

## A BRIEF OUTLINE OF HISTORICAL SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF THE GALICIAN LANGUAGE

---

XAVIER FRÍAS CONDE  
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

### 1. THE GALICIAN LANGUAGE AND ITS SPEAKERS<sup>1</sup>

Galician is a minority language spoken in the West of Spain belonging to the Romance languages family. It is spoken in Galicia and also in the neighbouring areas of the Spanish provinces of Asturias, León and Zamora. Far away from this area, there are three villages in Extremadura region in west Spain, next to the Portuguese border and just under the border with the province of Salamanca (this is the so-called Xálima region<sup>2</sup>).

Therefore Galician is theoretically the language of about 3 million inhabitants, of which more than 95% live in Galicia. Important minorities of Galician immigrants live out of Galicia, so that Galician is still spoken in certain big cities such as Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Madrid (Spain).

It is difficult to know exactly how many speakers Galician has. Despite the various interviews performed, it is almost impossible to work out the exact number of its speakers. According to the last Atlas of the ILG (1996), it is easy to see how the evolution in the use of the language has developed all over the last years.

As for the use of Galician, it can roughly been shown like this:

**Table 1**

---

Speakers born up to the 50:	95%
Speakers born in the 60's	50%
Speakers born in the 70's	30%
Speakers born in the 80's	10%

---

<sup>1</sup> I want to thank Cristina Blanco for her valuable comments and help, which have been incorporated in to this work.

<sup>2</sup> This point is under discussion. For many authors it is merely Galician-Portuguese, without ascribing this dialect to either Galician or Portuguese.

But it is quite different when speakers live in towns or in villages or hamlets. Urban speakers may not even speak Galician, so that certain cities like A Coruña or Vigo have very few Galician speakers, since the common language for every day situations is Spanish. In most cases, villages whose population is over 10.000 inhabitants may have lost Galician as its every day language. Santiago de Compostela, the capital city of Galicia, is an important exception to this rule.

Thus Galician still lives in the rural areas while in cities it withdraws. But these data are referred to the use of spoken Galician. The knowledge of written Galician has increased however during the last 20 years thanks to the entrance of Galician into the Educational System and the presence of some media in Galician, though I will refer to them later.

However, it is interesting to quote the phenomenon of the new-speakers. Young people possessing a high linguistic awareness and who have Spanish as their mother tongue have moved into Galician in a given moment of their lives; this is possible mainly to the received education in Galician. Nevertheless the fact of turning up new Galician speakers does not stop the continuous lost of speakers of Galician.

That is why Galician is a language which can disappear in a few years since the linguistic substitution does not stop.

## **2. THE SOCIAL SITUATION OF GALICIAN**

### **2. 1. The Historical Process: From the Middle Ages**

The Galician-Portuguese mediaeval literature was one of the best known in Europe. For nearly three centuries the Galician and Portuguese lyrical poets sang all over west Europe and had narrow contacts with the Provençal troubadours.

The creation of the Portuguese kingdom and the strength of the Castilian crown in Galicia favoured the separation of Galicia and Portugal in all aspects. Portuguese became a cultivated language (it became official in the new kingdom) while Spanish became the only official language in Galicia as well in the Leonese kingdom. That causes a dark period from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in which there is neither an administrative nor a literary use of Galician.

Hopefully the Romantic period changes things. There is an important rebirth of the conscience about Galicia and its language –which is parallel to the one occurred in Catalonia with the Catalan language. Some new and important authors write again in Galician after four centuries of silence. But the Renaissance, in Galicia, has mainly a cultural importance as the language did not reach any official status until the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Despite its highest consideration by generations and generations of Galician intellectuals and the defence of this important identity mark by nationalists all over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the language has not replaced Spanish in any of the fields it has been in since the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The rebirth of Galician in literature and culture does not have an important effect upon the population. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Galician becomes even more the language of the rural areas while Spanish tends to become the common vehicle of communication in urban centres. This century suffered from the strong repression of General Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975), during which all other languages than Spanish were

prosecuted. The continuous weakening of Galician during the last century became faster during Franco's regime.

The 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have witnessed the birth of a powerful and interesting literature but at the same time the constant lost of speakers. It is even so after the acknowledge of Galician as the co-official language of Galicia after 1979, when it gained its special statute of self-government within the Spanish state. Galician was officially standardised, it is officially used in all public documents, and it is present in the educational system, but things are not so easy, because in spite of all these apparently empowering factors, Galician is more and more a less-used language.

