

Linguistic Diversity of Spain

A multilingual map of Europe: identity and diversity

Agnieszka Pludra and Evangelos Kamanatzis

1. Introduction

The Kingdom of Spain is a country situated in southwestern Europe. It occupies the majority of the Iberian Peninsula and additionally includes Llívia (an exclave inside France), the Balearic Islands in the Mediterranean, the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean, and five places of sovereignty on and off the coast of North Africa. Due to the influences from the neighboring countries as well as the Muslim conquest, the country is both plurinational and plurilingual, which makes it an interesting subject for linguistic studies (Ramallo 2018: 462).

2. Official languages

The official language in all territorial Spain is Spanish; however, four additional co-official languages can be distinguished in the following autonomous communities (Fig. 1): Catalan (orange) in Catalonia, the Balearic Islands, and Valencia, Galician (blue) in Galicia, Basque (gray) in the Basque Country, and Aranese (red) in the Aran Valley (Ethnologue 2021). Except for Basque, which is a language isolate, all of these languages belong to the family of Romance languages (WALS 2013).

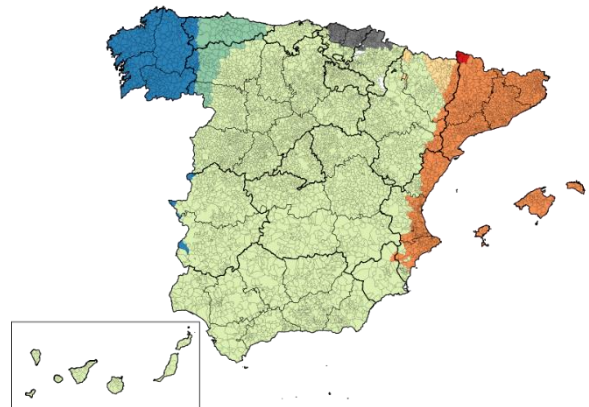


Fig. 1. Map of the official languages in Spain (after García Mouton 2018)

2.1. Spanish

Spanish, or Castilian, is the mother tongue of the vast majority of the population in Spain (spoken by approximately 38 million (81%) Spaniards (Pew Research Center 2020)). It is perceived as a highly prestigious language, whose teaching is mandatory throughout Spain at all educational levels. Apart from Standard Spanish, one could distinguish such dialects as Andalusian Spanish, Canarian Spanish, Murcian Spanish, and Castúo (Ramallo 2018: 473).

2.2. Catalan

Catalan is used by as many as 5.6 million (12%) Spaniards (Pew Research Center 2020). In the areas which recognize it as the co-official language, it is seen as highly prestigious – it has a firm presence in the media and radio stations and it is the most commonly used language within public administration and education. There are two main dialect groups in modern Catalan: the western group (West Catalan and Valencian) and the eastern group (East Catalan, Balearic, and Roussillonais) (Ramallo 2018: 475).

2.3. Galician

Galician, or Gallego, is spoken by over 1.4 million (3%) people in Spain (Pew Research Center 2020); however, it is now gradually losing vitality and heading towards a major setback. The language shares a lot of features with Portuguese, as Galicia and Portugal were united during the

Middle Ages. A further sub-division of Galician includes three dialects: western, central and eastern Galician (Ramallo 2018: 480).

2.4. Basque

Basque, or Euskara, is spoken by almost 500 thousand (1%) people (Pew Research Center 2020). It is considered to be one of the oldest languages in Europe. In the Basque Country, which recognizes Basque as the co-official language, it is commonly used in education, administration, and media. Apart from Standard Basque, there are also six dialects: Vizcaino, Navarro, Bajanavarro, Guipuzcoano, Labortano, and Sulentino (Ramallo 2018: 463).

2.5. Aranese

Aranese (a language derived from the Gascon dialect of Occitan) is the smallest co-official language spoken by only around 2.8 thousand Spaniards (Pew Research Center 2020). Due to its small number of speakers, Aranese receives a high level of legal protection and promotion (Ramallo 2018: 483).

3. Other languages

Apart from the aforementioned languages, Spain is also home to a number of minority languages which do not have the official status. These include: Aragonese, Asturian, Leonese, Extremaduran, Fala, Quinqui, Portuguese, and Ceutan Arabic (Ethnologue 2021). Along with them, one should also mention Romani Caló, which was spoken in the 15th century and is now undergoing the process of revitalization (Ramallo 2018: 462). Additionally, three sign languages, namely Spanish Sign Language, Catalan Sign Language, and Valencian Sign Language, could be distinguished in the territory of Spain (Ethnologue 2021).

4. Summary

The above data point to the observation that Spain is a largely multilingual country, which houses a range of different languages with various degrees of social and political acknowledgement. This diversity of languages makes the country a vibrant and fascinating place for visitors and an important area of investigation for researchers working in various fields of linguistics.

References:

Dryer, Matthew S. and Martin Haspelmath (eds.). 2013. *The world atlas of language structures online*. Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. (<http://wals.info>) (date of access: 26 March 2021).

Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2021. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Twenty-fourth edition. Dallas: SIL International. (<http://www.ethnologue.com>) (date of access: 26 March 2021).

García Mouton, Pilar. 2018. *Lenguas y dialectos de España*. (8th ed.) Madrid: Arco Libros.

Pew Research Center. 2020. Speaking the national language at home is less common in some European countries. (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/01/06/speaking-the-national-language-at-home-is-less-common-in-some-european-countries/>) (date of access: 26 March 2021).

Ramallo, Fernando. 2018. "Linguistic diversity in Spain", in: Wendy Ayres-Bennett and Janice Carruthers (eds.), *Manual of Romance Sociolinguistics*. De Gruyter, 462-493.