The Aragonese resistance

A qualitative study on the attitudes and motivations of new speakers of an endangered language in Zaragoza

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Abstract

While the number of Aragonese speakers is in steady decline in the rural areas of Spain where it was traditionally spoken, the efforts of grassroots movements since the end of Franco’s dictatorship in 1975 have contributed to create a community of new speakers in Aragon’s largest cities, mostly thanks to courses for adults organized by cultural associations. The capital, Zaragoza, which has been practically monolingual for centuries, after Spanish became the language of power and prestige in the 15th century, is now home to several thousand Aragonese speakers. Despite their growing importance, very little research has been done on the views and experiences of these individuals. Drawing on data from focus groups and interviews, the aim of this thesis is to analyze their language ideologies, motivations, frustrations, political engagements, language use and challenges. Hopefully, this information will be valuable in the design of an effective language policy in the future.
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1. Introduction
Spain is home to one of the world’s most widely spoken languages, with more than five hundred and seventy million native speakers in 2018, according to the Instituto Cervantes (Fernández Vítores 2018). However, Spanish, also known in Spain as Castilian due to its origins in the medieval kingdom of Castile, is not the only language spoken in the country today. As a consequence of a series of historical developments, not all of these languages—Catalan, Basque, Galician, Aragonese, Asturian-Leonese and Gascon—enjoy the same vitality as Castilian. Spanish has been the official language of the entire country for centuries. It was also taken to the American continent by the Crown of Castile, which led the Hispanic colonization process.

Some of these other languages have fared better than others, but all except Catalan and Galician, suffer some degree of endangerment according to UNESCO. This is by no means exceptional in today’s world. According to estimates from the beginning of the 21st century, only five percent of the world’s 6,000 languages could be labeled as safe (Krauss 2007: 2). On that long list of threatened language is Aragonese, a Romance language spoken in the Spanish region of Aragon.

According to UNESCO’s Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger (2017), Aragonese is definitely endangered. Krauss, who uses this same terminology, defines a definitely endangered language as one that “has passed the crucial basic threshold of viability, is no longer being learned as mother tongue by children in the home, that the youngest speakers are of the parental generation, or more precisely that the youngest generation of which all are speakers is the parental generation” (Krauss 2007: 5). This stage of endangerment also includes situations in which the parents speak to their children in the minority language, but allow them to reply in the dominant language, meaning that the children are unlikely to become proficient speakers of the former. This situation is confirmed by an Aragonese scholar, who admits intergenerational transmission is practically gone in the areas where Aragonese has been spoken over the last centuries (López Susín 2013: 166).

Most studies on endangered languages to date have focused on native or heritage communities (O’Rourke & Ramallo 2013: 289). In many parts of the world, these communities are suffering the consequences of globalization and other factors, such as improved communications and the progressive depopulation of rural areas, which are
reducing the number of speakers and putting a serious threat to intergenerational language transmission, the most important factor in language survival according to Brenzinger (2007: xi).

Protecting and promoting endangered languages in these heritage settings is undoubtedly paramount in any revitalization project, but another side of this same process should not be neglected. As pointed by O’Rourke et al. (2015: 2), the new speaker community —people who have learned the language by means other than intergenerational transmission or community exposure— has grown to become a significant group in many minority language contexts, sometimes even outnumbering or replacing traditional speakers. This means that new speakers can be crucial in the survival of many endangered languages. Yet, very little is known about the attitudes, motivations, language use and challenges these speakers of many endangered languages are facing all around the world. This is also the case of Aragonese, whose new speakers are mostly concentrated in the region’s largest cities.

Aragon is one of Spain’s 17 so-called autonomous communities, a term used to refer to the subdivisions of this quasi-federal European country. The Aragonese autonomous community has 1.3 million inhabitants and is located in the north east of the Iberian Peninsula, limits with France to the north and has borders with other Spanish multilingual autonomous communities, such as Catalonia to the east, Navarre to the west and the Valencian Community to the southeast. The capital of Aragon is called Zaragoza. It is Spain’s fifth largest city, with over 660,000 inhabitants (more than half of Aragon’s total population), and one of the country’s major economic hubs. Zaragoza, which is located in the center of the autonomous community, in the Ebro river valley, has been practically monolingual in Spanish for centuries. Paradoxically, it is also the home of the largest community of new speakers of Aragonese, according to the most recent estimates, as we will see in section 4.2.

2. Purpose

This study is intended as a first approximation to the community of new speakers of Aragonese in Zaragoza. As mentioned earlier, new speakers of minority languages have
emerged as one of the key factors in language survival. In the case of Aragonese, with no studies published on the matter so far, it is thus convenient to analyze the features of this unexplored group. Probably the best location to carry out this study is Zaragoza, where the grassroots movements to promote and defend Aragonese are strongest and the community of new speakers is the largest.

Given that its object is an unexplored field, this project will try to cover a broad range of questions regarding these individuals, but always from a qualitative approach. One of the main purposes is to describe their language ideologies, as defined by Irvine (1989: 255): “the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests”. This includes their views on the current situation of the language and its future, their self-perception as speakers of Aragonese, or legitimacy issues related to nativeness and language purity. The study will also explore their motivations to learn Aragonese and the pros and cons of their learning process, as well as their opportunities to use the language and their experiences with language transmission.

In a context where the heritage community is shrinking and the figures of new speakers are growing, hopefully the results of this thesis will be helpful to guide new revitalization initiatives aimed at people living in Aragonese areas where this language was once spoken before it was replaced by Spanish.

**3. The Aragonese language**

**3.1. History**

Aragonese is a Romance language which evolved from Common Latin in the northeast of the Iberian Peninsula in the High Middle Ages. It originated in the central Pyrenean valleys, from the Anso valley in the west to the Benasque valley in the east, and was clearly differentiated from Latin around the 8th or 9th century (López Susín 2013: 159). Aragonese belongs to the Iberian Romance branch and is closely related to other neighboring languages, such as Castilian, Catalan, Occitan or French. *Glosas Emilanenses*, written in Aragonese around 976, is the first document in a Romance language found in the Iberian Peninsula (Campos Bandrés 2017: 203).
As the tiny Pyrenean Christian kingdom of Aragon, founded in 1035, started to conquer land from the Arabs, who had invaded the Peninsula in the 8th century, the language expanded south. Aragonese reached its geographical peak in the late 13th century, when it was spoken in most of what is known today as the Autonomous Community of Aragon, parts of Navarre, Castile-La Mancha, Castile and Leon, the Valencian Community, Murcia and Andalusia. There are abundant legal documents written in Aragonese from this period, but literary works are scarce (Martín Zorraquino & Enguita Utrilla 2000: 17).

The decline of Aragonese started in the early 15th century, as the Castilian Trastámara dynasty rose to Aragon’s throne in 1412 and brought its language to the court. Medieval Castilian, whose evolution is known today as Spanish or Castilian (in the Spanish-speaking world), became the prestige language of the kingdom and it progressively replaced Aragonese in the main cities and towns. The dynastical union of Aragon and Castile through the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabel of Castile strengthened the role of Castilian in the spheres of power. Aragonese was not banned, but even its oral use was discouraged (López Susín 2013: 164). As a consequence, it was relegated to rural areas (Martín Zorraquino & Enguita Utrilla 2000: 37) and eventually confined to the same remote areas where it originated, far from the centers of political, economic and cultural power.

The victory of Philip V —the French candidate from the Bourbon dynasty— in the War of the Spanish Succession in 1707 entailed a severe centralization of the country, which had kept an almost federal structure since the union of the Crowns of Castile and Aragon in the 15th century. The latter’s institutions, privileges and laws were suppressed and Castilian became the official language of the entire country (Seymour & Gagnon 2012: 157).

In the 19th century, with the spread of Romanticism and nationalism, regional languages experienced a revival in Spain. The Renaixença movement in Catalonia is probably its clearest example of this trend (Martín Zorraquino & Enguita Utrilla 2000: 44), but even in Aragon the interest in the region’s original language grew significantly, with the publication of studies, essays and dictionaries (López Susín 2013: 165).

The early 20th century brought the creation of the Estudio de Filología de Aragón (Philology Study of Aragon), with support of the provincial administration of Zaragoza,
and the publication of first etymological Aragonese dictionary by Mosén Pardo Asso in 1938. Despite these efforts, foreign philologists warned that Aragonese would disappear before the end of the century (López Susín 2013: 165).

General Francisco Franco’s victory in the Spanish Civil War put an end to the brief Second Republic (1931-1939), during which regional differences were protected. Franco led a far-right dictatorship from 1939 to 1975. His regime was extremely centralized and based the national discourse on Castilian culture. Regional languages were therefore repressed in daily life (Bercero Otal 2014: 86) and banned in all public spheres. In many cases, including that of Aragonese, they were described as crude versions of Spanish, or in the best case, as dialects. Also, the rural flight of the 50s and 60s affected the areas where Aragonese was still spoken, with thousands of villagers moving to Aragon’s capital, Castilian-speaking Zaragoza, or to other Spanish regions. Despite these setbacks, the last years of the dictatorship saw a growing interest in dignifying Aragonese. A grassroots movement started to study and recover the language and made the first efforts to standardize it (López Susín 2013: 168).

Franco’s death in 1975 gave way to a peaceful transition to democracy, which brought a revival of minority languages in Spain. Basque, Catalan and Galician became co-official in the regions where they are spoken and vehicular in schools, but Aragonese did not achieve the same status in Aragon. Nevertheless, some major achievements came shortly after the death of the dictator. In 1976, the cultural association Consello d’a Fabla Aragonesa (Council of the Aragonese Language) was founded to defend, promote and study Aragonese, and Linguistics professor Francho Nagore Laín published the first Aragonese grammar in 1977. Ten years later, the first congress to normalize Aragonese was held (I Congreso ta ra Normalización de l’Aragonés) and a standard spelling was approved. However, some groups dissented and other standards have been proposed since.

As mentioned in the introduction, the current situation of Aragonese is very delicate, with intergenerational transmission severely affected in the historically high-vitality areas, which are also suffering the consequences of depopulation. A recent study showed that the population of Aragonese municipalities with less than 1,000 inhabitants decreased by 12.6 percent from 2000 to 2016, while that of municipalities with more than 1,000 inhabitants grew by 9.4 percent in the same period (Palacios et al. 2017: 9).
The number of native speakers experienced a sharp decline in the 20th century (Nagore Laín 2002a: 967) due to the previously mentioned factors, together with education and media being offered exclusively in Spanish and the negative impact of improved communications and tourism (Campos Bandrés et al. 2016: 6).

However, the grassroots revitalization efforts, which began in the second half of the 20th century and were led mostly by non-native speakers (Campos Bandrés et al. 2016: 6), have continued and are slowly gaining support. The stigmatization of Aragonese as an uneducated version of Spanish has slowly given way to a growing yet limited sense of respect and awareness among both native speakers and the general population of Aragon.

Over the last four decades, several cultural associations in Aragon’s largest cities have organized language courses, which have created a growing community of urban new speakers of Aragonese. As mentioned earlier, there are various normalized varieties defended by conflicting groups, and depending on which association the students choose, they will learn a different standard.

3.2. Legal status and institutional support

The first explicit legal recognition of Aragonese took place in 1999, when the regional Parliament approved the Ley de Patrimonio Cultural Aragonés (Aragonese Cultural Heritage Bill). It defined this language —together with Catalan, which is spoken in the border with Catalonia— as a cultural asset to be especially protected by the administration. Ten years later, in 2009, Aragon’s first Language Bill (Ley de Lenguas de Aragón) was approved under the rule of a left-wing government. It stated that Aragonese and Catalan must be protected and promoted as the original and historical, albeit not official, languages of Aragon. Left-wing parties in Spain have been more prone to defend linguistic diversity in the regions where languages other than Spanish are spoken.

