

COUNTERING LINGUISTIC RIGHTS IN SPAIN THROUGH LANGUAGE MAKING: THE DISCURSIVE DELEGITIMIZATION OF BASQUE IN ONLINE DEBATES

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Abstract

This article investigates discourses on the Basque language in Spain with a particular focus on delegitimizing positions towards the regional language. It identifies the most prominent patterns of the discourse in order to gain a better understanding of the argumentative strategies which are used to reject an intensified promotion of Basque. The analysis is empirically based on a sample of comments from online debates on news websites reporting on recent legislation for the use of Basque in local administration and on the position of Basque in regional education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on the concepts of *delegitimization* and *language making*, the paper shows how the rejection of enhanced linguistic rights for speakers of the minoritized language is interlinked with the co-construction of both Basque and Castilian: regional language policy is portrayed as the imposition of a supposedly irrelevant language against the indisputable national language as part of an alleged nationalist agenda serving the interests of elite profiteers.

Keywords: linguistic rights; language making; delegitimization; regional and minority languages; language ideologies; Spain; Euskadi; Basque Country.

L'OPOSICIÓ ALS DRETS LINGÜÍSTICS A ESPANYA AMB LA CONSTRUCCIÓ DE LLENGUATGE: LA DESLEGITIMACIÓ DISCURSIVA DEL BASC ALS DEBATS EN LÍNIA

Resum

En aquest article s'investiguen els discursos sobre la llengua basca a Espanya i es para atenció a les postures que deslegitimen aquesta llengua. S'hi identifiquen els patrons discursius més destacats per comprendre millor els mecanismes argumentatius en contra d'augmentar la promoció del basc. L'anàlisi parteix d'una base empírica: una mostra de comentaris de debats en línia, en webs de notícies on s'informa de legislació recent relativa a l'ús del basc a l'Administració local i de la posició del basc en l'ensenyament dins la comunitat autònoma durant la pandèmia de la COVID-19. A partir dels conceptes de deslegitimació i construcció de llenguatge, l'article mostra com el rebuig a millorar els drets lingüístics dels parlants de la llengua minoritzada va lligat a la coconstrucció del basc i el castellà: la política lingüística autonòmica es presenta com la imposició d'una llengua suposadament irrellevant davant la llengua nacional indiscutible, com a part d'una presumpta agenda nacionalista que serveix els interessos d'una elit que se n'aprofita.

Paraules clau: drets lingüístics; construcció de la llengua; deslegitimació; llengües regionals i minoritàries; ideologies lingüístiques; Espanya; Euskadi; País Basc.

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Article received: 31.05.2021. Blind reviews: 03.06.2021 and 30.06.2021. Final version accepted: 10.09.2021

Recommended citation: Breda, Karolin & Krämer, Philipp. (2021). Countering linguistic rights in Spain through language making: the discursive delegitimization of Basque in online debates. *Revista de Llengua i Dret, Journal of Language and Law*, 76, 118-140. <https://doi.org/10.2436/rld.i76.2021.3671>

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1 Introduction

In the past decades, Basque has been subject to numerous efforts of revitalization in Spain that have often created frictions between supporters of a broad recognition of Basque and defendants of the hegemonic position of Castilian as the national language.¹ In order to gain a better understanding of the rejection of further support for Basque, we will focus on a specific part of the public discourse: which arguments are put forward to object to the extension of linguistic rights and social functions of Basque? How do such arguments connect to each other, and how can we assess them in the light of existing research about minority languages and revitalization?

The paper draws on the notion of *language making* as processes in which linguistic entities are constituted socially, cognitively and on a discursive level, based on language attitudes and ideologies. Our objective is to show how the language making of Basque includes, among many positive elements, noticeable strategies of discursive delegitimization: the way the notion of *the Basque language* is constructed emanates to a great extent from arguments that deny the regional language the same value, recognition, and *raison d'être* as that of Castilian. In what follows, we will provide a critical discourse analysis of debates in which such arguments are brought forward. As a data type which so far has remained underused for the study of language ideologies and metalinguistic discourses, we use online comments posted by readers of news websites as reactions to media coverage of two recent events with an important linguistic dimension: the newly introduced decree of the Basque Autonomous Community which regulates the use of Basque and Castilian in administration, and questions relating to the use of minority languages during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper starts out with a short overview of current regulations in Spain and the Basque country, with a focus on linguistic rights and ideologies connected with them. We will then introduce the concepts of language making and delegitimization with a focus on the importance of language ideologies and linguistic rights for the concept. The following sections give a brief description of the methodology and corpus used for the case study. The subsequent analysis is structured along the most prominent elements of delegitimizing metalinguistic discourse targeting Basque as found in the data: first, the claim that Basque language policy is an imposition leading to discrimination against Castilian; second, the idea that Basque as a minoritized language is not relevant enough to enjoy further promotion; third, the mediated portrayal of regional language policy as “totalitarian”; and finally, the speculation about supposed hidden interests behind the valorization of Basque. In our conclusion, we will offer some reflections on the role of language making and the impact of delegitimizing discourses for the implementation of linguistic rights.

2 Regional languages in Spain: linguistic rights and language ideologies

The contemporary linguistic conflict in Spain (Ninyoles, 1969; see also Cagiao y Conde & Jiménez-Salcedo, 2015) can be traced back to the status (*normalizaci6n*) and corpus (*normativizaci6n*) planning processes that had begun in the autonomous regions with *llengües pr6pies*² by the time of the transition to democracy as well as to the resulting advancement of these languages into all domains of language use in their respective territories. According to Ramallo (2018, p. 473), linguistic conflicts arise “whenever one group carries out measures to increase its capital in all its forms and is met with resistance from other people or groups who benefited from the previous *status quo*”. The linguistic conflicts in Spain are characterized by divergent conceptualizations of and discourses on language rights sustained by proponents and opponents of minority language policies (Arzoz, 2007).

After a long period of radical monolingualism under Franco (1936-1975), multilingualism in Spain has been organized by the principle of territoriality since the time of the transition (cf. Laponce 1984; see also Patten & Kymlicka, 2003; Van Parijs, 2011). Castilian is the official language of the Spanish state, privileged by article 3.1 of the Spanish Constitution (1978) which states that “Castilian is the official Spanish language of the State. All Spaniards have the duty to know it and the right to use it”. The autonomy of the regions is

1 We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive and encouraging feedback. We also thank Diogo de Moraes Modesto for his technical support with the collection and annotation of our data.

2 The term *llengua pr6pia* was first used in the legal text of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy (1979) in order to emphasize the identity-forming function of the minority language in opposition to Castilian. For a detailed explanation of this term, see Süselbeck (2008).

enshrined in article 2 of the Constitution and in the Statutes of Autonomy which have since provided the legal basis for promoting regional multilingualism. Article 3.2 regulates the status of other Spanish languages – though without naming these other languages: “The other Spanish languages shall also be official in the respective Autonomous Communities in accordance with their Statutes”. Thus, regional languages such as Catalan, Basque and Galician have gained co-official status in their respective autonomous regions. However, according to Ramallo (2018, pp. 464-465), the devolution of linguistic diversity issues to the autonomous regions has generated the “question of territoriality”,³ and the asymmetric distribution of language rights by the Constitution – Spain-wide *duty* to know Castilian vs. the *right* to use the regional languages in designated territories, which makes it a monolingual project for most of the state territory – has further contributed to the minoritization of the regional languages (see Vernet i Llobet, 2007).

In the case of Euskera and Catalan, this asymmetry is aggravated by the fact that the Basque and Catalan-speaking areas are fragmented across several political entities, without a common legislation that could regulate the implementation of uniform language policies, as is the case in France and the foral community of Navarre (Hualde & Zuazo, 2007, p. 143; see also Harguindéguy & Itçaina, 2015; Jiménez-Salcedo, 2019; Itçaina, 2021).⁴ In the Basque Autonomous Community (henceforth, BAC), normalization policy has had very successful outcomes, reversing the complete exclusion of Basque from public functions and establishing its stable presence in domains that are subject to the regulation of the Basque government (see Azurmendi, Bachoc & Zabaleta 2001; Azurmendi & Martínez de Luna 2006; Garder 2013; Martínez de Luna, Erize & Zalbide 2016).

