2015

Ways of seeing language in nineteenth-century Galicia, Spain

José del Valle
CUNY Graduate Center
José del Valle

Ways of Seeing Language in Nineteenth-Century Galicia, Spain

Abstract: This article discusses a polemical encounter between two Spanish intellectuals – one Andalusian, Juan Valera, and one Galician, Manuel Murguía – who clashed on the desirability of cultivating Galician as a literary language. This encounter is framed as a language ideological debate and interpreted in the context of Spain’s late nineteenth-century politics of regional and national identity. The proposed reading does not so much attempt to assess the accuracy of Valera’s and Murguía’s views of Galician as to understand the terms in which they struggled to impose their particular way of seeing the region’s sociolinguistic configuration.

The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight (Berger 1972: 7).

We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice (ibid. 8).

Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world (ibid. 9).

On invisibility

We have been challenged to place our musings on language inside a frame built with two pieces: a formal chronological constraint – the nineteenth century – and a provocatively suggestive trope – invisibility. With respect to the former, if asked to automatically associate that particular century
with one single theme pertinent to linguistic history, this author would name, without blinking, nation-building. According to the modernist doxa (to which I unapologetically subscribe), the age of revolution resulted in the crystallisation of one particular form of polity whose legitimacy – whose right to constitute institutions of power of its own – was grounded in the alleged possession of a common identity and in the identification and defense of common interests (identity and interest weigh differently across nationalist discourses) (Smith 2000: 27–51). The nation is – if we are persuaded by Hobsbawm (1992) – a form of political organisation that emerges at a particular stage in the development of capitalism; it is one designed by the bourgeoisie to construct and protect a viable market (Hobsbawm refers to the size requirement as the threshold principle). Languages played a central role in the process: on the one hand, they were seen as the evident embodiment of national culture and as fundamental symbols of the nation; on the other, they were envisioned as an instrument that guarantees transparent verbal communication. They enable the proper functioning of the supply and demand components of the market as well as of the operations of the administrative structure of the state (Joseph 2004: 92–131).

*Seen* and *envisioned*, as I wrote in the previous lines, acknowledge, through my own linguistic choices, the editors’ second challenge. This book is underpinned by the trope of invisibility, by the idea that, often-times, language – a language or some dimension of it – is, somehow, left out of sight, pushed outside the scope of our historical gaze. When confronted with this image, we feel perhaps prompted to take another look at the historical record, that is, at the material evidence through which we build our chronicles: a language’s history, the linguistic history of a community, the social conditions under which a particular form of talk appears etc. However, in response to this conceptual trigger, I also feel an urge not only to revisit what is seen and what remains unseen, but, especially, to reflect upon our ways of seeing as language historians (hence my opening with a tribute to John Berger’s exquisite essay). It is not just a matter of setting the record straight on the visible world; it is
a matter of seeing how record-setting happens. In other words, to me it is the need to understand the gaze, the historicity of historical thinking, that is made evident (i.e. visible) by the felicitously disruptive trope thrust upon us by the editors.

Recognising agency, I believe, is key to fully developing the explanatory potential of the trope. Visibility and invisibility are not inherent conditions of a particular linguistic configuration but the result of complex and interested human intervention in the constitution of the visible world. We are reminded of Irvine & Gal’s notion of erasure, ‘the process in which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible. Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away’ (Irvine & Gal 2000: 38).

The reader will notice that I choose to link invisibility not to languages but to Language. The complex experience of human verbal communication can certainly be understood as a set of grammars clearly differentiated from each other; it can be seen, as it were, as a mosaic of discrete languages. But, if we are to produce a reflexive form of thinking that acknowledges that we – precisely as thinkers – can also be seen, if we acknowledge that – precisely as linguistic historians – we are deeply involved in struggles over the construction of the visible (on what is a legitimate object of linguistic inquiry), we must then accept that this grammar-based structuring of the linguistic universe, first, results from an intentional act of looking and, second, constitutes not a universally valid understanding of Language but one particular way of seeing that unbounded universe. In my interpretation of the proposed frame, therefore, languages are not discrete objects that, having an autonomous existence, can be rendered visible or invisible by historical agents and circumstances; they are instead historical constructs, and the operations – discursive and institutional – that produce their visibility are inherent to their historical condition. We must remain aware, in sum, that we, as language scholars, inhabit an interested position that compels us to choose where to look and what to look for.
A historical narrative

