

Educational Language Policy in Spain and Its Complex Social Implications

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Abstract: Spain is a linguistically diverse country encompassing language variations such as Castilian, Catalan, Galician, and Basque. Under national and regional legislation of the Spanish Constitution and the Statute of Autonomy respectively, language policy is exceptionally divisive in Spain. Currently, one of the most controversial topics in Catalonia is what language variant should be the principal language used as a vehicle for instruction. This paper seeks to explore how certain linguistic policies have culminated in the current controversy over the use of language in education. Because education is considered a critical equalizer interconnected with social mobility and access to employment, recent linguistic policies have been faced with acrimonious pushback. Furthermore, this paper will elucidate how language policy in education is interconnected to other socio-academic and socio-economic inequalities.

Keywords: Castilian, Catalan, Linguistic Normalization in Catalonia Law, Spanish Language Policy, Statute of Linguistic Normalization.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Significance of the Study

A linguistically diverse country, Spain encompasses seventeen autonomous regions, of which six regions utilize other co-official languages in addition to Spanish. These six Spanish autonomous communities include the Catalan-speaking Balearic Islands, Catalonia, and Valencia; the Galician-speaking Galicia; and the Basque-speaking Basque Autonomous Community (Lasagabaster, 2011). According to Wong (2017), Castilian Spanish is the official language deemed as “Spanish,” while regional languages such as Catalan, spoken by roughly 17% of the country’s population, Galician (7%), and Basque (2%) are known as *lenguas propias*, or “their own language”. Some Spanish speakers believe Castilian Spanish is crucial to their national culture. At the same time, Catalans, Basques, and Galicians wish to preserve their heritage, reflected through their languages. Thus, language policy is exceptionally divisive in Spain and is interconnected with other socio-academic and socio-economic inequalities.

1.2 Historical Context

The key historical events and legislation that led to the present-day dissent on the linguistic policy include the Franco regime (1935-1975), the Spanish Constitution (1978), and the Statute of Autonomy (1979). Regional languages were first threatened during the reign of Francisco Franco, who banned the usage of other regional varieties and promoted Castilian as the sole language of Spain. Seeking to establish a singular Spanish identity, Franco defined Castilian as the true “Spanish” and punished all public use of non-Castilian languages. After his oppressive reign, there was a revival of these minority languages and regional autonomy, culminating in the Spanish Constitution in 1978. The Spanish Constitution established a new linguistic policy. It officially promoted Castilian Spanish as the country’s official language while simultaneously giving the co-official status of other minority languages, such as Catalan, Galician, and Basque, at the level of the autonomous regions.

1.3 The Spanish Constitution (1978)

Specifically, Section III of the Constitution states:

1. Castilian is the official language of the Spanish State. All Spaniards must know it and have the right to use it.
2. The other languages of Spain shall also be official in the respective Autonomous Communities by their statutes.
3. The richness of the different linguistic modalities of Spain is a cultural heritage that shall be specially respected and protected.

The Spanish Constitution also allows Autonomous Communities to establish their statutes and linguistic policies and acknowledges that regional languages can become co-official if recognized by their provincial regulations. Such is the case for Catalan, Basque, and Galician, where each province has a Statute of Language Normalization that interprets the Constitution and establishes a slightly different approach. The Statute of Linguistic Normalization in Catalonia (1983) is the most demanding, stating that Catalan is the language of education in Catalonia. On the other hand, the linguistic normalization statutes of Galicia and Basque more accommodatingly state that Galician is “an official language in education.” Basque rule states that “all students have the right to be taught as much in Basque as in Castilian,” giving the parents the right to choose the language of education for their child (Hochberg, 2013).

Therefore, these slightly differing regional linguistic policies for Catalan, Basque, and Galician resulted from each province’s viewpoint and understanding of the imprecise instruction from the constitution. With a more stringent approach in Catalonia, there is also more controversy when Catalonians feel that their linguistic rights are threatened.

II. CURRENT LINGUISTIC CONTROVERSY IN CATALONIA

2.1 Related Policies Pertinent to the Controversy

The primary current-day linguistic controversy in Catalonia is on what should be the principal language in education. Referring to Catalonia’s Statute of Autonomy (1979), Catalan and Castilian were made Castilian co-official languages of the Spanish Autonomous Community of Catalonia. The agreement on the use of these two languages in the school system was based on four main points: both languages would be taught to all students; Catalan would be the primary language of instruction; students would not be separated based on the language they speak at home; and by the end of compulsory education, all students must know both languages equally well (Argelaguet, 2022). Thus, the Catalan educational policy gives primacy to Catalan.

While Catalan is designated as the language of instruction, Castilian is regarded as a foreign language like English. Specifically, the Linguistic Normalization in Catalonia Law (1983) states that Catalan and Castilian must be taught in all primary and secondary schools, that students have the right to be taught in their habitual language, but that they “must be able to use both Catalan and Castilian in a normal and correct fashion at the end of their primary education period” (Penny, 2013). In the last decade, there have been a series of judicial challenges to Catalonia’s educational and linguistic policies.

2.2 Recent Challenging of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy

In 2010, the Spanish Constitutional Court challenged the Catalan Statute of Autonomy, ruling that Catalan cannot be treated as the preferred language in Catalonia. Subsequently, the Court set more parameters for the linguistic model in schools: While Catalan could be the primary linguistic vehicle of instruction, Castilian Spanish had to be utilized in teaching. As a result of this mandate, other courts in the following years stated that at least 25% of school hours must be taught in Spanish.

