



# Minority Languages and Language Policy in Spain – Some Unresolved Issues

<sup>1</sup>Swagata Basu

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Doon University

**Abstract:** This article provides an overview of the unresolved issues regarding the acceptance of Spain's linguistic diversity, language policy of the state and its autonomous communities and the claims of linguistic minorities in Spain. The article highlights the conflict and issues that remain unresolved in Spain in spite of more than 45 years of democratic transition that allowed the recognition and protection of the regional and minority languages after years of being marginalized under the Francoist regime (1939-1975).

**Keywords – Language Policy, Minority Languages, Spain,**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Spain is a linguistically and culturally diverse country. Spanish is the official language and the most widely spoken language, used by 98% of its population. Catalan/Valencian, Basque and Galician are the other major languages of Spain spoken by 32% of its people. These languages enjoy co-official status within the territories of their traditional use. Besides these, there are other languages spoken by smaller groups of people limited to small areas and provinces such as Aranes, Asturian, Bable, Aragones, Occitan, Silbo etc. Only some of them have received some kind of recognition but are not yet co-official languages. Linguistic diversity and Language Policy (laws that govern the use of one or more languages for different purposes such as education, administration, public signage, media etc.) remain areas of debate and conflict in Spain even after 45 years of Democracy. This article discusses the different areas of unresolved conflict over languages in Spain.

## 2. NEED OF THE STUDY

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century nation-building process several European countries adopted a single language that came to represent the national identity and in that process minority languages were marginalized. The creation of the European Community which eventually became the European Union created a new context where minority languages and cultures found a space to claim their demands which were earlier ignored under centralizing policies. Spain is a member of the EU (European Union) since 1985. The EU views diversity as an asset and has several guidelines to prevent discrimination and marginalization of the regional minorities. While Spanish Constitution and legal framework gives recognition to some of its minority languages a lot of issues remain unresolved which continues to create conflict in Spain. Understanding the case of Catalonia particularly can be useful to understand the multiple factors that impact language policies in linguistically diverse areas such as Spain.

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The role language played in the rise of nationalism and the creation of nation-states in Europe has been recognized by Fishman (1973), Gellner (1983), Anderson (1991), and Hobsbawm (1992). While European nation-states are often assumed to be homogenous, with a single language and culture and hence a common identity, such monolingualism in Europe is usually the result of centuries of zealous language planning and policies that sought to eradicate regional languages in favour of a united and national linguistic identity (Carson, 2003). Wright (2004), in her analysis of the evolution of language policy in Europe from the Middle Ages to the contemporary period, illustrates that in Europe, nationalism and the promotion of a single language went hand in hand. Wright points out that some groups who got marginalized during the nation-building exercise and could offer little resistance against the weight of the language of the capital could reclaim their position under the new circumstance created by globalization and regionalization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Kymlicka and Patten (2000) have observed that dominant groups are usually reluctant to grant more rights or autonomy to minority/smaller languages as that is often seen as a first step in the recognition of minority nations. Robert Phillipson (1991) has shown how even after the end of colonialism linguistic imperialism goes on unchallenged which continues to give advantage to the states/nations that claim the ownership of dominant languages such as English and Spanish. LPP Research involves the analysis of laws and policies adopted by the governing entity that impacts the use and knowledge of languages in various areas such as education, media, literature, judicial system, business and administration (Ricento, 2006). Language Policy is comprised of three key components: language practices (how people use the speech varieties), language beliefs (opinions and beliefs about one or the other varieties) and management (ways in which the practices and beliefs are influenced or managed by individuals, groups or institutions) (Spolsky, 2018). Spolsky further highlighted that Language Policy

“is driven, at its core, by four co-occurring conditions—national ideology, English in the globalization process, a nation’s attendant sociolinguistic situation and the internationally growing interest in the linguistic rights of minorities (Albury, 2016)”. LPP thus is only an attempt to influence language use or prestige in society, but achieving it is not dependent solely on the implementation of the policy.

#### 4. DATA AND SOURCES OF DATA

The study is based on the analysis of the existing policies, laws and guidelines regarding languages in Spain. Content analysis and discourse analysis is done to highlight areas of unresolved conflict between the Spanish state and the regional governments, particularly the Autonomous Community of Catalonia.