The story I’m about to tell – a story of dissent between two men who appeared to be looking at the same segment of the linguistic universe – took place toward the end of the nineteenth century in the northwestern corner of the Iberian Peninsula. It unfolded in Galicia, then a region and now an autonomous community within the Kingdom of Spain. Numerous linguistic histories of this land have been written at different times and have taken multiple forms, and yet I would dare say that this plethora of texts has followed a single, fairly consistent plot that might be put in a nutshell as follows (cf. also Del Valle 2000: 107–109).

Galician is the language which evolved from Latin in the northwestern corner of the Roman province of Hispania, in the diocese of Gallaecia, north of Lusitania and west of Tarraconense. In the early Middle Ages Galician was the main medium of oral expression in that region and subsequently, as a result of the southward expansion of Christian kingdoms, in what would eventually become Portugal. Until well into the Middle Ages, there were no significant differences between the language spoken north and south of the river Minho (which constitutes part of the present political border between Galicia and Portugal), and it was only the independence of Portugal (in the middle of the twelfth century) that eventually led to the linguistic differentiation north and south of the border. The language of the vast majority of documents written in Galicia in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries was Galician. However, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed the increasing use of Spanish among socially and politically privileged groups. Castilian noblemen and their acolytes took charge of Galician land and administrative jobs in growing numbers and the members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Galicia were more often than not speakers of some Castilian dialect. The creation of the Spanish state and the consolidation of political unity by Ferdinand (1452–1516) and Isabella (1451–1504) in the second half of the fifteenth century augmented the subjugation of Galicia and the developing diglossic situation. As a result, Galician dialects came to be
associated with ignorance and poverty and practically disappeared from the written record. In the second half of the nineteenth century, some sectors of the Galician intellectual elite, influenced by the Romantic outlook, attempted to elevate the prestige of Galician culture and language. With this goal in mind, they promoted and developed grammars and dictionaries, attempted to recreate a literary standard, and studied other natural and cultural phenomena (such as Galicia’s political history, geography, and folkloric traditions) that became integral to the collective identity of the region. These cultural developments were closely linked to the emergence of, first, provincialist, then, regionalist and, finally, in the early twentieth century, nationalist political movements. In 1936, legislation was drafted (a Statute of Autonomy) granting Galician and Spanish co-official status in the regional administration. This legislative initiative was truncated, however, by the eruption of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), at the end of which a strongly centralist and patriotic military-type dictatorship was established in Spain with Francisco Franco as head of state. It was only after Franco’s death in 1975, the approval of the Law for Political Reform of 1976, and the constitution of 1978, that a legal framework was established for the possible officialisation, and, allegedly, the promotion and defense of Galician (as well as Catalan and Basque).

Here ends my condensed, schematic drawing of Galicia’s linguistic history. We could, of course, assume that the historical record is impeccable, that linguistic historians of Galicia have succeeded at producing an accurate representation of the language’s development. We could claim, even recognizing the figurative nature and prominence of tropes in historical writing (White 1973, 1978), that a sufficiently broad and satisfying consensus has been reached. However, we should take heed of Edward Hallett Carr’s warning: ‘When you read a work of history always listen out for the buzzing. If you can detect none, either you are tone deaf or your historian is a dull dog’ (Carr 1961: 26). The buzzing; the steady, monotonous noise that conceals its conspicuousness behind its own overpowering presence; the soundscape that remains unheard; the landscape that goes unseen; the master narrative that runs, undetected, under the apparently aseptic sequential disposition of facts.
The Renaissance period