The new right-wing government replaced this bill in 2013 by an act which was not well received by Aragonese language advocates (Campos Bandrés et al. 2016: 17), among other reasons because it did not refer to the minority languages of Aragon as Aragonese and Catalan. It used the acronyms LAPAO (for Catalan) and LAPAPYP (for Aragonese), which stand for Lengua Aragonesa Propia del Área Oriental (Original
Aragonese Language from the Oriental Area) and Lengua Aragonesa Propia de las Áreas Pirenaica y Prepirenaica (Original Aragonese Language from the Pyrenean and Pre-Pyrenean Areas). A widespread interpretation of these names was that Aragon’s conservative government refused to admit that Catalan was spoken in the region, which they feared would give neighboring Catalonia, where separatist movements are growing, some kind of linguistic authority—or even territorial claim—on the Aragonese areas where it is spoken. The current leftist government, which came to power in 2015, has announced its intention to revoke this new bill and go back to the 2009 one but has not done so yet.

These continuous lurches and shuffles have had a negative impact in the revitalization process. One of the clearest consequences of the political controversy regarding the status of minority languages in the region is the delay in the creation of an official Academy of the Aragonese Language. This governing body, which was expected to dictate grammar and spelling rules in order to end the internal disputes, was first proposed in the 2009 act, but was not established before the change of government. The 2013 bill changed the name to the Aragonese Language Academy and its statute was approved in 2018. 10 of its 15 prospective members have been elected, but the body has still not been fully established.

The incumbent regional left-wing government approved in 2015, for the first time in Aragon’s history, the creation a specific body to protect and recover Aragon’s original languages, its research, teaching and media presence: the Dirección General de Política Lingüística (The Linguistic Policy General Directorate). Also, the local administrations of Zaragoza and Huesca, the capital of Aragon’s northernmost province, where Spanish is also the dominant language, created an Oficina de la Lengua Aragonesa (Aragonese Language Office) in each of these cities, in 2017 and 2016 respectively. Its goals are to promote the presence of Aragonese in social and public life, as well as the teaching and use of this language in the relations between the citizens and the administration. The Zaragoza branch started offering free Aragonese language and culture courses in several neighborhood centers in 2017.

In 2018, the city of Huesca put a bilingual sign to welcome the visitors to a “bilingual city” and Zaragoza added street name signs in Aragonese in one of its oldest neighborhoods. Another major step in the efforts to increase the importance of the
language was the first official Aragonese language exam, which took place in early 2019 at the Escuela Oficial de Idiomas de Zaragoza (Official Language School of Zaragoza). Almost 500 people took the test and 161 obtained a certificate ranging from level A2 to B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. This exam was first planned thanks to the efforts of the Linguistic Policy General Directorate and the University of Zaragoza in 2015.

Also, after many years of negotiations and failed attempts, the regional public broadcaster, Aragón TV, began airing in May 2019 the weekly show “Charrín charrán”, its first program in Aragonese. Many Aragonese language advocates considered this as a major success in their efforts to revitalize the language and draw attention to their cause.

Finally, Aragonese first entered the public education system as an elective course in 1997 with a pilot program in four schools in the north of Aragon. In 2007, schools in the so-called high-vitality areas were given the possibility to use Aragonese as the instruction language together with Spanish at the pre-school and primary levels. However, despite a seemingly positive legal framework, Aragonese still has a token presence in the schools of the Pyrenean valleys, where it is offered as an elective course, and it has never been used as the vehicular language in education in any school (Campos Bandrés 2018: 250). The precarious situation of the teachers and the lack of appropriate teaching materials have further complicated a successful implementation of Aragonese teaching in schools (Campos Bandrés et al. 2017: 31).

3.3. Aragonese today
Despite the efforts described in the previous section, the current situation of Aragonese in the historically high-vitality areas is worrisome. Aragonese scholar Francho Nagore Lain, who published the language’s first grammar, argues that the situation in the north of Aragon has evolved from diglossic bilingualism at the end of the 19th century to the linguistic substitution of Aragonese by Spanish today, which in his opinion will lead to a fast extinction of the language if a dramatic change does not prevent it (Nagore Laín 2002a: 967). According to his estimates, the number of Aragonese speakers dropped from some 140,000 in the mid-19th century to 100,000 in the beginning of the 20th
century (Nagore Laín 2002a: 982). This figure had fallen to somewhere between 8,000 and 12,000 in the 1970s (Conte et al. 1977: 133).

There are no updated and fully reliable figures on the number of speakers of Aragonese today. According to UNESCO, there are probably fewer than 10,000. The Estudio Sociolingüístico de las hablas del Alto Aragón (Sociolinguistic Study of the Languages of Northern Aragon), commissioned by the autonomous government of Aragon to Equipo Euskobarómetro and still not published (Llera Ramo 2001) argues that there are around 13,000 people who have Aragonese as their mother tongue, which leaves new speakers out of the equation. According to the report of The Aragonese Sociology Association (Reyes et al. 2017: 29), based on data from the 2011 census, the total number of Aragonese speakers, including new speakers, is 25,556. As we will see in the following sections, where the proportion of new speakers in this community will be discussed, the linguistic data from this census is likely to be distorted. It is therefore important to treat this information cautiously.

4. The new speaker

4.1. Definitions and previous research
A broad definition of the new speaker was offered by Ó Murchadha et al. (2018: 4): “At its most basic level, the designation ‘new speaker’ refers to social actors who use and claim ownership of a language that is not, for whatever reason, typically perceived as belonging to them, or to ‘people like them’.” In European minority language contexts, new speakers are typically the result of a historical process —the minority language is progressively replaced by a dominant language and then experiences some kind of revival— which has a similar pattern in most cases, including Aragonese, whose specific case was described in section 3.1.

This study will partially follow the definition of new speakers offered by O’Rourke et al. (2015: 11): “individuals with little or no home or community exposure to a minority language but who instead acquire it through immersion or bilingual education programs, revitalization projects or as adult language learners”. Given the current situation of Aragonese, which lacks immersion or bilingual programs at school
and enjoys scarce revitalization initiatives, this project is based on members of the latter group: adult language learners, whether or not they are identified by others or themselves as new speakers and regardless of their proficiency level.

Other terms have been used to refer to these individuals, such as “non-native”, “L2” or “second language”, some of which are currently being questioned by linguistics scholars, arguing that they are defined in opposition to the “native speaker”, establishing a hierarchy model which privileges the latter and marginalizes the former (O’Rourke et al. 2015: 2). The new speaker concept is intended to overcome this hierarchical categorization. Furthermore, the very concept of native speaker as the model of correct language use is being questioned in the academic world. Ingrid Piller (2001: 17), for example, asks whether an early acquisition inevitably leads to privileged access to the language or if the linguistic competence of new speakers is fundamentally different from that of native speakers. O’Rourke et al. (2015: 7) argue that the “fuzziness” of this concept has drawn on the ideals of ethnonationalism, as it connects nativeness with “a particular community, within a particular territory, associated with an historic and authentic past”.

In Aragonese, new speakers are referred to as neofablants. In many minority languages, this specific word to refer to new speakers bears a negative connotation, as it is used to highlight the alleged lack of authenticity of this group. Ó Murchadha et al. (2018: 5) point at one probable cause of this phenomenon: “This is because new speakers tend to transgress the sociocultural profiles of an imagined ideal speaker and because they also, and not infrequently, move beyond what is regarded as authentic, legitimate and correct language usage”. In the same line of thought, O’Rourke et al. (2015: 12) explain that “the division between old and new speakers are not just characterized by their language learning trajectories, but by their social profiles, the ‘old’ being generally peasants located in declining rural areas and the ‘new’ being middleclass urban dwellers whose families recently adopted the dominant language”.

Previous studies on new speakers have focused on these and other issues revolving around legitimacy or authenticity in other Spanish regions with minority languages. In the case of the Basque Country, Ortega et al. (2015: 103) have explored the use and perception of three concepts defining a speaker of Basque: euskaldun (a general or unmarked term), euskaldun zahar (translated as native speaker of Basque)
and *euskaldunberri* (new speaker of Basque). In the conclusions of their qualitative study, they argue that new speakers “presume an impermeable boundary between themselves and native speakers”, as these individuals tend to perceive a lack of realness in themselves in comparison to the *euskaldun zahar*, reproducing the previously mentioned ideology that native speakers have a more legitimate ownership claim over the Basque language and identity.

O’Rourke and Ramallo (2013), for their part, describe an analogous reality in Galicia, another bilingual Spanish region, where new speakers who acquired the language at school also tend to perceive themselves as less legitimate and describe their variety pejoratively as “book Galician”. But in this case, there is an interesting twist, as many native speakers have the opposite view: they idealize new speakers of the standardized variety, whom they see as more educated. Thus, social class becomes for them more important than nativeness in the linguistic legitimacy debate. In the same article, the authors describe the linguistic sanctioning and policing which exists among new speakers themselves through “purist linguistic attitudes”, which in their opinion also points at the same “essentialist bias about language, where clear linguistic boundaries need to be adhered to” (O’Rourke & Ramallo 2013: 31).

In Catalonia, Pujolar and Puigdevall (2015) have explored the process by which individuals successfully become proficient and active new speakers of Catalan. These linguistic *mudes*, as they call them, have important implications in a context of language revitalization. The situation in Catalonia, where Catalan is official together with Spanish and immersion programs have been successfully implemented in primary and secondary education, makes it possible for this *muda* to happen at school, at university or in the workplace, as described by these authors: “the use of Catalan gradually becomes bound up with the pursuit of education qualifications from secondary school to university, thus providing an implicit connection between language and social groups that have a strong position in the labour market”. The situation in Aragon, where Aragonese does not enjoy an official status and is rarely used outside the domestic setting, is completely different. Some of the informants of this study, despite the less favorable circumstances, have successfully gone through this *muda* process and their circumstances will be discussed in the results section.
In the case of Aragon, there are no previous studies on new speakers. There is an ongoing project called “El neohablante como sujeto social: el proceso de conversión lingüística en Euskadi, Galicia, Aragón y País Valenciano”, which focuses on new speakers in four multilingual Spanish regions: Galicia, the Basque Country, Aragon and the Valencian Community. A preview of this qualitative study was published by Chabier Gimeno Monterde (2018). It analyzes the reactions of speakers of Spanish (monolingual), Catalan, Aragonese (as L1) and foreign languages when they encounter new speakers of Aragonese, as described by the new speakers themselves. In their account, some monolingual speakers of Spanish are positively surprised and other reject it, L1 speakers of Aragonese and speakers of Catalan have positive interactions with them, and speakers of foreign language are generally positive and often surprised by the existence of this language.

Beyond Spain’s borders, Michael Hornsby (2016) has performed an analogous study in the case of Breton, analyzing the responses to the linguistic practices of new speakers and the ideological tensions which arise between them and traditional speakers of this minority language in the French region of Brittany. Hornsby describes what he calls a postvernacular use of the language, which he defines as the continuing use of a language in transformed and creative ways after most speakers have stopped speaking the language in question: “In a situation of language obsolescence, the conscious effort to use the recessive language in non-traditional ways, at different points on a scale or continuum of linguistic practice, involves positive attitudes towards the language and are located within an ‘activist’ framework”. As we will see, the linguistic practices and attitudes of some of the informants of this study share some features with this postvernacular use of a minority language.

In Scotland, an article by Nicola Carty (2018) has described the differences between highly proficient Scottish Gaelic new speakers and potential new speakers who are learning this language as an L2, but use it infrequently outside the academic setting. Carty offers a detailed description of what makes the difference in terms of proficiency, analyzing their command of lexis and syntax, language use opportunities and ability to employ communication strategies. Such a detailed analysis goes beyond the scope of this study, but the distinction between highly proficient new speakers and potential new
speakers is particularly interesting for the project, as both profiles are present among the informants and their views and experiences differ in many cases.

