



Language planning in the Val d'Aran:

The recent work of the Conselh Generau d'Aran's  
'Oficina de Foment e Ensenhament der Aranés'  
and its effects on the Aranés-speaking population.



This essay originally formed the dissertation submitted under the pseudonym of *'Tony Wills'* for my BA degree in Modern and Medieval Languages at Girton College, Cambridge University.

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aranés dissertation

## 1. Introduction

Within five years of Franco's death, the Estado Autonomía de Cataluña recognised in 1979 the ancient political and cultural differences of the Val d'Aran and Aranés was made co-official language of the area, together with Catalan and Castilian Spanish. It asserted that:

*'Er aranés sera objecte d'ensenhament e especiau respècte e proteccion'<sup>1</sup>*

It is worth noting the similarities in this statement with those in the national Spanish Constitution, which highlights the concept of '*patrimonio*', which is essential in understanding the current situation of Aranés:

*'3. La riqueza de las distintas modalidades lingüísticas de España es un patrimonio cultural que será objeto de especial respeto y protección.'<sup>2</sup>*

In making Aranés co-official with Catalan and Castilian, the central government in Madrid was allowing the co-use of another variety related to Castilian. This is exceptional, and something that, for example, not even Asturian has achieved. The question as to whether this was allowed because it was not seen as a threat to the

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<sup>1</sup> Er Estatut d'Autonomia de Catalonha, article 3.4, quoted in Cases Andreu [2000a: 32]

<sup>2</sup> Constitución - Título Preliminar, Artículo 3: El castellano y las demás lenguas españolas,  
<<http://www.la-moncloa.es/web/sim05b.htm>>

existing dominance of Catalan/Castilian will be discussed later, and is central to the debate about the current status of Aranés.

In writing this dissertation, I have taken the term 'Aranés' to refer to the language as defined in the *Normes*, published by the Conselh Generau, except where I mention variations from this norm, where the meaning should be clear.

The grammatical and phonological features of standard Aranés, notably the loss of intervocalic 'n' and the change of Latin 'f' to aspirated 'h' (e.g. FARINA > *haria*<sup>3</sup>) have been amply discussed<sup>4</sup> and will not be repeated here, but it is important to note that many villages vary from the standard: for example, the northern end of the valley pronounces the phoneme 'b' as [b], whereas it becomes [w] in other areas. The same is true of final 'n', which is unpronounced in the north, and [ŋ] in the south.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Example from Conselh Generau de Aran, 'Er Aranés, La Lengua del Valle de Arán' [p. 5]. The 'h' is no longer pronounced, except in the village of Canejan, according to Cors [p. 71]

<sup>4</sup> cf. particularly Winkelmann [1989, Chap. 5]

<sup>5</sup> cf. Coromines [1976: 12]

## 2. Legal Status of Aranés

A number of important changes in the legal status of the valley have occurred since the 1980s, when the majority of previous linguistic studies were carried out, and so it is worth discussing the extent of more recent developments.

The most important change is that, on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1990, the Catalan Regional Government passed the *Ley de Aran*, which reinstated the ancient *Conselh Generau* as the local council in the valley, and made it responsible for the promotion of Aranés. It is worth noting that the valley is still part of the Lérida province in the far north-west of Catalonia but that the 1990 law gives the Conselh, based in Vielha, a certain autonomy within this structure.

The aforementioned law also made the Conselh directly responsible for the teaching of the language as well as its standardisation and ‘protection’:

*‘Eth Conselh Generau d’Aran a competència plia en tot aquerò que hè referència ath forment, e er ensenhament der aranés.’<sup>6</sup>*

It is proposed, in this dissertation, to look at the status of Aranés, dealing with each of the following topics: standardisation, teaching and promotion, and protection, although it is recognised that there may be some areas of overlap between these general topics.

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<sup>6</sup> Article 20.2, Ley 16/1990, quoted in Cases Andreu [2000a: 33]

Firstly, however, a brief overview of some of the latest demographic statistics will be given, together with some personal observations, since the origin of the speakers must be fundamental to the eventual survival or otherwise of the variety.