The co-official status of Euskera in the BAC is ensured by the 1979 Statute of Autonomy, followed by the 1982 Act on the Normalization of the use of Euskera (10/1982 Legea, azaroaren 24koa, Euskararen erabilera normalizatzeko oinarrizkoa). The positive rights enshrined in the Normalization Act involve the right to know and use any of the two official languages with the administration or any public entity in the BAC, and not to be discriminated against on the basis of language. Since the project of Linguistic Normalization consists of raising Basque language and culture to a level of equality with Castilian which within this paradigm is considered a “normal” level (Ninyoles, 1971, pp. 93-100), this implies certain language policy measures to be taken within the legal context of the Normalization Act in order to grant these equal linguistic rights to all citizens.⁵

The measures taken since the early eighties relate to the creation of a linguistic Advisory Board and to the elaboration of an *Action Plan for the Promotion of Euskera* (Euskara Sustatzeko Ekintza Plana [ESEP]) in each sector, to a Basque Radio and Television network (Euskal Irrati Telebista), an educational system based on the principle of language separation, the introduction of a system of linguistic profiles for jobs in the civil service and of an infra-structure of language schools (euskaltegiak) allowing for a progressive “linguistic Basquization” of adults (Goirigolzarri Garaizar & Urresti Landabidea, 2019, p. 511).⁶ These measures have had an important impact on the numbers of Basque speakers. Statistical data derived from the official sociolinguistic surveys point to a significant increase in the BAC from 24.66% bilingual and 14.75% passive bilingual speakers in 1986 up to 41.05% and 14.95% in 2016 (see Urrutia & Irujo, 2008a, p. 170; Basque Government, 2019). Despite this success, Basque remains a *minority language* in terms of its demographic range in the region, and even more so considering the size of the speech community in relation to the total population of Spain. At the same time, the fact that Basque has gradually lost ground to Castilian is due, among other things, to the increasing political centralization of Spain and to accompanying marginalizing language policies that made Basque a minoritized language in the historical Basque provinces.⁷

3 See also Tacke’s notion of a “conflict of territorialities” (2015, p. 285), Cetrà (2019, pp. 46-49) discusses the various models of territoriality and personality principles. For a critique of the linguistic territoriality principle, see De Schutter (2008).

4 For a discussion of Basque language policy in Navarre and the problems of linguistic zoning, see Urrutia & Irujo (2008b).

5 Cobarrubias (2008) differentiates between linguistic and political Normalization, stating that “[m]any politicians, including several presidents of the dominant Basque Nationalist Party (Partido Nacionalista Vasco), defined political normalization as status close to statehood” (p. 138).

6 For a full discussion of Basque language policy and planning see Azurmendi et al. (2001); Martínez de Luna and Azurmendi (2006); Gardner & Zalbide (2005); Hualde & Zuazo (2007); Urrutia & Irujo, (2008a); Arzo (2008).

7 For a history of the Basque territory and an external history of Euskera, see Trask (1997, pp. 7-49).

The educational system has been an important key factor in this process. Contrary to the Catalan immersion model, the Basque educational model followed the principle of separation, such as in the Valencian Community, in order to guarantee the parents' linguistic freedom to choose the main language for their children (Urrutia & Irujo, 2008a, p. 167; see also Urrutia, 2005). Therefore, the Normalization Act (10/1982 Legea, azaroaren 24koa, Euskararen erabilera normalizatzeko oinarritzkoa) and the Decree on Bilingual Linguistic Models (Uztailaren 11ko 138/1983 Dekretua, Euskal Herriko irakaskuntza ez unibertsitarian hizkuntza ofizialen erabilera araupetuz) prepared the ground for an educational system with three different linguistic options:

- *Model A* - Castilian as teaching medium and Basque as a subject;
- *Model B* - both Castilian and Basque used as means of instruction;
- *Model D* - total immersion with Basque as the teaching medium and Castilian as a subject.⁸

Interestingly, models A and B have shown a significant decline in numerical terms over the years, with the vast majority of parents preferring model D for their children (Lasagabaster 2001). In the academic year –2020-2021 –, 76.7% of the children aged 6-11 in the BAC are enrolled in model D, 19.2% in model B and only 3.3% in model A (Department of Education, n.d.). Whereas survey results indicate that this outcome reflects an increased interest of parents to educate their children through the immersion model (Erize 2016, p. 20), these developments have been accompanied by parents' complaints that their right to choose Castilian monolingual education for their children would be infringed by the reduction of models A and B (see below; Mar-Molinero 1997, p. 157; DePalma & Teasley 2013, p. 112.f). These complaints have been used by initiatives opposed to normalization policies to launch Spain-wide campaigns aimed at revealing the “imposition” of the minority languages.⁹

Despite the increase in its use in public domains, Basque is still classified as vulnerable (UNESCO, 2017), a classification which is certainly true for the situation in Navarre and France. In order to develop a framework for the Basque language policy in the twenty-first century, the Basque Advisory Board (Euskararen Aholku Batzordea) launched the initiative *Euskera 21* in 2008 to stimulate a debate on the criteria for symmetric and sustainable bilingualism. According to the initiative, this can only be reached by focusing on the normalization of the *use* of Euskera and thus by working towards a more balanced “functional compartmentalization” of Euskera and Castilian, which implies efforts to extend and to open up formal and informal domains where Euskera can become a realistic option (Euskararen Aholku Batzordea, 2009, p. 31). One important factor is the normalization of Euskera in the sphere of public administration (p. 23), which had been realized hitherto through linguistic requirements for positions in the public service. For each position, a specific linguistic profile was determined, based on the level of Basque language skills required to do the job (Urrutia & Irujo, 2008a, p. 180).

This system of linguistic profiles has been repeatedly criticized by the People's Party of the Basque Country (EAP-PP) for being discriminatory, allegedly infringing the principle of equal access to the civil service (Goirigolzarri Garaizar & Landabidea Urresti, 2019, p. 518). Similarly, the newly introduced decree on the normalization of the use of the two co-official languages in Basque institutions (179/2019 Dekretua, azaroaren 19koa, Euskadiko toki-erakundeetan hizkuntza ofizialen erabilera instituzionala eta administratiboa normalizatzeari buruzkoa) which aims to guarantee the equality of linguistic rights in the local administration, has been denounced at the High Court of Justice of the Basque Country (Euskal Autonomia Erkidegoko Auzitegi Nagusia) by the PP as “unconstitutional” and by the far-right party Vox as a “racist system” (Segovia, 2020). These arguments are based on a rhetoric of “reverse discrimination” (DePalma & Teasley, 2013, p. 113), which centers around the conception of language rights as individual rights that are allegedly threatened as soon as any measures in favor of the minoritized language require a certain accommodation from the monolingual speakers of the majority language (Goirigolzarri Garaizar & Landabidea Urresti, 2019; see May, 2012, pp. 328-330 on the issue of “tolerability”). Non-government organizations working under labels such as Galicia Bilingüe (now integrated into Hablamos español) or Asociación por la Tolerancia call for

8 Since the letter C is not part of the Basque alphabet, it has deliberately been left out in the creation of the linguistic models. A fourth model (Model X) with Spanish as language of instruction, except in English class, has disappeared in practice.

9 See for example the several projects documented on the official website of Hablamos Español, hispanohablantes.es.

the “same rights” for speakers of both co-official languages and refer to the constitutionally granted right to live, study and work in Castilian in all autonomous communities. Put this way, the claim for “bilingualism” translates into the claim for “the ‘right’ to remain monolingual in the majority language” (May, 2012, p. 16). This right, however, does not have universal character, since speakers of the minoritized language cannot claim to remain monolingual in their mother tongue. Relying on discourses that perceive any language policy in favor of the regional languages as a potential threat to their own linguistic privileges, these organizations encourage monolingual Castilian speakers to assert this claim through public activities such as organized protests against the restitution of autochthonous toponyms in the bilingual autonomous communities (Tacke, 2015, pp. 291-292).