All the aforementioned studies will be used as a framework to analyze various features of the new speakers of Aragonese in the discussions and results section.

4.2. New speakers in Zaragoza

There are no exact figures of new speakers of Aragonese, neither in the total of Aragon nor in the city of Zaragoza, but as we will see in this section, there are indications that most of the Aragonese speakers in the capital have acquired the language as adult learners. According to an analysis of the 2011 population census performed by Ánchel Reyes (2018:3), which was commissioned by the local administration of Zaragoza through its Office of Aragonese Language, this city has the biggest concentration of new speakers of Aragonese. All of the following figures are extracted from this study, the first of its kind, which was intended as an initial quantitative approach to complement the previously mentioned qualitative project to be published in the coming years.

In opposition to the widespread myth that Aragonese speakers are an ageing group living isolated in remote rural areas, Reyes draws a picture in which 53 percent of Aragonese speakers live in cities (Reyes 2018: 3). In a first estimate, the author counts 7,184 new speakers in Zaragoza —compared to a total 25,556 speakers of Aragonese—, but then admits that a closer look at the demographic data of the census casts doubts over this result. 29.5 percent of the people who declared they speak Aragonese were born abroad. Reyes (2018: 22) believes that it is unlikely that so many immigrants have become new speakers of Aragonese given the restricted presence of the language in Zaragoza. He suspects they might have thought they were being asked if they spoke Spanish instead of Aragonese, as many might not even be aware of the existence of the latter. Taking this into account, the estimate drops to 5,069. Even though this represents around a fifth of the total population of Aragonese speakers, it is still marginal in Zaragoza, where 97.8 percent of the inhabitants are monolingual in Spanish or speak languages other than Aragonese.

The clearest indication that most of these speakers are new speakers is that only 7.1 percent were born in the Pyrenean high-vitality areas. Also, language transmission
seems to be limited in Aragon’s capital: 41.2 percent of Aragonese speakers in Zaragoza are between 26 and 45, but only 10.3 percent are under 16. This further strengthens the hypothesis.

5. Methodology

5.1. A qualitative approach
The findings in this thesis are based on discussion groups and in-depth personal interviews with highly proficient and potential new speakers of Aragonese. The original idea was to only hold discussion groups, but it proved more complicated than expected to organize the meetings due to the numerous commitments of the participants. Four groups and three personal interviews were conducted in March and May 2019. At the request of some of the informants, their identity will not be revealed in this study, so a code will be used to refer to them instead. However, all the participants’ profile will be briefly described in section 5.3. along with their code.

Zaragoza’s two main Aragonese language associations, Nogará-Religada and Ligallo de Fablans de l’Aragonés, were contacted as the first step to find suitable informants. The person in charge of the language courses at Ligallo de Fablans de l’Aragonés offered to forward an email to its members and students, which proved unfruitful. His counterpart at Nogará-Religada, however, showed an active implication in the process and provided personal access to many members of the association and students of different levels. In addition, this same person was working as a teacher of the free courses organized by the local administration at two neighborhood centers and offered the opportunity to attend the lessons and present the study to the students.

This direct approach proved much more successful to recruit participants, but as a consequence, the interviewees were selected through a personal connection with one of them, who provided the contact information for the rest, all friends or acquaintances of his. The only exception was a participant chosen thanks to a random encounter. The advantages of this system are obvious, as a more impersonal approach gave no results, but Sallabank (2010: 188) warned of an important setback: “Caution needs to be observed when utilizing social networks to identify language users via the ‘friend of a
friend’ method (Milroy 1987), where the researcher makes contact with a small group of relevant people who then contact others. This research method has the advantage of a very low proportion of nonresponse, but as Bryman (2004:102) comments, it is unlikely that such a sample will be representative.”

In this particular case, the approach of the study was qualitative from the beginning, so there were no intentions to obtain a representative sample and extrapolate the results to the new speaker population as a whole. The initial intention was to obtain a balanced sample in terms of age, gender and language proficiency. The time restraints of the potential participants, which kept delaying the group meetings, forced a more pragmatic approach in which obtaining information was prioritized over the creation of a demographically balanced group. It is therefore necessary to point out the possible shortcomings of the selection process.

All of the 19 informants were living in Zaragoza, except for two: one of them had always lived in the city but moved to a nearby town shortly before the interview and the other one was living in another town outside Zaragoza. Eleven were men and eight were women, and their age ranged from 18 to 68. All but one, who was self-taught, initially acquired their Aragonese skills through courses for adult learners. Ten had only taken the free courses at a neighborhood center and eight had learned Aragonese at Nogará-Religada. As for their proficiency, six were highly proficient, three had an intermediate level and ten were beginners. The focus groups and interviews were recorded and the total duration of the recordings was 9 hours and 33 minutes.

Before the interviews or focus groups, all the participants filled out a short questionnaire with relevant demographic data which can be found in the Annex section.

The groups were organized according to the proficiency level of the participants, which in this case also proved to have a link with their general involvement in Aragonese activism. The idea behind putting similar profiles together was that maybe the presence of more experienced speakers, with a broader knowledge of the situation of the language and its social and political ramifications, could make the beginners feel uncomfortable and less likely to share their thoughts and experiences. The risk of putting similar people together was that it might create a less passionate discussion, as the experiences and views of the participants were more likely to be similar, but in this case making the informants feel comfortable was prioritized. Also, one of the
informants was the Aragonese teacher of some of the beginners at the time of the study, which could have further contributed to make the setting awkward for the students.

5.2. Ben Levine’s video feedback

The method used to trigger the discussions in the focus groups combined two approaches. In most cases, I used US psychologist and documentary filmmaker Ben Levine’s system known as video feedback: a technique in which edited documentation is played as a prompt to start the conversation. Levine originally researched the use of video feedback as a therapy for schizophrenic teenagers and Vietnam veterans with a heroin addiction in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and then used it in his documentary films, with a result that has been described as intimate, engaged and thoughtful.

Instead of video footage, audio files were used in this project. These files were excerpts from a previous assignment for the Current Trends in Linguistics course I took in the spring semester of 2018 at Uppsala University. This research project looked into the transmission of a variety of Aragonese called Cheso, which is spoken in the village of Hecho, located in the Western end of Aragon’s Pyrenees. The informants were young parents who were native speakers of Cheso and the Spanish-speaking partner of one of them, and the interviews covered not only their interest and success in the transmission of Aragonese to their children, but also their language ideologies and opinions on other relevant topics. Both the audio files and the group discussions and the interviews were in Spanish at my own request, as I understand Aragonese but could miss important details.

When there were no appropriate audio prompts from this previous project to trigger a conversation, I introduced the topic with direct questions. In general, I tried to let the conversation flow as freely as possible, unless the participants took it to areas that were completely irrelevant for the study. Also, despite the introductory explanation which preceded all the group sessions, during which the informants received instructions about how the audio files should be an inspiration to discuss their own views and experiences on the matter, some groups insisted on analyzing the ideas expressed in the recording, which in most cases was uninteresting for this project. When this happened, I redirected the discussion. At the end of each session, the participants
were offered the opportunity to bring up other topics they thought were important and had not been covered during the discussion.

After recording all the interviews and focus groups, the audio files were transcribed one by one, and then the opinions of all the participants were sorted by topic in different documents. The result was one document for each discussion topic with all the relevant opinions and experiences of each participant. Sometimes, new discussion topics which were not foreseen arose during the discussion. These new topics were closely related to other topics which had been planned, so they were analyzed in the same section as a subtopic. The information concerning potential new speakers was placed at the beginning of each document, and that of highly new speakers at the end. This decision was made based on the hypothesis, after listening to the recordings, that there were several discussion topics in which both groups behaved differently. This procedure, albeit very time-consuming, was chosen to facilitate the subsequent analysis of the data.

Once the information was properly sorted, I performed an analysis looking for general trends shared by all or most participants. When these trends existed, after describing them, I tried to illustrate them with a quote from one—or several if needed—of the informants which summarized them best. The general approach to select quotes was to find passages were the informants clearly expressed their views and emotions or shared experiences they thought were important. When I found an opinion which differed from the general trend and was considered relevant, it was mentioned and supported with a quote if needed. Some topics triggered a more passionate debate, be it by disagreement between the participants or because of the audio prompts they listened to. This was noted and then analyzed. Also, as mentioned earlier, in many occasions there seemed to be major differences between potential and highly proficient new speakers. When this was detected, a comparative analysis was performed.

A brief description of the areas covered in the group sessions and a transcription of the audio prompts I used to trigger the discussions follows. Even though this was the exact order in which the prompts were played during the sessions, the analysis in the discussion will not follow exactly the same structure. First, the most revealing views on certain topics that were planned to happen with a specific prompt sometimes happened
before or after. Also, after classifying all the opinions following the previously described system, it made more sense to group them differently.

Section 1: Perception of the current situation of Aragonese, its major challenges and threats, and the feelings this arouses in the participants.

Audio prompt 1: *A mí me gustaría que fuera más optimista, pero lo veo... Se va manteniendo y eso, pero a medio plazo. Igual la generación que estamos, aún se mantendrá, pero es una pena decirlo, pero yo creo que se va perdiendo poco a poco.*

“I would like it to look more positive, but… It is managing to survive for now, but in the medium term, maybe my generation will still keep it, but I think that, unfortunately, it’s slowly disappearing.”

Audio prompt 2: *No es una cosa vital que me quite el sueño, sinceramente. ¿Pena? Sí que me da. ¿Que se dejara de hablar el cheso? Pues a ninguno le hace gracia que se deje de hablar la lengua con la que te has criado y con la que te has comunicado. Pero no sé si hay cosas más importantes o menos. No lo sé. Hombre, una pena es, desde luego, que se dejara de hablar.*

“This is nothing vital to me, nothing to lose sleep over, honestly. Pity? I sure think it’s a shame. If Cheso stopped being spoken at all? Well, I don’t think anybody would like to see that happen to the language they grew up with and they used to communicate. But I don’t know if there are more important things… I don’t know. But it’s definitely a shame.”

Section 2: National identity

Audio prompt 3: *¿Cómo se siente un cheso? ¿Qué cheso? Yo te puedo decir cómo me siento yo en relación con mi tierra, mi manera de ver las cosas, pero decir ‘yo me siento cheso’... Es como aragonés, ¿te sientes aragonés? [...] Yo no sé cómo se siente otro cheso que no sea yo. No sé cómo se siente otro aragonés. No sé cómo se siente otro español.*

How does a Cheso feel? Which Cheso? I can tell you how I feel, regarding the place where I come from, the way I see things. But saying ‘I feel Cheso’. It’s like
Aragonese. ‘Do you feel Aragonese?’ I don’t know how other Chesos feel, or how other Aragonese people feel. I don’t know how other Spaniards feel.”

Section 3: Motivations to learn Aragonese and learning process
I introduced this section directly and asked the participants to share the reasons why they decided to learn Aragonese and to assess their learning process, with their satisfactions and frustrations.

Section 4: Language use
Audio prompt 4: Muy orgulloso y no me avergüenzo de hablarlo. Y en cualquier situación que estoy me gusta utilizarlo. En mi entorno laboral y familiar, cien por cien. Incluso yo con mi mujer, que trabajamos juntos. Yo igual le hablo en cheso y ella me contesta en castellano. Con mi hermana, con mis padres, con chicos que vienen aquí en verano a trabajar en temporada si son del pueblo. Se utiliza siempre, sí. Cien por cien.

