

## THE PRESENT STATE OF ARAGONESE

Brian Mott

Universitat de Barcelona

mott@ub.edu

### Abstract

How much Aragonese is still spoken remains largely an unknown quantity. Naturally, establishing the number of speakers of any variety begs the question of what speaking a language actually means, and the picture is often clouded by the political interests of particular groups, as is the case in Aragon. The strong claim to the continued widespread use of Aragonese made by such associations as the *Consello d'a Fabla* in Huesca is counterbalanced by that of the more reactionary, sceptical academics at the University of Saragossa, who maintain that Aragonese varieties, ignoring the Catalan of Aragon spoken right down *La Franja*, the transition area between Aragon and Catalonia, now only survive in certain pockets of resistance across the north of Huesca.

This paper will attempt to provide a summary of the available facts and report on some of the author's own findings during his more recent trips to Aragon.

### Keywords

Spanish dialectology, Aragonese, standardization of Aragonese, vitality of Aragonese

### 1. Aragonese: historical background

Aragonese is the variety of Romance spoken in the region of north-east Spain called Aragon (now mainly in the Province of Huesca, rather than the other provinces, Zaragoza and Teruel — see fig. 3) between Catalonia to the east, Navarre to the west and the Gascon-speaking area of France across the Pyrenees to the north. To the south and south-west of Huesca we find mainly Castilian spoken with an Aragonese accent and including some local items of vocabulary.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, the Ebro valley is romanized but the high Pyrenean valleys do not come fully under Roman influence until the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, after a long period of bilingualism, during which Basque is assumed to have been spoken right

across the Pyrenees (if place-name elements are anything to go by<sup>1</sup>), and indeed no doubt continued to be spoken well into the Middle Ages.

The Aragonese dialect originated in the tiny state of Aragon, a territory which was first confined to what is now north-west Huesca, and which takes its name from two rivers: the Aragon, which runs through Jaca, and the Aragon-Subordan, which flows into the Aragon from the Valley of Hecho. Aragon came into existence around 800, when it was under the protection of Charlemagne. The first count was Galindo Aznar I (833?-864?). On the death of Galindo Aznar II (893?-922?), Aragon became part of Navarre, but in 1035, Sancho III (the Great) of Navarre left the state to his son Ramiro, whereby it became an independent kingdom. Ramiro I, the first king of Aragon, annexed the territories of Sobrarbe and Ribagorza, which lay to the east, in 1044 (see fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>

The Moorish invasion did not have much effect on the lives of the inhabitants of the Pyrenees. The Moors established themselves in Saraqusta (Saragossa) in 714 and called the whole of this northern frontier, which embraced Saragossa, Huesca, Calatayud, Tarragona, Lérida and Tortosa, *Marca/Frontera Superior*. Directly to the north of Saragossa, they reached Loarre and Alquézar, and in Sobrarbe they got as far as Boltaña, seven kilometres north-west of Aínsa.<sup>3</sup>

In the cities of Saragossa and Huesca, Mozarabic was spoken, but there was no real Moorish influence north of these places. The most northerly regions simply paid taxes for a time: for example, in the PAGUS GISTAUENSIS (now the Valley of Gistau) of the TERRITORIUM BOLTANUM a tribute called the “jarach” was levied (Durán, 1975: 8-10), but the eventual refusal of the local communities to pay such tithes leads to political independence and the beginning of the Reconquest of all the territory lost to the Moors.

Through the Reconquest, Aragon expands south in an effort which is equalled across the whole of the north of Spain. Huesca is conquered by Pedro I in 1098, and Saragossa is regained in 1118 by Alfonso I the Battler (Sp. *Alfonso el Batallador*).

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<sup>1</sup> Basque territory is now confined to the western part of the Pyrenees, the eastern boundary being the valley of Roncal in Navarre, but Basque place-names abound further east: in the Province of Huesca, witness the village of Hecho, whose name means ‘house’, and even further east, the tautologous toponym Valley of Aran.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of the facts, see, for example, Lafoz (2005).

<sup>3</sup> “Parece seguro que la ocupación musulmana de Sobrarbe alcanzó hasta Boltaña” (Lacarra, 1960: 147)

Aragon and Catalonia are united in 1137 by the marriage of Petronila, daughter of Ramiro II (the Monk) to Count Ramon Berenguer IV of Barcelona, and Aragon becomes bilingual (trilingual if we count the use of Latin). The union favours the commercial expansion of Catalonia overseas, while Aragon is relied on to guard the frontier with Castile. But later the nobles of Aragon begin to favour union with Castile in order to counterbalance Catalonia's mercantile policy, and in 1412 the House of Trastamara comes to reign in Aragon after being elected through the "Compromiso de Caspe". In order to avoid a civil war, representatives of Catalonia, Valencia and Majorca came to an agreement in Caspe with the Castilians after Martin "el humano" died without descent.

Castilianization of Aragonese texts is reckoned to have been complete by about 1500. According to the French linguist Pottier,<sup>4</sup> the process is at its strongest between 1460 and 1500. In the 16th century, Philip II abolished the "fueros" ('local laws') of Aragon, and no more documents were issued in Aragonese after that. We have no concrete data about the Castilianization of spoken Aragonese, but the language must have undergone gradual erosion, with loss of local dialects in the Province of Teruel and the southern and central areas of the Province of Saragossa during the sixteenth century, to be eventually confined to the Province of Huesca in modern times, particularly the valleys bordering on France (see fig. 5). Until the demise of the Franco regime on the dictator's death in 1975, and the subsequent rise of regional autonomy in Spain, Aragonese was widely regarded as provincial, uneducated speech, unworthy of attention, and the accent, particularly that of Saragossa, was often the butt of ridicule.<sup>5</sup> In recent times, various associations have attempted to change this negative perception, and have taken measures to protect the surviving local dialects, and even standardize and encourage the use of the Aragonese language as a respectable tool of communication.

