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Tongue-Tied: The Role of Linguistics in Basque and Catalan Nationalism

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Nationalism is alive and well. While its focus has changed from interstate (e.g., France or Germany) to intrastate, as in Flanders or Wales, the idea is thriving. Language has always been an essential element of nationalism, providing a distinctive feature and source of pride for a collective people. The ability to communicate with one another is essential to building bridges between strangers and forging the idea of a “nation,” which instills the idea of unity among a people that have never met. This is why efforts at nation-building, employed by the core or dominant state, place a premium on homogenizing language as linguistic differences can isolate the periphery from the core and form a basis for nationalism to take root.

Language is crucial to understanding this phenomenon. How do nationalists utilize language? What effects, if any, do differing uses of language have on nationalist movements and their relations with the state? It is in this context that this paper will address the Spanish case. Within Spain, there are currently seventeen “autonomous zones” or federal regions, which share power with Madrid. But two, which wield distinctive histories, languages, and symbols from that of Spain, stick out: the Basque Country and Catalonia. These two movements trace their nationalist histories back for centuries, and most vociferously lobby the Spanish government for greater power. They differ from one another in two primary aspects—terrorism and separatism—that can be linked to linguistic elements.

The Basque Country is home to the terrorist group ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, which translates roughly into “Basque Homeland and Liberty”), which has claimed over eight hundred victims in its almost half decade-old struggle for independence and is generally separatist in its outlook. Meanwhile, there is no significant armed movement in Catalonia, and the Catalan nationalist platform has – to a great extent – merely sought further autonomy within Spain. What explains this disparity?

This paper asserts that varying forms of nationalism and linguistic differences, as well as the ensuing divergences in the utilization of language, have had a major impact on the respective peoples’ attitudes toward immigrants and, thus, on their levels of tolerance. Some Basques, notably the early nationalist leaders such as Sabino Arana, espoused a nationalism based on race, which eschewed those devoid of Basque blood or inheritance. This has led to a greater emphasis on ethnicity and intolerance within much of Basque nationalism, partially sowing the seeds for a violent group to emerge and become successful.

Conversely, Catalan nationalism has placed heavy emphasis on its language, which is linguistically closer to Spanish and easier to learn, thereby facilitating the assimilation of immigrants. In most cases, adoption of the language would ensure acceptance. Linguistic similarities between Catalan and Castilian contributed to the emergence of Catalonia as a melting pot, producing a more tolerant culture where violent extremists had a more arduous time promoting their platform. This theory cannot fully explain the difference in the levels of violence and separatism in the Basque Country and Catalonia. Few theorists place much emphasis on language in investigating this puzzle, but it must be a prominent feature in any theory that seeks to do so.

This paper first provides a brief link between nationalism and language, which seeks to explain the general importance of linguistics in any nationalist movement. With this overview, the linguistic differences between the Basques and Catalans and their importance are more easily understood.

The next segment begins by succinctly laying out these general differences—their origins and grammatical divergences. However, its focus is on how these languages were

utilized in different ways by early nationalists; Basque leader Sabino Arana used it as an exclusionary tactic, whereas Catalan nationalists exploited it to promote Catalan culture.

This difference is also at the heart of the immigration issue: What effect did these varying nationalist platforms have on general perceptions of immigrants? It can then be argued that the anti-immigrant strategy of Arana and the relative assimilatory nature of Catalan nationalism play a primary role in elucidating the question of why separatism and violence is more prominent in Basque nationalism.^a Finally, the concluding section sums up this paper's main points and provides a more recent update on this issue.

Language and Nationalism

What is a nation? Many theorists have endeavored to answer this age-old question. Some, such as Benedict Anderson, posit that since members of a so-called nation have failed to even meet or talk to the majority of their fellow members, nations are "imagined communities" (i.e., they only exist in one's mind). Others believe that the nation is real, whether it is based on networks of multiple social relationships¹ or on "primordial" ties such as race. While this issue is still debatable, language is undoubtedly essential to the idea of a nation.