In order to properly set the stage for the main event, we must give some extra attention to the second half of the nineteenth century, to the period conventionally labeled as *rexurdimento* (renaissance) by Galician historiography, to the decades when the language is said to have re-surfaced in written texts after centuries in hiding, apparently doomed to historical oblivion. Henrique Monteagudo, in his essential *Historia Social da Lingua Galega* (1999, ‘A Social History of Galician’), identifies four stages through which the awakening of Galicia’s linguistic awareness occurred (see also García Turnes 2004; Hermida 1992a & 1992b):

- The transition stage between 1808 and 1840 (*transición*)
- The blooming stage between 1840 and 1880 (*eclosión*)
- The emergence stage between 1880 and 1915 (*emerxencia*)
- The modernisation stage between 1915 and 1936 (*modernización, elevación e expansión*)

The first (1808–1840), which begins with the political upheavals caused by the Napoleonic invasion of Spain, is characterised by the profusion of political pamphlets written in Galician (mostly in periods when the Liberal Party was dominant: 1810–1813, 1820–1823, 1836–1837). For the most part, we find transcriptions of local speech and no significant efforts to standardise (in the technical sense of the term) and raise the language’s status. In Monteagudo’s view, in this phase, Galician enters politics as a response to liberal politicians’ pragmatic needs.

In the blooming stage (1840–1880), ethnographic, historical, literary and sociological interest in Galicia provides a context for greater attention to the language as well as for the appearance of some literary texts written in Galician. Two main forms of discourse seem to dominate the metalinguistic landscape: first, numerous essays are written to argue for Galician’s autonomous status with respect to Spanish, and second, a considerable number of dictionaries and grammar books are produced and aimed at the significant number of foreigners (here meaning from other
parts of Spain) who were arriving in Galicia as teachers, civil servants, and employees of the courts of law. A great number of these dictionaries and grammars were meant to offer the newcomers an instrument that would allow them to better communicate with the Galician-speaking peasants.

In the emergence stage (1880–1915), there is a considerable increase in the production of literary texts written in Galician as well as in the role played by literary contests and periodical publications dealing with Galicia’s literary and linguistic awakening. The discourse on language started now to focus on standardisation, mainly on the development of a stable variety that would serve as a beacon for literary production. Significant research was conducted in this period on Galician literature of the Middle Ages. This resulted in an extensive archive of medieval texts that provided, on one hand, an argument for projecting an image of Galician as a language endowed with a noble tradition and, on the other, sources for the elaboration of the literary language.

Finally, during the modernisation period (1915–1936), Galician comes to be used profusely in both literary and non-literary prose, and discourses that propose the institutionalisation of Galician take stronger roots in Galician society. It is the period when a political front claiming greater autonomy for the region assumes the co-officialisation of Galician and Spanish as one of its ideological tenets.

A polemic between Juan Valera and Manuel Murguía

The event around which the present article is organised happened during the third period, or emergence stage, specifically in 1896 (Carballo 1977). The first protagonist of the episode was Juan Valera (1824–1905), not a Galician but an Andalusian who had moved to Madrid as a young adult and pursued a political career. He became a member of parliament for the Liberal Party, and held influential posts in the diplomatic corps, including ambassadorships in Brazil, Russia, and the United States. He distinguished himself among his contemporaries however, not as a politician but as a
José del Valle, a sharp thinker and much respected literary critic, who was honored quite early in his life with his appointment to the Real Academia Española (Spain’s language academy). He took great interest in Spanish American literature and, as even a cursory view of his complete works shows, like many Spanish men of letters at the time he also became intrigued by the proliferation within Spain of cultural practices grounded in languages other than Spanish, such as Asturian (also known as *bable*), Basque, Catalan, and Galician.