The old Kingdom of Aragon survived until 1833, when it was divided into the three existing provinces of Huesca, Saragossa and Teruel (see fig. 3).

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<sup>4</sup> "La pénétration castillane, accidentelle avant le XV<sup>e</sup> siècle, a commencé réellement vers 1460, et la castillanisation était à peu près achevée en 1500." (Pottier 1952: 198).

<sup>5</sup> The speech of the city of Saragossa (and the Ebro Valley) is characterized by a steep rise + fall intonation pattern on the post-tonic or final syllable of the word that receives the sentence or phrasal stress (*¡Comes mucho-o-o!*). The duration and intensity of the syllable in question also play a key role in marking its prominence and giving the hearer the impression of an unusual prosodic type. For details, see Simón (2009).

## 2. Dialectal areas of Aragon

It is possible to distinguish several different dialectal areas in Aragon based on the presence or absence of various linguistic traits which permit us to establish a certain degree of internal cohesion in each one (see fig. 4). It must always be borne in mind, however, that the degree of vitality of the local dialects of Aragon varies enormously from one area to another and, apart from geographical location, is dependent on sociolinguistic factors, such as age, sex, standard of education and social mobility of the speakers. If a person's job requires them to travel even short distances, this will bring them into contact with speakers of other varieties and, of course, Castilian, which, it must not be forgotten, is the dominant language in Aragon today, and is spoken by all members of the Aragonese community. My classification, which is based on Nagore and Gimeno (1989: 18), who recognize six areas, divides Aragon into seven different linguistic areas. The information provided is basically a translation of that expounded in Mott, 2005 (21-25) with some expansion, modification and updating where appropriate.

**Area 1: *aragonés occidental*.** It stretches from the River Aragon in the east to the Province of Navarre in the west. The valleys of Ansó and Hecho are the only areas with well-defined local dialects, the village of Hecho having the most robust form of Aragonese in the area: *el cheso* (< *echeso*). The speech of Ansó appears to be much less well preserved.

Most of the area traditionally uses the articles *o, a, os, as*, but Hecho, Aragüés and Jasa have *lo, la, los, las*. Past participles end in *-au* and *-iu* (*puyau* 'risen', *muyiu* 'milked'), as opposed to *-ato* and *-ito* further east, and *-ado* and *-ido* in Castilian.

**Area 2: *aragonés pirenaico central*.** It stretches from the River Gállego in the west to the River Cinca in the east; to the south it is bounded by the Rivers Guarga and Basa. Little pristine dialect remains despite use in the literature on Aragonese of names like *panticuto, bergotés* and *tensino* to refer to the speech of the valleys of Panticosa, Broto and Tena, respectively, where, in fact, Castilian has taken over (see 4 below). However, some interesting dialect features can still be heard from the remaining speakers. The most interesting of these is the preservation of unvoiced intervocalic plosive consonants: *capeza* (Sp. *cabeza* 'head'), *ixato* (Sp. *azada* 'spade'), *caixico* (Sp. *quejigo* 'oak'), and past participles like *comprato* (Sp. *comprado* 'bought'), *ito* (Sp. *ido* 'gone'). With regard to verbal morphology, note also that <b> is preserved in the

conditional in Panticosa (Nagore, 1986: 169-171): *trobarba* (Sp. *encontraría* ‘would find’), *meterba* (Sp. *pondría*, *metería* ‘would put’), *escribirba* (Sp. *escribiría* ‘would write’). Another archaic feature is voicing of plosives after a nasal or liquid, though this is rarely heard today: *cambo* (Sp. *campo* ‘field’), *fuande* (Sp. *fuelle* ‘fountain, spring’), *bango* (Sp. *banco* ‘bench’), *aldo* (Sp. *alto* ‘high’), *ixordica* (Sp. *ortiga* ‘nettle’). There is scanty survival of the articles *o*, *a*, *os*, *as* (*ro*, *ra*, *ros*, *ras* after a vowel: *de ros millors* [Sp. *de los mejores* ‘of the best’], *enta ro lugar* [Sp. *hacia el pueblo* ‘to the village’]). Bielsa, however, has *el*, *la*, *es*, *las*, like Gistaín in area 4. Also typical of area 2 are the diphthongs <ua> and <ia>, Spanish <ue> and <ie>, respectively: *fuande* (Sp. *fuelle* ‘fountain, spring’), *puande* (Sp. *puente* ‘bridge’), *viallo* (Sp. *viejo* ‘old’), *tiango* (Sp. *tengo* ‘I have’), recorded especially in the valleys of Broto and Vio. These diphthongs are reminiscent of those found in Modern Romanian: *iapă* (Sp. *yegua* ‘mare’), *iarbă* (Sp. *hierba* ‘grass’), *piatră* (Sp. *piedra* ‘stone’); *coardă* (Sp. *cuerda* ‘rope’), *poartă* (Sp. *puerta* ‘door’), *poate* (Sp. *puede* ‘is able’), *soare* (Sp. *sol* ‘sun’).

