus to the independence movement to the point where, according to Catalan separatists, nothing can be said or done to convince Catalonia to remain a part of Spain, and where there is no obstacle they are not willing to confront in order to achieve independence.

³ This is indirectly confirmed by the fact that the final section of the 2012 Agreement for the National Transition and to Guarantee the Parliamentary Stability of the Catalan Government, which establishes a roadmap for Catalan independence, concerns national identity, the Catalan language, and culture, with the paragraph on Catalan language being the 59th of 60 (55 out of 56 in the Spanish version of the document (Agreement for the National Transition..., 2012): “Ambitiously deploy a regulatory framework that promotes Catalan in certain areas where our language is marginalized, such as the cinema, consumer goods and immigration ((Agreement for the National Transition..., 2012: 6), which underlines the fact that Catalan enjoys a strong position and is in no danger of extinction.

Nationalists do not see any great risks in an eventual secession, as they understand that the European Union has already assumed a number of the important functions of the state. In the past, steering a course for independence would necessarily have involved re-establishing the entire structure of the state, which would complicate everything considerably. Now, however, there is a sense that such efforts are not needed. As far as the separatists are concerned, Catalonia would assume the same competencies and responsibilities that it already enjoys within the Spanish state but as its own separate entity.

On the other hand, EU principles state that a territory seceded from a member state would not automatically be granted EU membership; rather, it would have to apply for membership as a non-EU third state. The problem here is that, on the one hand, these principles have been expressed within the highest structures of the Autonomous Community since the process began. On the other hand, the subsequent conduct of member states with regard to the Catalan problem (for example, the treatment of former President of the Catalan Government Carles Puigdemont, who fled to Belgium to escape the Spanish authorities and now enjoys the freedom of movement and action and is allowed to give lectures at universities and hold media conferences; the obstacles to his extradition; and the internationalization of an internal Spanish conflict as a whole) have emboldened separatists with the false (or perhaps not so false) hope that the problem of reintegration into the European Union under a different flag will be resolved quickly. This confusing mess of a situation has fostered nationalist sentiments, even though it is unclear where the adventure is actually heading. Despite the fact that the three documents that have guided the process towards independence have been drawn up (namely, the 2012 Agreement for the National Transition and to Guarantee the Parliamentary Stability of the Catalan Government (Agreement for the National Transition..., 2012); the 2014 Paths for Catalonia's integration in the European Union (Paths for Catalonia's integration..., 2014); and the 2015 Unitary Road Map for the Catalan Sovereignty Process (Unitary Road Map..., 2015)) and that the steps included therein have been followed methodically and progressively, the flavour of Catalan separatism promoted by the nationalists appears to be ignorant of the real and burdensome consequences of secession (Volkova, 2007: 89). We believe that the separatists are emboldened by the way in which supranational structure (the European Union) operates, as it can assume most of the functions of the nation-state and maintain the economic stability of the region, as well as by the weakness of internal ties within the state and the economic and social crisis that Spain is suffering. It is very much relevant to cite here the words of the famous 20th-century Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, who spoke at the Court Session during the debate on the first Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia in May 1932: "Nationalisms can only be depressed when they engage in a great ascensional movement of an entire country, when a great state is created, where things are going well, on which people are eager to embark because fortune blows in their sails. A state in decline fosters nationalist sentiments; a state in good fortune strips them naked and reabsorbs them" (Ortega y Gasset, Azaña, 2011:

56). It would seem that the recent explosion of independence movements is largely due to this very fact.

Faced with a structurally and economically weak Spain, the Catalan independence movement aspires to achieve the objective for Catalonia to “become a State within the European framework” (Agreement for the National Transition..., 2012: 1). Those lobbying for independence prefer not to see any contradiction in the fact that, under Article 4.2 of the Treaty on European Union, Catalonia would automatically be outside the European Union should it separate from Spain.⁴ And while they concede that reintegration into the European Union is not guaranteed and place their hopes in the hypothetical (and desirable) “flexibility” of the European Union, they choose not to focus the attention of the Catalan people on this weak point in order to hide the evidence of the jump into emptiness they intend to take.

In this context, we should stress that the current state language policy is of particular importance and needs to be carefully balanced and guided by established long-term national interests. All languages deserve the same respect as repositories of a unique way of thinking, but the question is whether they really should be afforded the same rights in order to function.

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The author declares the absence of any conflicts of interest.

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"The Union shall respect the equality of Member States before the Treaties as well as their national identities, inherent in their fundamental structures, political and constitutional, inclusive of regional and local self-government. It shall respect their essential State functions, including ensuring the territorial integrity of the state, maintaining law and order and safeguarding national security. In particular, national security remains the sole responsibility of each Member State" (Consolidated Version of the Treaty...).

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