

A model of relationship between collective identity and language in pluricultural and plurilingual settings: Influence on intercultural relations

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Abstract

The introduction of the Spanish Constitution in 1978, together with the development of the Statutes of Autonomy in the autonomous communities, established the co-official status of the regional language alongside Spanish. In one of these communities, Catalonia, located on the north-west boundary of the Lleida province, is the Aran Valley, where three languages coexist: Occitan-Aranese (regional language), Catalan (Catalonia's co-official language) and Spanish. The Valley of Aran is an ideal setting to study the construction of their collective identity and its relation to the language in an intercultural setting. As a result of immigration and the gradual decrease in the population born in the region, intercultural contact takes place among clearly distinct groups.

In this work we present an analysis of the development of the Aranese identity and of the role language plays in this process and the way this process influences intergroup relationships. The study is based on a perspective that considers that the influence of language on the creation of collective identity is not a categorical and universal phenomenon [Fernández, M. A. (2000). Cuando los hablantes se niegan a elegir: monolingüismo e identidad múltiple en la modernidad reflexiva. *Estudios de Sociolingüística 1 (1)*, 47–58; Siguán, M. (1996). *L'Europa de les Llengües*. Barcelona: Edicions 62]. Rather, we view language as a socially constructed means of expressing community membership. In this way, language plays an important part in the formation of Aranese identity, but the meaning given by the population to the language varies according to whether residents identify themselves or not with the Aranese world. At the same time, language also interferes in the relationship between the different groups living in the territory. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Contact between people with different languages and culture, has always been a common phenomenon in human history rather than an exception (Siguán, 1996). Nowadays though, as a consequence of diverse social processes such as globalisation and migratory flows of people, it has become an essential aspect of Western societies.

In these multicultural areas there is the coexistence and the living side by side of different cultural and linguistic groups. One of the fundamental aspects to be analysed in this situation is precisely the process of constructing group identity and the role of the languages of the different groups in this process.

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The relationship between home language and identity construction has been looked at from different points of view, and in different areas but mainly Europe. This relationship has also been studied in relation to the development of nationalism (Fishman, 1980; Gubbins & Holt, 2002; Guibernau & Rex, 1997; Guibernau, 1999; Siguán, 1995, 1996).

Spain has not been an exception with this research tradition. Since the introduction of the Spanish Constitution in 1978, and of the Statutes of Autonomy in the corresponding autonomous communities, several studies have been carried out in order to analyse the role played by language in the formation of identity and nationalism. These studies have been carried out in communities with a regional language and a consolidated collective identity, mainly Catalonia and the Basque Country (Aliende, 1999; Cabrera, 1991; Guibernau, 2001; Herranz, 1996; López-Aranguren, 1995; Moral, 1998; Moral & Mateo, 1999; Pérez-Agote, 1985; Pujals, 1998; Sangrador, 1996; Serrano, 1998; Tejerina, 1992, 1999). We should note that the ratification of the Statutes of Autonomy, which took place gradually towards the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, gave the possibility of assigning co-official status to regional languages alongside Spanish.

By looking further into Spain's multiculturalism and multilingualism we find that it goes beyond the contact between two languages. In the Aran Valley, a territory belonging to Catalonia, three co-official languages coexist, and there are two other languages that are significantly present. The Aran Valley is located on the north-west Catalan border, in the middle of the Pyrenees. It has an overall surface area of around 620 km² and about 9,200 people live there (Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya, 2007).

Three official languages coexist there: Occitan-Aranese (a Gascon variety of Occitan), Catalan and Spanish. Additionally, two other languages are socially present: Galician, given the high number of people coming from the autonomous community of Galicia; and French, as a consequence of the traditional contact with the neighbouring country.

As we will see later in this study, this situation, together with the socio-demographic evolution undergone in the area for the last decades, has created a region that is characterised by contact between different cultures and linguistically different groups. Because of this The Aran Valley is a privileged setting for analysing the process of identity construction, its relationship with the language and the way it influences the development of intergroup relationships.

2. Collective identity, group membership, language and intercultural relations

Several definitions of the concept of identity have been elaborated for the last decades within the social sciences with the aim of studying its origin, use and analysis. It is not our aim here to establish a classification of all the categories developed in order to define identity. Nevertheless, we would like to state clearly the approach and definition we are using in our analysis. In other words, we will try to explain what we are talking about when dealing with identity and related concepts, such as social and/or ethnic identity. We would also like to pay attention to the way these different concepts may be co-articulated, insofar as all these dimensions are constitutive of the subject, are inter-related and have fuzzy boundaries; we will isolate them for analytical purposes.

For Giddens (1995), identity is the result of a process where different elements come into play, related to the structure of the world we live in, to social interaction and to our own psychological processes. All these different processes are inter-related and are influenced by the rest, so that identity is the way in which we think and constitute ourselves, after a process of reflection, according to our experiences in life. Thus, identity is conceptualised as a dynamic element, which implies a reflexive process of constant re-elaboration taking place as a psycho-social phenomenon.

At the same time Castells (1998), who focuses more on collective identity, asserts that, “. . . [identity is] the process of construction of meaning that focuses on a cultural attribute, or on a related set of cultural attributes, which is more important than the rest of the sources of meaning. For a specific individual or a collective actor there may be a plurality of identities” (Castells, 1998, p. 28).

Two major aspects can be derived from this definition. On the one hand, the focus on identity as a process of construction of meaning; on the other, the plurality of identities or the multidimensional nature of identity. As to the first aspect, we must draw attention to several sociological theories that have centred their efforts on clarifying the importance of meaning production, both for the construction of identity and for social interaction (Garfinkel, 1984; Mead, 1982; Schutz, 1972, 1973, 1993). Beyond this, though, the stress on the importance of meaning found in Castells' definition seems to come from the necessity man has to give meaning to existence. In other words, we may

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