**Area 3: aragonés meridional.** It occupies principally the sub-areas called Somontano de Huesca and Somontano de Barbastro. This is a highly homogeneous, Castilianized area with residual Aragonese lexis and elements of grammar, such as sporadic use of the articles *o*, *a*, *os*, *as* (but *lo*, etc. in El Grado and Naval). We also find the Aragonese preposition *enta/ta* ‘towards’ < INDE + AD?/INTUS + AD? (Sp. *a*, *hacia*), the adverbial particle *en/ne* ‘of it, etc.’ < INDE, and less frequently the adverbial *bi/i* ‘there’ < IBI (*no n’i hay* ‘there is none’, Sp. *no hay*). One also hears some instances of the imperfect with intervocalic <-b-> in the ending of the second and third conjugation: *sabeba* (Sp. *sabía* ‘knew’), *saliba* (Sp. *salía* ‘used to go out’).

**Area 4: aragonés oriental.** The northern dialects in this area are spoken between the River Cinca to the west and the River Ésera to the east. The southern frontier is around Fonz. The most well preserved variety is *chistabino* (spoken principally in Gistaín), which is still in use. The most interesting feature is the use of the periphrastic preterite formed with the verb *ir* ‘to go’, as in Catalan, except in La Comuna (Sin, Señes and Serveto), Salinas, Aínsa and the western half of La Fueva. Thus in Gistaín: *voy puyar*, *vas puyar*, *va puyar*, *von puyar*, *voz puyar*, *van puyar* (Sp. *subí*, *subiste*, *subió*, *subimos*, *subisteis*, *subieron* ‘I went up, etc.’). Further south, this type of verbal morphology is found again in places such as Graus and Fonz.

The definite articles are *el, la, es, las*, except in Salinas, Aínsa and the western half of La Fueva, which have *los* instead of *es*, and very occasionally *o, a, os, as*. The speech varieties of this area are considered to be Aragonese, rather than Catalan, partly in view of the general tendency to diphthongize Latin short stressed Ē and Ō (SEPTĒM > *siete* ‘seven’, PORTA > *puerta* ‘door’), though there are also cases in which the diphthongization is not carried through: Graus *ben* (Sp. *bien* ‘well’), *dent* (Sp. *diente* ‘tooth’), *pedra* (Sp. *piedra* ‘stone’), *cova* (Sp. *cueva* ‘cave’), *bous* (Sp. *bueyes* ‘oxen’).

**Area 5: the Catalan of Aragon.** Catalan varieties, closely akin to those spoken within Catalonia just across the regional border, are spoken in a swathe of territory running from an area to the east of Benasque in the north right down to the Province of Castellón in the south. This territory is called *La Franja (Oriental [de Aragón])* (from the Aragonese perspective, i.e. ‘the Eastern Fringe’). Apart from preservation of Latin initial F- (*fulla* ‘leaf’, Sp. *hoja* < FOLIA), which is typical of Catalan and Aragonese in general, the most interesting phonological features of the area are:

1. Palatalization of Latin initial L-: *llengua* ‘tongue, language’ (Sp. *lengua*) < LINGUA.
2. Palatalization of the lateral in the clusters PL-, BL-, FL-, CL- in Ribagorza, though not south of Fraga: *ploure* ‘to rain’ (Sp. *llover*), *bllanc* ‘white’ (Sp. *blanco*), *flor* ‘flower’ (Sp. *flor*), *cllot* ‘hole, cavity’ (Sp. *hoyo*).
3. Palatalization of the medial clusters -LY-, -C’L-, -G’L-: *filla* ‘daughter’ (Sp. *hija*) < FILIA, *abella* ‘bee’ (Sp. *abeja*) < APICULA, *rella* ‘ploughshare’ (Sp. *reja [del arado]*) < REGULA.
4. Reduction of -CT- to [t]: *nit* ‘night’ (Sp. *noche*) < NOCTE, *llit* ‘bed’ (Sp. *lecho*) < LECTU.
5. Latin initial J- and G- > [tʃ] in some dialects: *chermà* ‘brother’ (Sp. *hermano*) < GERMANU, *chitar-se* ‘to lie down’ (Sp. *echarse*) < \*JECTARE < JACTARE. The resolution in other dialects and in Eastern Catalan is a voiced fricative or affricate.
6. No diphthongization of Ē and Ō: *dent* ‘tooth’ (Sp. *diente*) < DENTE, *font* ‘fountain, spring’ (Sp. *f fuente*) < FONTE.
7. Five vowels in the atonic system, as opposed to three in Eastern Catalan: *ansa* ‘handle’, *mare* ‘mother’, *ivert* ‘winter’, *obrir* ‘open’, *budell* ‘intestine’.

**Area 6: the transition area** between Aragonese and Catalan. This area extends from Benasque in the north down to San Esteban de Litera, a village only six

kilometres from the Castilian-speaking town of Binéfar. The northern varieties, such as *benasqués*, show much greater vitality than the southern ones, since the latter are the linguistic consequence of repopulation, while the former are the continuation of the Latin taken by the Romans to the mountains of Ribagorza.<sup>6</sup> The affinity of *benasqués* in particular has been much discussed, the main problem of classification residing in the fact that it has an equal number of Catalan-type and Aragonese-type features.