The most contested sector in the bilingual communities, however, remains educational policy, whose models of linguistic immersion, according to the Spanish organization, which according to the Spanish organization *Hablamos español* are being used by “minority nationalists” in order to “change children’s languages” for the following purposes: “Su objetivo es crear una zona monolingüe que la distancie del resto de España. El niño se convierte en un instrumento; se le cosifica en aras de engrandecer la lengua minoritaria” (*Hablamos español*, n.d.). According to Moreno Cabrera (2015), the construction of Castilian as a language that is being “minoritized” in the bilingual autonomous communities derives from an ideology that, in its extreme form, allows only for the state language, Castilian, to be the dominant language (p. 30). This *españolismo lingüístico* (Cabrera 2008) is also linked to the idea of Castilian having become the “common” language by a seemingly natural process of expansion (cf. Narvaja de Arnoux & Del Valle, 2010). As we will see below, fragments of this ideology are frequently recurring elements in the processes of language making that we find in our data.

3 Language making and the delegitimization of linguistic rights

Discourses on bilingualism and language rights interact with linguistic ideologies, a term by which we refer to the shared representations of languages and language use that forge indexical links between social phenomena and linguistic practices (Woolard, 2021, pp. 1-2; see also Schieffelin, Woolard & Kroskrity, 1998; Silverstein 1979). As per Kroskrity (2000, p. 195), these perceptions of language and discourse are implicitly or explicitly “constructed in the interest of a specific social or cultural group”. In our project with its focus on linguistic rights and minority language promotion, interest is rendered visible for instance when the legitimacy of Basque in particular domains of use is contested in metalinguistic discourse. By *metalinguistic discourse* in this context, we refer to any discourse in which the object of discussion is language itself as a target of ideologically constructed preferences about its forms and functions.

Language ideologies are a key component for the concept of *language making* (henceforth, LM). The term covers “conscious or unconscious human processes in which imagined linguistic units are constructed and perceived as ‘a language’, ‘a dialect’ or ‘a variety’ (...) with clear-cut boundaries (...)” (Krämer, Vogl & Kolehmainen, *forthc.*). These processes operate on the basis of implicitly emerging or explicitly established norms for the structures and social functions of the linguistic entity. Depending on their social position, speakers and non-speakers of the variety in question contribute to the LM process to different degrees. Very influential “language makers” include teachers, journalists, sometimes politicians or artists, who shape the public perception of the linguistic entity at hand. At the same time, each individual can and usually does contribute to LM whenever they reflect on a particular variety, when they communicate about it, and when they use it. Individuals then feed their own views about what constitutes the linguistic entity at hand into the LM process. As a result, the notions which they contribute to LM are not necessarily congruent. In fact, their ideas compete with and sometimes even contradict each other. LM is a process of discursive negotiation mirrored in cognitive representations which relies heavily on language attitudes and ideologies (see Krämer, Vogl & Kolehmainen, *forthc.*) for a more extensive account of the concept, see Krämer, 2020, pp. 5-11 for the significance of Language Making for the global conception of Spanish). The way a linguistic entity is constructed bears clear traces of the belief systems and values held by the persons who contribute to LM. In the case of Basque, for instance, new speakers (*euskaldun berriak*) and traditional speakers (*euskaldun zaharrak*) contribute in different ways to the ideological construction of their language and its structural norms, for instance when reflecting on code switching practices with Castilian (Lantto, 2018; on new Basque speakers’ self-perceptions see also Breda, *forthc.*).

Among the many *loci* of metalinguistic discourse, online discussions are a promising source of data to tap into processes of LM. They reveal argumentative patterns brought forward by persons who are motivated to participate in shaping the social norms which ultimately compose the conceptualized entity. Sources such as readers' comments added to news articles or postings on social media provide access to relatively spontaneous utterances which are subject to less social control than for instance contributions made by journalists, teachers or politicians. As a phenomenon of a "participatory culture", online commenting is a bottom-up practice that adds to democratization as citizens can express consent or dissent toward political agendas and societal developments in the public sphere (Ross & Rivers, 2019, pp. 3-5). Admittedly, the contribution of such debates to LM is impossible to quantify and social control is of course not completely absent, as can be seen when offensive remarks are removed by moderators or called out by other users. Reactions like these are, in turn, contributions to LM just as much as other comments since they define fundamental conditions and discursive boundaries in which the negotiation of norms can take place.

LM can have inclusive and emancipatory effects, for example when marginalized languages gain prestige and recognition or when new standard norms emerge. In the case of Basque, positive contributions to LM can be observed in the many steps of promotion since the democratization of Spain. Such effects are most visible in the creation of *euskera batua* as a common structural norm or when linguistic rights are granted on a legal basis for the use of Basque, i.e., with the creation of explicit functional norms. More implicit impulses can be found in expressions of positive attitudes towards the language which finally also succeeded in stimulating overall vitality. As a result, we can see a growing number of speakers and also younger speakers making creative use of potentials for LM by shaping their own informal register of Basque (Urla, 1999; Lantto, *forthc.*; see also Pujolar, 2001).

Negative and exclusionary effects of LM can occur with processes in which the concept of a linguistic entity carries negative connotations. As a competing force to the beneficial dimensions outlined in the previous paragraph, these aspects of LM remain visible and influential also in the case of Basque. Again, while it is impossible to quantify the relative strength of the two basic dimensions – i.e., the balance between inclusionary and exclusionary effects of LM –, we will focus on these negative occurrences. It is important to understand these mechanisms in particular since they bear the risk of infringing upon the linguistic rights of minority language speakers: They often provide argumentative foundations for language-based discrimination and they increase linguistic insecurity in the community.

When a conception of Basque is constructed on the basis of dismissive attitudes towards it, we interpret this aspect of LM as drawing on mechanisms of *delegitimization* as the direct opposite of *legitimization*:

Legitimization refers to the process by which social actors accredit or license a type of social behavior (...). The practice of legitimization is enacted by argumentation, and therefore, by providing arguments that explain our social actions, ideas, thoughts, declarations and so forth. In addition, the act of legitimizing or justifying is related to a goal, which, in most cases, seeks others' support and approval (Reyes, 2019, p. 18).

Delegitimization, then, entails processes in which types of social behavior, for instance the use of a particular language in a particular setting, are presented as unjustified with the goal to prevent such behavior and to favor a preferred alternative. As Bar-Tal (1990, p. 67) points out, delegitimization is usually born out of an inter-group conflict: "The perception that the outgroup will achieve its goals poses a danger to the very existence of the ingroup." Based on the assumption of a threat, the interests of the opposite group are deemed irreconcilable with those of one's own group. For instance, following the logic of a "zero-sum game", increasing support for Basque is believed to presuppose a loss in significance for Castilian and the discrimination against monolingual or dominant Castilian speakers in the autonomous region. Subsequently, "delegitimization is used when a group perceives another group as different and devalued, and feels fear of it and/or contempt for it" (Bar-Tal, 1990, p. 74). In extreme cases, delegitimization involves a complete dehumanization of 'the others' and it can lead to or result from violent conflict. Other elements of delegitimization include negative stereotyping, downplaying the relevance of the outgroup's interests or objectives, and assigning politically or socially undesirable labels (see Krämer 2017 for comparable cases targeting speakers of Creole languages and multiethnolects). Delegitimizing discourses also serve the purpose of justifying invasive behavior towards the outgroup, including, for instance, the denial or reduction of rights. Van Leeuwen (2007) proposes a framework of four different forms of legitimization that are realized by specific linguistic resources:

- authorization: (de)legitimization by reference to specific persons, experts, customs and so on;
- moral evaluation: reference to moral values by means of evaluation, abstraction or comparison;
- rationalization: reference to the goals, uses and effects of practices and activities, or reference to a “natural order” of things through definitions, explanations or predictions;
- mythopoesis: legitimization through “*moral tales* which reward protagonists forengaging in legitimate social practices” (p. 105; original emphasis).