There is an inherent human need to structure things in order to make sense of them. This is where identity comes into play. To distinguish themselves from others and consolidate a large group of people into one or many groups, people adhere to identities, whether it is a religious, athletic, or, in this case, a national affiliation. Mobilizing into a community or nation requires that a large group of strangers be able to communicate with one another. Hence, one basic and important aspect of language, specifically in relation to nationalism, is communication. As Stephen Barbour notes, "A nation in the modern sense cannot exist without a shared sense of identity, and for people to share an identity a certain minimum level of communication between them must be guaranteed."²

Moreover, communication brings knowledge with it. Language conveys the ideas of a people or nation through literary works such as poems or novels, which nationalists can look back on with pride. Indeed, for Herder, the godfather of German nationalism,

“Every language bears the stamp of the mind and character of a national group.”³ This is why the study of one’s language “would contribute much toward increasing the knowledge of national characteristics.”⁴

Other than for sheer means of communication, the different aspects inherent in a language, and – more importantly – how linguistic differences are utilized by nationalists are important indicators of nationalism. Languages differ from one another in structure and similarity, which is why linguistic experts group languages into families such as “romance languages.” Linguistic distinctions “work in two ways: a distinctive language may help to demarcate the ethnic group from other groups, and a common language may facilitate communication and hence coherence within an ethnic group.”⁵

Language can be used for either assimilation or differentiation, and both tactics can be aided by the degree of structural differences that exist between languages. For nation-builders, efforts to homogenize a language within a state are paramount because the presence of varying languages can be counterproductive. It encourages differentiation, which is antithetical to a state’s goal of uniformity and unity. Unsurprisingly, peripheral nationalists may stress their linguistic differences when attempting to detach their group from the core.

In this context, it is no wonder that nationalists endorse policies that propagate their language. Québécois nationalists logically want greater means of educating the masses in French. Québécois theorist Albert Breton points out, “For the Francophones in North America...language policies have been policies designed to promote the use of the French language in an environment which has been hostile to that language and is growing increasingly so.”⁶

To be sure, education and the teaching of native languages in schools are useful tools of nationalization. Getting pupils to think of themselves as Basque or Catalan and to speak the language at a young age can do wonders for creating a national identity for the citizenry. As Balsera notes, “The policies that impose a language are inherent in nation-states and stateless nations and form a basic element in the representative of collective identity.”⁷

Peripheral nationalists can further their cause by flaunting linguistic differences, and there are various ways to do it. As stated earlier, demarcation lines can be drawn by language, and groups can utilize their linguistic differences to protect their language and nation from outsiders (i.e., exclusion). On the other hand, nationalists can prioritize the use of their language to spread its adoption and, thus, attempt to bring immigrants to their cause by getting them to learn the language.

Language is essential to nationalist causes for communication, differentiation, and assimilation. Structural differences can either help or discourage a language's adoption depending upon the degree of uniqueness between two languages. The greater lesson lies, however, in the role of language in a nationalist cause. Exclusion and acceptance are two tactics which can be furthered by the use of language. Encouraging the adoption of a nation's language helps assimilation, whereas railing against the "foreign" use of one's language prevents it. It is in this light that the study of linguistic differences between the Basques and Catalans, as well as the wide uses of their languages by nationalists, is presented in the following sections.

The Utility of Language in Basque and Catalan Nationalism

At first glance, the primary linguistic variance between the Basques and Catalans is the relative obscurity and learning difficulty of the Basque language. Euskera, or Basque, is "a non-Romance language that has long puzzled linguists because of its seemingly untraceable origins."⁸ Conversi adds, "Euskera is completely unrelated to any other known language being the only remnant of a pre-Indo-European aboriginal stratum."⁹ As a result, Gunther and Shabad observe, "Euskera is extremely difficult for a Spanish-speaker to learn."¹⁰

Catalan, on the other hand, is a romance language. Although it borrowed much from French, "Catalan is very similar to Castilian."¹¹ Catalan also has a richer literary tradition. The "Renaixença," or Catalan cultural rebirth, sparked a flurry of great literary works in the 19th century which the Basques could not duplicate. Renaixença writers, however, had more material to revert back to as Catalan literature is centuries old. Such variations in linguistic structure and history profoundly impacted the use of language in

nationalist efforts—many early Basque nationalists used linguistic uniqueness to exclude foreigners, whereas Catalans were better able to spread their language and culture due to a linguistic similarity with Spanish.