Like Ribagorza, this area palatalizes the lateral consonant in the clusters PL-, BL-, FL-, CL-, but it also has a number of linguistic features not shared with its neighbours. In the first place, note that *benasqués* has the ending [ts] on the second person plural of verbs: *cantets* ‘you sing’ (Sp. *cantáis*, Cat. *canteu*), *venets* ‘you sell’ (Sp. *vendéis*, Cat. *vendeu*); *ubrits* ‘you open’ (Sp. *abrís*, Cat. *abriu*). Secondly, observe that past participles in *benasqués* end in *-au*, *-eu*, *-iu* in the singular, but *-ats*, *-ets*, *-its* in the plural: *cantau*, *veneueu*, *ubriuiu*; *cantats*, *venets*, *ubrits* (Cat. *cantat[s]*, *venut[s]*, *obert[s]*, Sp. *cantado[s]*, *vendido[s]*, *abierto[s]* ‘sung, sold, open’, respectively). Unlike Catalan, the southern dialects of this area distinguish [θ] from [s]: *pozal* ‘bucket’ v. *posa’l* ‘put it’. Note also that the vowel systems of the various dialects of this southern area are complex. For example, San Esteban de Litera has open [e] in word-final position where Castilian has [a] and Eastern Catalan has schwa.

The transition to Catalan is most noticeable between the River Ésera and the River Isábena, where Ę and Ŏ show particularly strong resistance to diphthongization.

**Area 7: the Castilian of Aragon.** The western and southern limits of Aragonese are assumed to correspond to a line running from Fago (between Ansó and Roncal in neighbouring Navarre) through Biel, Biscarrués, Almudébar, Barbués, Torres de Alcanadre and Berbegal to Fonz (Nagore y Gimeno, 1989: 16). South and west of this line, we no longer find anything but Castilian spoken with the Aragonese accent and a few localisms, although the boundary (if one can be assumed to exist) remains somewhat hazy. Recent work by Fernando Romanos attests the survival of Aragonese elements in several villages in the north of the Province of Zaragoza (Romanos, 2003).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Joan Veny (1991: 100; 1993: 19-20) makes a distinction between *dialectes constitutius*, which form part of a natural linguistic continuum and are the result of the development of Latin in the area in which they are spoken, and *dialectes consecutius*, which are the result of reconquest and repopulation.

<sup>7</sup> In particular, note the data from such villages as Longás, El Frago and Santa Eulalia, and see the map on page 32.

### 3. The vitality of Aragonese today

One of the principal reasons for the attrition of local speech forms in Aragon is the increasing imposition of a more prestigious language, Castilian, but not, as is often believed, the presence of the Castilian-speaking Civil Guard or the spread of radio and television to everyone's home. Another important factor is emigration in times of poverty or war. The speech of Bielsa, for example, was affected to some extent by the Spanish Civil War: from April to June 1938, the whole of the population of the valley was evacuated to France, as Bielsa was a red zone (often referred to in books about the area as *la bolsa de Bielsa*), heavily pounded by the advancing Nationalist troops. Most of the people, however, did return to their homes when the danger was over and continued to speak *belsetán*, so the linguistic loss was by no means complete.

The continuation of a local speech form often depends on the willingness of emigrants to perpetuate it on their return. Naturally, extended periods of absence away from a birthplace which has a characteristic speech form will have some effect on the speech of even the most resilient speakers, but a strong desire to reintegrate can reverse the process of loss. However, it is often the case that individuals from country areas that move away from their homes to urban environments to return later introduce new speech habits that have an influence on the local dialect, so long as such speakers are still perceived by the local population as being insiders. These sort of people are what the British sociolinguist Peter Trudgill, translating the term *språkmisionær* used by the Norwegian social dialectologist Anders Steinsholt, would call "language missionaries".<sup>8</sup>

In the case of Aragonese today, there is no doubt that local dialects are struggling for survival and continue to be subject to a process of erosion from Castilian that dates back to at least the sixteenth century, despite the attempts at revitalization on the part of several associations intent on preserving Aragonese or even resurrecting the language as an official vehicle of communication.

Naturally, it is the cities of a dialect area that first succumb to external influences as melting-pots or foci of diverse immigration, which has a levelling effect on the

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<sup>8</sup> For an example, albeit dated and therefore understandably misguided, of the popular misconception about the erosive effect of the mass media on dialect, see Badía (1950: 75), where he suggests the radio as one of a series of negative factors detracting from the survival of *belsetán*. For the more up-to-date view expounded here, see Trudgill (1986: 56-57).



language and may give rise to new urban dialects. Jaca is now so accustomed to a continuous influx of tourists and the staging of international events that its present-day inhabitants are mostly unaware that Aragonese was ever spoken there. The term *jaqués*, if ever applied linguistically nowadays, can only refer to a small number of dialectal traits that might have been heard until recently in the surrounding villages of the so-called Campo de Jaca. Similarly, the cities of Huesca and Saragossa know very little of Aragonese dialect, though Huesca, as a provincial capital in closer contact with the rural speech of Aragon, is probably more aware of the existence of speech varieties in the province that are different to Castilian. Teruel, having been Castilianized at a much earlier date than the northern territories, is hardly likely to be acquainted with Aragonese dialect. Some of the smaller towns of Huesca may still have dialect speakers, though. In Graus, for example, it is still possible to find older speakers who remember *grausino*, even if its use is very restricted; on the other hand, the only speakers of local dialect known in Aínsa are the population that has moved there from the surrounding villages in order to enjoy a more comfortable life, and these people, once settled in, soon find little use for their rural speech modes.