## 2. 2. Galician in the Media and in the Society

The use of Galician is ruled by means of a specific law (1982). It has favoured the increasing use of Galician in the media, but in no moment since 1980 has never reached a similar level to Spanish. In order to show things briefly, we can point out that Galician is present:

- ❑ **Newspapers**: there are nowadays two newspapers in Galician and probably there will be a new one in a short time. The main newspapers in Galician are in Spanish but most of them include articles and reports in Galician.
- ❑ **Television and radio**: there is a public station whose programmes are entirely in Galician. One of the state stations has several hours of emission in Galician. There is also a public radio station in Galician and several private stations broadcast in Galician as well.
- ❑ **Books and edition in general**: books in Galician are a happy reality. There is an important production of them and the number of books printed in Galician increases every year. Galician is now used for all kind of editions, even as a language for Science, Law or Mechanics.
- ❑ **Education**: Galician should be, by law, present in the 50% of the school subjects. However this is not accomplished in the 90% of the cases and the Galician government does not show any interest in making schools follow the law.

When an outer visitor sees all the means set up to protect and promote Galician it is difficult to imagine that the language is losing speakers so quickly. However this is the sad reality. It is true, however, that new speakers are using more and more Galician. This phenomenon is not exclusive of Galician, but it is also common in the Basque Country, Catalonia, Valencia, the Balearic Islands or Asturias, where children educated in Spanish learn the language they could not get through their parents. These are the so-called *new-speakers* (in Galician *neofalantes*, in Spanish *neohablantes*).

Another positive aspect is that most of Galician do not consider their own language as an inferior way to speak. Bilingualism is appreciated in most cases, so young people may change their register with no difficulty. Their parents and grandparents were marked generations in which the use of Galician was punished at schools. Nevertheless, these same younger generations do not appreciate, in many cases, to have a historical language, they prefer to use the common language of the whole state in which they get all they need, their fun, their hobbies, their education. All of them have received a part

of their education in Galician but in most cases they do not become active speakers of this language.

### 3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GALICIAN AND PORTUGUESE

Traditionally the Romance linguistics has considered Galician and Portuguese as a unity. However it is not perfectly defined this concept, because of extra-linguistic reasons which have always had an important influence upon linguists.

Undoubtedly Portuguese is a language according to linguistic and sociolinguistic patterns. But as for Galician, the consideration of language according to sociolinguistic patterns is really recent. Therefore it is paradoxical that Galician may be studied independently as a tongue but at the same time there is no reason to include its studies within that rather undefined name of Lusitanistics, so widespread in the German tradition. Even in Spain (except currently in the University of Santiago de Compostela and for not very clear reasons) there is a unique degree called Galician-Portuguese Philology.

Some scholars adopted the term *codialects* to refer to this peculiar relationship between Galician and Portuguese in order to avoid defining whether they are languages or dialects. According to this vocable, Galician and Portuguese may be considered as independent languages (sociolinguistic criterion) but their narrow relation has not broken yet (linguistic criterion).

#### 3.1. Other similar cases in the Romania

It is interesting to have a glance around Europe and try to find similar situations. The first one is in the neighbouring linguistic dominion, Asturian-leonese. Here Asturian is a language experiencing a process of standardisation, spoken in the Northern Principality of Asturias. Some hundred kilometres bellow Mirandese is experiencing the same process. For obvious reason, the spelling system on which Asturian is based cannot be other than the Spanish one with a few innovations; meanwhile Mirandese uses the Portuguese spelling system adapted to its own peculiarities. The differences between Asturian (mainly standard Asturian which was build up on Central Asturian) and Mirandese are much bigger than the ones existing between Galician and Portuguese. Hopelessly the two parallel processes, Asturian and Mirandese ones, do not coincide and run autonomously despite the important attempts carried out to try to find a common path that would save their still remote linguistic unity.

The next case is Catalan and Occitan. Their unity is much weaker and no current linguist would defend today the unity between these two languages in spite of the general belief existing during the Middle Ages and still in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Catalan was a mere variant of Occitan. As for Romance Linguistics, some authors like Pièrre Bec maintain that Occitan and Catalan are a uniform linguistic group, different from Ibero-romance and Gallo-romance, called Occitano-romance by him.

Outside the Iberian Peninsula there is an outstanding and singular case that is really shocking. This is Sardinian, a language that has been the target of important arguments about its nature, classification and standardisation of this Romance language. But what

turns out to be really interesting is the consideration of its two main dialects: Logudorese (spoken approximately in the northern part of the Island) and Campidanese (spoken almost elsewhere). The different trends to be found may be simplified in the following way:

- (a) It is necessary to create two different substandards for each main variant (Blasco Ferrer 1996);
- (b) The only possible standardisation may be performed by using Logudorese as the base of the standard (despite is not the variant spoken by most of the Sardinians) (Corraïne 1998);
- (c) The standardisation of Sardinian must be taken as a whole, so that the spelling system must be over-dialectal (Bolognesi, 2000).

In almost no case the unity of Sardinian has been denied. The problem lies on the profound differences between the two main dialects of the Sardinian language. I would dare to say that the mutual understanding between northern and southern Sardinian speakers is worse than between speakers of Galician and Portuguese.