#### 5. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Iberian Peninsula had been a diverse area with home to several kingdoms speaking different languages throughout its history. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century know Castilian Spanish became the most widely spoken language in Spain. Around the turn of the century Spanish nationalist intellectuals known as the Generation of 1898 saw Spanish as an integral part of the national identity while regions where Catalan, Basque and Galician were spoken were witnessing a renaissance of their language and culture. Under the regime of Francisco Franco these languages and regional identities were repressed. A process of cultural homogenization and reconstruction of the nation was led by Franco from the beginning of the Civil War in 1936 and continued till 1959 (Molina Aparicio, F 2017). After the death of Franco, Spain transitioned to a constitutional monarchy by 1978.

#### 6. 1. LANGUAGE POLICY OF SPAIN AS PER THE CONSTITUTION OF 1978

The Spanish constitution in its article 3 states

“3 1. Castilian is the official Spanish language of the State. All Spaniards have the duty to know it and the right to use it.  
3.2. The other Spanish languages shall also be official in the respective Autonomous Communities in accordance with their Statutes.  
3.3. The wealth of the different language modalities of Spain is a cultural heritage which shall be the object of special respect and protection.”

Languages apart from Spanish are not named therefore they gain only partial recognition with this article. They are given co-official status in the respective Autonomous Communities where they have been traditionally used. The responsibility of recognizing them is bestowed on the governments of the Autonomous Communities through their Statutes. According to Schiffman’s (1996) categorization this is an example of ‘tolerance policy’ that is a policy that allows but do not officially promote any or all languages. The nature of the rights gained through this article for the regional language speakers is territorial. People have rights to use their language in their territories but that right is not personal and portable. Further, the rights of using one’s language even within their own territory is not governed and therefore not guaranteed by the state. The linguistic rights of the regional languages are developed and guaranteed by the laws of the regional governments. The problem with this is that unless a group is empowered enough to influence laws and policies of the regional government, their rights are not guaranteed. In Galicia for example Galician nationalist parties have never come to power. When a small group of people use a language, while living in a context where a larger and the dominant group use a bigger language, the smaller language already exists in a diglossia which is a situation where the speakers themselves begin to have negative attitudes towards their own language and shift to the dominant language. Therefore, more needs to be done to revitalize languages that are already in a diglossic situation with a bigger language.

#### 6.2. Supranational Language Policy and its impact

Spain's membership in the EU plays a very important role in the dynamic of language policy the treatment of its regional linguistic communities. Given that EU has several guidelines and laws against the discrimination and marginalization of the regional minorities of Europe, Spain's language policies have very rare scope to be discriminatory. Spain has also signed and ratified the European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML from now) of the Council of Europe in 1992 which obliges states to protect minority languages. The European Parliament’s resolution on minimum standards on the minorities in the EU draws attention to the fact that “non-discrimination policies alone do not solve the issues minorities are faced with and do not prevent their assimilation”. EU follows the principals of multilingualism which means equal status is given to all the official languages but in Spain, Castilian is the only official language for the entire territory of Spain which privileges its status. The other language speakers have rights to use their language but it is not a duty.

#### Normalization and Revitalization of Smaller Languages of Spain

Democratic Spain created a framework wherein the communities that speak languages other than Spanish could maintain them. Using Spanish is both a right and a duty as per the constitution, whereas, using the regional languages is only a right that too within the territory of its traditional use. Thus, a competitive framework of language planning has emerged in Spain: the central government promotes the use of Spanish, the already dominant language while the autonomous governments have the responsibility to protect and promote their regional minority languages (Gil, 2016).

In the decade of the 1980s Catalan, Basque and Galician governments passed their respective Language Normalization Acts. Through these acts the languages received co-official status and the regional governments took up the responsibility to promote the use of their own languages for all purposes (institutional, educational and cultural etc.) in their territory.

However, in many cases the regional governments are challenged after they develop policies that favors their regional languages. For example Catalonia’s Language Normalization Act of 1983 was challenged as unconstitutional due to the use of the term ‘preferential use’ for Catalan. After several years of litigation, the Supreme Court upheld the decision to legalize it as unconstitutional (Rees 1996). The Catalan policy makers believe that the recuperation of a minoritized language requires policy that defends it (Pueyo i Paris 2007: 44). Thus the ‘preferential use’ of Catalan should be understood as positive discrimination (Rees 1996).

### 6.3. Areas of Conflict

So far this paper has discussed that Spain's central government allows the regional governments to formulate their own language policies to govern their languages but the central government only takes responsibility of Spanish, the only official language of the Spanish state, it is interesting to note that when the regional governments formulate policies that privileges their own language like Catalonia has done the centralist political parties and the central governments hinders the process. Many cases of conflict arise which are taken to the legal system. There are three major areas where there are unresolved issues: language in education in Catalonia, use in judiciary and use in parliament. These cases are discussed below.