Despite the pessimism expressed to me in a personal communication by M<sup>a</sup> Pilar Benítez about the negligible number of speakers of *ansotano* (perhaps only one elderly female speaker really spoke the dialect well, in her opinion), my own researches over the past few years have revealed considerable use still among the over sixties. One consultant hazarded a guess (in 2009) that the number of speakers might still amount to as many as eighty among a population of three hundred inhabitants in the winter, rising to five hundred in the summer. As for *cheso*, spoken in nearby Hecho, the vitality of the dialect has become a cliché about which the three daughters of the deceased local poet Veremundo Méndez Coarasa express some reservation. They speak of the loss of key speakers in recent times and some decay in everyday use of the local language. Moreover, although they are familiar with *cheso* themselves, it was apparently not customary for them to use it at home with their parents.

The central area of the Pyrenees of Huesca is the most linguistically impoverished of these mountainous regions as far as the survival of Aragonese is concerned. In Panticosa, for example, the centre of which has been almost entirely reconstructed to judge by the number of modern chalets, it is now only possible to find three or four people that are still able to speak the local dialect, *panticuto*, while Nagore (1986: 15)

claims that in the 1970's it was still possible to hear conversations in the local speech, even though it had been lost in other villages in the Valley of Tena. In more recent times, Vázquez (2000) was able to recover considerable vocabulary from Sobremonte, but a visit to the villages of Betés, Yosa and Aso by the author of these lines in the autumn of 2009 confirmed the absence of dialect speakers in the area any longer.

Further east, we encounter one of the bastions of the ancient Aragonese dialect, *chistabino*, spoken in the village of Gistaín (*Chistén* in the dialect) in the Valley of Gistau, and to a lesser extent in nearby San Juan de Plan and Plan. About five kilometres away, in a subsidiary valley, there are three villages, Sin, Señes and Serveto, that constitute *la Comuna*, where people speak or have spoken related dialects more akin to *belsetán* in verbal morphology, though these have suffered greater erosion than the speech of Gistaín, mainly through depopulation (Señes is now abandoned). Bielsa itself no longer has any dialect speakers, although it is still possible to come across one or two in the outlying villages. Bielsa is on the route up to the tunnel that connects the valley to Aragnouet in France, so there is a constant stream of tourism that the neighbouring Valley of Gistau has not seen.

The Valley of Benasque (in my zone 6) shows no signs of surrendering its traditional speech, which, because of its large number of speakers and stability, has become a political football for Aragonese activists who assert the continuing widespread existence of the language (see also 2, area 6). Further south, the speech of places such as Torres del Obispo and Azanuy, constituting as it does a transitional type between Catalan and Aragonese/Castilian, has fared less well. On the other hand, the Catalan varieties of my zone 5 are still in common use, and there has been some demand for instruction in Catalan in the area. In November 1997, these varieties and the *hablas aragonesas* were granted equal official status with Castilian in Aragon, though there was no concerted effort on the part of the authorities to make provision for education in any of the local linguistic varieties of Aragon, and no mention of official written use. This declaration of *cooficialidad* came just a year after article 7 of the 1996 edition of the *Estatuto de Autonomía de Aragón y Propuesta de Reforma* stated:

#### Artículo 7

Las lenguas y modalidades lingüísticas propias de Aragón gozarán de protección. Se garantizará su enseñanza y el derecho de los hablantes en la forma que establezca una Ley de Cortes de Aragón para las zonas de utilización predominante de aquéllas.<sup>9</sup>

The *Ley de Lenguas* referred to in article 7 has been a long time coming, presumably owing to the scepticism of many academics about the issue and the desire of the *Cortes* to tread their ground carefully, but it was finally published in December 2009. Article 2-ter. concerning “Derechos lingüísticos” says:

1. Se reconocen a los ciudadanos y ciudadanas de Aragón los siguientes derechos lingüísticos en los supuestos establecidos por la presente Ley:
  - a) Conocer las lenguas propias de Aragón.
  - b) Usar las lenguas propias de Aragón, oralmente y por escrito, en las relaciones privadas, así como en las relaciones con las administraciones públicas.
  - c) Recibir la enseñanza de las lenguas propias de Aragón.
  - d) Recibir, en las lenguas propias de Aragón, publicaciones y programaciones de radio, televisión y otros medios de comunicación social.
  - e) Usar las lenguas propias en la vida económica y social.
2. Nadie podrá ser discriminado por razón de la lengua.
3. Los poderes públicos aragoneses garantizarán el ejercicio de estos derechos, a fin de que sean efectivos y reales.<sup>10</sup>

The *Ley* further states that a *Consejo Superior de las Lenguas de Aragón* will be created as a body for consultation on matters of *política lingüística* (‘language planning’). The ultimate authority on questions of linguistic usage will be two newly

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<sup>9</sup> Article 7: The languages and language varieties proper to Aragon shall be accorded protection. Their teaching and the right of their speakers shall be guaranteed in the form which may be set out in an act of the Aragonese parliament for application to the areas in which they are predominantly used.