Language plays a significant role in the evolution and priorities of nationalist movements. Conversi acknowledges that “The choice of a special symbol of national identity, such as language or race, can have direct political consequences, as reflected in each movement’s ideological formulations.”¹² These nationalist decisions on what traits to emphasize for national identity (e.g., race and language) can influence popular attitudes on issues such as immigration and devolution, which was the case with Basque and Catalan nationalism.

The Basque Country: Exclusion and Intolerance

The Basque language suffered a crisis in the 19th century because many found it difficult to learn and few prominent literary works were written in the language. However, Sabino Arana, the founder of modern Basque nationalism, and numerous fellow nationalists saw this as an advantage since it enforced their sense of uniqueness from the rest of Spain. As Clark maintains, “Toward the end of the 18th or the beginning of the 19th century, scholars of the Basque language advanced a number of ‘theological’ notions regarding the origins of Euskera which appear to us today as absurd, but which were taken most seriously at the time.”¹³

These linguistic peculiarities and the corresponding view on language are directly linked to the immigration issue. Indeed, Arana espoused a radically racial platform, one that portrayed Spaniards as unwanted outsiders. Heavily industrialized during the 19th century, the Basque Country attracted a flood of Spanish workers. In fact, “it has been estimated that approximately 70 percent of the population in Bilbao was non-Basque in 1899,”¹⁴ and “the Basque language as it was spoken during the 18th and early 19th century was apparently ill suited to a modernizing and industrializing region.”¹⁵ Thus, increased Spanish immigration forced Arana and other nationalists to differentiate themselves.

For Arana, it was not a difficult task. He perceived the Spanish immigrants to be impure pollutants in his pristine Basque nation, and created an offensive word to refer to these outsiders—“maketos.” While Arana attempted to revive the Basque language by writing grammar books and literary pieces in Basque, he placed primacy on race and ethnicity to set the Basques apart from the Spanish invaders. Arana solemnly declared, “If we had to choose between a province of Bizkaya populated by ‘maketos’ that would only speak Basque language and a Bizkaya populated by Bizkainos that would only speak Castilian, we would certainly choose the latter.”¹⁶

Hence, blood ties, rather than language and territory, formed the basis of Basque identity during Arana’s era and beyond. This created tension between Basque nationalists of Arana’s persuasion and Spanish immigrants. Arana saw in these immigrants the antithesis of what he thought it meant to be Basque: dirty, poor, working class, socialist, secular, and Spanish-speaking. Arana placed great emphasis on Catholicism, which also distinguished Basques from Spaniards, as “salvation was to be won through complete isolation from other peoples, especially the Spaniards.”¹⁷

In essence, early Basque nationalism was exclusionary. It sought to keep Spanish outsiders from polluting the nation at all cost, which explains Arana and others’ emphasis on “primordial” or unchanging characteristics such as race and descent. It is no surprise that Conversi refers to Arana’s use of language as an “ethnic border,” noting that “Arana simply saw language as a means of keeping the Basque people away from mixing with foreigners.”¹⁸ Arana viewed race as a better means of exclusion, which was an end in itself because of its primordial nature, a contrast to the fungibility of language. As Arana put it, “So long as there is a good grammar and a good dictionary, language can be restored even though no one speaks it. Race, once lost, cannot be resuscitated.”¹⁹

The distinctiveness of the Basque language aided this segregationist effort. Immigrants took pains to learn the language, but even in modern times, as noted in Gunther and Shabad’s early 1980s investigation, “[v]ery few immigrants from other parts of Spain in our survey (4%) claimed to have learned and to speak Euskera.”²⁰ There is a lack of 19th century figures, but the number was certainly smaller. The roots of Basque nationalism toward the mid-20th century are entrenched with racist and anti-immigration

attitudes whereby language and – to a much greater extent – race were used as exclusionary tactics.