### 3. Historic, Geographic and Demographic Considerations

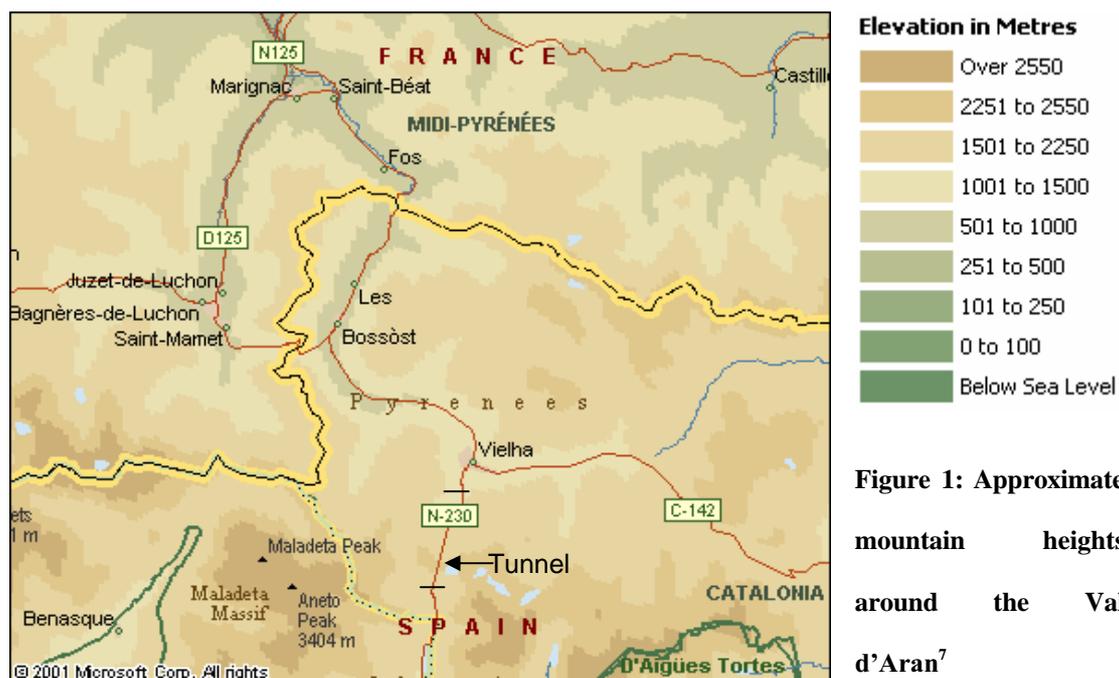
One of the main factors which contributes to the language used in the valley is demographic. One should look briefly at the history of the valley, since language is inevitably linked to social factors. Geographical considerations are also important here: the valley looks north towards France as it is separated from the rest of Spain and Catalonia by 3000m high mountains to the south.

#### 3.1 Roman history

According to displays and videos shown in the *Museo Etnológico* in Vielha, Caesar wrote that the peoples of the Upper Garonne valley spoke a language similar to Basque. The valley was known to the Romans when they settled, as there is a major Roman road leading out of Vielha (VERULA in Latin) to Saint Bertrand de Comminges (Latin: LUDUNUM CONVENARUM), where it joined the main road from Dax through Pau to Auch and Toulouse. These roads are still used today. This would seem to suggest that, to the Romans at least, the valley was considered part of Gaul, with the southern limit of that part of the empire falling in the mountains to the south of Vielha.

#### 3.2 Geography

The geography of the area, then, would imply that the area ought to be in France and Figure 1 below shows the France-facing valley clearly, with the main road running parallel to the Garonne river along the valley's length, as far as Saint-Béat.



The mountains, it must be remembered, form a distinct barrier. In winter, at least until the completion of the Vielha tunnel (marked on the map above) in 1948, the entire valley was cut off from the rest of Spain. As Viaut [1986: 7] has calculated, only 5.6% of the valley is below 1000m above sea level, compared to 30% above 2000m.

### 3.3 Post-Roman history

As well as the geographical consideration, historical politics have contributed to the current status of the valley. As Lladonosa [2001: 8] describes, at the collapse of the Roman Empire around 585AD, the valley, in common with other Pyrenean valleys, left the Roman province of CIVITAS CONVENARUM (Haute Garonne), although it retained some trading relationship with Toulouse. He continues [2001: 9]:

<sup>7</sup> Cartography from Microsoft Corporation, [Microsoft AutoRoute](#)

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*'Fou Alfons el Cast, anomenat amb molt d'encert per Rovira i Virgili*

*l'Emperador dels Pirineus, qui integrà la Vall d'Aran a les terres catalanes.'*

That was at the end of the twelfth century, and since then the valley has almost continuously looked towards Catalonia as its fatherland, despite many invasions from the north (some successful, others failed) and attempts by various political figures at joining the valley to France, most notably during Napoleon's administration. It is seen, then, that the modern concept of the nation-state has almost continuously put the Val d'Aran in Spain, despite the geography but one should recall that, in more peaceful years until the building of the Vielha tunnel, the region was left to its own devices, especially in winter, due to the difficulties of transport to Spain. An example of this is a plaque on the wall of the town hall in Vielha which commemorates the first visit of a Spanish monarch to the valley, which took place as late as 6<sup>th</sup> July 1924.