<sup>10</sup> “Derechos lingüísticos” (Language rights):

1. The following rights of all citizens of Aragon are recognized in accordance with the provisions of the present act:
  - a) The right to know the languages proper to Aragon.
  - b) The right to use the languages proper to Aragon, both in their oral and written forms, in their personal relationships and in dealings with the public administration.
  - c) The right to be taught in the languages proper to Aragon.
  - d) The right to have access to publications, radio programmes, television and other mass media in the languages proper to Aragon.
  - e) The right to use the languages proper to Aragon in financial affairs and social life.
2. No person shall be discriminated against by reason of language.
3. The Aragonese authorities shall guarantee these rights, so that they shall be effective and real.

created academies: the *Academia de la Lengua Aragonesa* and the *Academia Aragonesa del Catalán*.

#### 4. The total number of speakers of Aragonese today

Just how much Aragonese is still spoken is very difficult to assess. We might start by considering a questionnaire that was included with the 1981 population census that was conducted in Aragon. The *Consello d'a Fabla Aragonesa*, based in Huesca, asked for the data and found that about 10,000 people said that they spoke some kind of Aragonese in the Province of Huesca, about 2,000 in the Province of Saragossa, and only 71 in the Province of Teruel. These figures exclude the approximately 40,000 people that speak a variety of Catalan in La Franja (Martín, 1995: 12). But just how reliable are these results? First of all, much will depend on the wording of the actual question about language use in a questionnaire of this sort and how people interpret it. Naturally, establishing the number of speakers of any variety begs the question of what speaking a language actually means. If an inhabitant of an Aragonese village often greets his acquaintances with “Qué fas?” (‘How’s it going?’) as a gesture of solidarity, but otherwise uses predominantly Castilian, is s/he a speaker of Aragonese? And between this situation and that of a fluent dialect speaker who uses his or her dialect the whole time there is an infinite range of possibilities. There will be people who only use their local dialect at home and resort to the standard language in their work as a *lingua franca*. Again, there can be big differences among speakers in the same family: brothers and sisters, for example, whose different education and occupations have had a great influence on their speech. There will even be people who can understand or read their local variety but never speak it.

In the second place, answering a questionnaire may not be as simple as it would appear at first sight because the speakers are simply not aware of exactly what they speak. This may seem absurd to speakers of a major world language like English or Spanish, but not all speech varieties have been given reference labels and been unambiguously codified to distinguish them from related varieties (which may or may not merit a separate name, from a practical, taxonomic point of view, especially if they are contiguous speech forms constituting part of a continuum). Strictly speaking, a

dialect is a variety of a language which differs grammatically, phonologically and lexically from other varieties. Varieties which only differ in pronunciation (with or without the use of some local lexis) are known as *accents*. This is the case of the Castilian of Aragon, but there is much confusion surrounding this issue, so some people in Aragon might claim to speak an Aragonese dialect when their speech is basically Castilian sprinkled with localisms and shows no substantial grammatical differences to the standard language.<sup>11</sup>

Thirdly, it needs to be mentioned that the picture is often clouded by political interests. People sometimes say that they speak a particular variety because it is their wish to do so and not because this statement is a true reflection of their linguistic competence. They would like to see their variety more widely spoken and are greatly concerned about its preservation and promotion for reasons that may be more overtly political or perhaps more culturally linked. This might be the case of Welsh or Breton. At the same time, it may be the (tacit) policy of a government to play down the number of speakers of a variety, also for political reasons, such as a desire to dampen their claims for autonomy or to detract from their appeals for more attention. This could be the case of Xhosa, a language of the Bantu group.

Factors of the kind just mentioned make it difficult to estimate the number of speakers of Aragonese in present times. The strong claim to the continued widespread use of Aragonese made by such associations as the *Consello d'a Fabla Aragonesa* in Huesca is counterbalanced by the scepticism of the more conservative *Departamento de Lingüística General e Hispánica* at the University of Saragossa, who maintain that Aragonese, i.e. ignoring the Catalan of Aragon spoken right down *La Franja*, now only survives in certain pockets of resistance across the north of Huesca. However, one thing is for sure: if 10,000 people claim to speak Aragonese, then the number of real speakers is probably somewhat smaller.

## 5. Standardization

Interest in the standardization of Aragonese began in the early 1970's and is still pursued by a minority despite its being denounced by many academics as lacking

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<sup>11</sup> On this point, see Mendivil (2002: 1435-1436).

scientific foundation. For the activists who believe that it is a viable proposition for Aragonese to regain widespread use, the first target in the early years of their campaign was to achieve a distinctive spelling system. They argued that a special orthography, rather than adherence to Castilian norms, would help stem absorption by the national standard and foment revitalization of local dialects. A new system of notation for Aragonese was discussed in November 1974 in the *Palacio de Santa Cruz* in Zaragoza by a small group of scholars and writers, and the guidelines were formalized in the *I Congreso ta ra normalización de l'aragonés*, 18-19 April 1987, in the *Casino Oscense* in Huesca.

Despite the positive figures given by Nagore for use of the spelling rules in books written in or on Aragonese from 2001 to 2005 (2006: 70), he admits that there are a significant number of authors and publishing houses that still ignore them, and even sees this fact as a sinister plot to hamper the standardization of Aragonese and wrest control of the process from himself and his associates in the *Consello d'a Fabla Aragonesa* (2006: 71-72).