It is clear that the sociolinguistic reasons are much heavier than the mere linguistic ones in the case of Galician and the consideration of its status in front of Portuguese.

## **3.2. Positions as for the relationship between Galician and Portuguese**

Apart from the comments that the status of *codialects* is held as an official position, within the Galician society there is a great deal of trends. Nevertheless this is not a debate in which most of the population takes part. So I am going to refer to the main tendencies defended by intellectuals. The positions vary from the absolute defence of the Galician independence up to the defence of the necessary unity with Portuguese, but there are many other positions in the middle. These trends show different spelling systems and in certain cases distinct morpho-syntactic and lexical choices.

### **3.2.1. The official position: the ruling Galician standard**

The approval of the current Galician standard occurred in 1982. It was performed by an official institution, the Instituto da Lingua Galega (=Institute of the Galician Language), according to the lines marked by the Real Academia Galega (=Royal Galician Academy). All official institutions follow this norm in all circumstances. It may be described as the most isolated vision of Galician within the Lusophony. It adapted the Spanish spelling system to the Galician phonological features including some surprising elements, such as allomorphs for the definite article written by means of an hyphen and the dieresis in certain verbal forms. The different degrees of /e/ and /o/ are not marked in the spell, except in the case of diacritics. In the morphological field the choice is isolating as well, looking for the difference from Portuguese without minding the coincidences with Spanish (e.g. between Portuguese *viver*, *escrever*, *perceber*, *dizer* and Spanish *vivir*, *escribir*, *percibir*, *decir*, the standard forms of this Galician verbs follow the Spanish rule (for *decir* in Galician there is *dicir*). The justification lies on the generalisation of these forms in the common speech, but the influence of Spanish is an element to be taken into account.

### ***3.2.2. The possibilist position:***

This a recent current promoted by ancient reintegrationists (see later). Possibilists defend the survival of the language over internal and useless fights to argue about the standard. Therefore they accept the official norm but add many morphological and lexical items from the minimalists (see later) that approach to Portuguese.

### ***3.2.3. The minimalists:***

This is a trend started mainly by Ricardo Carvalho Calero in the 70's of the former century. The Spanish-based spelling system is completed with some Portuguese-based elements, such as the use of hyphens to separate clitics from verbs, use of <b> and <v> according to the Portuguese tradition, etc. The original proposal has been modified in the last years in an attempt to get closer to the possibilist option. As for morphology and lexicon, the approach into Portuguese is the same as in the possibilist option.

### ***3.2.4. The maximalists or reintegrationism:***

Its defenders understand that Galician forms a unity with Portuguese, therefore the Portuguese spelling system has been adapted to the Galician habits. Certain Galician forms, such as verbal and nominal endings, preposition and some other are respected, but as for the rest, the Portuguese norm is the only model.

### ***3.2.5. The lusism:***

For some people it is useless to use a particular variant so standard European Portuguese is the only possible written language to be used by Galicians.

## **3.3. Galician versus Portuguese?**

As a conclusion, Galician is the only minority Romance language suffering from a similar situation. Other romance languages were not divided artificially into two new tongues so that one part is minored while the other is official in a different state. The maintenance of this situation is favouring the separation between Galician and Portuguese started some centuries ago. Only the relationship between Flemish and Dutch, outside the Romania, may be compared. However it must be recognised that most of the Galician population does not identify their language with Portuguese (it is not an irreversible situation, though).

It is interesting to compare the position of Galician in front of Portuguese defended by all these trends. They may be summarised in the following table:

**Table 2**

Trend	Status of Galician			
	Galician and Portuguese as independent	Galician belonging to Lusophone world but autonomously	Galician belonging to the Lusophone world with its own norm	Galician is Portuguese
officialism	+	–	–	–
possibilism	–	+	+/-	–
minimals	–	+	+	–
maximals	–	–	+	–
lusism	–	–	–	+

#### 4. THE SUBSTANDARDS OF GALICIAN OUTSIDE GALICIA

If there was not enough confusion with the existing standards in Galicia, a couple of neighbouring areas also show conflicts as for the normalisation of the Galician dialects spoken in those territories.

Galician is spoken, as it was already said, in the east strips beyond the Galician border, i.e., in the Asturias, León and Zamora provinces, as well as in a little region of the Cáceres province. I am going to refer to the first and the last of these areas.

##### 4.1. Galician in Asturias, the so-called Eonavian Galician

The west strip of Asturias by the Galician border possesses the highest number of Galician speakers outside Galicia, which must be around 50.000. The local Galician dialect presents a long series of particular features that make it quite singular within the Galician language. Its speakers are utterly aware of the personality of their dialect.

