

PORTUGUESE IN GALIZA REQUIRES DETERMINED POLITICAL ACTION

How a language is socially marginalised

The Development of the Galician language? Portuguese, the historical language of the nation of Galiza in the Spanish state — most commonly viewed in the country as “Galizan” (galego) due to its origins and its identity value — is by no means a “small” language. In fact, in Galiza it has uninterruptedly been the majority language over Spanish. However, there is no doubt that Galizan Portuguese has been socially minoritized and is now undergoing rapid language loss which only committed collective political action can reverse.



As in many processes of language shift, sociolinguistic facts about the Galizan situation are seemingly contradictory. On the one hand, Galizan is legally recognized as “Galiza’s own language” (art. 5.1 of the 1981 Galizan Statute of Autonomy) and it is fully co-official with Spanish for all purposes (art. 5.2). However, obstacles to its practical implications still persist, the legal system perhaps being the most resistant domain. Galizan is taught in all primary and secondary educational levels, albeit under a Castilianized standard. According to the unanimously voted 1983 Language Normalization Act (LNL) all students should master Galizan and Spanish equally after mandatory schooling.

However, effective formal competence in Galizan has never reached the level of Spanish. Further, in terms of social

usages, in no other prior period has the language had so much written presence; it is well alive in social media. But, again, language attrition by Spanish influence is noticeable. As for media, the only Galiza-wide stations operating fully in Galizan are two TV channels and two radio channels from the public CRTVG corporation.

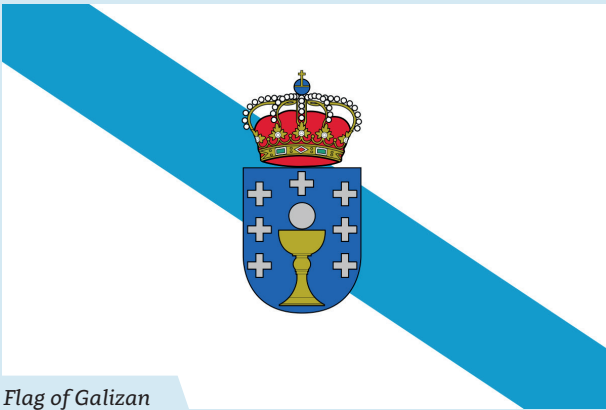
And, most importantly, macro data indicate that primary intergenerational transmission of Galizan Portuguese is losing ground to Spanish even in its traditional spaces, i.e. the countryside and fishing regions. Indeed, if this tendency continues, Galizan will become residual in the decades to come, while perhaps maintaining vitality only among ideologised intellectual and political sectors.



Where is the cause? In Spain of course

It could be claimed that this situation attests to the failure of “normalization” policies which, again, apparently the entire parliamentary spectrum has embraced unanimously, both with the LNL and with the General Plan for Normalization of the Galizan Language (PXNLG, 2004). However, there are reasons to believe that the economic elites support the logic of capitalist commodification of social life by which even languages are viewed as (pseudo)commodities subject to exchange for social mobility, prestige, or symbolic power. In that sense, it appears that Galizan is losing the battle of pseudocommodification against powerful Spanish.

Contrary to the Basque Country or Catalonia, in Galiza there is no strong nationalist right which could appropriate the purported value of language for that capitalist mirage called “upward mobility” or bourgeois normalcy. Galizan nationalism is strongest in the left, as represented by the Galizan Nationalist Bloc, (BNG) whose core communist party, Galizan People’s Union (UPG), theoretically



Flag of Galizan



The independentist flag.

strives for independence and socialism. Therefore, whatever “language normalization” may variously mean, it is obvious it has not meant the same for the nationalist left and for the regionalist conservative Popular Party, which has been hegemonic in Galiza for most of the 44 years of Autonomy while defending the interests of the Spanish-allied bourgeoisies.

In fact, when the PP regained power in 2009 after a brief term of government by a socialist-BNG coalition, one of its first measures was to dismantle educational policies which promoted the presence of Galizan in preschool education and guaranteed at least 50% of primary and secondary mandatory schooling in Galizan.

Galician is a form of Portuguese and Madrid prefers not to promote it.

In other words, the prospect that the educational system could favor the creation of potentially persistent Galizan-speaking social networks among youngsters threatened the elites’ logic of the relation between languages and social stratification. One of the results is that currently there are even subject matters, like Math, which by decree cannot be taught in Galizan.

Closely linked to the language crisis is, of course, the dominant political language ideology which departs from the traditional view of Galizan as a form of Portuguese. By attempting to separate Galizan from Portuguese, Cas-

tilianist ideology is managing to create the effect of its own theory: that minoritized Galizan, while undoubtedly “authentic” and “beautiful”, is useless for modern economic life.

On the other ideological end, the Reintegrationist proposal for a language standard either identical or very close to that of Portuguese via organizations such as the *Academia Galega da Língua Portuguesa* or AGAL is increasingly attracting young, active sectors. However, Reintegrationism per se, by also sometimes totemizing Lusofonia (the Portuguese speaking world) and an undefined ‘language market’, not always offers an alternative model to challenge the pseudo-commodification which underlies language loss.

The solution lies internally but also internationally

Indeed, a substantially different approach to language maintenance is needed at several, coordinated levels if Galizan Portuguese is to be preserved. Political action and language ideology must simultaneously conjugate: the full reintegration of Galizan as Portuguese within the broader Portuguese-speaking world together with a collective political will for national self-determination and independence for Galiza. In sum, a new social and ideological landscape which strives for equality without material pressures for language assimilation or loss.



And this effort also requires the attention of conscientious sectors in Portugal itself, as it is the future of a part of their own language which is at stake. The Galizan sociolinguistic crisis, as other social conflicts in the Spanish state, is an international matter.

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