### 3.4 Industry in the valley today

The modernisation and mechanisation of the farming industry, in common with other areas of Europe, caused a great change in the valley's demographics in the twentieth century. It is rare to see sheep grazing the mountain pastures above the villages and farming is no longer the main area of activity. Instead, tourism is the major industry, particularly in winter, with the popular Baqueria-Beret ski-station, visited by the Spanish royal family each year, only about ten miles to the east of Vielha. In summer, tourists also come to hike and sightsee in the mountains. The importance of the tertiary sector is highlighted by Lagarda [1986: 39], who says that 64% of the 184 fathers of the local children he interviewed had this type of work.

The deregulation of the European electricity industry has also contributed, with about one hundred and fifty of the valley's inhabitants<sup>8</sup> – a sizable percentage of the population of working-age – employed in the many hydroelectric stations which almost every village along the Garonne has built in the last decade.

These changes have seen a great influx of people from other areas into the valley; people who will inevitably not have a native knowledge of the local language and customs.

### 3.5 Origins of the inhabitants

A number of studies of the demography of the valley have been made. Lagarda [1986: 51] gives a percentage of 57.6% of the 184 children he interviewed as having at least one parent from the valley and for Viaut [1986: 12] the same statistic is 61.2%. Lagarda also mentions that, of his interviewees, only four have mothers who were originally from France. [1986: 43]

As part of the research for section 5.4, the primary school in the village of Les was visited. The author took this opportunity to ask a class of nine and ten year-olds where their parents came from. The results are shown in the table below.

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<sup>8</sup> According to information in the *Museo Etnológico*, Vielha

**Table 1: The origin of the parents of the nine and ten year-olds in Les**

<b>Child number</b>	<b>Mother:</b>	<b>Father:</b>
1	Aranés	French
2	Aranés	Aranés
3	Aranés	Aranés
4	Catalan (not Val d'Aran)	Rest of Spain
5	Aranés	Rest of Spain
6	Aranés	Rest of Spain
7	Rest of Spain	Rest of Spain
8	Catalan (not Val d'Aran)	Rest of Spain
9	Aranés	Catalan (not Val d'Aran)
10	French	Aranés
11	French	Catalan (not Val d'Aran)

Obviously, this is only an indicative study with a very small sample size, and so it would be dangerous to draw too many conclusions from such little data. Nevertheless, it is seen that only nine of the twenty-two parents, less than fifty percent, are originally from the valley and that three have even crossed the border from France to live in the region. This would seem to suggest that the levels of immigration demonstrated in the studies by Viaut and Lagarda (about forty percent of the population) continue.

### 3.6 Other people in the valley

It has already been described how tourism is a major industry in the valley. The greater proportion of tourists comes from Spain, and then France. Of course, these tourists will generally not have any knowledge of Aranés – indeed, many of them will not have heard of it and perhaps only discover it from the relevant leaflets published by the Conselh.

The tourist industry, therefore, predominantly operates in Castilian and French and, indeed, most of the French spoken in the valley is by people operating in this sector. However, shopping is another industry in the area necessitating the use of French, encouraged by the opening of borders between European Union countries and the implementation of the Schengen plan in July 1995. This will, of course, not have existed in the time of the linguistic surveys of the 1980's.

With taxes on alcohol and tobacco so much lower in Spain than in France, it should be no surprise to learn that many residents of the nearby villages on the French side of the border come to the Val d'Aran to shop. This lucrative trade has led to the building of a new supermarket in Les and also the creation of many jobs. A count of the cars in the car park of this supermarket one Saturday morning in October 2002, out of the main tourist season, found that, of the seventy-four cars there, only ten had Spanish number-plates, a number which may well be accounted for by the staff. The remaining cars were all French and over half of these (forty) were from the immediately neighbouring *départements* of the Haute-Garonne and Hautes-Pyrénées. Eight others came from two other nearby *départements*, the Pyrénées-Atlantiques and Gers. (Incidentally, the supermarket staff claimed that the introduction of the euro has had little impact: in the first half of 2002, numbers of foreign shoppers were little different from 2001.) French, then, is an important language in other branches of the tertiary sector, too.

## 4. Standardisation

### 4.1 General issues in language planning

Milroy and Milroy [1985: 22-23] explain how they see that complete standardisation of a language is an unachievable 'ideology', with relatively easy possibilities for standardising the written language (including a normative spelling system and some aspects of grammar) but with little chance of standardising spoken forms:

*'Standardisation... is promoted in various ways, including the use of a writing system, which is relatively easily standardised; but absolute standardisation of a spoken language is never achieved (the only fully standardised language is a dead language). Therefore it seems appropriate to speak more abstractly of standardisation as an ideology, and a standard language as an idea in the mind rather than a reality – a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may comply to a greater or lesser extent.'*

This seems to hold true for Aranés, since, although the Conselh's *Oficina de Foment e Ensenhament der Aranés* (henceforth referred to simply as the *OFE*) can enforce the standardisation of all books in Aranés (through the almost dictatorial system described on page 13), and the teaching of grammar rules in schools, where a formal written style predominates, it cannot absolutely rule individual speakers.