In 1896, he wrote for the Revista Crítica de Historia y de Literatura (‘Critical Review of History and Literature’) a lengthy review of a recently published history of Spanish literature in the nineteenth century (*La Literatura Española en el Siglo XIX*, ‘Spanish Literature in the Nineteenth Century’, 1891–1893) written by Francisco Blanco García (Valera 1961a [1896]). In this particular article, Valera focused on volume 3, which was entitled ‘Las Literaturas Regionales y la Hispanoamericana’ [‘Regional and Spanish American Literatures’], and separately discussed Blanco García’s treatment of, in this order, Catalan, Galician, Asturian, and Spanish American authors. One third of the review was devoted to discussing Catalan literature; just a little bit less than he devoted to all of Spanish America’s production. In those pages, he decidedly recognised the existence of a fully developed Catalan literary field and praised its quality. He mentioned lyrical and epic poets, prolific and clever narrators, comedic and tragic playwrights, and he even commented with meticulous detail on some of their works.

In contrast, Galicia was given barely one tenth of the space, and the nature of the discussion differed significantly from that of Catalonia. In the pages devoted to Galicia, Valera acknowledged the ‘exquisite and wise efforts’ (‘primorosos y atinados esfuerzos’) of authors such as Rosalía de Castro (1837–1885), Curros Enríquez (1851–1908) and others mentioned in Blanco García’s book, but emphatically discouraged the development of an autonomous literary field:

> Why would one want to turn this dialect now into a new literary language? Wouldn’t it be better if important Galician writers either continued to write in Spanish – like Feijoo, Pastor Díaz and Ms. Emilia Pardo Bazán – or assimilate their language to
Portuguese, a move with which the language would gain in elegance and wealth and writers would be able to reach a less limited public? (Valera 1961a [1896]: 896)

For Valera, Galician and Portuguese were one and the same language, one that, after the fifteenth century, had ceased to be cultivated north of the river Minho. He clearly accepted that, at the end of the 1800s, a new set of conditions made it possible for Galicians to write in their own tongue. And he even conceded that Galician dialects could be used in certain minor genres associated with folklore. But why engage, he wondered, in the rapid, artificial creation of a cultivated variety when such variety had already developed more organically in Portugal?

Valera’s article was not well received among Galicians committed to the region’s cultural renaissance. On 15 August, a few weeks after the publication of the Andalusian’s review, Manuel Murguía (1833–1923), a renowned member of the emerging Galician lettered class (married to Rosalía de Castro – one of the key canonical figures of Galicia’s literary renaissance – and author of the first significant multi-volume history of Galicia), replied to Valera in La Voz de Galicia, a newspaper from the city of A Coruña (Murguía 1976 [1896]). His unquestionably and unapologetically harsh response was structured in two parts. In the first, Murguía agreed that Galician and Portuguese were one and the same language and he refused to accept Galician’s alleged stagnation after the fifteenth century. He developed an argument for the historical continuity of Galician as a viable language in all dimensions of social life – always spoken by the upper classes – and minimised the importance of the limited literary output during the period that conventional linguistic and literary historiography have termed the dark centuries. Galician and Portuguese, therefore, were portrayed by Murguía as a forked tongue, as one single organic entity in spite of a split that had resulted from specific historical conditions of use. In his view, linguistic unity was not incompatible with separate processes of cultivation.

In the second part of his response, Murguía tackled what he found to be the most insulting aspect of Valera’s article: his near absolute silence with respect to the accomplishments of Galician writers, his indifference towards Galician literature, those few paragraphs devoted to denying the
language’s autonomous status; merely a few lines alongside the several pages devoted to praising the triumphs of the Catalan literary field.

Here is the real insult to our country and our regional writers, refusing to give us what he generously granted to others [...] In our eyes, Mr. Valera is not guilty of what he says but of what he does not say; he does not hurt Galicia with his opinions but with his silence; he does not upset our writers with what he presents but with the indifference with which he treats them and their work. (Murguía 1976 [1896]: 187–188)

Murguía made one further point in response to Valera’s dismissal of Galician literature and to his skepticism about the need for an independent process of linguistic cultivation. Why build a literary language out of Galician?