All these strategies can contribute to processes of LM in both negative (Basque) and positive (Castilian) ways, sometimes also in combination.

As Van Leeuwen (2007, p. 92) puts it, “legitimation is always the legitimation of the practices of specific institutional orders”. The same can be said for the opposite, delegitimization. Linguistic rights are institutionalized normative orders. Delegitimizing an entire language, then, means encroaching on its speakers’ linguistic rights as institutionalized. Hence, debates about specific legal frameworks such as the decree about the use of Basque in administration lend themselves to an analysis of (de)legitimizing discourses. Similarly, discussions about the role of Basque in school touch upon a significant institutional order with a determined linguistic setup. Ross and Rivers (2019, p. 6) argue that new digital media offer “a much broader field for the discursive dynamics of (de)legitimization to be played out and thus observed.” The increased accessibility of political participation via virtual platforms creates more opportunities for (de)legitimization as it makes more discursive spaces available.

In the present case, delegitimization draws on arguments which are supposed to substantiate the alleged illegitimacy of Basque speakers’ claims to normalize their language. These arguments are inscribed on a discursive level into the characteristics of what is supposed to constitute the core idea of *the Basque language*. The discourse elements analyzed in this paper are those which construct the linguistic entity called *Basque* as one which should not claim equal or even more legitimacy in the autonomous region than Castilian. The points raised in our data represent the commenters’ genuine beliefs about language and linguistic realities and as such may not necessarily be consciously intended as acts of deliberate delegitimization. However, this does not prevent them from feeding into a discourse that has a delegitimizing effect.

In a dialectical relation to metalinguistic reflections about Basque, these discourses also feed into the LM of Castilian. As Reyes (2019, p. 29) puts it, “the very act of legitimization per se implies an attempt to justify an ideological position on a specific issue. As the two sides of a coin, legitimizing a position is delegitimizing another.” The delegitimization of Basque is mirrored in the legitimization of the hegemony of Castilian. The concept of *the Castilian language* is constructed opposite that of Basque as an entity which is under threat and therefore needs to be defended. As a result, despite its long-standing social, economic and political dominance, Castilian is portrayed as a victim. Such strategies of self-victimization are frequent in delegitimizing discourses also in connection with migration, social or economic change.

4 Case study: debates about the promotion of Basque

In order to better understand the process of delegitimizing contributions to the LM of Basque, we selected two recent events which triggered reactions in the broader public and this way made metalinguistic discourses accessible for analysis. The first debate connects to a decree introduced in late 2019 by the Department of Culture and Language Policy of the regional government of the BAC. The text (179/2019 Dekretua) regulates the use of the region’s two official languages by the local authorities. It explicitly guarantees citizens the right to freely choose between the two languages when communicating with the authorities and to receive services in the preferred language (articles 6 and 15). It does not presume that all employees in local public service are bilingual and therefore states that other qualified staff members must be consulted if they cannot attend the enquiry of a citizen in Basque (article 27.1). Beyond direct written or oral communication between the authorities and individual citizens, the decree regulates in great detail all other domains of local authorities’ public communication, e.g., when providing information for a broader public, installing signage or developing elements of corporate identity. As a general rule, the decree follows a principle of additive, rather

than subtractive, institutional multilingualism. As a key aim, it is supposed to arrange for a “*progresiboki euskalduntze*” (‘progressive linguistic basquification’, article 5.3) of public service – a phrasing which easily triggered opposition. However, this process is not supposed to entail a progressive “de-castilianization” of local authorities. Its objective is to ensure the use of Basque in public service to the same extent as that of Castilian. It does not seek to replace the position of Castilian by Basque but rather to remove obstacles which so far have kept Basque from occupying the same rank as the dominant language of the state. When the decree took effect, it received extensive media coverage on a regional and Spain-wide level, and it sparked vivid public debates about its consequences not only for the use of Basque but also for that of Castilian in the region.

The second case was chosen to avoid a bias towards debates which exclusively focus on direct interaction between citizens and the state or explicit legal regulations since linguistic rights are relevant in many other domains of social life. The COVID-19 pandemic determined large parts of daily realities in all societies around the globe, and it also had a linguistic dimension which unfolded in the Basque Country. With schools being closed for several months, many children and youth from predominantly Castilian-speaking families had little contact with the Basque language for a sustained period of time. Their exposure to and acquisition of Basque is usually guaranteed primarily by the education system. Another challenge brought about by the pandemic emerged from information policy. As in many other minority language contexts, a topic discussed in the region was the extent to which health and safety advice and up-to-date information about the pandemic should be communicated in Basque, and not only in Castilian.¹⁰ Vivid debates were sparked as many proponents of a promotion of Basque feared that the regional language was being neglected even though the availability of information in a person’s most accessible language is of particular importance in an emergency situation.

In our analysis, we are not immediately concerned with the characteristics of the debates about these two specific scenarios. Instead, we use them as a point of entry to the more general discourse about Basque as they have triggered extensive discussions that draw on the types of delegitimizing arguments which we are particularly interested in.

5 Data and methodology

The data we used as a basis for our analysis consists of online comments posted by readers as reactions to articles which reported on the topics described in the previous paragraph. The news outlets selected were websites of national and regional newspapers. As the main criteria of selection, we considered media (1) in which the discourse segment was expected to be represented, particularly due to the position of the media outlets on the pro-Spain and right-wing side of the political spectrum, and (2) which had an open and public section for reader comments. Online comments can be a valuable source for research on metalinguistic discourses. We operate on the basis of three assumptions of computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) as described by Herring (2004, pp. 342-343). “Discourse exhibits recurrent patterns. (...) Discourse involves speaker choices. (...) Computer-mediated discourse may be, but is not inevitably, shaped by the technological features of computer-mediated communication systems.” Within the CMDA framework, we opted for a theme-based data selection to ensure topical coherence since we were interested in a particular sub-segment of the metalinguistic discourse about Basque (Herring, 2004, p. 351).

It is both an advantage and a disadvantage that online reader comments give access to a largely abstract and anonymous discourse.¹¹ They often display statements which show less socially conditioned restraint than for instance data gathered with the help of interviews. Evidently, social control is not completely absent in this setting. Still, online comments are frequently posted in a context of anonymity and spontaneity so that there is a potential to access parts of a discourse which would be unutterable in face-to-face situations or publications with open authorship. At the same time, these factors also set the limits of this data type. It is virtually impossible to retrace the particular context of an utterance, for example from a person’s individual

10 See Piller, Zhang & Li (2020) and Chouinard & Normand (2020) for examples from various minority contexts, Jiménez Salcedo (2020) for the specific case of Spain.

11 For similar approaches and discussions about the potentials and limitations of online comments as data for metalinguistic discourse, see e.g. Tan (2012, pp. 342-344) on Chinese in Singapore, Reyes (2013, pp. 339-340; 2019, pp. 20-22), Krämer (2017, 111-115) on various Creole languages and multiethnolects, Vukotić (2019, p. 43-44) on Lithuanian, Norwegian and Serbian.

background, identity, or location.¹² With many comments gathered from Spain-wide news websites, we can assume that users from various parts of Spain (or even abroad) took part in the debate; the share of users from the Basque country cannot be ascertained. Apart from small pieces of information made transparent in the postings by the users themselves, we cannot determine who influences the discourse the most or what motivated a person to contribute to the debate. Similarly, any hypothesis about an individual’s underlying beliefs which are not explicitly stated in a comment will always remain speculative. Yet, we can assume that persons who engage in online debates have a strong inclination to express their views and in this way are actively involved in shaping the discourse because the matter at hand is of importance to them. As they decide to feed their metalinguistic conceptions into the discussion, they actively and willingly contribute to the LM process. As a consequence, the data under investigation may indeed be biased due to the fact that extreme views are strongly represented in the sample. To a certain extent, however, this bias is desirable since it makes the discursive patterns particularly visible and therefore easy to access for analysis.