As observance of the 1987 spelling proposals has not been a hundred per cent, debate on these and other issues was reopened at *II Congreso de l'Aragonés* in Zaragoza, 13-15 July 2006, under the banner “Chuntos per l'aragonés”. Much discussion has centred on the use or withdrawal of the letter <h>, which is silent in Modern Aragonese, as it is in Castilian, and the use of <b> for <v>, which is now pronounced as bilabial rather than labio-dental in both of these Peninsular varieties, and was abandoned in Aragonese spellings under the 1987 ruling. The “Academia de l'Aragonés” (alias “Estudio de Filología Aragonesa”) at this very moment (April 2010) is discussing proposals for a new orthography which pays closer attention to etymology and is not so blatantly simplistic as the 1987 system. This latest proposal maintains the written distinction between <b> and <v>, and also retains <c> before <e> and <i>, instead of converting it to <z>. Other decisions have determined that the plural of words ending in <t> like *font* (written with <t>, though this letter is silent after <n>) shall be written as <-tz> and not just <-z>, which has hitherto been the norm, and the many consonant clusters like those in *acción* and *tractor* shall also be preserved, whatever degree of assimilation may take place in fast speech or whatever dialectal pronunciation might be commonest.

Apart from the great deal of time devoted to the question of a standard spelling system for Aragonese (too much time in the view of many critics), which has turned into a bone of contention out of proportion to its importance, some attention has also been given to standardizing the grammar. A milestone in this area is Francho Nagore's controversial *Gramática de la Luenga Aragonesa*, which reached its fifth edition in 1989, having been first published in 1977. Detractors object that the work is a hodge-podge of grammatical features cobbled together from the various different existing varieties of Aragonese: for example, the conditional from Panticosa (see 2, area 2), the present perfect as formed in Bielsa with the auxiliary *ser* 'to be', and the articles *o, a, os, as* (or *ro, ra, ros, ras* after a vowel), rather than the equally common *el/lo, la, es/los, las*. Criticism has been levelled at the tendency to always choose the forms most divergent from Castilian, as in the examples just quoted, and, worst of all, at the fact that the grammar describes a language that does not exist, i.e. a kind of Esperanto that is nobody's native language and has not been generated by any real speakers.<sup>12</sup>

In view of these considerations and the fact that unless a standard is accepted by the *poderes públicos* ('authorities') and used by the administration, it is doomed to failure, the prospect of a standard Aragonese does not bode well for Aragon. Certainly, linguists at the University of Saragossa see no future in it. In the opinion of José María Enguita, attempts at linguistic unification can have far-reaching negative effects: in particular, they can kill local dialects (presumably the very opposite of what their proponents set out to do), and can create an additional educational burden for those who already have their own local dialect and a standard language (in this case, Castilian) to cope with.<sup>13</sup>

In the case of the Aragonese speakers in Huesca, it is also worth bearing in mind that, as far as the inhabitants of the valleys bordering on France are concerned, they communicate more often with Castilian speakers to the south than they do with speakers of other dialects to the east and/or west.

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<sup>12</sup> For arguments of this kind that weigh against the creation of an Aragonese standard, see Mendivil (2002: 1431-1432).

<sup>13</sup> For further details and argumentation, see Enguita (1997) and Mott (2002).

## 6. Conclusions

In view of the attrition, disintegration and fragmentation that Aragonese has suffered since its subordination to Castilian at the end of the fifteenth century, in present times we can only hope to preserve the existing dialects and through adequate legislation encourage their use. However, much will depend on the inclination of the speakers to continue to lend support to their local speech varieties. “Are these useful, or do the people consider them to be useful, in their daily lives and in communication with administrative bodies?” are the kind of questions that are relevant to the future of the speech varieties of Aragon. Moreover, we no longer live in a world where people spend their whole lives in their birthplace, so that patterns of migration can have a profound influence on the language of an area.

On the subject of standardization, it is questionable whether speakers of local varieties would have any use for a panlectal model. For communication with the world outside of their village, either their own local dialect, for use in the immediately surrounding area, or Castilian would serve them very well for this purpose without their having to learn the rules of another, regional standard. On the other hand, a standardized spelling would certainly be of practical use to linguists who need to put in place some kind of internal cohesion in their discipline. It can be quite frustrating to write articles not knowing how to spell words, where to find them in dialect dictionaries, and miss the vital link between related forms because of the divergent orthographical conventions adopted by different authors.

This year and the next will probably be decisive for the ultimate survival of Aragonese in years to come. Instruction in or on the dialect(s) at school and university, if promoted by the *Ley de Lenguas*, will make some contribution to raising people’s awareness of the existence of local speech varieties in their region and stimulating interest in them, while helping to put a brake on their demise.

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## Figures

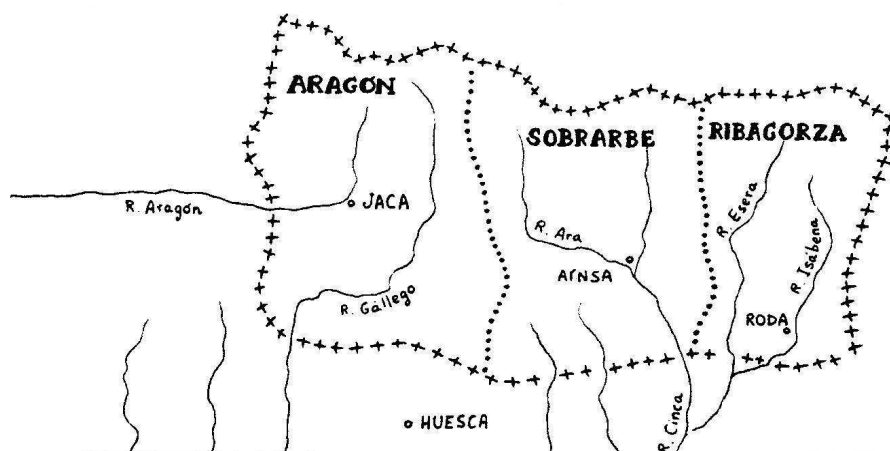


Figure 1. Origins of Aragon (800+)