What does 25% of school hours look like in practice? According to Figuls (2021), each school has some flexibility in creating its educational policy. There are usually around three or four hours of weekly classes taught in Spanish, depending on the grade level. The Supreme Court ruling would increase the minimum amount to slightly over six hours a week in primary school and seven-and-a-half hours a week in secondary

school. Catalonians are quite sensitive to changes in language policy, especially since their language was banned for four decades under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, and any encroachment on their language rights can be perceived as a possible relapse to the ideology of the Franco reign. In the last couple of years, the Catalan government has tried to appeal this mandate, but the Spanish Supreme Court dismissed its final appeal at the end of 2021. The educational policy topic in Catalan remains very controversial in current-day society.

III. SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

3.1 How Language of Education Affects Larger Social Issues

Why does the language of education matter? Not only is language a reflection of one's culture and sense of nationalism, but it can also affect social behaviors, perceptions, and other complex societal matters. The social issues derived from the language policies can be categorized as socio-academic and socio-economic. Depending on what language residents are taught and comfortable with, their access to primary and secondary education, employment, and social services can significantly differ.

Furthermore, the perception of a "primary" and "minority" language can also affect perceptions of superiority and discrimination. Utilizing a specific form of language within a restrictive legal framework can significantly impact that language's sustainability. Thus, this linguistic issue's socio-academic and socio-economic impact cannot be overstated, as it affects an individual's social mobility and compromises their fundamental rights.

3.2 Socio-Academic Considerations

From a socio-academic standpoint, education is a crucial equalizer of social mobility, and thus establishing a solid educational foundation is integral. Following the recent ruling that 25% of classes must be taught in Spanish, proponents of Catalan see the language as the most used language of their society, which students are already comfortable with. This recent ruling can be very challenging for students accustomed to Catalan as the primary vehicle of instruction. On the other hand, some claim that this ruling would benefit foreigners or other Spanish co-patriots outside of Catalonia if more classes were taught in Castilian. Many speakers of Castilian are not originally from Catalonia, and they do not want to feel discriminated against as a minority within the learning environment in Catalonian schools.

Another socio-academic consideration is where language is learned—in schools or the streets. In urban Catalonia, Castilian Spanish is the language of the playground. According to a study by a Catalan NGO, Plataforma per Llengua, the use of Catalan in the playground falls by half from primary to secondary school, and only about 24% of conversations in the playground between students in urban schools were in Catalan (Fox, 2021). Regardless of classroom educational policies, children in urban areas are learning Castilian Spanish. Thus, a key consideration is how linguistic policy fits into the current educational landscape outside the classroom. Improving access to education for all residents is essential, and currently, there is a lot of variation between schools that depend on their demographics and neighborhood.

3.3 Socio-Economic Considerations

Additionally, from a socio-economic point of view, the knowledge of specific languages can impact employment and access to social services. Since the Linguistic Normalization in Catalonia Law of 1983, Catalan has been used in schools, media, administration, and government. As a result, Catalan has gained prestige in Catalonian society, and non-Catalan speakers face a massive linguistic obstacle when seeking employment and social services. (Penny, 2013). Regarding access to employment, non-Catalan speakers are significantly deterred as knowledge of Catalan is almost always a job requirement. Even the job search engine on the website for the government of Catalonia showed the prominence of Catalan either as a required language or as the language of the advertisement.

Similarly, access and awareness of social services in Catalonia are limited to non-Catalan speakers. If an individual cannot obtain education or employment, the next step would be to secure social services. However, the homepage of the Department of Social and Family Health is available in English, Catalan, and Castilian, but the specific pages regarding social services are only available in Catalan. It is important to note that non-Catalan speakers can include Spanish citizens and immigrants from all other nations. Thus, physical mobility to Catalonia and social mobility within Catalonia is highly challenging for these groups of people.

3.4 Potential Discrimination

Issues of potential discrimination and prejudice further complicate the sociolinguistic situation in Catalan. According to Vann (1999), in Catalonia, Catalan is regarded as a more sophisticated variety of language that is used in literature and formal education, while Castilian is viewed as a lower variety that is not associated with formality (i.e., conversations with friends, folk literature, instructions to service workers). Suppose Castilian speakers feel that they are being discriminated against. This goes against the Catalonia Constitution, which states that the government will ensure that Castilian and Catalan are treated equally. As such, the language conflict in Catalonia is multi-dimensional, with linguistic policies indirectly influencing perceptions of inequitable linguistic treatment. Fundamentally, language policies can enable unjust and discriminatory viewpoints toward specific language speakers.

IV. CONCLUSION

In summary, the core of the conflict is the provisions of the Spanish Constitution that mandate the duty of all Spanish citizens to know Spanish, as well as the differing interpretations of the Constitution by the Statutes of Autonomy for autonomous regions. Even though the recent ruling mandating 25% of the curriculum to be taught in Castilian Spanish is final, discontent permeates Catalonia. Various social issues derived from language policies include socio-academic and socio-economic ones, and this complex topic also extends to perceptions of cultural identity, autonomy, and nationalism. Furthermore, how speakers' rights are regulated can impact the language's sustainability and inadvertently facilitate prejudice and discrimination between Castilian vs. regional variations. Spain's linguistic policy has culminated in the creation of the "language wars" of the present day, and any proposed education reform on this sensitive issue can reignite conflict. While there may not be a solution that pleases all language speakers, future reform should be mindful of how it affects residents' access to education, employment, and social services, ultimately enabling or impairing one's social mobility.

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