We selected a total number of nine press articles about the two topics and manually extracted 1222 comments posted in reaction to them on the date of the publication until a few days thereafter. The majority of these comments were written in Castilian with very few, and usually very short, passages in Basque. The original spelling of the comments was retained, including errors. Between the two news events, the distribution of the data is manifestly uneven. As online comments are self-emerging data, the composition of the corpus will inevitably depend on the dynamics of the debates and the extent to which they yield contributions. Nevertheless, the small number of comments posted in connection to the COVID-19 pandemic does enable us to retrieve discursive elements from the larger sub-corpus about the decree. The second case study therefore serves its purpose as a test subject to substantiate observations from the first one.

Table 1. Composition of the corpus

Publication date	Source	Code	Number of comments	Number of delegitimizing comments
19 Sep 19	El Mundo	D_ELM_20190919	627	140
19 Nov 19	ABC	D_ABC_20191119	96	32
19 Nov 19	El Español	D_ELE_20191119	40	12
20 Nov 19	El Correo	D_COR_20191120	151	41
01 Dec 19	El Mundo	D_ELM_20191201	127	25
03 Dec 19	El Correo	D_COR_20191203	2	1
22 Jan 20	ABC	D_ABC_20200122	22	4
06 Sep 20	Diario Vasco	P_DV_20200906	27	17
02 Dec 20	El Español	P_ELE_20201202	130	20
Total			1222	292

Table 1: Composition of the corpus. The code of each press article serves to attribute the comments quoted in the following chapters to the individual articles. Codes beginning with “D” are for articles about the decree, those beginning with “P” report on the language situation during the pandemic.

The postings were subsequently annotated with the help of the software *F4 Analyse* which allows to hierarchically code qualitative data. The codes were determined in a three-step process: First, a preliminary complete reading of the data to extract salient discursive patterns and their interrelations as a basis for categorization; second, an aggregation of the patterns which allowed to rank them as main and sub-categories, and third, paraphrasing the arguments under code headings with abstract keywords to grasp their common

¹² In this respect, our data differs from similar sources like social media which can give access to more personal background information, though it often remains fragmentary (e.g., see Alvarado Pavez, 2020, p. 268 for the use of data from Facebook).

core. The subsequent attribution of these abstract codes in F4 Analyse made it possible to also attribute several codes to the same text passage in order to make argumentative overlaps immediately visible in the software interface during analysis.

Among the comments collected from the source, a total number of 292 contained statements which could be identified as overtly delegitimizing positions against Basque as outlined in the following chapters. These comments were retained for analysis. Their share in the overall volume of the online discussions should not be mistaken for a quantitative value indicating the influence of delegitimizing positions in the discourse. Among the comments not considered in the analysis are many which agreed with such attitudes without, however, providing any argumentative substance, e.g. simple signals of agreement or indignation. Other comments contained sarcastic remarks, emojis or links to websites. Of course, arguments in favor of the promotion of Basque were also widely represented, but these were not part of the discourse segment under investigation. The elaborateness of the comments analyzed covers a wide range from short claims about the linguistic reality in the BAC to thoroughly composed trains of thought.

The categories for coding followed the main discursive patterns identified in a close-reading process of the corpus: we “let the phenomenon of interest emerge out of a sample of computer-mediated data and devise[d] coding categories on the basis of the observed phenomenon, as in the grounded theory approach” (Herring, 2004, p. 358). The following section presenting the analysis of the data will be structured along these discursive patterns which can be identified as “argumentation schemes” in the sense of Reyes (2019, p. 19). In our analysis, we adopted an approach of critical discourse analysis, that is, an interpretation of the data with the objective to carve out underlying ideological assumptions and convictions (Van Dijk, 1995). More precisely, in an eminently qualitative perspective, we strive to uncover the argumentative mechanisms which serve to delegitimize Basque and its functional or social norms as part of a process of LM.

6 Analysis: elements of delegitimizing metalinguistic discourse in the language making of Basque

With the help of examples taken from our data, the following paragraphs will provide an analysis of the four most prominent discursive patterns of delegitimization targeting Basque and its promotion in the BAC, keeping in mind that these patterns are, of course, intimately interconnected: the assertion that Basque is being imposed at the expense of Castilian, the idea that Basque is not relevant enough to be promoted, the discreditation of regional language policy as “totalitarian”, and finally the suspicion that the valorization of Basque serves obscure interests.

6.1 Imposition and supposed discrimination against Castilian-speakers

Contrary to what decree 179/2019 stipulates, many comments interpret the legislation as an imposition of Basque upon those who prefer not to use it. Even though the objective of the decree is to expand the use of Basque in local administration, it clearly states that citizens can continue to freely choose between the two official languages. Often, comments do not directly refer to the decree as such, but rather use the news coverage as an opportunity to comment on Basque language policy in broader terms.

El gobierno vasco ha impuesto sobre la población una lengua desaparecida y que no hablaban (D_ELM_20191201).

Si en seis meses sin clase lo olvidan ... es que es un idioma impostado y artificial (P_FB_20200907).

The motive of imposition is connected to various supposed reasons and consequences. Some argue that an obligation to use Basque leads to resistance and therefore counteracts the original objective to promote it:

La libertad para elegir o no estudiar euskera o en euskera es básica para que la gente ame el euskera. Lo único que están consiguiendo con las políticas de educación en euskera obligatoria es lo contrario de que se tendría que perseguir (P_DV_20200906).

euskera cuanto más lo impongan, en la enseñanza o en la administración, menos se usará... y será un idioma más antipático para la mayoría de los ciudadanos (D_COR_20191120).

In a way, these comments make a perceived process of LM explicit. They describe a development in which a conception of Basque is being formed by a change in its functional norms and associated attitudes. Interestingly, this observation of a – supposed or actual – process of LM then feeds back into the metalinguistic discourse and as such contributes to shaping an element of what constitutes the notion of Basque in this particular discourse: the idea of an imposed language.

A particularly frequent motive which is concomitant with the idea of Basque as an imposed language is the view that the promotion of the regional language constitutes an act of discrimination against Castilian-speakers. Despite the long-standing dominance of Castilian in the country and the retained right to use it in the BAC, many readers depict expanded rights for the use of Basque as an infringement of their personal choice.

[L]o que no es de recibo es que los ayuntamientos a los que contribuimos con nuestros impuestos nos eliminen y discriminen en derecho constitucional como es el de expresarse y comunicarse en el idioma oficial de nuestro país (D_ELM_20190919).

Hints to the Spanish Constitution are a recurrent theme in the comments. However, they are rarely more elaborate than the mere mention of a supposed conflict between linguistic legislation in the BAC and the Constitution.

Es anticonstitucional (D_ABC_20191119).

Esa decisión va contra la Constitución y las leyes: ¿qué medidas va a tomar este gobierno contra ello? (D_ABC_20200122).

As far as arguments drawing on constitutional principles are substantiated, they again present the newly introduced legislation as a coercion to acquire or use Basque:

Este decreto del Gobierno vasco es flagrante y obscenamente inconstitucional. La Constitución Española establece que todos los españoles tienen el deber de conocer el castellano y el derecho de usarlo en todo el territorio nacional. En cambio, con respecto a las otras lenguas cooficiales en sus respectivas Comunidades Autónomas, no establece ningún deber de conocerlas (D_ELM_20190919).

In a complex logic, this comment uses a lower level of protection of the regional languages in the state Constitution as a means to defend Castilian against the supposed imposition of Basque. As a matter of fact, unlike the Constitution, the decree does not introduce any obligation whatsoever on the part of the citizen. It is exclusively directed at the local administration in order to ensure that the state's obligations towards the citizens are met.