“I feel very proud and I never feel ashamed of speaking Cheso. I like to use it in every situation I can, no matter where I am. At work, at home. One hundred percent. Even with my wife. We work together, and I talk to her in Cheso and she replies in Spanish. With my sister, with my parents, with younger guys who come to the village to work in the summer… Yes, we always use it. One hundred percent.”

Section 5: Self-perception as speakers of Aragonese. Legitimacy issues between native and new speakers.
Audio prompt 5: Ellos han tenido... Son gente que normalmente vive en Zaragoza. Han tenido la ilusión de aprender aragonés, la variante unificada o estandarizada. O se han querido tirar a un tipo de aragonés más de una zona o de otra. Yo no soy quién para quitarle la ilusión a esa gente, ni para criticarlos, ni a favor ni en contra, ni para hacerles una crítica negativa. Pero a mí como chesoparlante no me resulta agradable oírlos hablar. […] Me resulta artificial.

“These people, who usually live in Zaragoza, and are eager to learn Aragonese and learn this unified or standardized version. Or maybe they tried to learn a
variety from this or that area… I have no right to discourage these people or to criticize them, but for me, as a native speaker of Cheso, it isn’t pleasant to hear them speak. […] It sounds artificial.”

Audio prompt 6: Yo por lo menos tengo aquí clientes que vienen y han estudiado fabla en Zaragoza y lo hablan y nosotros les contestamos igual y sí, está muy bien.

“I sometimes have guests who have learned Fabla [a different term to refer to Aragonese] in Zaragoza and they use it with us. And we reply in Cheso and I think it’s really nice.”

Section 6: Language normalization

Audio prompt 7: Es que no ha existido nunca una lengua común, ¿no? No nos la vamos a inventar ahora. Yo no le veo el sentido. Me parece bien conservar lo que hay, no perderlo, pero hacer una lengua común para todo Aragón, no le veo ni pies ni cabeza.

“A common language has never existed, so why should we make up one now? I think that makes no sense. I think what already exists should be preserved, but creating a common language for all of Aragon makes no sense at all for me.”

Section 7: Institutional support and Aragonese in the school system

Audio prompt 8: También el gobierno central, por supuesto, sí, pero los gobiernos autonómicos son los que tienen que fomentar estas cosas si realmente se quiere revalorizarlo y recuperarlo. Yo creo que ese apoyo no es suficiente. O a lo mejor no hay interés o igual los propios ciudadanos tampoco mostramos un gran interés sobre este tema. También es posible. Al final son un poco el número de personas. Cuantas más personas, más fuerza se hace.

“The central government as well, sure, but I think the regional government is the one that must promote these things if they really want to preserve them and recover them. I think this support is insufficient. Maybe there’s no interest. Or maybe even the citizens show no major interest in this. That’s also possible. In the end, it depends on the number of people… If there are more people involved, they will push harder.”
Audio prompt 9: A mí, una inmersión lingüística y que luego derivara en un nacionalismo aragonés no me gustaría nada. […] Una cosa que a los catalanes o los vascos la pueden sentir como suya es que la están convirtiendo en un arma arrojadiza hacia el resto del país.

“I wouldn’t like a scenario were a linguistic immersion program led to an Aragonese nationalism. I wouldn’t like that at all. […] Something that Catalans and Basques feel as theirs is becoming a political weapon against the rest of the country.”

Section 8: Language transmission


“To my children, in Cheso. Always. When we’re at my in-law’s in Zaragoza, I always speak to them in Cheso. I never feel ashamed. And they sometimes reply in Spanish, sometimes in Cheso.”

Section 9: Perceived importance of the language

Audio prompt 11: Al final, siendo sinceros, pues gramaticalmente a nivel de escribir, pues que dominen bien el castellano, porque al final el día de mañana es lo que tenemos que escribir todos bien, hablarlo y nos va a abrir puertas. Al final el cheso son cosas locales y que fuera de aquí no… No hay que llegar tampoco a radicalismos.

“And to be honest, when it comes to grammar and spelling, it’s very important that they know Spanish well, because in the future it’s what we all have to speak and write well. That is what opens up doors for the future. At the end of the day, Cheso is something local and outside this village it doesn’t… I don’t think we have to be too radical…”
Section 10: Perceived importance of Spanish

Audio prompt 12: *Tan importante es la una como la otra. Tampoco hay que llegar a, no voy a decir radicalismos, pero solo hablar una lengua local de aquí y no... El castellano lo veo superinteresante, sí.*

“I think they are both equally important. I don’t think it’s convenient to speak only a regional language. Spanish is very important.”

In the in-depth personal interviews, the same topics were covered, but no audio files were played. I asked the questions directly, as I considered this format would make for a better atmosphere and connection with the interviewee than playing audio files.

5.3. *Brief description of the participants*

Group 1

Date: March 27, 2019

Number of participants: 4

Duration of the recording: 103 minutes

Proficiency of the participants: beginner and intermediate level.

Participants:

G1-A: 49-year-old female with secondary education, born in France to Spanish parents and currently living in Zaragoza. She travels often to the high-vitality areas and her mother-in-law spoke Aragonese. She has taken a free three-month Aragonese course at a neighborhood center.

G1-B: 60-year-old female with secondary education. She was born in Zuera (outside Zaragoza), where she still lives. She has relatives from the high-vitality areas and has taken a free three-month Aragonese course at a neighborhood center.

G1-C: 60-year-old male from Zaragoza with unfinished higher education. He travels often to the high-vitality areas, where he has friends. He has studied Aragonese for two years, both at a cultural association and a neighborhood center.

G1-D: 68-year-old male from Cáceres, a city located in another Spanish region (Extremadura), who has lived in Zaragoza most of his life. He has secondary education and no links with the high-vitality areas. He has taken a free three-month Aragonese course at a neighborhood center.
Group 2
Date: May 9, 2019
Number of participants: 3
Duration of the recording: 139 minutes
Proficiency of the participants: highly proficient
Participants:
G2-A: 35-year-old male from Zaragoza with higher education. He is currently working as an Aragonese teacher and is highly involved in an Aragonese language association. He started learning Aragonese 10 years ago at a cultural association.
G2-B: 33-year-old male from a Zaragoza suburb with higher education. He has worked as an Aragonese teacher and is highly involved in an Aragonese language association, as well as a platform to promote Aragonese. He has studied Aragonese for six years.
G2-C: 37-year-old male from Zaragoza with higher education and no links with the high-vitality areas. He started studying Aragonese in 2009 at a cultural association and is a member of an Aragonese language association.

Group 3
Date: May 14, 2019
Number of participants: 5
Duration of the recording: 80 minutes
Proficiency of the participants: beginner and intermediate level
Participants:
G3-A: 19-year-old female from Huesca (Aragon’s second largest city) currently studying at university and living in Zaragoza. She has friends from the high-vitality areas and has taken a free three-month course at a neighborhood center.
G3-B: 19-year-old female from Almudévar, a Spanish-speaking town near Zaragoza, currently studying at university and living in Zaragoza. She has taken a free three-month course at a neighborhood center.
G3-C: 20-year-old male from Zaragoza currently studying at university. He has no links with the high-vitality areas and has taken a free three-month course at a neighborhood center.
G3-D: 43-year-old man from Zaragoza with secondary education. He traveled in his childhood to the high-vitality areas and is partially involved in an Aragonese-language association. He has studied Aragonese for two years at a cultural association.
G3-E: 18-year-old male from Barbastro, a Spanish-speaking town in the northern Aragonese province of Huesca, currently studying at university. He has friends from the high-vitality areas and has taken a free three-month course at a neighborhood center.

Group 4
Date: May 15, 2019
Number of participants: 4
Duration of the recording: 114 minutes
Language proficiency of the participants: beginner and intermediate level
Participants:
G4-A: 54-year-old female from Zaragoza with secondary education. She has no links with the high-vitality areas and has studied Aragonese for four years, both at a cultural association and a neighborhood center.
G4-B: 68-year-old female from Zaragoza with higher education who grew up in Barcelona and is currently living in Zaragoza. She has no links with the high-vitality areas and has taken a free three-month course at a neighborhood center.
G4-C: 62-year-old female from Zaragoza with secondary education. She has no links with the high-vitality areas and has studied Aragonese language and culture for one year at a neighborhood center.
G4-D: 64-year-old male from Zaragoza with primary education. He has no links with the high-vitality areas and has taken a free three-month course at a neighborhood center.

Interview 1
Date: May 13, 2019
Duration of the recording: 58 minutes
Language proficiency of the informant: highly proficient
Participants:
I1-A: 33-year-old female from Zaragoza with higher education and a major involvement in an Aragonese language association. She is a former Aragonese teacher and is currently working for the first Aragonese-language program in Aragon’s regional broadcaster. She started studying Aragonese 14 years ago at a cultural association.

Interview 2
Date: May 14, 2019
Duration of the recording: 38 minutes
Language proficiency of the informant: highly proficient
Participant:
I2-A: 40-year-old male from Zaragoza with secondary education and a major involvement in an Aragonese language association. He is currently teaching Aragonese and is involved in many other cultural activities related to Aragonese culture (dance, theater…). He started studying Aragonese in 2003 at a cultural association.

Interview 3
Date: May 17, 2019
Duration of the recording: 41 minutes
Language proficiency of the informant: highly proficient
Participant:
I3-A: 22-year-old male from Zaragoza. He is currently studying Hispanic Philology at college and bartending at a bar where Aragonese is spoken. He started learning Aragonese five years ago and is self-taught. He has many close friends from the high-vitality areas and travels there frequently.

6. Results and discussion

6.1. General remarks
First of all, I would like to re-emphasize that, as stated before, this is a qualitative study and the results are not expected to represent the whole community of new speakers in Zaragoza. However, the analysis will bring up the most interesting trends, as they might
point at phenomena worth exploring through a more in-depth quantitative approach. That said, I will first mention some aspects that arose from a quick analysis of the information on the brief demographic questionnaire the subjects filled out before the sessions.

All of the informants but one, I3-A, had no strong social or family ties with the high-vitality areas. One cited her deceased mother-in-law and some reported that they had acquaintances and traveled there often for various reasons (work, vacation...), but a majority of the informants —11 out of 19— had no links with these areas at all. This is a clear indication that the interest in learning Aragonese is independent of the personal background. Moreover, there were many other features which made the I3-A stand out, as I will discuss in the analysis.

Also, there were significant age differences between the potential and the highly proficient new speakers. Most of the students at the neighborhood centers were either very young —under 25— or quite old —near or past retirement age—, while the highly proficient speakers were between 30 and 40, except for previously mentioned I3-A, who was 22. It is also worth noting that a great majority of the beginners belonged to the elderly group. Clearly, this could be sheer coincidence, as the sample is far from representative, but at least in the neighborhood centers, the students themselves confirmed the trend.

(1) G1-C:  
En los cursos que han organizado no veo gente joven tan apenas. La mayoría somos gente de bastante edad.  
“In the courses they’ve organized, I hardly see any young people. Most of us are old.”

(2) G4-B:  
Visto los que estamos haciendo los cursos de aragonés... La edad media es bastante elevada. La juventud no sé si está mucho por la labor.  
“Judging from what we see in the Aragonese courses… The average age is quite high. I’m not sure young people are very interested.”
One possible explanation of this phenomenon could be their different degree of commitment. In general terms, the highly proficient speakers who took part in this study fit into Ramallo and O’Rourke’s (2014: 61) description of their Galician counterparts: “This group is very dynamic, not only regarding language use but also in their activism in linguistic revitalisation. This makes them an active, innovative and progressive minority.” If Aragonese language and culture are an important part of their life, these individuals are more likely to prioritize all sorts of related activities, despite being at an age when work and family commitments are usually taking up most of the time. The potential new speakers, for their part, could have fewer responsibilities, being university students, older people with grown-up children or even pensioners. This would allow them to try new things and engage in activities which seem interesting to them but are not among the driving forces in their lives. If this theory could be confirmed by new studies, it would pose a challenge to prospective revitalization efforts, as its promoters would have to find ways to reach these people with a certain interest but a lesser involvement degree.

