



Presentation by Chunta Aragonesista (CHA) on the situation of the Aragonese minority languages (Aragonese and Catalan)

European Parliament Intergroup on Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages

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Aragon is one of the historical nations on which the current Spanish State was set up. Since its origins back in the 9th century in the central Pyrenees, two languages were born and grew up on its soil: Aragonese and Catalan (the latter originated simultaneously in Catalonia as well as in some areas that have always belonged to Aragon). Both languages expanded Southwards from the mountains down to the Ebro basin, Iberian mountains and Mediterranean shores in medieval times, and became literary languages by their use in the court of the Kings of Aragon, who also were sovereigns of Valencia, Catalonia and Majorca.

In the 15th century a dynastic shift gave the Crown of Aragon to a Castilian prince. The new reigning family only expressed itself in Castilian language. That fact plus the mutual influences of Castilian and Aragonese through their common borders, as well as the lack of a strong linguistic awareness in Aragon facilitated a change in the cultural trends of society. From then on the literary and administrative language had to be Castilian and the old Aragonese and Catalan languages got relegated in Aragon mostly to rural areas or the illiterate.

That process of ‘glottophagy’ or language extinction sped up through the 17th and 18th centuries, especially after the conquest of the country by the King Philip of Bourbon during the Spanish War of Succession and its annexation to Castile. Catalonia, not having a linguistic border with Castile and because of its own cultural, social and political evolution, kept a higher number of speakers of Catalan and –especially over the 19th and 20th centuries- a strong commitment in favour of its language which was to be considered as the most popular basis for national identity.

Much weaker than Catalonia in all the factors that could have helped Aragon’s minority speakers to find a “place in the sun”, significant language awareness only could emerge in Aragon in the late years of Franco’s dictatorship. The political transition brought about an upsurge of the interest for our “hidden” culture and identity, including our marginalized vernacular languages, even if spoken by less than 10% of the Aragonese population. Many NGOs and cultural leaders started to work actively in bringing back to light our trilingual reality. As a result, the accession of Aragon to political autonomy entailed the recognition by the first Statute of Autonomy (1982) of the existence of the “languages and linguistic modalities of Aragon” -without naming them explicitly-, providing for their protection and teaching.

None of it was ever done. Further reforms of the Statute of Autonomy (in 1994, 1996 and 2007) also failed to name our minority languages by their names. Only the prospect of passing a specific law on the issue was introduced in 2007, although several previous laws

approved by the Aragonese parliament contained linguistic provisions in which Catalan and Aragonese were called as such and even some of them (i.e., the 1999 Law on Aragonese Cultural Heritage) stated that such specific Law of Languages of Aragon would give official status to both of them together with the Castilian. These provisions were the result of the consensus reached in a Special Committee on Aragonese Languages of the Parliament of Aragon in 1997 in which all the political parties agreed upon the need to recognize such denominations and status for the Aragonese languages in the law to be passed by the parliament in a nearby future... which only came twelve years after.

In 2009, in the wake of a series of claims, actions and demonstrations made by NGOs, the majoritary party in the coalition government, the Socialist Party, in disagreement with its partner in government (Partido Aragonés, centre-conservative Aragonese regionalist party) tabled a bill on this issue which, after a series of amendments and negotiations, was supported by Chunta Aragonesista (Aragonese nationalist) and eventually approved by the Aragonese Parliament. It provided for:

- Precise definition of linguistic territories
- Setting up of Aragonese academies
- Teaching in schools as a curricular subject (now they are taught in a limited number of schools once the academic activities are over)
- Social dignification and cultural promotion
- Use to communicate with public administrations
- Promotion and use by the media and in social and economic life
- Promotion of civil society initiatives

All these provisions are voluntary for particulars, defining (limited) obligations only for public instances.

The law failed to give official status to these languages, but in many respects such equivalence can be easily assessed. For Chunta Aragonesista it was not the Law we aimed at, but it was at least a good first step to start with. The amendments we introduced also guaranteed that the European Charter on Regional and Minority Languages, whose article 7 is applicable to Aragon, was duly applied, as it had been requested by Council of Europe's experts in their two previous monitoring reports.

However, the previous government did not apply this Law at all, the only exception being the setting up of the Aragonese Languages Council. For the rest none of the deadlines were met: creation the official language academies, introduction the teaching of Aragonese and Catalan as curricular subjects for those students wishing to take them, the appointment of qualified civil servants to apply the law, the possibility of using these languages when communicating with some public administrations, the use of Aragonese and Catalan by public-owned media and their promotion in private ones, their fostering in economic, social and cultural life... Nothing materialized even partially during one and a half years before the regional election that gave the government of Aragon to the People's Party in May 2011.

During that election campaign, the People's Party and the Aragonese Party attacked harshly the Law of Aragonese Languages and those who supported it, claiming that it obliged citizens to study these languages or even use it. The general "argument" held then and now in government is that Aragonese does not exist: there are only local dialects, apparently with no relation among them. That's what they call "linguistic modalities" (*modalities of what?*) to avoid using the term Aragonese. They claim that all the process carried out to set up a common linguistic standard (absolutely necessary to ensure its survival) is considered an aggression to the preservation of the "genuine" local dialectal "patois". Attacks against Catalan are even more ruthless: since in Catalonia language is a strong identifying feature, recognizing that there are Catalan speakers in Aragon would mean that a part of the Aragonese population and the territory where they live could be given up to Catalonia, even against the will of that population (which actually feel proudly Aragonese), thus yielding to the territorial claims of pan-Catalan movements. As a consequence, an anti-Catalan campaign with the slogan "We do not speak Catalan" rejected all philological evidence about what this Aragonese language is; by doing it, unwittingly they might also be giving satisfaction to pan-Catalans, as they seemed to accept the premise that "you are what you speak". Thus, "if we don't speak Catalan, we are not Catalans". Anti-Catalan phobia reached its peak when the People's Party broadcasted an election radio spot with the statement that Catalan was to be "imposed" even in non-Catalan speaking areas of Aragon, like Zaragoza, our capital city, something conspicuously presented as scandalous.

The new government of Aragon that came out of that election made public statements on its will to "cut" the -so far largely unapplied- Law of Languages to wipe out any "obligation" on citizens and the "imposition" of Catalan and to reject the use of Aragonese or Catalan for administrative purposes. They announced the introduction of their reform for March 2012, but so far no initiative has been disclosed. In the meantime, the government of Aragon has made severe budgetary cuts in the few existing programs aimed at the social and cultural promotion of our minority languages, teachers' training and support to NGOs. The cultural and social promotion scheme for the Catalan language was directly withdrawn.

In this context, some NGOs began to express publicly their protest and Chunta Aragonésista submitted on March 24th a report to the Council of Europe about this situation. Even the only official body created by the Aragonese government, the Aragonese Languages Council, expressed its discontent to the regional Minister of Education and Culture, who met for the first -and last- time with the Council six months after her appointment despite the repeated requests made by its President. The lack of communication between the government and the Council continued after that meeting and, due to the lack of response given to the last letter, both President and Vice-President of the Council resigned on May 10th. At this moment discouragement and anger spread among NGOs and protest campaigns are not to be ruled out in the near future both in Aragon and abroad, to raise awareness on the dramatic situation that undergo Catalan and -far closer to actual extinction- Aragonese languages.

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