Ultimately, the notion of imposition and discrimination serves to shift the power relation between Basque and Castilian, with Basque being presented as in a much stronger and Castilian in a much weaker position. This strategy can be qualified as a “delegitimization by proxy”: on a superficial level, the debate seems to revolve around Castilian and the rights of its speakers in the Basque Country. This topic, however, serves to question the right of Basque to occupy a strong(er) position in society, for instance through increased use in local administration. The concept of Basque in LM rests on the narrative of an alleged threat that it poses to Castilian. The idea of Basque taking up too much space at the expense of Castilian is inscribed in the notion of what constitutes the Basque language.

6.2 Countering the relevance and benefits of the minority language

Discursive elements closely interrelated with the feelings of imposition and discrimination described above are linked to the status and relevance of the minoritized language. The comments subsumed under this category put the value of Euskera and thus the benefits of learning and using it into question, contributing explicitly or implicitly to the authority of Castilian. In many cases, the comments display legitimization strategies that draw authority from reference to what is perceived as logical and reasonable (cf. Van Leeuwen, 2007). In the eyes of the commenters, it does not make sense to learn a language which they evaluate as being “small”, “useless”, a language “of villagers and shepherds”. Thus, the supposed obligation to learn and use Euskera is presented as illogical and unreasonable:

No entiendo por qué tanto empeño en forzar a la gente a aprender y a hablar semejantes lenguas inútiles (D_ABC_20191119).

Languages comparable to Basque are marked as “useless” in this comment, an evaluation which not only implies an underlying concept of language that draws value only from its utility or socio-economic benefits, but which also delegitimizes the speakers of minoritized languages since within this logic their language does not have any value and therefore no authority. This “uselessness” is put in contrast with alleged efforts of promoters of these languages to force people to learn and speak them: an apparent paradox that does not conform with the rules of “common sense”. The negative construction “no entiendo por qué” puts the commenter in a position of innocence and rationality, as they appear to look for an explanation.

In the same vein, the following two comments draw on the utility argument:

(...) vete a contárselo a una chica que tiene que meter horas y más horas para sacar una nota decente en la selectividad cuando no le interesa para nada el euskera y sabe que en la vida lo va a usar (D_COR_20191120).

Cuando vaya por Europa le va a servir mogollón saber euskera... (D_COR_20191120).

In this case, sarcasm is used as a delegitimizing strategy, explaining the lack of value of Euskera through its inutility in other European countries. It is obvious that the perceived benefit of learning dominant European languages resonates in this statement.¹³

In the same way as Basque is perceived as unsuitable for international communication, Castilian is often constructed as a useful and necessary language, obtaining its hegemonic status from its global demographic spread. In the following comments, we find recurring ideological elements that contribute to a construction of Castilian as what Del Valle (2007) termed *lengua de encuentro*:

No entiendo esa manía de algunos vascos de perseguir y hasta prohibir el castellano o español, es el idioma que nos permite comunicarnos con 700 millones de personas... y francamente no sé qué sería de esta comunidad sin él (D_COR_20191120).

El castellano es el idioma oficial español y es tal vez el segundo idioma más hablado del mundo (D_ABC_20191119).

Cuántas personas que viven en estas zonas hablan, escriben y leen euskera? No se puede imponer una lengua minoritaria, sin ninguna relevancia nacional o internacional (...). No lo van a conseguir, el español-castellano, es demasiado fuerte y lo hablan mas de 500 millones de personas en todo el mundo... No way, Patxi (D_ELM_20190919).

Within this concept of Castilian as a site of global encounter for millions of people and as a “strong” language, we find the implicit assumption that it is not an imposed language, but rather a subject of free will and choice (Del Valle, 2007, p. 42). This vision becomes problematic when histories of linguistic imperialism are camouflaged as stories of “natural spread” in order to construct a “de-nationalized” image of Castilian as a universal and unifying language (*hispanofonía*). In the first comment, the value of Castilian is furthermore drawn from its alleged function as koiné in the autonomous community (“francamente no sé qué sería de esta comunidad sin él”). The idea of Castilian as *koiné* or *lengua común* has been subject of much criticism. Ramallo points to the fact that the common language “is the result of renunciation and relinquishment” (2018, p. 474) and that its apparent naturalness often serves as an argument to underpin allegations of imposition.

Further cases of language change and spread as seemingly “natural processes” can be found in comments that refer to the death of Euskera. Here, measures for the revitalization of Basque are perceived as a waste of financial resources, since they act against the “natural” flow of things and will not be able to hinder language death:

Sin subvenciones el euskera hace tiempo que habría muerto o lo hablarían cuatro gatos. Gastarse millones en promocionar una lengua que por su natural tiende a desaparecer me parece tirar el dinero (D_ELM_20190919).

13 Compare, however, the position of Spanish as a foreign language: many learners of Spanish in Germany attached little material and limited instrumental value to the language and based their learning motivations primarily on affective components (Krämer, 2020, pp. 152-162; 2019).

El gobierno vasco ha impuesto sobre la población una lengua desaparecida y que no hablaban (D_ELM_20191201).

Sí, pero algunas lenguas han evolucionado, otras se han quedado paradas (D_COR_20191120).

The idea of languages being subject to processes of “natural selection” does sometimes lead to the assumption that minority languages supposedly are at a lower level on an imagined evolutionary scale. Proponents of such arguments take the lack of technical lexicon and its assumed unsuitability for contemporary life¹⁴ as a confirmation, ignoring that this perceived unsuitability is rather a consequence of linguistic repression than of natural processes. The concept of the death of Euskera is closely linked to voices that delegitimize Basque for its standard variety *euskera batua* being “inauthentic” and “artificial”.

Han inventado un nueva lengua el esker-batua y se la han impuesto. Hasta hace poco tiempo solo hablaban vasco 100.000 personas. En Bilbao no hablaba ni Dios vasco, tan solo cuando llegaban los aldeanos (D_ELM_20191201).

Euskera is reduced to its standard variety which has been introduced in the late sixties. The assertion that Euskera had to be “reinvented” is insofar misleading, as the standard brings together elements from different dialectal varieties of Basque that are still spoken until today without any break in transmission. Although in the first period after its introduction *euskera batua* triggered a controversial debate within the Basque society about its degree of artificiality vis-à-vis the numerous traditional dialects, this debate has changed significantly towards the recognition of the standard’s benefits for social cohesion and transmission. However, non-traditional speakers may feel the pressure to learn dialectal forms of Euskera, since in most Basque speaker’s view, these forms convey more authenticity (Urla, Amorrortu, Goirigolzarri & Ortega, 2018; for a discussion of purist tendencies among Basque speakers, see Lantto 2015; 2018). In the following comment, the internal debate about the “invented” nature of *batua* is being transferred to another metalinguistic discourse as a delegitimizing argument against the genuineness of the language:

Yo me descojono cuando oigo hablar vasco, es una lengua que dejó de hablarse hace mucho tiempo y tuvieron que reinventarla. Cuando la gente habla vasco no suena natural, la hablan como si la estuvieran leyendo, sin tono, sin cadencia, es una lengua rígida y nada flexible (D_ELM_20190919).

Concomitantly, statements like this one contribute to the *erasure* (Gal & Irvine, 2000) of the continuity of Euskera. The commenter believes to recognize the artificiality of the language in prosodic elements and pronunciation. The ideological positioning against the authenticity of Euskera is legitimized through the alleged personal experience of listening to Basque speakers’ “unnatural” way of talking and has an alienating effect. Other comments draw on an urban-rural-contrast to expose the assumed unsuitability of Euskera and its different local varieties to serve the communicative functions in urban spaces:

La mayoría de vascos urbanos no entienden ni el vasco ni esa mezcla del vasco-batúa, inventado por Sabino Arana del que se reía Miguel de Unamuno (D_ABC_20191119).

The juxtaposition of two famous Basque representatives of a two-century-old conflict about the importance of Euskera for the continuity of Basque culture and ethnicity is used here to discredit one side (Sabino Arana-Goiri and Basque linguistic nationalism) with the authority of the other (Miguel de Unamuno and his conviction of the unsuitability of Basque for literary purposes). In similar constructions, the hegemony of Castilian is constructed through its value as *lengua culta* (López García, 2007), which in turn is legitimized by references to the authority of role models and famous representatives of Castilian culture:

Cómo se va a imponer una lengua de aldeanos y pastores al español de Cervantes, García Márquez, Quevedo, o Perez Reverte. Qué ilusos (D_COR_20191120).