Galician poets, in order to become modern and European, felt compelled to cease using a language [Spanish, JdV] that kept them tied to the artificiality and conventionality of a form of poetry in which metric stiffness and the noise of words seem to be essential. (Murguía 1976 [1896]: 185)

While an element of spite for Valera’s disdainful treatment of Galician literature may be present in this statement, it is also crucial to see it as a powerful emancipatory declaration, as an affirmation of Galicia’s cultural renaissance not as a nostalgic and retrograde movement but as a forward-looking endeavor that hopes to overcome the constraints implicit in the cultural dependence on Castile.

Debates, ideology, and linguistic imaginings

Before I offer my reading of this controversy, I must present two theoretical concepts that inform my perspective. First, language ideological debate, which was proposed by Jan Blommaert in his 1999 book of the same title. Blommaert’s project is rooted in the field that started to crystallise in the early 1990s around efforts to define and identify linguistic ideologies, that is, representations of language – of any form of verbal communicative practice – that construe and enact a particular social world, a collective
order, a certain form of identity, aesthetics, morality and epistemology (Woolard 1998: 3). Linguistic ideologies contain traces of the conditions of their own production and cue us in to the context within which those representations operate. Blommaert highlighted the need to develop a historiography of linguistic ideologies and he identified linguistic debates – polemics in which language is the object of controversy – as a productive pathway toward this goal. He defined language ideological debates as patterns of interrelated discourse activities [...] often with a fuzzy beginning and end, of which we usually only remember the highlights, the most intense and polarised episodes. In the light of the textual nature of the process, it would be accurate to characterise debates as historical episodes of textualization, as histories of texts in which a struggle is waged between various texts and metatexts. Debates are more or less locatable periods in which a ‘struggle for authoritative entextualization’ takes place. (Blommaert 1999: 9)

From this perspective, polemics surrounding topics such as dialectal variation and language change, the symbolic status of a particular set of linguistic practices, or the literary cultivation of a linguistic variety are imagined as complex sets of texts that construe and enact struggles over the establishment of hegemonic readings of specific historical-linguistic experiences. Consequently, the purpose of our analysis should be to reveal the socio-political entanglements of the texts that constitute the basis of the linguistic polemic at hand.

A second theoretical category that informs my reading of the Valera-Murguía polemic is the imagined community, inextricably associated with Benedict Anderson and his 1983 classic (I use the second edition, 1991), in which he examined the conditions that allowed for the nation to emerge as a model of political organisation. He defined nations as particular manifestations of a broader category: the imagined community. Anderson’s theoretical elaboration of imagination – and we must be watchful about this – does not suggest fabrications ex nihilo of communities that have no real correlate; it does not even refer to a process that puts together a new object out of pre-existing available parts. Imagining a community, in Anderson’s usage, is believing – naturally accepting – that there are commonalities with others beyond the evidence offered by sensory experience.
It is accepting that we are one with others whom we have never and, in all likelihood, will never meet. Therefore, our task as scholars in the humanities and social sciences, Anderson says, should not be distinguishing communities ‘by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined’ (Anderson 1991: 6). Following Anderson, as language historians, we should focus not only on affirming or denying the real grounds for the imagining of a language but on understanding the conditions that facilitate and encourage some imaginings but not others. To return to our original trope, our task is not only to render visible that which has been rendered invisible; our task includes elucidating the set of historical agents and conditions that produced one particular view, its scope and blind spots.