6.2. Language ideologies
6.2.1. The current situation of Aragonese and its future

All the informants were aware that Aragonese is an endangered language and that its current situation is precarious. They said they understood that people from the high-vitality areas might have a negative opinion, as they pointed out that the number of native speakers is decreasing due to depopulation and a frail language transmission. However, when it came to their views on the future of the language, there were differences between the potential and the highly proficient new speakers. The opinions of the first group were mixed, ranging from very negative thoughts —if no effective measures are implemented, the language will be gone in less than 100 years— to a hopeful perspective:

(3) G3-A:  
-Se ha perdido mucho, pero ahora hay un movimiento y como que se está intentando recuperar y que sí es difícil, pero que sí que hay un movimiento y que va a recuperar, y que va un poco para adelante la cosa.
“A lot has been lost, but now there is a movement and people are trying to recover it. And I know it’s difficult, but there’s this movement and it is slowly moving forward.”

Highly proficient informants, on the contrary, were all positive except for the cited outlier: I3-A. They highlighted how the situation had improved in recent years and cited significant progress in language awareness and institutional support.

(4) I1-A:  *Desde cuando yo empecé hasta ahora es un mundo totalmente diferente porque ha resurgido un interés muy fuerte y, sobre todo, una concienciación lingüística que antes no había.*

“Comparing to when I started studying, it’s a completely different world today, because a very strong interest has emerged and, especially, a linguistic awareness which wasn’t there before.”

There are several reasons which could explain these speakers’ general positivity. First, they were all highly involved in grassroots movements, which should give them easier access to information about all the improvements they mention. Less involved individuals might not even be aware of them. Also, as highly proficient speakers, they had been in touch with Aragonese for many years and could therefore assess the situation from a broader time perspective, as is implied in the quote. Finally, as pointed out by G2-A, they also felt it is part of their activist role to transmit a positive view:

(5) G2-A:  *Los que estamos involucrados en la lengua tenemos que asumir un rol. Aunque sepamos que las cosas no son buenas, no podemos transmitir negatividad a la gente que empieza porque eso no transmite muchas ganas de seguir, ¿no?*

“As people who are involved in the language we need to take on a role. Even though we know that things aren’t great, we can’t transmit negativity to people who are starting because that won’t encourage them to continue.”
In the introduction section I mentioned how new speakers can play a major role in revitalizing a language. Many of the informants were aware of this and acknowledged their responsibility as a growing and committed group.

The outlier, I3-A, had a very negative view. He said the language was in decay and that its recovery had not even started. As I said before, this informant had very close friends and relatives in the high-vitality areas, where the views on the future of the language tend to be glummer. When reflecting on his emotional experience of this negative view, these ties did also play a major role, as he explained how he had seen his friends suffer because of the decline of their language, which in turn also saddened him. This sadness was shared by all the participants, some of which pointed out that it was not only about the personal loss of something they considered “theirs”, sharing McIvor’s (2009:18) idea that “once a language is gone all of that traditional knowledge accumulated for thousands of years—all those mythologies, cosmologies, ceremonies, and unique ways of viewing and interacting with the world—are gone forever”:

(6) G3-D:  
*No muere solo el idioma, muere la forma de vivir, porque no es lo mismo decir que te quiero a una persona, expresar tus sentimientos, en una lengua que en otra.*

“It’s not just the language that dies. It’s the way of living, because it isn’t the same to say ‘I love you’ to someone in one language or another.”

6.2.2. Major challenges facing Aragonese

In this section I will discuss some of the factors the informants see as the biggest threats the language faces in its quest for survival. One of them —issues revolving around legitimacy and authenticity— will be discussed in a separate section due to its complexity.

One of the most repeated problems had to do with the negative ideas about Aragonese that are widespread in society. Despite reporting significant improvements regarding awareness, some subjects argued that many still see the language as a crude version of Spanish, both among monolingual Spanish-speakers and native speakers of
Aragonese. G4-A exemplifies this with her own experience, as she grew up speaking Spanish with many Aragonese traits:

(7) G4-A:  
A los que teníamos esos sustratos, aunque viviéramos en la ciudad, nos decían que éramos de pueblo. Vivíamos en barrios pequeños. Había gente de Huesca, de Teruel, de pueblos de Zaragoza. Hemos ido adoptando el castellano por la única razón de no ser menos, que no te considerasen menos.  
“Those of us who had this substrate, even if we were living in the city, were considered villagers. We lived in small neighborhoods. There were people from Huesca, from Teruel, from villages in the Zaragoza province. We adopted Spanish for the sole reason that we didn’t want to be seen as inferior.”

(8) G3-A:  
También está el problema de que se ha dicho siempre que el aragonés es algo de pueblo, es algo como de segunda.  
“There’s also this problem that Aragonese has always been seen as something rural, as something second-class.”

There is another idea which is closely tied with this image of the language and was brought up multiple times during the group sessions and the interviews: Aragonese is seen as useless. Almost all of the informants reported that their decision to learn Aragonese was constantly questioned by others, who thought they were “crazy” or “weirdos” for “wasting time” in something with no real-world applications. Those who had been studying Aragonese for years argued that they were living proof that this was wrong, as they had obtained job opportunities thanks to their Aragonese skills.

(9) G2-B:  
A mí con mi padre me pasó. Me criticaba en plan “A ver, ¿por qué aprendes aragonés?, ¿para qué aprender a hablar eso?, ¿para qué sirve?” Pero abrieron listas de profesor de secundaria de lengua aragonesa, me presenté y quedé en un puesto muy bueno. Cuando se dio cuenta de que podía incluso trabajar de “algo que no servía para nada”, entonces ya no dice ni mu al respecto.
“It happened to me with my father. He criticized me saying: ‘Why are you learning Aragonese? What is that good for?’ But then there was an open competition to teach Aragonese in high schools, I applied and obtained a great result. Then he realized that one could even get a job thanks to ‘something useless’ and he never said a word about this again.”

Probably the strongest reactions to the prompts came after listening to audio file 7, where a woman says that she is against standardization because a common language has never existed and it would make no sense to “make it up” now. Vivid discussions followed, pointing at the hypothesis that this might be one of the most important and complex challenges in their opinion. They agreed on the need for a consensual standard variety, but they were also aware of the difficulties normalization involves. For example, they brought up the fragmentation of Aragonese in multiple dialects which they all believed should be preserved and respected in parallel with the normalization process. They did also agree that Aragonese will not survive without a universally accepted standard and that this should be the priority, even though they understood that it would be impossible to please all the parts involved, both in the Pyrenean valleys, where they foresee native speakers will react if the standard variety is closer to one dialect than to others, and among highly proficient new speakers and academics from the cities, who they report are caught in decades-long internal fights.

Those with a broader time perspective agreed that the first efforts to standardize the language in the 1980s backfired, as those in charge prioritized creating a variety which was as different as possible from Spanish and Catalan, choosing words and grammatical structures which were in many cases old or only used in an tiny dialect. This standard, they reported, was broadly rejected both in the high-vitality areas and the urban setting. They also described more recent attempts as “linguistic nonsense” or a “Frankenstein” language which tried to please all the conflicting parties and ended up being universally rejected. They all hoped for a new standard which is as close as possible to real-world language, with common features being prioritized over rarities, and able to overcome internal disputes.
This internal divide was also mentioned as a major problem for the Aragonese-speaking community in Zaragoza by all the highly proficient informants, who compared the situation with Game of Thrones. Some of the beginners were also aware of these fights and regretted what they thought were the disastrous consequences of these power struggles on the survival and revitalization of Aragonese.

(10) G4-C: *Ahora hay dos asociaciones que son las que mueven todo, pero resulta que se juntan en un momento y los unos quieren hacerlo de una manera, los otros de otra. Solo hay dos y entre los dos son incapaces de unirse. Es que no entiendo estas cosas.*

“Now there are two associations which are in charge of everything, but it turns out they get together and these ones want to do it this way and the others don’t. There are only two, and still, they are unable to join forces. I just can’t understand it.”

Despite their awareness of the challenges this situation poses to the language, the informants with a higher involvement degree did also think this was a stage that all minority languages have to pass in their revitalization process. In I1-A’s words:

(11) I1-A: *Estamos en el momento ese en el que hay distintas opiniones, diferentes luchas y es lo que empañña el asunto y lo lastra, porque yo pienso que es un mundo un poco masculinizado, muchos egos, yo quiero que se vea lo mío. […] Al ver los procesos en otros sitios, sabemos que ha pasado. Yo veo que el aragonés está siguiendo el proceso normal de revitalización.*

“We’re at this point where there are different opinions, different fights, and that’s what is marring and damaging the matter, because I think this is a masculinized world, with big egos, where everyone wants to stand out […] Seeing the process in other places, we know this has happened. I think Aragonese is having a normal revitalization process.”
This takes us to another related topic, as the highly proficient speakers also regretted that the Aragonese Language Academy had not been fully established. They argued this was an essential step to push the normalization process forward, which in their opinion was severely affected by the fact that anything related to Aragonese was highly politicized in the region. In fact, the politicization of the language was a recurrent discussion topic in all the groups and interviews and most participants seemed to have revealing personal experiences about it. They agreed that the origins of the revitalization process in the second half of the 20th century were generally linked with left-wing nationalistic movements and that the idea that Aragonese is related to this particular ideology is still widespread in Aragon’s society, which makes supporters of other options, mainly to the right, reject the language altogether.

(12) G2-C: De hecho, cuando dices estudio aragonés o hablo aragonés, enseguida alguien te dice “¿votarás a Chunta, no?”.

“In fact, when you say that you’re studying Aragonese or speak Aragonese, there’s always somebody saying ‘So you vote for Chunta [a left-wing nationalist party], right?’”

The informants also recalled many occasions in which other people had enraged reactions to the increased presence of Aragonese. Two members of the cultural association reported that they had been insulted while promoting their activities in central Zaragoza. Other examples were the street signs in Huesca, which they said had been attacked with graffiti, or the new TV show in Aragonese, which in their opinion had mostly obtained supportive opinions on social media, but had also triggered furious comments:

(13) G2-A: La reacción de mucha gente era ‘se empieza así y se acaba en una dictadura’. Para esta gente, cualquier cosa que no sea en castellano ya lo identifican con política y con represión y con imposición.

“The reaction of many people was ‘this is how it starts, and then we end up in a dictatorship’. These people, they identify anything that isn’t in Spanish with politics, repression and imposition.”
This type of comments must also be read in a larger Spanish context, as there are currently many tensions between Madrid’s centralism and other multilingual regions, such as Catalonia or the Basque Country, where minority languages have been revitalized and nationalistic or even pro-independence movements have gained large support over the last decades. In any case, most participants have the feeling that these reactions are becoming increasingly infrequent. Still, they share the thought that “the worst enemy is under our same roof”.

Another challenge facing the revitalization of Aragonese mentioned by all the informants was the lack of consistent institutional support. Among the beginners, the general opinion was that very small steps have been taken so far, and that a much bigger effort was needed. The highly involved informants, for their part, agreed that more support is needed, but gave a lot more value to what they considered recent major achievements, such as the TV show in Aragonese, or the creation of the Linguistic Policy General Directorate and the Aragonese Language Offices under the rule of left-wing administrations. Again, this was consistent with their deeper knowledge and broader time perspective I mentioned earlier, but could also be tied to the personal satisfaction of seeing their activism efforts rewarded. However, they feared that the regional and local election to be held shortly after the group sessions and interviews would bring a new right-wing leadership to the regional government and the city hall:

(14) II-A: En esta legislatura tendría que haber salido la Academia. No pueden marcharse sin saber qué va a pasar. Igual vuelven a salir, pero como salga un grupo político muy negativo y nos quedemos sin dirección general y sin academia, nos quedamos en un cuadro muy malo.