Within this argumentative scheme, Castilian is presented as a cultural symbol established by its writers. On the other hand, Euskera is reduced to its original rural space. More implicitly, we also find a juxtaposition of written and oral language in this statement, drawing on the culturally stereotypical idea that talk is not real

14 See for example the statements of Popular Party’s executive secretary in the Basque Country, Leopoldo Barreda, in an online article of the Wall Street Journal entitled “Basque Inquisition: How Do You Say Shepherd in Euskera?” (Johnson, 2007).

language (Linell, 2005). Thus, Basque is not only perceived as lacking functions for “modern” communication because of its rural localization, but also because of its roots in oral transmission.

Another example of LM that draws on the limitation of the minoritized language in terms of space can be found in comments about Euskera as the “language of school” and not the home language of most pupils:

A ver si he entendido bien: cuando “desaparece” la escuela, también desaparece el uso del vasco ? Si es así, significa que en casa no se utiliza. Y es verdad, en muchas casas no se usa porque no es la lengua m/paterna. Sólo la escuela hace ‘inmersión’, pero en cuanto hayan salido los jóvenes pasan al castellano. Creo que hay que repensar la política lingüística, tomando más en cuenta la realidad (P_DV_20200906).

El idioma materno de la inmensa mayoría de los vascos es el español. Y hay más de dos centenares de miles de vascos repartidos por España huidos de su región por culpa de ETA-Bildu y su recoge nueces PNV (P_ELE_20201202).

In this case, the alleged imposition is justified with the fact that children speak another language at home than in school. This reality is being problematized with reference to the children’s mother tongue (“en muchas casas no se usa porque no es la lengua m/paterna”). Other commenters argue that Euskera is not adequate for educational purposes *because* it is only a home/family-language.¹⁵ In both cases, societal bilingualism is conceived as parallel monolingualism without any necessity of accommodation, as it is seen to only affect the part of society that has a “native” bond with Basque. Within this logic which is frequently used by initiatives against linguistic immersion models in education, Castilian-speaking children are deprived of their right to be educated monolingually and current language policies are perceived as inadequate, since they imply a certain degree of accommodation and concession from part of the monolingual Castilian-speakers.

The data examples of this section illustrate that the conceptions of the two languages are often formed in mutual dependence based on evaluative criteria. Pairs of characteristics assigned to Castilian and Basque such as authenticity vs artificiality, urbanity vs rurality, internationality/universality vs particularism, usefulness vs uselessness illustrate the parallel LM processes in a dialectical relationship with a clear-cut hierarchy. Interestingly, the respective attributes are mostly interpreted as results of seemingly natural processes, whereas factors of historicity or agency in these processes are often left out.

6.3 Victimhood, totalitarianism and two-sided nationalism

With Castilian being presented as the victim of the promotion of Basque, some users deny the minority position of Basque itself with its history of marginalization. In extreme cases, this motive includes a relativization or downright denial of the linguistic and social consequences of the Franco era.

Lo que le interesa es pensar que se perseguía al euskera y así lo denota al escribir ‘fue desapareciendo con medidas similares a las legisladas contra el euskera’ porque va a eso, al victimismo (D_ELM_20191201).

En algún momento de mi frase he atacado a los que quieren o quieren hablar en euskera? Creo que no... Pero vosotros a lo vuestros... Eternas víctimas inexistentes... (D_COR_20191120).

Luego criticaban a Franco, por no permitir ikastolas. El gobierno vasco no permite el castellano, ¿cuál es la diferencia? (D_ABC_20191119).

Yo he vivido siempre en democracia y siempre he oído eso de que Franco prohibía hablar en catalán, gallego y euskera y creo que es un bulo que nos han metido. (...) Hay personas mayores en Euskadi, Galicia, Asturias que casi no saben ni hablar en castellano. ¿Entonces que es eso de que se prohibía hablar en euskera? Eso es un bulo que nos quieren colar (D_COR_20191120).

Even though “the overt repression of Spain’s minority languages that characterized Franco’s dictatorship has given way to the more subtle hegemony of Castilian” (DePalma & Teasley, 2013, p. 102), this period of history still plays an important part for present-day debates. As can be seen from the previous comments, some users choose to erase the history of oppression from the concept of Basque in LM and replace it by an ahistorical narrative in which Basque itself is an instrument of oppression against Castilian. While supporters

15 “[S]on lenguas que los niños la aprenden en el núcleo familiar y se queda para hablar las entre ellos...” (P_FB_20200907).

of language rights for Basque are portrayed as deliberately assuming a victim position, monolingual Castilian speakers in the Basque country are said to be victims of the consequences of regional language policy. These reactions are in line with observations from other regions of Spain like Catalonia or Galicia where:

(...) protestors ignore the legacies of historical linguistic domination and adopt a victim discourse for speakers of the currently hegemonic language (Spanish). Invoking the aforementioned rhetoric of “reverse discrimination” they claim that their individual language rights are being denied by the “imposition” of the minoritized language in schools (DePalma & Teasley, 2013, pp. 112-113).

From an assumed position of victimhood, some opponents of regional language policy resort to drastic vocabulary to qualify supporters of the promotion of Basque and politicians in particular.

Y los Nazis son otros ??? Medida totalitaria de unos políticos Vascos totalitarios (D_ELM_20190919).

Eso es fascismo. Solo el 20% de la poblacion vasca habla o entiende el euskera. Nacionalismos fascistas son el vasco y catalan (D_ELM_20190919).

INCONSTITUCIONAL. Un paso más del nazismo vasco (D_ELM_20190919).

These examples confirm Bar-Tal’s observation that extreme forms of delegitimization lead to the use of labels which serve to exclude opponents from the range of a socially or politically justifiable spectrum altogether. The opposing party is portrayed as “a political entity that threatens the basic values of the given society, is a danger to its system, and is therefore totally unacceptable, e.g., Nazis, fascists, communists, or imperialists” (Bar-Tal 1990, p. 66). Basque and the language policy promoting it then appear as instruments in a severe breach of democratic principles and hence as intrinsically illegitimate. As the last comment shows, this strategy can easily be combined with generalized hints to the Constitution which is evoked as a guarantee against the alleged totalitarianism of regional language policy.

A similar, yet more complex, theme is that of nationalism. As Cetrà (2019, p. 43) shows, “languages are constructed through political mobilisation and contingent historical circumstances as national identity markers, and individuals may derive value from them for this reason.” Unsurprisingly, the debate about Basque frequently touches upon the existence of independence movements in the Basque country and the long history of violent conflict. Favorable attitudes towards the Basque language and its promotion may partly overlap with autonomist political stances without, however, automatically coinciding. Within the discourse of delegitimization, efforts to promote Basque are indiscriminately associated with Basque nationalism.

El vasco y el catalán son un par de aberraciones lingüísticas que únicamente han sido utilizadas como instrumento de la manipulación nacionalista (D_ABC_20191119).

Again, nationalism fits the criterion of the assignment of politically and socially undesirable labels: it is a notion with eminently negative connotations which few would deliberately claim for themselves, at least in most European contexts. Many users express the suspicion that the promotion of Basque ultimately serves the objective of creating a monolingual Basque-speaking nation-state separate from Spain which would exclude Castilian-speaking citizens from partaking in its society. In connection with this apprehension, they often express their own form of linguistic nationalism in favor of the ideal of Spain as a unified nation with one common language, sometimes also drawing on examples from other countries in which they see this ideal fulfilled.

Debiera ser como Francia e Italia, solo un idioma oficial (D_COR_20191120).

El español es nuestra lengua común y lengua NACIONAL (D_ELE_20191119).

Así que si me destinan al país vasco tengo que aprender otra lengua? Ni de coña! El castellano es lengua oficial de España (D_ELM_20190919).