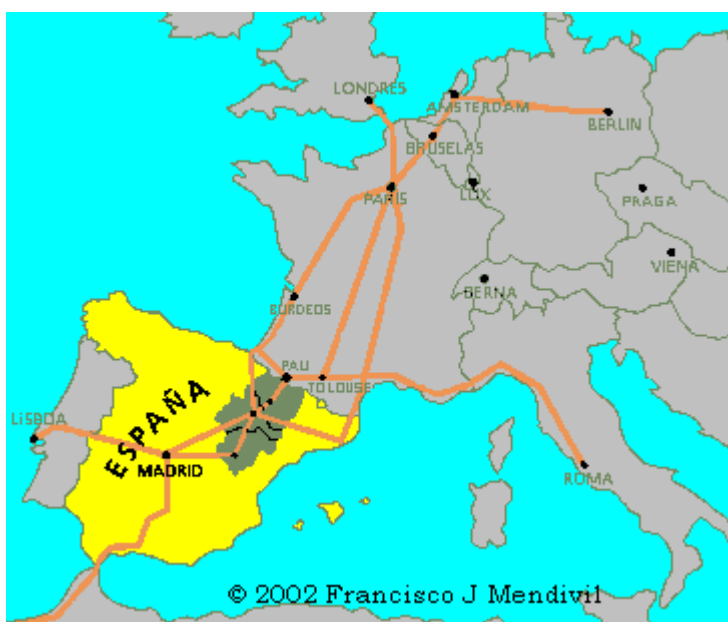


Figure 2. Geographical situation of Aragon



Figure 3. The three provinces of Aragon

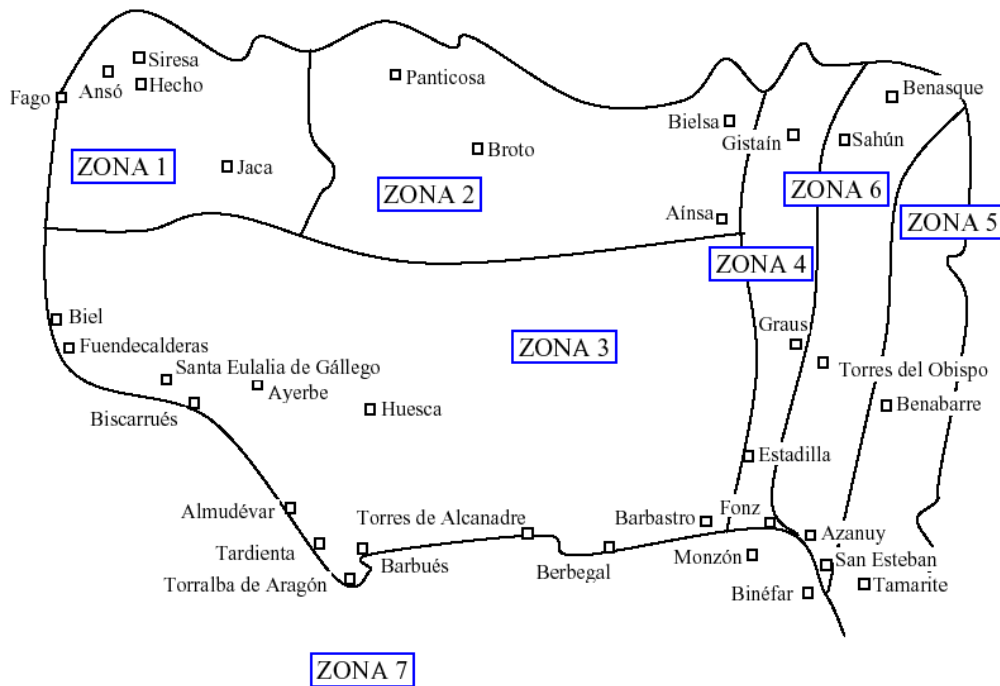


Figure 4. Classification of the linguistic varieties of Aragon

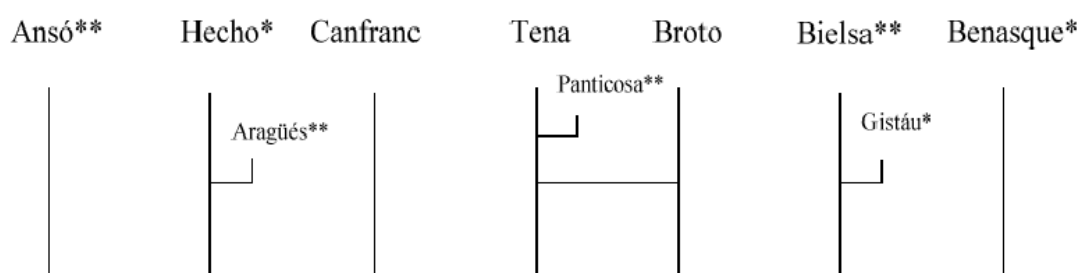


Figure 5. The Pyrenean valleys of the Province of Huesca bordering on France

\*Aragonese dialect still spoken

\*\*Vestigial Aragonese dialect still found