We can now return to Juan Valera and Manuel Murguía’s controversy and look at it as a language ideological debate over the conflicting ways in which they were looking at Galicia’s sociolinguistic configuration. There is no doubt that both authors see Galicia’s linguistic uniqueness and acknowledge that the region’s linguistic repertoire includes a set of varieties of its own, that is, a series of dialects that are not Spanish and, at the same time, differ from those spoken in Portugal. And neither of them hesitates to affirm the existence of, on the one hand, an essential historical unity between Galician and Portuguese dialects and, on the other, a common noble heritage grounded in Galician/Portuguese medieval literature. The differences of opinion between the two, however, first come into view at the textual level when we notice that, while Murguía refers to Galician [‘el gallego’], Valera talks about Galician dialects [‘los dialectos gallegos’]. Murguía develops an argument in which Galician and Portuguese are constructed as the same language, but the former is said to constitute a dialectal group that has enough historical and formal autonomy to serve as the anchor for the constitution of an independent cultural field. It is precisely the task of Galicia’s renaissance intellectuals to develop this field. In contrast, Valera refuses to accept that Galician dialects’ historical and formal autonomy justifies their independent cultivation. He encourages instead the adoption by Galician men and women of letters of either Portuguese or Spanish and their consequent participation in already-existing literary fields. Both authors are able to see Galician dialects in the context provided by the rexurdimento movement; however, they imagine them in different
linguistic constellations and, through this debate, struggle in the very open space of the public sphere over the entextualisation of this new linguistic scene and, consequently, over the establishment of one particular view of Galician either as the basis of a new autonomous literary field within Spain or as a local idiosyncrasy that should in no way alter the already established system of three literary fields in the Iberian Peninsula (anchored in Catalan, Portuguese, and Spanish respectively).

These representations of language must be interpreted in the context provided by the complex games of Spain’s regional politics in the late 1800s. The arrival of the Bourbons – to replace the Habsburgs – early in the 1700s was the beginning of a steady policy of centralisation that slowly deprived parts of the kingdom of a high level of self-government that they had been able to exercise for centuries. This process of administrative centralisation slowly took the form of Spanish nationalism throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, while several versions of what Spain ought to look like as a nation competed for a long time – and such dispute is still very much alive as these lines are written and Catalonia still pushes decisively towards independence. Spanish liberals, who ran the country for a significant part of the 1800s, embraced a combination of civic and ethnic ingredients to build their vision of Spain. They seemed to be in sync with other European liberals in feeling that only countries of a certain size, countries that could sustain a competitive economy based on a free market, would be viable as nations (as mentioned above, Hobsbawm (1992) has referred to this view as the threshold principle). The presence of other languages in the national territory was not perceived as a threat but as a normal situation that would be resolved naturally according to the laws of progress.

Hobsbawm quotes a Welsh Rev. Griffits as saying: ‘Let it [the Welsh language] die fairly, peacefully and reputably. Attached to it as we are, few would wish to postpone its euthanasia. But no sacrifice would be deemed too great to prevent its being murdered’ (Hobsbawm 1992: 36). Or Czech socialist theoretician Karl Kautsky: ‘National languages will be increasingly confined to domestic use, and even there they will tend to be treated like an old piece of inherited family furniture’ (Hobsbawm 1992: 36).

And this seems to have been the view of Spanish liberals, too (Núñez Seixas 2013). This was their attitude until the 1880s, when the historically
established sociolinguistic arrangement – which sociology of language and language policy studies have traditionally labelled as diglossic – began to be altered by mostly Basque, Catalan and Galician writers who proudly engaged in the cultivation of a literary variety of their language. These writers were often linked and committed to the development of first regionalist and later nationalist movements in their respective regions and participated in the struggles over the organisation of Spain’s state structure and the associated distribution of political power and economic resources. The emergence of these regionalist movements obviously disrupted the vision that Spanish nationalists had for the nation, and led to various forms of pushback. These included the intensification of discourses and policies aiming at constructing a single national identity that would justify a centralist form of governmental organisation. In this process, establishing Spanish as the national language – spreading its knowledge and use throughout the land and securing loyalty to the nation through a language-based discourse of identity – became a central goal (Del Valle 2002; Medina, Del Valle & Monteagudo 2013; Monteagudo 2013).

