Rapid intergenerational change of linguistic attitudes and implications for revitalization in Valencia

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The process of “linguistic normalization” in Valencia over the last 25 years attempts to remedy the social and linguistic damage caused by the forcible imposition of Castilian Spanish on the Valencian population during the forty years of Francoism. Language contact in Valencia, however, is complicated by the confluence of two different conflicts: a genuinely linguistic conflict that pits Valencian (a variety of Catalan) against Spanish and a politically-inspired conflict between two barely distinguishable linguistic varieties, Valencian and standard Catalan, which is actually a surrogate for the conflict between local progressive movements and conservative federalist forces.

Ten years ago, we collected data on the linguistic attitudes and reported language use of 180 secondary students in Valencia, using three instruments: a modified matched guise test, a sociolinguistic survey and a sociolinguistic interview. Analyses we published then, based on multiple regression, implicational scale and other techniques, characterized how Spanish was the most prestigious, Valencian the symbol of identity for a reference group, and Catalan the rejected variety. However, great differences among the students were revealed when we took into account demographic, ideological and behavioral factors. We established the co-existence of five distinct attitudinal models and their impact on the differential use of Valencian and Spanish.

We have recently returned to the same schools to collect new data on 260 students, to evaluate how the normalization program has evolved. Comparison in real time makes possible an assessment of the perceptions of young people according to the same demographic and ideological factors. We have discovered that attitudes have changed dramatically since 1996, but in the direction opposite from that projected then. Our statistical analysis shows an abrupt reversal of prestige and solidarity roles of Valencian and Spanish and the attenuation of the major attitudinal divisions among the younger generation. We discuss the demographic, political and sociological factors responsible for this turnabout and the implications for the normalization process.