“The Academy should have been established in this term. They can’t just leave without knowing what’s going to happen. Maybe they win again, but if a very negative political party does, and we are left without a General Directorate or an Academy, the situation will be really bad.”
Finally, the beginners, who were less involved or not involved at all in grassroots movements, also thought that institutional support is important, but added that ordinary people should do more too. Many of them argued that Aragonese people had been unable, or even unwilling, to defend what is theirs, compared to other regions they see as an example, namely Catalonia and the Basque Country.

(15) G4-C: *Ves los vascos y ahí están. Y nos quejamos ahora por ejemplo de los catalanes... Pero están defendiendo lo suyo, por lo que creen, su tierra... Parece que la gente pasa de todo. No se mueve por nada. Me duele que la gente no se mueva más por defender lo nuestro.*

“Look at the Basques, for example. And now we’re complaining about the Catalans… But they are defending what’s theirs, what they believe in, their land… Here it seems like people can’t be bothered. They don’t get involved in anything. It makes me very sad that people here don’t commit themselves in the defense of what is ours.”

The awareness of all the aforementioned challenges did not seem to interfere with the participants’ determination to continue learning and defending Aragonese, but rather as one of the driving forces of their commitment, as they tended to see themselves as a strong-willed minority facing a tough yet exciting endeavor.

6.2.3. Aragonese in the education system

All the informants concurred that the presence of Aragonese in the education system needs to be increased. However, none of them thought that an immersion program for all schools in Aragon, similar to that of Catalonia, where Catalan is clearly prioritized over Spanish, was viable or convenient in the current circumstances. The most ambitious plan was suggested by I2-A, who has an activist profile and was for a balanced bilingual program for the entire autonomous community as the only way for Aragonese to survive. The rest believed that, outside the high-vitality areas, where some but not all thought that an immersion program would be interesting, the best option would be to start with an elective course. First, because they were aware that there were not even enough teachers in Aragon with the required proficiency to implement a more
ambitious plan, but mostly because they thought that forcing Aragonese onto people from Spanish-speaking areas would backfire:

(16) G4-C:  *Porque si les dices a muchos padres que les van a enseñar aragonés en el colegio, en según qué partes o en qué colegios, te pueden los padres hasta pegar [bromea]. Sería meterlo poco a poco y no de una forma obligatoria, porque si no, sería todo lo contrario.*

“Because if you tell many parents that they [their children] are going to be taught Aragonese at school, in some regions or schools, those parents might even hit you [joking]. It should be done little by little and not as an obligation. Otherwise, it would give the opposite result.”

This thought is related to the reactions of certain Spanish-speaking people described in section 6.2.2. It is also interesting to note that even two of the participants, who were obviously interested in the language and had made the effort to learn it, had their reservations:

(17) G4-D:  *Si tuviera un hijo y hubiera un colegio donde solo dieran clase en aragonés, no lo llevaría.*

“If I had kids and there was a school where they only taught in Aragonese, I wouldn’t take them to that school.”

(18) G2-A:  *Si se fomentara una inmersión en aragonés que supusiera que la única realidad del mundo que le enseñas a la gente es esa, la realidad aragonesa y solo exista la aragonesa, pues sería lo mismo que estamos diciendo en cuanto al modelo español actual que genera rechazo.*

“If there was an immersion in Aragonese, in which only an Aragonese perspective was given to the kids, then it would be the same thing as the current Spanish model which breeds rejection [among critics of Spanish monolingualism].”
As we can see, the opinions are varied among the participants, but none of them would be for a more radical approach, which suggests that any attempts to increase the presence of Aragonese in the education system will have to be carried out cautiously, as the reactions of the general population are likely to be more negative than those of the new speakers.

6.2.4. Perception of Spanish
Closely related to the views discussed in the previous section is the perception the informants have of Spanish. The general impression is that they are far from the reality described by O’Rourke and Ramallo (2013: 288) among certain new speakers of Galician: “In some cases this can lead neofalantes to ‘abandon’ Spanish altogether, adopting somewhat similar linguistic practices to the ‘Catalan converts’ described by Woolard (1989, 2011) in the context of one of Spain’s other minority languages.” A thought shared by all the informants was that they feel Spanish as part of their identity. There were no signs that any of them intended to abandon the language they consider their “mother tongue” and an important communication tool. They all agreed that Spanish is one of Aragon’s languages, even if it did not originate in the region. Only I1-A expressed mixed feelings about how Spanish had become the dominant language:

(19) I1-A: *Es mi lengua materna. Lo he hablado toda mi vida. También la siento como mía. Por un lado es una suerte, porque es una de las más habladas del mundo y me da la oportunidad de comunicarme con un montón de personas, pero a la vez también te sientes mal porque las lenguas colonizadoras o los estados colonizadores... puedes sentir un pesar de que esa lengua ha destruido a otras.*

“It’s my mother tongue. I’ve spoken Spanish my entire life. I feel it’s part of me too. On the one hand, I feel lucky, because it’s one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, but on the other hand, you also feel bad, when you think that colonial languages or colonial states have destroyed other languages.”
They all acknowledged the importance of Spanish in their daily life, as it is the language they use at work and in many social settings. They also highlighted that Spanish is very important, particularly in the job market and generally in life, because it “opens many doors of opportunity”:

(20) G2-C: *Es una lengua que hablan no sé cuántos millones de personas. Es que yo jamás dejaría de hablar el castellano.*

“It’s a language spoken by countless millions of people. I would never stop speaking Castilian.”

In general, it seems like the profile is more moderate than the ones mentioned earlier in Galicia or Catalonia, even among the more committed new speakers. It would be interesting to further explore if this could have something to do with the modest size of the Aragonese-speaking community and the reduced opportunities to use the language in a predominantly Spanish-speaking environment, or if the difference is more deeply rooted and points at a more hybrid linguistic identity in Aragon’s case.

### 6.3. National identity

A strong Aragonese sentiment was the dominant note among all the informants, suggesting that there is a direct correlation between national identity and an interest in the language. As in other topics, there was a clear difference between the potential and the highly proficient speakers. A great majority of the latter—all but one—felt only Aragonese and not Spanish, and two of them openly declared being in favor of the independence of Aragon. It is interesting to note that these two subjects did not seem fully comfortable expressing this view. One of them asked for anonymity—the reason why the following quote is unattributed—and the other one felt he had to justify his opinion. These attitudes might find an explanation in the social tensions discussed in subsection 6.2.2.:

(21): *Yo es que no me siento español. Solo me siento aragonés y es lo que pienso, pero no es algo que diga públicamente porque actualmente*
eso está muy mal visto. Bueno, por lo menos aquí en Aragón pues no lo digo.
“‘I don’t feel Spanish. I only feel Aragonese and that is what I think, but I never say it in public, because it is frowned upon. At least, in Aragon I never say it.’”

(22) I2-A:  *Yo sí que me considero más de izquierda, más pues independentista, pero que, vamos, respeto a todo el mundo.*
“I am more of a leftist and, well, more pro-independence, but, I mean, I respect everybody.”

It is also worth highlighting that, within the potential new speakers group, which included varied views, the strongest Aragonese identity was expressed by people who had taken courses not only at the neighborhood centers but also at the cultural association, further reinforcing the hypothesis that speakers with a higher degree of involvement tend to have a stronger nationalistic sentiment. Another hint pointing in the same direction is that three of the informants, all of whom were involved in the association —be it as students, members or teachers,— had decided to change their name to its Aragonese version, something which was not observed among the students at the neighborhood centers. The rest of the beginners felt either equally Aragonese and Spanish, or more Aragonese but still Spanish. None of them supported, at least openly, the idea of Aragon’s independence.

What both groups shared was the feeling that Aragon had been historically mistreated by Spain, something which in many cases was the main reason why they declared not feeling Spanish:

(23) G1-C:  *Yo me siento aragonés, claro, pero sobre todo por el maltrato que ha recibido esta cultura a lo largo de los siglos. Si no nos hubieran machacado como nos han machacado, aún te podría decir que español...*
“I feel Aragonese, of course, but mostly because of the abuse this culture has been subjected to for centuries. If we hadn’t been battered like this, I might be more prone to say [I feel] Spanish…”

(24) G2-C: Lo que viene fuera de Aragón no favorece para nada, por lo menos a mí parecer, no favorece para nada el hecho de querer sentirte de algo más grande, sobre todo cuando te están queriendo imponer que tú tienes que ser así, porque el estereotipo es ese. Y no, el estereotipo podrá ser ese, pero es que yo no formo parte de ese estereotipo, ni creo que donde yo vivo forme parte de ese estereotipo.

“What comes from outside Aragon doesn’t help at all, at least that’s the way I see it. It doesn’t make me want to feel part of something bigger, especially when they are trying to impose the way you have to be, so that you can fit into the stereotype. And no, the stereotype might be like that, but I’m not a part of it. And I don’t think the place where I live is either.”

Even one of the participants who felt both Aragonese and Spanish seemed affected by these perceived affronts, which he believed are still happening today:

(25) G2-B: Esta situación de desprecios continuos... El último ejemplo, esta campaña electoral: ni un solo político que se presentaba como candidato a presidente del Gobierno ha pasado por Aragón. Ni uno solo.

“This situation of continuous slights... The last example, this election campaign: not one of the politicians running for president of the country came to Aragon. Not one.”

6.4. Authenticity and legitimacy

In the light of the opinions and experiences shared by the informants, the authenticity and legitimacy dynamics in Aragonese are very complex, in line with the discussions
about this topic, which were rich and sometimes even emotional. First of all, it is convenient to point out that the reaction to audio prompt 5, where a native speaker says he does not like to hear new speakers talking because he finds it artificial, was quite different depending on the language proficiency of the participants. While the highly proficient speakers almost played it down and thought it was a normal reaction, many of the beginners seemed disappointed and surprised, as if they were not aware of the existence of this attitude among native speakers:

(26) G1-A:  *Me ha sabido mal, porque encima de que vas con ilusión, diciendo “hoy he aprendido cosas”, y vas y les dices algo y te miran como “¿Esta qué hace?” No me ha parecido bien.*

“I feel bad. So you’re here, with all your enthusiasm, thinking ‘today I’ve learned new things’, and then you go there and say something to them and they look at you like ‘What is she doing?’ I don’t think that’s right.”

There were multiple indications that the participants shared the idea that, as new speakers, they were less authentic than those who acquired the language through intergenerational transmission in the high-vitality areas. Some of their comments resonate with the “impermeable boundary between themselves and native speakers” described by Ortega et al. (2015: 103):

(27) G3-B:  *Yo, con veinte años, no voy a poder igualar a un niño que empiece a hablar con tres años.*

“Being 20 years old, I will never be able to be on the same level as a child who starts speaking at three.”

(28) I1-A:  *Yo, al ser neohablante, me siento hablante de segunda y creo que más gente lo ve así. Más que de segunda, que tienes que justificar que has estudiado muchísimo, que has investigado muchísimo, para que la gente realmente valore que tú estás hablando y que no te estás inventando nada.*
“Being a new speaker, I feel like a second-class speaker and I think many others see it this way too. Rather than second-class, I mean that you have to justify that you’ve studied a lot, that you’ve done a lot of research, in order for other people to value you and not think that you’re making up anything.”

