Book review

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Although this book is certainly a “must read” for sociolinguists interested in language revitalization, I intend to emphasize here its value from a wider perspective: its relevance to the literature on social movements and civil rights. I believe it should be read by scholars and activists connected with other civil rights agendas, i.e. those addressing ethnicity, race, class, religion, gender, sexuality or disability. Linguistic revitalization movements are rarely mentioned in these debates, even in those stressing the need for an intersectionality perspective. Jacqueline Urla provides here the means to build these connections, and actually to strengthen the case for the intersectional angle specifically.

The book is a historically-informed ethnography of Basque linguistic activism, that is, an analysis of the trajectories and discourses of the social groups and organizations that have for decades struggled to turn Euskara ‘Basque’ into a fully functional language that is adequate for the expressive needs of any social activity. Euskalherria, the Basque country, is a small region situated in the mountainous area where Spain and France meet on the Atlantic coast. As such, Urla observes, the Basques provide a remarkable case study of a movement explicitly committed to bring about social change, and precisely the kind of change that requires analyzing and confronting the subtle processes that reproduce social inequalities in contemporary everyday life. The historical dimension is an important ingredient in the argument and provides a special analytical depth to the whole account. Chapter 1, for instance, examines the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries’ discourses around Euskara and Basque identity and successfully depicts the important discontinuities that often get erased in conventional histories about Basque resistance. Thus, while the enlightened Jesuit scholar Manuel de Larramendi was making the case that Basque represented Spain’s original language and granted Basques pride of place in the Spanish (Catholic) race, 19th century romantics saw in the language an expression of the new ideas about tradition that enabled them to define a Basque nationhood. But it is the early
20th century Basque nationalism that enables the author to weave her most important point, i.e. the connection between language and governmentality. As she puts it herself:

My purpose is to revise the thesis that language revival is the outcome of nationalism and to show, rather, that revival strategies grow out of the conjuncture of nationalist imaginaries with the emergence of “the social” as a sphere of life demanding expert knowledge and intervention. (p. 14)

The author shows how, faced with a (Spanish) nation-state that failed to build the liberal economic, educational, welfare and cultural infrastructures associated with industrial capitalism, a wide variety of Basque social groups coalesced at the turn of the 20th century to provide their own alternative: a Basque nation. These groups also perceived that they had to address the issue of the Basque language, and they opted to modernize it too at a moment when it was only used outside the main industrial centers. Basque was then taken up as a national symbol at a time when language was overwhelmingly considered in the Western world as the main acumen of nationality; but the most important issue, Urla argues, was the very fact that from this moment on language became an object of planning and a sphere of social intervention. The key event, from her perspective, was the creation of the Basque Language Academy (along with the Basque Studies Society) in 1919 with the objective of creating a linguistic standard.

In Chapter 2, the author moves the focus to the historical roots of contemporary language activism, which emerged during the dictatorship of General Franco. Here we learn, for instance, that the militant organization ETA started in 1952 basically as a reading group whose first illegal activity consisted of smuggling forbidden books from France before it started, after many years, the shootings and bombings that made the headlines worldwide for four decades. This early version of ETA is most interesting, as it expresses the appropriation of nationalism by the radical left, which in turn provides the basis for a political duality that is fairly unique to the Basque context. Basque nationalism had so far developed under the umbrella of Catholic liberal and conservative groups represented through the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV), one of the first Christian-democratic parties in Europe. But by the early 1970s it was the Marxist left that was seemingly pushing hardest for the revitalization of the Basque language. Thus, when Franco died, there were two distinct approaches, one conservative one revolutionary, that provided the grounds to develop the Basque language and identity.

Jacqueline Urla examines the first round of this internal strain, which came with the development of a unified standard for Basque, as explained in Chapter 3. As the 1980s began with the establishment of autonomous governments in the Spanish territories, the government of the three main Basque provinces fell under
the comfortable control of the PNV. The political duality was then reproduced through an official infrastructure of language planning controlled by conservatives accompanied by a sizable grassroots sector (managing, for instance, a huge network of adult language schools) under the aegis of the nationalist left. In this context, orthographic debates and discussions on the objectives of language policies brought frictions between the two strands of Basque nationalism. The left, for instance, supported the development of linguistic innovations by the Language Academy that were hard to accept for conservatives. Seen from a historical perspective, it is remarkable that the grassroots movement managed to retain a good deal of control over the politics of language by determining aspects of the official political agenda and leading on changes of strategy. Sociolinguistic change was also buttressed through the new forms of imagining the Basque speaking community brought about through census data and statistics. Chapter 5 is, from this perspective, a key chapter in the book that shows how language is reconstituted by procedures of government. Most interesting here were the struggles between “official” and “grassroots” actors on how to define the Basque speaker or how to represent the Basque territory (with the “grassroots” side scoring significant victories too).

