

La lengua común en la España plurilingüe.
Ángel López García (2009)

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Reviewed by Carmen Pena

Spain has an internal linguistic diversity comparable to other western democracies such as Switzerland, Belgium or Canada, however, Spain does not have a state language policy of protection and promotion of its internal linguistic diversity, but each bilingual region regulates its own linguistic policy. In July 2008 a manifesto for a common language was published in one of Spain's most important newspapers, *El Mundo*, trying to defend the use of Spanish where bilingualism exists as an official language in the bilinguals regions of Spain (the Basque Country, the Balearic Islands, Catalonia, Galicia and the Valencian Community). This manifesto is none but a mirror of the social dimension of the controversy which rose from political decisions taken in these communities regarding their language use and specially concerning the fewer class hours dedicated to Spanish as opposed to the increase of the other official language in obligatory education.

As the author mentions in the introductory chapter, this book is published right in the middle of this social controversy about the status of the different languages which co-exist in Spain. Ángel López very bravely tries to explain the status of each of the official languages, Spanish, Catalan, Galician and Basque going back to their origins and historical evolution to give possible solutions

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to the problem of where they stand at present and how the non equalitarian relationship some people consider there is could turn into a conflict free equal society. The most striking feature is its critical and quite polemic point of view, which is very well reasoned and explained throughout.

Already in the introduction, the first chapter of this volume, the author places himself at the centre of the controversy, differentiating the perspectives of monolingual Spanish language users and that of plurilingual other languages users (Catalan-Valencian, Galician and Basque), by claiming that linguistic policies are sometimes thoughtless and explaining the title of his book, *A Common Language for a Plurilingual Spain*, which refers on the one hand to the fact that Spanish is the common language for all Spanish citizens and on the other, the common languages of the four different regions¹ which are officially bilingual, Catalonia and the Valencian Community, Galicia and the Basque country. He points to the fact that a common language is considered a taboo in the monolingual regions where they find it suspicious that there are bilingual regions and see them as possible separatists and also in the bilingual ones, where they find it difficult to accept that no matter which your mother tongue is, all citizens in Spain can understand each other perfectly in Spanish. He ends this chapter by saying that he is probably trying to reconcile the irreconcilable with the hope that it may shed light on possible solutions to this controversy.

The second chapter talks about the Iberian Peninsula² as a plurilingual space, making the distinction between plurilingual states such as the former USSR where hundreds of languages were spoken at the same time for political reasons, and plurilingual spaces, being the case of the Iberian Peninsula, which the author describes as having a cultural origin, possibly consisting of more than one state (such as in this case, Spain and Portugal), having a diglossic linguistic interrelationship. It is very interesting to read how the author compares the situation with different kinds of shops and the items sold in each.

In the third chapter, the geographical space is related to the different towns and peoples and their natural space. The fact that in some places Spanish is considered the main language of prestige whereas the other official languages are considered as less important and prestigious is criticised, going back to Franco's dictatorship where this was openly stated. This gives way to the fourth chapter, which describes the difference between a country's³ languages and its regional languages, criticising the wording of the Spanish Constitution's article 3 (1978) where it states that 'Spanish is the official language [...] The rest of the Spanish languages will also be official in their respective regions (Comunidades Autónomas)...' and the author proposes

'There are four languages in Spain, Spanish, Catalan/Valencian, Galician and Basque'. They are spoken in different regions and have expanded their cultural influence to the whole of the Spanish territory throughout history. The Spanish language is used as a common language in all of Spain. There are also other regional languages which are spoken in certain regions and which constitute a cultural heritage which should remain.