#### Use of minority language in education

Spanish is the main language used in the education system except in Catalonia. The use of Catalan as the medium of instruction at all levels of school education system, known as "language immersion" in Catalonia has remained the biggest area of conflict and controversy in Spain. Catalan's Language in Education policy is unique within Spain. Parents do not have a choice regarding the medium of instruction for their children. All children in Catalan schools study in Catalan irrespective of the language used at their home (Areny et.al 2012). Catalan Language Policy makers defend this as a policy that fosters a common identity and does not divide people in linguistic lines (Pueyo i Paris 2007: 45) and (Strubell 1984). However the use of Catalan as medium of instruction was also declared unconstitutional in 2010. The TSJC<sup>1</sup> ordered the Generalitat to change the language of instruction in Catalonia, something that has still not been implemented<sup>2</sup>. Political groups and organization that oppose Catalan policies allege that the Catalan Education system is propagandist and raise several complaints against the indoctrination of pupils in Catalan schools.

In Basque Land there are four different models of schools with different degree of use of Basque and Spanish languages (Gardner 2005). In Balearic Islands, Galicia and Valencia, the regional languages are taught as subjects but not as medium of instruction, which is Spanish. The levels of use and proficiency of the regional languages of these Autonomous Communities is much lower compared to that of Catalan and this can be explained as a result of the differences in the Language in Education Policy.

#### Administrative Use

Another area of ongoing conflict and debate is over the use of the co-official languages in the chambers of the parliament of Spain. The use of co-official languages is not permitted in the lower house of the parliament (*Congreso*). In 2011 a new regulation allowed the use of co-official languages for limited purposes in the Upper house of the Parliament (the *Senado*). However, in practice it is kept quite under leash and depends on the attitude of the president of the session (Romero 2020). Arguments in the parliament over the right to use the regional languages get reported regularly in the media.

Controversy over the freedom to use the regional languages with co-official status in front of the administration, judiciary, health care facilities and security personnel by common citizens also keep cropping up in the media. Several people complain that authorities show disrespect and discriminate against those who speak regional languages even though the laws guarantee the right to use those (Torrus, 2017). However, there is no concrete mechanism by the state to redress such grievances.

#### Conclusion

Spain was always a federation of several independent kingdoms. The idea of 'Spain as Castile' and therefore Castilian as the only Language of Spain is an ideology born amongst intellectuals of Spanish nationalism around 1898 (Fox, 1999). Franco's regime (1939 to 1975) was extremely repressive towards regional identities in the first decade of its rule. Languages other than Spanish were relegated to use at home and did not receive state recognition. That historic repression is still present in people's minds. These linguistic communities are still making efforts to recuperate and enhance the status of their languages and cultures. Thus, they condemn any incident of discrimination against their language and as an extension their identity. In such a scenario any attempt by the Spanish state to ensure the constitutional mandate of using Spanish as the only official language and thus at a superior position than the co-official languages can and is easily interpreted as authoritative and disrespectful. Spain's Language Policy does not reflect its linguistic diversity and more could be done to protect and promote its minority languages. Recently, some changes are developing in this respect, especially as the PSOE leader Pedro Sanchez needs the support of the Catalan independentist groups to stay in power.

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<sup>1</sup> TSJC (Tribunal Superior de Justicia de Cataluña) is the highest Judiciary Body in Catalonia

<sup>2</sup> There are several news reports on this since 2010 till present. See "TSJC gives Ultimatum to the Generalitat to make Spanish the Vehicular Language" Correspondence. *La Vanguardia* 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2011, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20110902/54210555762/ultimatum-del-tsjc-a-la-generalitat-para-que-el-castellano-sea-lengua-vehicular-en-la-escuela.html> and "No Catalan School meet the requirement of 25% of Spanish teaching" 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2019, [https://www.abc.es/sociedad/abci-generalitat-miente-incumple-ley-ninguna-escuela-cataluna-cumple-exigencia-25-por-ciento-ensenanza-castellano-201905221301\\_noticia.html](https://www.abc.es/sociedad/abci-generalitat-miente-incumple-ley-ninguna-escuela-cataluna-cumple-exigencia-25-por-ciento-ensenanza-castellano-201905221301_noticia.html)

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