Catalonia: Acceptance and Assimilation

Catalan nationalists, however, utilized language differently. The cultural renaissance and Catalan nationalism were mutually reinforcing. The use of the Catalan language revived the idea of a distinctive people and the “rising tide of nationalism...gave new impulse to the development of the language.”²¹

In other words, to preserve the Catalan language, attacked throughout its history, an autonomous movement - with the help of nationalism – had to be created. Observing the Renaixença era, Balcells notes that “While a Catalan literature had been created, a Catalan culture was still required, and that meant “Catalanizing” education and securing official-language status for Catalan. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to bring about political autonomy without which cultural autonomy was impossible.”²² Indeed, nationalism imbued the linguistic revival, and the spread of the Catalan language, a product of the cultural rebirth, left its mark, reinforcing language as the main source of Catalan identity.

Unlike Arana and the Basques, Catalan nationalists emphasized language largely at the expense of race and blood ties. Indeed, as Shabad and Gunther argue, “From the beginning, language lay at the very heart of Catalan nationalist beliefs.”²³ The majority of Catalan nationalist founders privileged language above most other traits.

Prat de la Riba, who founded the Lliga de Catalunya in the late 1880s, defined the nation as “a society of people who speak a language of their own and have the same spirit that manifests itself or is characteristic for the whole variety of the whole collective life.”²⁴ This attitude persisted into the 20th century as the Catalan Cultural Committee wrote in 1924, “Our language, the expression of our people, which can never be given up...is the spiritual foundation of our existence.”²⁵

This rhetoric is a far cry from Arana’s insistence that he would rather see Basques speak Castilian than Spaniards adopting the Basque language. It is no surprise, then, that

Catalonia's views on immigration differed significantly from that of the early Basque nationalists. Just as the Basque Country witnessed an influx of poor, Spanish immigrants, industrialized Catalonia experienced a similar phenomenon, but immigrants there largely encountered different circumstances.

Because many Catalans insisted that language defined one's identity, they were more tolerant of immigrants, making it easier for them to deem immigrants – who spent the effort to learn the language – Catalan. Hence, the Catalan emphasis on language permitted a more flexible view on what constituted the Catalan nation. Arana, having lived in Catalonia for a time, clearly recognized this difference between the Basque and Catalan platforms but was unapologetic: “The Catalans want all Spaniards living in their region to speak Catalan, but for us it would be ruin if the maketo residents in our territory spoke Euskera.”²⁶

Catalonia's history and geography also point to the territory's perception as a welcoming melting pot. “Catalonia's special position along the Mediterranean coast and between Castile and France has meant that traditionally it has absorbed multiple cultural influences and movements of people.”²⁷ Catalan nationalist and sociologist Cardús i Ros observes that Catalonia has for years been a “country of immigrants,” and that today, “approximately three out of four Catalans have amongst their recent ancestors one who was an immigrant.”²⁸ In other words, Catalonia has more experience with immigrants, a situation that could either lead to a backlash or tolerant assimilation. The latter has largely been the result thanks to the Catalan language and identity.

Since Catalans used language as their defining characteristic, “[t]he preservation and furthering of that national identity could be achieved by continued use of Catalan in daily life, and by teaching the immigrant community in Catalunya the Catalan language and customs.”²⁹ Cardús i Ros goes even further, suggesting that Catalan nationalism and Catalonia in general would have largely deteriorated without immigration: “The paradox that most people are unaware of...is the fact that immigration in Catalonia has not, in overall terms, meant a threat to its economic, cultural or political identity. In fact, its effect has been shown to be the contrary: immigration has proven to be a necessary condition...for Catalonia's survival and consolidation as a nation.”³⁰

Can Language Explain Separatism and Violence?