However for clear political reasons, Asturian cultural and political groups have promoted among the inhabitants of this western area and also in the rest of Asturias that the language of this zone is a mixture of Asturian and Galician, which from a linguistic point of view is completely absurd. Apart from these alien influences, for internal reasons it is necessary to admit that the original Galician dialect spoken in Asturias needs its own way to be standardised. The belonging to a different region (Asturias) and the heavy load of the Galician-Asturian border are the main reasons I perceive for this. Personally I am not keen on the creation of substandards but it has been proved that the current Galician standard is not accepted by most of the Galician-speaking community of the Eo-Navia region in Asturias. Therefore there had been two main tendencies up to now:

1. The isolationist: its aim is to declare an independent language within the Galician-Portuguese ensemble. It is called Asturian-Galician and the usual spelling system is an adaptation of the Asturian one.

2. The integralist: its aim is to keep Eonavian Galician within the Galician language. It accepts the substandard but it must be build up within the existing one for Galician<sup>3</sup>.

The survival of Galician in Asturias depends on many different factors. First of all, Galician has not been recognised by the Asturian autonomous government, although Asturian has a feeble law which has not been developed yet and which in no case admits the co-officiality of Asturian. According to this law (1998), Galician, here called Galician-Asturian, is said to enjoy the same rights as Asturian.

Anyway, all the Galician TV and radio stations are easily received in this area which allows to maintain a slight hope in the future of the language. The presence of Galician at school is really scarce.

#### ***4.1.2. Galician in Extremadura***

The little region of Xalma is at least 700 kilometres away from Galicia. The presence of a Galician dialect in this area is due to historical reasons coming directly from the repopulation of this land after their conquest to the Moors (13<sup>th</sup>).

Not all the authors admit that this is a Galician-speaking area. For some of them it is only Galician-Portuguese. Anyway most of the Extramadurian Galician speakers consider their dialect much closer to Galician than to Portuguese, despite they are 10 kilometres away from the Portuguese border.

During the last ten years the people of this area are aware of their language. They reject the Galician standard because it is far away from the reality of their dialect. That is why the search of a local norm has become one of the main aims of some people in order to take the language into school and try to make it survive.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

Despite all the laws in favour of Galician approved during the last twenty years, Galician is more and more a minored language, with a scarcer number of speakers. In most cases the language is not transmitted at home yet, from parents into children.

Anyway the Galician literature is living its best moment and there immense possibilities to develop a cultural activity in Galician.

It is necessary to clarify, from a sociolinguistic point of view, the relationships between Galician and Portuguese. It is needed that Galician enters the Lusophone world.

The outer Galician speaking areas show a peculiar need for a substandard within the Galician language.

---

<sup>3</sup> The last proposal for an Eonavian substandard is the one presented by the Cotarelo Valledor group of writers (2001), which is an adaptation and improvement of a former one.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

APPEL, RENÉ & PIETER MUYSKEN (1996): *Bilingüismo y contacto de lenguas*, Barcelona, Ariel Lingüística.

ATLAS LINGÜÍSTICO GALEGO (3 vols.)

Vol I Morfoloxía verbal (1990). 2 volumes. A Coruña: Fundación Pedro Barrié de la Maza, Conce de Fenosa.

Vol 2 (1995). Morfoloxía non verbal. A Coruña: Fundación....

Vol 3 ¿Léxico? Aínda inédito.

FERNÁNDEZ RODRÍGUEZA, M & M. A. RODRÍGUEZ NEIRA (coord.)

1994: *Lingua inicial e competencia lingüística en Galicia*, A Coruña, RAG.

1995: *Usos lingüísticos en Galicia*, A Coruña, RAG.

1996: *Actitudes lingüísticas en Galicia*, A Coruña, RAG.

FERNÁNDEZ RODRÍGUEZA, M & M. A. RODRÍGUEZ NEIRA (coord.)

1994: *Lingua inicial e competencia lingüística en Galicia*, A Coruña, RAG.

1995: *Usos lingüísticos en Galicia*, A Coruña, RAG.

1996: *Actitudes lingüísticas en Galicia*, A Coruña, RAG.

FRÍAS CONDE, F. X. (2001): *Resumo de gramática eonaviega*. CCV. On-line edition:

<http://www.terra.es/personal/cvalledor>

GARCÍA NEGRO, P. (1991): *O galego e as leis. Aproximación sociolingüística*, Madrid, Edicións do Cumio

ILG & RAG (1997): *Normas ortográficas e morfolóxicas do idioma galego*, Santiago, RAG.

MONTEAGUDO, H (ed.) (1995): *Estudios de sociolingüística galega. Sobre a norma do galego culto*, Vigo, Galaxia.

MONTEAGUDO, H (1999): *Historia social da lingua galega. Idioma, sociedade e cultura a través do tempo*, Vigo, Galaxia.