El idioma común y oficial de España es el español (castellano en España) (D_ELM_20190919).

As can be seen from these comments, they often take a form of apodictic hints at the status of Castilian in Spain while leaving out the equally official status of regional languages in the respective parts of the country. We

can describe this motive as a “two-sided nationalism” in which users project their own linguistic nationalism from the Castilian model onto the BAC (again, cf. Cetrà, 2019 for an extensive account of the links between language and nationalism). Since Spain is supposed to be, in their view, a nation with Castilian as the one dominant language, drawing on the argumentative patterns of majority nationalism (Fossas, 2011; Lecours & Nooten, 2011), they presume that the promotion of a regional language aspires to the same situation in the autonomous region. The dominance of the common language for the whole of Spain needs to be secured against competition from other languages which threaten the model of homogeneity. Within this logic, the equitable coexistence of two languages in the same political entity – which may or may not be an independent state – becomes virtually unthinkable. The linguistic setup of the imagined ideal nation-state then may take one of two forms within a narrow margin of argumentation: It is either fully monolingual, or it accepts other languages as long as they remain in an inferior position to the dominant language in a relation of one-way bilingualism. Either way, the basic principle of linguistic hierarchy and dominance remains unchallenged and a third option in which two or more languages are recognized on an equal footing is excluded from the conceptual scope.

When it is assumed that Basque language policy is supposed to pursue a monolingual nationalist agenda, this goal collides with the desire to preserve the dominance of Castilian in all of Spain. In this scenario, the model of Spain is supposed to take precedence on historic grounds:

Español y nacionalista es contradictorio por naturaleza. El nacionalismo pretende crear una nación, y España va sobrada desde hace siglos. Son las renegadas provincias de Castilla las que están creando algo que nunca existió, Euskadi, y eso sí que es nacionalismo. La imposición del euskera por el gobierno vasco a una sociedad que no lo hablaba, es uno de los medios (D_ELM_20191201).

In this comment, the long-standing history of dominance of Castilian justifies itself. The language is supposed to maintain this position also in the BAC, like everywhere else in the country, and not to be relativized by the promotion of regional languages. In order to substantiate the criticism of Basque monolingual nationalism, the idea of Castilian-dominant nationalism needs to be erased altogether. Instead, comments build on various time-based arguments, ranging from the decades which have passed since the end of the Franco era across various stages of Castilian linguistic history until Roman times. The underlying logic is usually to deduce a legitimization for the dominance of Castilian from the long continuance of its prominent position in the country. In the debate, these arguments usually meet immediate reactions on the grounds of the pre-Roman history of Basque.

6.4 Conjectured political and economic motives

While many comments refer to an alleged far-reaching objective of totalitarianism behind regional language policy in the BAC, others suspect more individual political or economic motives behind the decree and the promotion of Basque in general:

Yo no hablo de prohibir sino de dejar de imponerlo y subvencionarlo... El que quiera hablarlo y utilizarlo que lo haga... Pero que a los demás nos dejen tranquilos y no nos perjudiquen porque no queramos aprenderlo, usarlo ni subvencionarlo (D_COR_20191120).

Si lo hacen pensaremos que lo unico que quieren es dar trabajo a loa traductores que los ayuntamientos tendran que contratar para traducir al castellano. Osea mas funcionarios y mas coste (D_COR_20191120).

Un articulo que en el fondo solo nos avisa de que “cuando se desembolsen millones de euros para lo que sea relacionado con impulsar el euskera” estara justificado. Una pena que el mayor tesoro cultural que tenemos aquí sea utilizado sistemáticamente de manera política y como combustible para sacarnos la pasta (P_DV_20200906).

The promotion of minority languages is usually a rather costly project, not least because of the fact that dominant languages are typically associated with educational, social and economic opportunities. This frequently leads to a rejection of efforts for revitalization and promotion of minority languages which are deemed inefficient and unprofitable:

El euskera sobrevive gracias a las subvenciones millonarias y a toda la “industria” pública que revolotea alrededor (traductores, maestros fanáticos, escritores, periodistas, intelectuales, editoriales, funcionarios, etc.) (D_ELM_20190919).

Most languages which today carry economic weight have gained this status through imposition, for instance in colonial history or with policies of national monolingualism against regional languages or dialects. The fact that, as a consequence, minority and regional languages depend on public resources to remain in use is now turned against them in a tautological argument. Economized discourses of this kind can feed into speculations which rest on the assumption that interested parties supposedly expect economic benefits from favorable language policy. Views like these can even border to conspiracy myths:

Euskera... Un claro ejemplo de imposición, odio e instrumentalización al servicio de intereses oscuros (D_COR_20191120).

The “obscure interests” mentioned in this comment remain unclarified and the term is open for interpretation, particularly for others who disapprove of the regional language policy. Ultimately, such arguments delegitimize the regional language as an unduly cost-intensive matter of non-transparent, partial interest which eludes social control. Similar arguments are brought forward in connection with other non-dominant languages, for instance in Creole-speaking postcolonial societies (Krämer, 2017, p. 129). Both on a political level, as seen above in the context of nationalism, and on an economic level, this strand of LM constructs Basque as a language linked to a small, closed circle of persons as opposed to Castilian as a universally valid means of social and national cohesion. This way, Basque is construed as the language of a numerically insignificant, but economically influential minority which poses a threat to the legitimate majority – a thought which often creates the basis for conspiracy narratives. At the same time, this segment of the discourse connects the notion of arcane interests behind revitalization policies to the idea of relevance and benefits discussed above.

7 Conclusion

In the previous sections we have discussed a selection of discursive elements which are used to delegitimize the promotion of Basque as a regional language. While the analysis inevitably needs to be linear in the textual structure of this paper, we rather have to imagine it as a network of argumentative patterns and ideological *topoi* which underpin and connect to each other. Basque is displayed as an imposition upon monolingual or dominant Castilian speakers, a project which allegedly serves a nationalist agenda in the BAC benefitting the interests of anonymous profiteers, even though the language itself supposedly lacks relevance for a modern society.

The delegitimization of Basque in the discourse we analyzed is based on the fundamental principle of a reversal of roles between Castilian and Basque. The linguistic rights of Castilian speakers are used in order to set limits to the rights invoked as a basis for the promotion of Basque. The regional language is presented as carrying much more weight and power than it has, and is then challenged for it; its legitimacy in the place which it supposedly occupies is being contested. This way, two opposite strands of LM are operating with one seemingly common denominator: the strength of Basque. As an important tool of LM, official language policy, backed up by an important part of the population, seeks to strengthen the position of Basque in society by expanding its use. Opponents depict Basque as becoming or already being too strong in relation to Castilian, and language policy as a means to enhance a perceived dominance of the regional language. While in the first case, a comfortable position for Basque is an objective to be achieved, in the second, it is perceived as an already existing threat. With this in mind, it becomes clear that the LM of minority and marginalized languages is intimately linked to that of the majority language(s) in the respective society: the idea of what constitutes the non-dominant language is very often formed in a dialectical relationship with the dominant one(s).

Much of the debate revolves around language rights. The perception of these rights as individual rights that are infringed upon by normalization policies and the accompanying expectation of “accommodation”, contrasts with a view of language rights as collective rights whose positive recognition justifies the state support for the minority language (Kymlicka, 1995; May, 2012; see also Kymlicka & Patten, 2003). Starting from the individual definition of language rights, we are dealing with a strong discourse of “not having the right to do something” because it could violate the personal freedom of choice. This discourse either invokes the law,

for example when referring to the Constitution, or a lack of *raison d'être* of the language itself. In the aspects of LM of Basque described in this paper, the relation between *legitimacy* and *legality* plays a crucial role.

The segment of metalinguistic discourse on Basque described in this paper highlights the fact that linguistic rights are not achieved from the moment they are formally guaranteed in legislation. Rather, they need to be continuously recognized and defended in public discourse. The right to use a language has to be inscribed in the conception of the language itself in a process of discursive negotiation: in Language Making.

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