Evidently, linguistic differences abound in Basque and Catalan nationalism, especially during the early eras. As Gunther and Shabad note, “These historical differences in the role played by language in Basque and Catalan nationalism are muted in contemporary expressions of nationalist thought.”³¹ These divergences profoundly impacted both Basque and Catalan political platforms and the evolution of these nationalist ideas.

Because Arana and the Basque nationalists preferred race and descent over language and culture, they beget separatism and violence. Poor, Spanish immigrants found Euskera to be too difficult to learn, but even if they took the vast time and effort needed to learn it, Arana and the Basque nationalists would still see them as impure “maketos.” Thus, the Basque nationalist movement used exclusion as its founding premise. Catalans, however, viewed language as a primary facet of their national existence and heritage. Catalan’s linguistic similarities with Castilian also aided with the immigrants’ assimilation.

It cannot be ignored that some conflict in Catalonia arose between hardcore nationalists and immigrants, while civil wars and violence have littered Catalonia’s past. But the cohesive nature of the language and region contributed to more tolerance. This is perhaps the main reason why there is no Catalan ETA, and why many Catalans are more willing to work with the Spanish state, rejecting outright secession—a striking contrast to the Basques. Aside from pointing out the sheer differences in the role of language in Basque and Catalan nationalism, this linguistic study may explain the disparity in the degree of separatism and violence between them.

A heritage of tolerance and assimilation, brought about by the primacy of Catalan and its similarity to Spanish, clearly must have played a role in the popular eschewing of separatist violence in Catalonia. Colomer concurs, adding, “[n]oneconomic structural variables, such as the very different language linguistic difference between the Spanish language and each of the other two languages, Basque and Catalan, should help [to] explain the higher degree of internal conflict in the Basque Country.”³²

Conclusion

Language has been an asset for Basque and Catalan nationalists, who have used it similarly – as a means to communicate and bond together as nations – or divergently.

Basques, for instance, saw race as the basis for their identity and used language as a segregationist tool, a task that the structure of the Basque language assisted. As Basque is a pre-Indo-European language, it is difficult for immigrants and non-Basques to learn, helping early Basque nationalists to exclude them. Catalans, on the other hand, viewed language as the greatest indicator of their identity, wishing its usage to spread. Given Catalan's linguistic closeness to Spanish, immigrants adopted Catalan with greater ease.

These nationalistic tactics (i.e., employing language for exclusionary and assimilatory means) created differing forms of nationalism in the Basque Country and Catalonia. In the former, many early nationalists viewed themselves as racially superior and became largely intolerant of foreigners, a perverse idea that allowed a radical, violent group such as ETA to emerge. In the latter, immigrants were more easily assimilated, only having to learn the language and adapt to the culture to become Catalan.

This difference in nationalism, however indirectly, even plays itself out in an obsession that practically all nations in Spain share: soccer. The Atletico Bilbao soccer club, a prominent team in the Basque Country, maintains the following policy: It will not accept any players who are not of Basque origin.^b

On the contrary, FC Barcelona, the most popular team in Catalonia and perhaps the world, is home to top international players including Ronaldinho from Brazil, Eto'o from Cameroon, and Messi from Argentina. Reportedly, incoming players must take Catalan language lessons after arrival, but they are accepted and the team is often a source of Catalan pride. This reference is not academic; however, it is another example of how Catalonia is seen as more tolerant and focused on language.

Historically, Basque nationalism focused less on language and more on separatism and violence than Catalonia. But has this changed since the post-Franco democratic transition and the onset of autonomy? Recent public opinion polls confirm

the perpetual differences outlined above. Regarding language, the 1996 census reports that Catalan is spoken by 75% of Catalans, over 40% of non-Catalans, and more than 90% of those born in the region. However, the Basque language is spoken by far fewer people.³³

Separatist attitudes also continue to differ dramatically. According to a November 2006 Basque poll,³⁴ the Euskobarómetro, roughly 32% of the Basque populace favors independence, while a Catalan survey in October of 2006 notes that only approximately 14% desire an independent Catalan state.³⁵

Hence, while not an exact science, it seems that the differences in language and violent, separatist attitudes have crystallized. More Catalans speak Catalan, fewer Catalans favor independence, and no terrorist group of ETA's stature is present in Catalonia—partly because they tied their tongue to tolerance.