From chapter 5 to chapter 11, the writer gives us a brief but complex description of the origins and historical evolution of all the official languages in Spain. Going back to the third century B.C. he describes the Iberian Peninsula as a space divided by four horizontal lines, which are drawn by mountains along the main rivers. Those people who lived on each side of the rivers communicated with each other and either spoke the same language by choosing one of their languages or if they decided to each speak their own language, one of them would become a koiné⁴ (a common language). At that point in time, the distribution was the following: the Celts were in the NW of Spain, the Vascons were in the NE, the central and Western part was inhabited by Celtiberians and in the East (Mediterranean coast) lived the Iberos. The South was conquered by the Tartessius. Nowadays, almost the same divisions take place and those who were Celts at some point now speak Galician, the Vascons now speak Basque, the area occupied by the Celtiberians is now where Spanish is spoken, where the Iberos were there are Catalan and Valenciano speakers now and the Tartessius area is now referred to as Atlantic Spanish. The author considers that the Iberico, Celt and Basque acted as koinés in order for the different tribes to be able to communicate amongst themselves. He relates the horizontal division of language in Spain to that of other countries and continents. This linguistic division is almost always horizontal and always induced by geography. However, in Europe, the tendency is for these divisions between language groups to be oblique, due not only geographically but also for historical reasons, due to opposed tensions between the different regions and each one pulling obliquely. In the Iberian Peninsula, we now seem to have vertical divisions (Portugal and Galicia forming a West column, the Basque Country and Central Spain a central one and Catalonia, the Valencian Community and Balearic Islands forming an Eastern column). Spain seems to have widened from North to South progressively, which takes the author to the controversial origins of the Spanish language, claiming that its origins are actually tied to the Basque language. The writer states that Spanish is a Romance language of Latin origin which has followed a course of its own. Basque is probably the oldest language in Europe. It was already a language when the first Indoeuropeans came to Western Europe. However,

with the Roman Conquest Latin imposed itself and the only way to maintain the original language was to become bilingual, maintaining the mother tongue to communicate within the group and using a 'protective romance' to communicate with outsiders. In other regions Latin was fragmented into multiple dialects and varieties and in the case of Basque, their koiné turned into Spanish which later on progressively moved South and ended up being used in most of the country.

From chapter 11 to chapter 16 the author revises each of the official languages in Spain, describing their present status and historical evolution. The author considers Catalan and Valenciano as one same language with different varieties in Catalonia, Valencia or the Balearic Islands. With Galician he talks about Galician-Portuguese as one same language in origin but Portuguese moving away from Galician and the rest of the Iberian Peninsula in the twelfth century.

From chapter 17 on, the writer talks about the thwarted past linguistic policy plans and goes on to explain that although the bilingual regions are giving priority to their own language rather than to the common one (i.e. Spanish) especially in education, the number of speakers of those languages does not rise. On the contrary, these languages do not acquire any speakers from the outside but are simply maintaining those they had. For the author, a positive feature would be the increase in number of non-native speakers and the only way to do this would be for the other regions of Spain learning these other official languages, i.e. expanding the use of the four official languages in Spain from their own regions to all other regions and citizens of Spain. He calls this 'receptive plurilingualism' and briefly mentions some European projects such as the 'EuRom4-Lingua' which is trying to elaborate a method to teach three simultaneous Romance languages at the same time.

La lengua común en la España plurilingüe is structured into twenty-two short chapters which blend into each other. The language used is clear and its often humorous tone makes it an easy read. However, conceptually, it is an extremely complex book full of facts and figures.

This book will definitely be of interest to anyone concerned with plurilingualism and languages in contact. Even if one were not to agree with the author's perspective, it would still be a useful volume to go through to know more about the historical evolution of Spanish and the rest of the official languages used in Spain. Although the author has quite a controversial and unconventional point of view on the use of these languages in Spain, his book is definitely a good way of understanding the historical evolution of the languages in question. It would have been useful to have a separate Bibliography, although references are given as endnotes.

Notes

- 1 The term 'regions' refers to the *Comunidades Autónomas*, the geopolitical territories into which Spain is divided.
- 2 Spain and Portugal.
- 3 The author emphasizes the difference between *country* and *nation*, stating that he is now referring to *country* and not *nation* which has political connotations.
- 4 The term 'koiné' comes from the Greek word which means 'common'.