We might expect the Valera-Murguía language ideological debate to fall squarely within these broadly drawn parameters. And, to some extent, it does. Manuel Murguía was not just a man of letters interested in and proud of his region’s culture, but a leading figure in the establishment of an autonomous cultural field in Galicia, in the development of a Galician consciousness, and in the articulation of a Galicianist political movement. And Juan Valera was a staunch defender of Spain’s national unity and a firm believer in the Spanish language’s central role in the articulation of a vision for the nation. However, a close reading of their respective positions on this particular polemic (I should insist that they were both prolific authors whose writings on language and other matters throughout their lives exhibit a level of complexity and variation that falls outside the scope of this article) reveals the presence of language ideological systems that, to some extent, challenge conventional narratives of the struggle between different nationalisms.

One aspect of Murguía’s linguistic thought that must be highlighted, for example, was his unconventional embrace of the equation that links language, culture, and nation. He saw Galician as a sign of Galicia’s identity and
its cultivation as a requirement for the region’s modernisation. However, if a nation is seen as being grounded in a unique culture which is in turn embodied in a unique language, then Murguía’s position fit uncomfortably – if not altogether challenged – such a view: he saw Galician and Portuguese as one and the same entity and, out of the complex dialectal map of the Iberian northwest, he was able to draw the image of a two-headed language that nicely adjusted to – in a way normalising – Galicia’s contorted position between a historical link to Portugal and Spain. For his part, Valera, like his adversary, also stayed away from the tight identification of nationality with the possession of one single language. For the Andalusian, the existence of three languages and three literary traditions within Spain was not in and of itself a threat to national unity, since greater mutual knowledge would secure mutual loyalty (see Alejandro Alonso’s 2005 essential study of this topic). His position with regard to placing Galician within the conceptual structure of Portuguese and encouraging Galicians to embrace the literary variety of this language as their own is unique evidence of the unconventionality of the particular form of Spanish nationalism that he embraced and of his view of the relation between language and nation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have singled out a polemical encounter between two Spanish intellectuals who clashed on the desirability of cultivating Galician as a literary language, which I framed as a language ideological debate and, therefore, suggested an interpretation that placed their views in the context of Spain’s late nineteenth-century politics of regional and national identity. As a contribution to the discussion of the invisibility of non-standard and regional language central to this book, I examined this controversy under the inspiring lens of the following questions: Was Valera and Murguía’s visible world, by and large, one and the same? Did they not face an identical set of linguistic practices when judging Galician’s potential as a literary language? Who was right and who was wrong? However, taking John
Berger’s thoughts on *Ways of Seeing* as a point of departure resulted in the formulation of questions of a rather different nature. How comfortably did what they saw fit with what they knew? What were they choosing to look at? Valera and Murguía, it turns out, were engaged in a battle over the discursive construction of the visible; they were each committed to producing and publicly projecting images of Galician at the service of particular configurations of community.

Invoking John Berger (1972), hence, highlights the complex constitution of the visible world and the seeing subject’s necessary involvement in the construction of visibility. And we, as language historians – legitimised by our professional affiliations, titles, and awards –, are very much involved in the production and reproduction of that which is worth seeing (i.e. visible) within our field. So, what have I looked at? What have I placed in front of the readers’ eyes? What do you see? A call, perhaps, to be mindful of our dependence on binary oppositions, such as history from above and from below, that might uncritically accept linear theories of power. A call, maybe, to place metalanguage at the center of our inquiry; not only as an intermediate layer of representation that gives us access to what was actually happening (and should therefore be seen by the trained eye of the historian), but as an essential part of what was actually happening. Lest we, as social historians of language, render invisible the constructed dimension of language, the reticular nature of power, and the centrality of metalanguage.

References


Núñez Seixas, Xosé Manoel. 2013. ‘La(s) lengua(s) de la nación.’ In: Moreno Luzón, Javier, & Núñez Seixas, Xosé Manoel (eds). *Ser españoles. Imaginarios nacionalistas en el siglo XX.* Barcelona: RBA. 246–286.
Valera, Juan. 1961b [1896]. 'El regionalismo filológico en Galicia.' In: Valera, Juan. 