Endnotes

¹ Miroslav Hroch espouses this idea, which contrasts to the subjective notion that the nation is derivative, in *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), n.p.

² Stephen Barbour, "Nationalism, Language, Europe," in *Language and Nationalism in Europe*, eds. Stephen Barbour and Cathie Carmichael (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4.

³ Robert Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 105.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵ Barbour, "Nationalism, Language, Europe," 9.

⁶ Albert Breton, "Nationalism and Language Policies," in *Canadian Journal of Economics* 11, no. 4 (November 1978): 662.

⁷ Pauli Balsera, "The Educational System and National Identities: The Case of Spain in the Twentieth Century," in *History of Education* 34, no. 1 (January 2005): 24.

⁸ Juan Diaz Medrano, *Divided Nations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 6.

⁹ Daniele Conversi, *The Basques, the Catalans and Spain*. (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 1997), 163.

¹⁰ Richard Gunther and Goldie Shabad, "Language, Nationalism, and Political Conflict in Spain," in *Comparative Politics* 14, no. 4 (July 1982): 446.

¹¹ Conversi, *The Basques, the Catalans and Spain*, 163.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ Robert Clark, *The Basques* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 1979), 132.

¹⁴ Milton Da Silva, "Modernization and Ethnic Conflict: The Case of the Basques," in *Comparative Politics* 7, no. 2 (January 1975): 230.

¹⁵ Clark, *The Basques*, 133.

¹⁶ Medrano, *Divided Nations*, 139.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

- ¹⁸ Conversi, *The Basques, the Catalans and Spain*, 173.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.
- ²⁰ Gunther and Shabad, "Language, Nationalism, and Political Conflict in Spain," 446.
- ²¹ Earl W. Thomas, "The Resurgence of Catalan," in *Hispania* 45, no. 1 (March 1962): 44.
- ²² Albert Balcells, *Catalan Nationalism: Past and Present* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 27.
- ²³ Gunther and Shabad, "Language, Nationalism, and Political Conflict in Spain," 446.
- ²⁴ Juan J. Linz, "Early State Buildings and Late Peripheral Nationalism Against the State: The Case of Spain," in *Building States and Nations*, ed. S.N. Eisenstadt and Stein Rokkan (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1973), 37.
- ²⁵ Conversi, *The Basques, the Catalans and Spain*, 171.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.
- ²⁸ Salvador Cardús i Ros, "The Memory of Immigration in Catalan Nationalism," in *International Journal of Iberian Studies* 18, no. 1 (2005): 38.
- ²⁹ Gunther and Shabad, "Language, Nationalism, and Political Conflict in Spain," 447.
- ³⁰ Cardús i Ros, "The Memory of Immigration in Catalan Nationalism," 39.
- ³¹ Gunther and Shabad, "Language, Nationalism, and Political Conflict in Spain," 448.
- ³² Josep M. Colomer, "Reviewed Work: *Divided Nations: Class, Politics, and Nationalism in the Basque Country and Catalonia* by Juan Diez Medrano," in *The American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 6 (May 1996): 1724.
- ³³ Josep Costa, "Catalan Linguistic Policy: Liberal or Illiberal?" in *Nations and Nationalism* 9, no. 3 (2003): n.p.
- ³⁴ The poll results can be found online, in Spanish, at the following link:
http://www.ehu.es/cpvweb/paginas/ultimoeusko/ultimoeusko_04.html
- ³⁵ The survey results can be found online, in Catalan, at the following link:
<http://www.idescat.net/cat/idescat/estudisopinio/rpeo/R-363.pdf>