Probably the most conventionally linguistic aspect of the book is the author’s careful analysis of the sociocultural impact of linguistic standardization. She describes the complex issues that had to be dealt with as standardization created a new gulf between the speakers of traditional colloquial varieties of Basque and those of the new euskara batua ‘unified Basque’. The use of Basque for schooling, government and publishing reconstituted people’s linguistic attitudes in contradictory ways: traditional native speakers were feeling delegitimized while “new” speakers of academic Basque felt a lack of authenticity. This marked the need to foster a “reappropriation” of the vernacular (Chapters 4 and 7) that triggered important changes in the way activists understood what it meant to support Basque. In Chapter 7, the author describes how these contradictions were managed in a specific context: that of illegal radio stations administered by radical youth groups. This particular process is of especial relevance for sociolinguists who have for decades explored issues of language variation and linguistic attitudes without due attention to the historical conditions in which these phenomena emerge. It is the author’s effort to historicize the practices and events analyzed that brings to light the social conditions that determine people’s relations to different varieties of the language.

One last, though not least, important thread is provided by the way in which the author shows how language activism transformed received conceptions about Basque identity. From the early Romantic and popular traditions that laid emphasis on race and descent, left-wing nationalism and linguistic activism managed to
redefine Basque identity as based on political stance and linguistic practice. Urla provides convincing evidence of how such a change developed out of the social and political complicities that emerged in everyday conviviality, and also as activists realized that they had to dispense with the barriers that prevented people from using Basque in normal social life. Chapter 6, for instance, focuses on how activists faced the typical problem of moving Basque “beyond the classroom”, of turning competence into practice. This chapter takes us through one further turn when the author depicts how Basque language activism incorporated the discourses and procedures of quality management and corporate decision-making in the late 1990s. This is by far the most original piece, not only because it identifies a development so far fairly new in language revitalization, but also because of the author’s stance towards the material. Urla does not succumb to the temptation to easily dismiss “Total Quality Language Revival” – as she calls it – as one more case of social actors being duped by rampant neoliberal ideologies. Rather, she observes how political activists very self-consciously took their chances to adopt a discourse that allowed them to push their agenda into new territories, i.e. new social groups which were not attracted by the radical left, public administration and the private economic sector.

The book ends on a sad note as Urla reports on the massive clamp-down undertaken by the Spanish police and judiciary in 2005 to dismantle Basque grassroots groups and newspapers with the pretext that they were part of ETA. The process met the reprobation of the European court of Human Rights in 2012 for allegations of torture; but nonetheless caused the permanent closure of the only newspaper written exclusively in Basque: Egunkaria. The case against this newspaper was, tellingly enough, finally dropped by the court; but has so far been unable to reopen. Basque activism, the author observes, will probably have to innovate further to face the challenges of a new “Age of Counterterrorism”.

In the context of ongoing abstract debates about the characteristics, foundations and effects of nationalism, this book shows how social actors and groups draw from different conceptions of the nation, combine them and transform them through political action. This provides, as I see it, food to feed the debates about power, agency, resistance and social reproduction, as it shows very clearly how social actors can articulate new political possibilities. Furthermore, I believe that the Basque case illustrates how at least some grassroots social movements have long sought to articulate intersectional perspectives that encapsulate resistance to multiple forms of social inequality (class, ethnicity, gender, language) in their attempts to craft alternative hegemonies.

This brings us back to the issue of the traditional inattention by civil rights movements with respect to language activism. This inattention may be partially caused by the fact that these movements are often led intellectually by largely
monolingual US organizations. However, the larger blame is probably to be given
to the long established tradition in the social sciences and the humanities to treat
language and society as objects of totally separate disciplines. As sociologists,
anthropologists or historians rarely address language issues, it is no surprise that
students of gender, race or sexuality ignore linguistic inequalities even when they
hail the need of intersectional perspectives. I would very much hope that this
book helps readers across disciplines to realize that this gulf between language
and the rest is not justified and is to the detriment of all who care about power
and inequalities.