(29) G3-C:  *El problema es que, si se dejase de hablar ya el aragonés digamos patrimonial, el real, el resto del aragonés no tendría sentido. O sea, para estudiar una lengua inventada... La razón de ser real del aragonés es que haya gente que mantenga esa lengua.*

“The problem is that if patrimonial Aragonese, the real one, stopped being used, this other one wouldn’t make any sense. I mean, studying an invented language? The true *raison d’être* of Aragonese is that there are people who keep that language alive.”

It is also interesting to note that even those who initially stated categorically that new speakers were as legitimate and authentic as native speakers, then used expressions which pointed in the opposite direction:

(30) G1-B:  *Yo creo que no tienen más legitimidad como hablantes de aragonés, pero ellos lo sienten así [...] La gente de la montaña debería abrir los brazos a los nuevos hablantes, aunque no sean tan puros.*

“I don’t think they have more legitimacy as Aragonese speakers, but they see it that way [...] People from the mountains should open their arms to new speakers, even if they aren’t that pure.”

Actually, the purity concept came up several times during the discussions, and G4-D established a connection between this nativeness and history, an idea O’Rourke et al. (2015) tie with ethnonationalism, as discussed in section 4.1.:
(31) G4-D:  \textit{Yo creo que hay unas variantes más puras, y que deberían existir siempre esas variantes, porque si no estás renunciando a una cosa tuya, a tu historia, a tus antepasados...} \\
“I think some varieties are purer than others and those should always exist, because otherwise you’re giving up something of your own, your history, your ancestors...”

This perceived distance between new and native speakers was also reflected in some of the personal experiences of the informants in the high-vitality areas. They all reported a general refusal of native speakers to talk to them in Aragonese if they knew they were from Zaragoza and spoke a standardized version. Some of them said they feel too embarrassed to even try, while others, who were competent enough to do so, used the local variety to increase the chances of having a friendly conversation. An analogous behavior was described by O’Rourke and Ramallo (2013: 295): “They describe their Galician as ‘school Galician’ (galego da escola) and ‘book Galician’ (galego de libro), characteristics that new speakers wish to hide in an effort to disguise their new-speaker identity.” The informants’ accounts of their experiences in the high-vitality areas speak for themselves:

(32) G3-D:  \textit{Vi cómo el camarero les dijo a las chicas que entraban antes que yo ‘Qué queret?' y las chicas dijeron no sé qué. Y yo tuve una vergüenza brutal y no me atreví a preguntarle en el aragonés que hablo yo o intentar... Esas cosas también son barreras que existen.} \\
“I saw the waiter asking the women who were before me ‘Qué queretz?’ [‘How can I help you?’ in Aragonese] and they said I don’t know what. And then I felt terribly embarrassed and didn’t dare ordering in Aragonese, not even try... These things are also barriers that exist.”

(33) I3-A:  \textit{Nunca usó una variedad estandarizada, porque por experiencias y vivencias que oyes de gente de los pueblos, siempre es de rechazo}
total y absoluto: “Porque estos que vienen aquí a imponer, estos que no hablan como nosotros, estos inexperimentados”.

“I never use a standard variety, because my experience is that the reaction of people from the villages is always that of complete and absolute rejection: ‘These people who come here and try to impose their thing, these people who don’t speak like us, these inexperienced people’.”

(34) I1-A:  Hay que ir con un poco de cuidado […] Siempre les dices que vienes a aprender de ellos, para que ellos te enseñen lo suyo porque te gusta.

“You have to be careful […] You always say that you want to learn from them, that you want them to teach you because you like the way they speak.”

(35) G2-A:  Es habitual que no te quieran hablar en aragonés, sobre todo si dices que eres de Zaragoza. A veces lo que hemos hecho es decir que eres de otro pueblo, y piensas ‘espero que no conozcan a nadie en ese pueblo’, pero es verdad que funciona más, porque así no te asocian a un urbanita que ha aprendido y tal, y te hablan tranquilamente.

“It’s quite common that they refuse to speak to you in Aragonese, especially if you say you’re from Zaragoza. What we sometimes do is that you say you’re from another village, and then you think ‘I hope they don’t know anybody in that village’, but it really works, because that way they don’t see you as an urbanite who has learned, and then they have no problem talking to you [in Aragonese].”

This last quote brings up another interesting angle of the problem. According to the informants’ opinions, there is a rivalry between Zaragoza and the rural mountainous areas of Aragon that goes beyond language use, and further complicates a cordial relationship. Some of them attribute this spat to the closed-mindedness of the villagers
while other point at the arrogance of the people from capital. Actually, arrogance is an attitude which several informants see as the original cause of the linguistic tensions between native and new speakers. They describe a type of new speaker they call saputo (know-it-all in Aragonese): researchers or activists which in the early days of standardization went to the rural areas and felt entitled to correct native speakers. The problem, they say, was worsened by the fact that the first standard varieties were very different from the language spoken in the mountains. This arrogance contrasts with the insecurities described by O’Rourke et al. (2015: 12): “In Galicia, new speakers themselves feel uncertain about their status and the adequacy of the Galician they speak, despite the fact that ‘old’ speakers usually regard them as linguistic models of correctness.”

In line with this, the more experienced informants, and even some of the beginners, admit that the language spoken today in many high-vitality villages is very “castilianized”, as confirmed by Nagore Lain (2002b: 14). They have a negative view on this “castilianization”, but still they say they would never correct a native speaker:

(36) I1-A:  Yo no me atrevería a corregir a una persona que habla nativo por mucho que tenga la lengua más chafada y tú sabes que en este pueblo se decía de otra forma.
“I wouldn’t dare to correct a native speaker even if his language was broken, and you knew that in that village things were said differently before.”

This idea of correcting other speakers connects with the essentialist bias mentioned in section 4.1. while discussing linguistic sanctioning and policing among new speakers of Galician, a practice some highly proficient informants also described in Aragon. One of them, who was working on the new TV show in Aragonese, explains the pressure this policing practices puts on other new speakers:

(37) I1-A:  Lo que más me pesa últimamente son las luchas internas que ha habido dentro de los neohablantes precisamente: quién habla mejor, quién habla peor. Y ahora nosotros con el programa nos sentimos
un poco presionados porque lo tenemos que hacer todo de libro para que no nos vengan unos y otros.

“What I really regret lately is the internal fighting among new speakers: who speaks better, who speaks worse… And now with the show, we feel a little pressured because everything we say must be by the book, so that they don’t come to us with…”

As we have seen in this subsection, the legitimacy and authenticity dynamics in the Aragonese-speaking world are extremely complex and, even though the informants did not identify these issues as one of the main challenges facing the languages today, their views and experiences indicate that they are a major hurdle for a successful revitalization. In fact, some of the activists mentioned that they have been working on this for years and are beginning to see the results. There was a general consensus that more bonding activities were needed to bring native and new speakers together.

6.5. Learning process and motivations

Many of the motivations behind the decision to start learning Aragonese are shared by a majority of the subjects, but the identity (or political) component seems stronger among the highly proficient speakers, a majority of whom link their initial interest with their nationalistic or pro-independence views. This attitude was also observed by Ramallo (2010) among new speakers of Galician.

(38) G2-A: Yo sí que tengo un sentimiento aragonés muy fuerte. Entonces, en mi caso en concreto, fue la razón por la cual empecé a aprender aragonés. En un principio cuando era joven tenía un componente identitario muy importante. Para mí, un buen aragonés tenía que saber aragonés. Inicialmente era así, ahora pienso de otra forma.

“I had a very strong Aragonese sentiment. So in my case, this was the reason why I started learning Aragonese. When I was young, the identity component was very important. I thought that a good Aragonese had to speak Aragonese. Initially, it was like that. Now I think differently.”
The beginners have less political ways of describing their Aragonese sentiment, using words like “romantic” or making references to their ancestors:

(39) G1-A:  *Quería saber cómo hablaban mi abuelo, mi bisabuelo*...
“I wanted to know how my grandfather and my great grandfather spoke.”

(40) G3-D:  *Cuando era un criajo, mi padre tenía colmenas en un terreno que era de un amigo de él, y subíamos, que estaba en el valle de Ansó. Y yo tengo ese recuerdo de oír hablar al amigo de mi padre. Desde entonces llevo esa historia metida en la cabeza.*
“When I was just a kid, my dad had hives on a piece of land of a friend of his, and we went there often. It was in the Ansó valley. And I have this memory of hearing my dad’s friend speak. I have had this thing on my mind ever since.”

Another repeated idea is that they study Aragonese because they want to contribute to the survival of the language, which connects with the activist profile of many of these speakers:

(41) G3-A:  *Yo estudio filología. Me empezaron a hablar de la importancia de las lenguas y dije “yo tengo que hacer algo, o sea yo, como aragonesa y como lengua de mi territorio, tengo que tomar yo iniciativa y hacer lo que sea para no perderla”.*
“I study Philology. They started talking to me about the importance of language and I said to myself ‘I have to do something’. Being Aragonese, and given that it’s the language of my territory, I have to take the initiative and do something so that we don’t lose it.”

On a more mundane level, many of the beginners stressed the fact that the courses at the neighborhood centers were free as a determining factor. Also, there were several of
these potential new speakers, including some of those who started because they were free, who indicated their intention to continue studying Aragonese at the cultural association, where the courses are paid-for. This proves that expanding these free courses at neighborhood centers would be crucial in future revitalization plans.

It is also worth mentioning that several of the informants mentioned online content in Aragonese as one of their first points of contact with the language and an important factor in their initial interest.

Finally, none of the participants gave more practical reasons for starting to study Aragonese. This is consistent with the limited use of Aragonese in the public sphere. This type of motivations is probably much more frequent in other multilingual Spanish regions where it is a requirement to, for example, access public jobs, such as Catalonia or the Basque Country. G4-D exemplified the situation:

(42) G4-D: *La gente que estamos casi lo hacemos más como hobby que con intención de... porque luego no tienes la posibilidad de practicarlo diariamente por la calle.*

“We do it more as a hobby than with the intention of… because then you don’t have the opportunity to practice it on a daily basis.”

All the participants were generally satisfied with their learning process and the most repeated source of satisfaction was that they felt very rewarded when they realized that many of the words and sayings they had used or heard before in Spanish were actually Aragonese:

(43) I1-A: *Vas a clase y te das cuenta de que cosas que incluso habías dicho a tu madre, “no digas esto, que está mal”, pues eran en aragonés. Y eso fue lo que a mí más me enganchó, porque te das cuenta de que el aragonés, sin que lo hubieras hablado tú, es que formaba ya parte de ti.*

“You go to class and you realize that even things you told your mom ‘Don’t say that, it’s wrong’ were in Aragonese. And that’s what really got me hooked, because you realize that Aragonese, even without you knowing, was already a part of you.”
As for the difficulties or the frustrations in their learning process, the most repeated idea was the disorientation they felt because of the lack of a universally approved standard, both among the beginners and the highly proficient speakers, who even joked about it:

(44) G2-A:  *A veces hacemos bromas de que cambia cada minuto. Ah no, esto ahora está mal dicho. Ah no, ahora vuelve a estar bien dicho.* […] *Esto pasó en todas las lenguas, pero como lo estamos viviendo ahora pues sí que te genera un poco de inseguridad. Un poco no, bastante inseguridad. Y yo creo que es un problema para la gente que empieza.*

“We sometimes crack jokes about how it changes every minute. ‘Oh, no, this is wrong now.’ ‘No, wait, now it’s right again.’ […] This has happened in all languages, but we are going through this process now, and it does make you feel a little insecure. Actually, not a little, very insecure. And I think this is a problem for beginners.”

(45) G4-C:  *Dices: “Si me apunto aquí, aprendo de una manera, y si me voy con estos, aprendo de otra manera”. Entonces, ¿cuál lo está haciendo mejor?*  
You say: ‘If I chose this school, I’ll learn this way, and if I choose the others, I will learn in a different way.’ So, which option is best?”

Another problem that came up was the scarcity of appropriate materials for language education and literacy, listed among UNESCO’s major evaluative factors of language vitality (UNESCO 2003: 7). The highly proficient speakers concurred that the availability of materials had dramatically improved since they began studying, but was still insufficient:

(46) I1-A:  *Uno de los problemas a la hora de aprender el aragonés es que es una lengua que está menos codificada que otras. Hay muchos problemas de poder aprenderla correctamente, de tener unos buenos*
One of the problems when trying to learn Aragonese is that this language is less codified than others. It is hard to learn it correctly, to have good materials, good examples. Much progress has been made in recent years and people are better oriented, but I still find people who ask me on social media about book recommendations to learn Aragonese and I honestly don’t know what to recommend.”

Finally, it’s worth remembering that one of the informants, I3-A, was self-taught. In his case, he learned using books but also thanks to his close personal ties with many native speakers, and he agreed that the materials available were insufficient. It would be interesting to explore if this profile is more frequent than suggested in this study’s sample, and if that is the case, take a closer look at their particular views and circumstances.

6.6. Language use
The clearest conclusion which can be drawn from the experiences and views shared by the informants is that they thought the opportunities to use Aragonese in Zaragoza were insufficient or even non-existing for some. Many of them knew about a couple of bars where the staff knows the language and the menu is in Aragonese, but some of the beginners had never heard of these venues.

The difference between the activists and the beginners in terms of language use is substantial. The latter seem mostly disoriented and frustrated, as they are unable to practice outside the academic setting. Some mention their intention to create conversation groups, but have not done so yet. The former, for their part, have managed to go through the mudá process described by Pujolar and Puigdevall (2015), who explain that in Catalonia there are multiple environments where people can become proficient and active speakers of Catalan: at school, at work, at home… In the case of our informants, the only option was to actively create a favorable social or home
environment. Three of them spoke Aragonese at home with their partners, and another one, who had a Spanish-speaking wife, managed to build this Aragonese-speaking environment by getting involved in multiple cultural activities and social circles. I1-A explained the effort needed:

(47) I1-A: Estoy satisfecha con mi uso de aragonés, pero me lo he construido yo. Es una lucha continua. Para hablar inglés es más fácil. Para hablar aragonés diariamente tienes que hacer más esfuerzos para buscar gente, pero yo estoy contenta con cómo me lo he montado al final, porque he conseguido vivir en aragonés.

“I’m satisfied with my use of Aragonese, but I’ve built this myself. It’s a constant struggle. It’s easier if you want to speak English. If you want to speak Aragonese every day, you have to make more efforts to find people, but I’m happy with my current situation, because I’ve managed to live in Aragonese.”

In a context where real-life interactions in Aragonese are difficult to find for many new speakers, online platforms emerge as a great tool, especially for beginners or people who are not especially involved in grassroots movements. Several informants reported using Aragonese on social media and following Aragonese influencers on Instagram and YouTube.

(48) I3-A: El principal uso es por redes sociales: WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, porque es la forma actual en la que estamos todo el mundo conectados.

“The main use is on social media: WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, because it’s the current way in which we’re all connected.”

Social media has also become a very important tool for the highly proficient speakers, some of which reported using only Aragonese on the Internet, despite getting enraged comments on occasion. O’Rourke and Ramallo (2015: 163) describe a similar situation
in Galicia and read it from an activist perspective consistent with our informant’s attitude, which fits into the profile of “proponents of social change”:

(49) G2-A: *Yo me expreso siempre en aragonés, incluso en posts [de Facebook] que no tengan nada que ver, porque quiero reivindicar que es mi medio de expresión y que no lo hago en contra de nadie, sino que simplemente yo me expreso en esa lengua.*

“I always use Aragonese, even if the [Facebook] posts have nothing to do with the language, because I want to assert that this is my means of expression and that I’m not doing it against anybody, that I just express myself in that language.”

Even some of the uses described by the beginners could be seen as some kind of linguistic activism:

(50) G3-A: *Si para decir una palabra tengo las dos opciones, pues digo la aragonesa y es como que digo: “bueno, por lo menos algo estoy haciendo a favor del aragonés”.*

“If I have both options to say a word, I say it in Aragonese and I think: ‘At least I’m doing something for the language’.”

(51) G3-C: *A mí me gusta mostrar el vocabulario también a mis amigos, a los que sé que no me van a mirar como un loco […] Yo conscientemente también digo palabras aragonesas dándome cuenta de ello.*

“I like to show my friends the vocabulary, to those whom I know won’t look at me as if I was crazy […] I consciously choose to say Aragonese words.”

This attitude could be seen as one of the post-vernacular uses described by Hornsby (2016: 4), discussed in section 4.1., as they are a conscious effort to use the minority language in non-traditional ways, with a positive attitude towards the language and from an activist perspective.
In sum, the opportunities to use the language are another example of a major challenge for the new speaker community in Zaragoza which was not listed by the informants themselves as such. The more experienced speakers have managed to overcome this drawback through a strong personal commitment to build a social circle with other speakers of Aragonese (new or native), while the Internet emerges as a partial substitute of real-life encounters for the beginners. Online platforms, which are also widely used as communication and activism tools by the highly proficient speakers, seem to have great potential in situations like that of Aragonese, where native speakers are scattered in isolated valleys and most new speakers live in practically monolingual large cities.

6.7. Language transmission

The results of this section are particularly sparse, because only one of the informants had young children, so most of them could express their intentions or opinions but not their direct experiences. I2-A, who had a two-year-old son and a five-month-old daughter, said he always spoke to them in Aragonese. He explained that the girl was too young to speak and the boy usually replied in Spanish, but understood Aragonese. Another member of the association explains that this is a common pattern among her Aragonese-speaking acquaintances in Zaragoza, and believes the lack of a large community of speakers could be one of the reasons the children reply in Spanish, as they do not want to feel different from other kids.

All the participants had very positive views on transmission. Those who thought they would have children in the future said that they intended to speak to them in Aragonese, and the older subjects expressed the same intention about grandchildren. As some of them put it, it was not only a way to ensure the survival of the language, but also something with an emotional component:

(52) G3-C: Cuando [nuestro profesor] habló en clase de que su pareja hablaba en aragonés y tal, estuve pensando y se me hizo una imagen muy bonita de poder tener una mujer que hablara aragonés y criar a los hijos en aragonés.
“When [our teacher] said in class that his partner talked to him in Aragonese, I started to think about it and I pictured this really beautiful image, with a wife who speaks Aragonese and raising our children in Aragonese.”

These results offer an ambivalent picture, as there appears to be a great interest in transmitting the language to future generations, but success in the endeavor seems hard to achieve.

7. Conclusions

Based on the results of this study, it is fair to conclude that there are at least two profiles of new speakers of Aragonese in Zaragoza, which share some features but differ in other relevant characteristics. The individuals in the first group are highly proficient speakers of Aragonese and possess an activist profile. They are involved in grassroots movements, have learned Aragonese through paid-for courses at cultural associations and share a deep Aragonese sentiment, which in some cases leads to pro-independence political ideas. The other group is made up of beginners, most of whom have just started studying the language and have chosen to do so at neighborhood centers, where free courses are offered since 2017. These individuals are not involved in activism and their Aragonese sentiment, which is also strong but generally compatible with their Spanish identity, seems to be less political than that of the activists. It is also interesting to note that there seems to be no correlation between an interest in Aragonese and direct personal links with the high-vitality areas.

Both groups share the idea that Aragon and its culture have been historically mistreated by Spanish centralism and that the current state of Aragonese, which they see as worrisome, is a consequence of this. This does not prevent them from considering Spanish as part of their identity and something valuable they want to keep using, pointing at a hybrid linguistic identity. Even though they grew up speaking Spanish in a practically monolingual area, they all feel Aragonese as part of their identity and are saddened by the thought that it is an endangered language at a very delicate stage.
However, they seem more prone to hope and proactivity than to despair and resignation, as they are aware of the decisive role new speakers will play in the survival of the language.

They report being constantly questioned in their decision to learn Aragonese, a language they are aware is seen as useless and rural by many, or even verbally attacked by Spanish-speakers, who see them as a threat to the unity of the country. These setbacks do not seem to affect their determination. Those who have a broader knowledge of the Aragonese-speaking world, are aware of the legitimacy tensions between new and native speakers, which many have experienced personally in the Pyrenean valleys. In their encounters, they tend to “adapt” to the local varieties of Aragonese to avoid rejection from the native speakers. In general, they feel “less authentic” than native speakers but many are also aware that the varieties spoken in the Pyrenean valleys are very “castilianized”.

These are not the only internal tensions they report. The highly proficient individuals also argue that they feel under pressure when speaking Aragonese with certain other new speakers, as policing and sanctioning attitudes are frequent.

In the Aragonese context, the transition from being a potential new speaker to becoming an active and highly proficient speaker of Aragonese seems an arduous task, as all the informants report a lack of opportunities to practice the language in a city where Spanish has been the dominant language for centuries. Those who have successfully made the transition have achieved their goal thanks to a personal effort to build a social and family life with other Aragonese speakers.

They are generally happy with their learning process despite reporting a scarcity of learning materials and a certain degree of disorientation due to the lack of a universally approved standard. They cite this as one of the major challenges facing the language today, together with the politization of Aragonese, which in their opinion has associated Aragonese with left-wing nationalism, a widespread idea they think is progressively being neutralized but has had a very harmful effect.

As for their motivations to learn Aragonese, political ideology was a determining factor for several of the highly proficient speakers, whereas sentimental or cultural reasons were the dominant note among the beginners, many of whom also mentioned the fact that the courses at the neighborhood centers were free, thanks to the
cooperation of the local administration. A successful revitalization of Aragonese will undoubtedly need to reach these less committed individuals, so their motivations should be especially taken into account in the design of future initiatives. A small improvement in institutional support from the city hall, which has offered these free courses for the first time in history, has proven successful in attracting students who had not taken the step before despite their interest in the language. In line with this, the potential of online platforms and social media should also not be neglected in future revitalization plans, as many of the younger informants reported that their first contact with the language was on the Internet.

As mentioned before, this thesis has the limitations inherent in a study of this nature and is only intended as a first approximation to the matter. In future research, it would be interesting to conduct an in-depth study of a sample which is representative of the entire community of new speakers of Aragonese in order to obtain more reliable quantitative results. The fact that the only informant who was chosen through a different method, I3-A, had a very different profile is an indication that this study could be leaving out important angles. It would also be convenient to find people who started studying Aragonese but decided to give it up, as their views and experiences would offer invaluable insights for more successful revitalization initiatives in the future.
References


Martín Zorraquino, María Antonia & José Miguel Enguita Utrilla. 2000. *Las lenguas de Aragón*. Zaragoza: CAI.


Annex

Neohablantes de aragonés en Zaragoza
(New speakers of Aragonese in Zaragoza)

Grupo de discusión (Discussion group):
Fecha (Date):
Nombre (Name):
Apellidos (Last names):
Edad (Age):
Sexo (Gender):
Lugar de nacimiento (Place of birth):
Lugar de residencia actual (Place of residence):
Lugar(es) de residencia durante la etapa escolar (Place(s) of residence during the schooling period):
Nivel de estudios (Education level):
Profesión (Profession):
Vínculos con las zonas de alta vitalidad del aragonés (familia, amigos, trabajo, viajes, segundas residencias…) (Ties with the high-vitality áreas: family, friends, work, travel, secondary residence):
Tiempo estudiando/hablando aragonés (Years studying Aragonese):
Variedad lingüística del aragonés empleada (Linguistic variety):
Teléfono (Phone):
Correo electrónico (Email):