### 4.2 Standardisation of Aranés

In trying to devise a standardised language, in terms of its grammar, orthography and other factors, the Conselh has worked in partnership with the *Institut d'estudis*

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*occitans* (*IEO*). Its influence is notable, since Aranés might have been expected to look towards the authorities who were involved in the standardisation of Catalan, as did the Languedoc area, but one assumes that this was not done since, in part, what makes a language unique are the differences from its neighbours (particularly highly-prestigious ones like Catalan). It is also worth adding that the *IEO* has had relatively little involvement in direct language standardisation in the wider area, generally contenting itself with promotion and teaching, although it expresses support for a standardised mutually-intelligible ‘Occitan’ writing system<sup>9</sup>, presumably since this might provide a more unified, and therefore stronger, alternative to French than the range of varieties currently present. But the *IEO* mainly concentrates on literary Provençal, which probably ought not to be a ‘macrostandard’ on which Aranés is based, since it is phonetically and morphologically very different.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, publishing a document or even a legal text which attempts to standardise a language is in itself insufficient if the inhabitants who speak and authors who write in that language do not themselves follow the normalised rules. Aranés, however, has been largely successful in its standardisation of the written form, since all recent published titles in the language have received funding and help from the Conselh, in return for which the *OFE* proof-reads the draft to ensure that it satisfies the standardised rules.

These changes have generally been minor orthographical standardisations, often made for etymological reasons more than phonological ones. For example, according

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<sup>9</sup> Institut d'estudis occitans <<http://ieo.oc.free.fr/ieopres.html#10>>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. particularly the linguistic atlas of Occitania <<http://membres.lycos.fr/simorre/oc/atlas.htm>>

to Cors, [p. 5], the 1999 standardisation rules (called the *Normes*) included the differentiation of two sorts of verbs, both of which end in the sound /isa/. One group is those of which a deriving noun is spelt with a 'z' (such as *realizacion* > *realizar*), which must henceforth be spelt only with a 'z'. The other sort of verb is where the deriving noun is spelt with an 's', as in *d'analisi* > *analisar*, which may now only be spelt with an 's'. This is likely to be a case where etymological reasons have influenced a decision by the *OFE* but other, relatively arbitrary, decisions have had to be taken in the standardisation process. For example, the final /n/, which may have a zero or velar value, depending on the village, is written 'n' in the orthography, apparently in a compromise to make it somehow easier to learn.

Written standardisation is, however, far from complete and, particularly in common words, there can be a surprising amount of difference between people, especially given the confined geographical spread. For example, 450 mots, [p. 33] published by the *OFE* nine years after the first set of *Normes*<sup>11</sup>, gives *novanta*, *noranta* and *nauanta* as accepted lexical variants for the word 'ninety', although the 2000 edition of Cors [p. 48] has reduced the accepted possibilities to *novanta* and *nauanta*.

It is perhaps indicative of problems faced by the language planners that there has been more than one version of the *Normes* (the most recent one dating from October 1999), which has caused changes to be made even in the official textbook (Cors [p. 5]):

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<sup>11</sup> The 1983 *Normes*, as published in the Diari Oficial de la Generalitat de Catalunya, may be found in Viaut [1986: 26-32]. The 1999 version is at <<http://cultura.gencat.es/llengcat/aran/docs/normes.pdf>>

*Poiratz comprovar qu'ei revisada e corregida en tot tier compde es petiti cambis que dejà se plantegen en tèxte Normes Ortografiques der Aranés, aprovat en plen deth Conselh Generau d'Aran eth 5 d'octobre de 1999.*

A further example of the problems with normalising any language is found on page 37 of Cors, where a long list of 'barbarisms' is printed. These are words which have started to be used in Aranés under influence from Catalan and Castilian. Examples include the use of *casi* in place of *lèu*, *colocar* instead of *plaçar*, *olvidar* rather than *desbrembar*, and so on... Yet, as proved in most, if not all, languages, new words are naturally borrowed from neighbours all the time, and there are periods when such new loan-words are more numerous than others. The *OFE* is not the only body concerned about this issue but this is a case where they have decided to try to stop the language from being able to evolve naturally in order to protect it, a clear example of the fossilisation effect which is described on page 27. Yet, as explained above, it is difference which makes a language distinct from its neighbour. By proscribing against borrowing in this way, the *OFE* is ensuring that Aranés continues to be different and does not move into a phase of intense borrowing from Catalan or Castilian which could be potentially damaging to efforts to 'protect' (i.e. preserve) it:

*'...that the avant-gardistes should resent H [the higher prestige language, i.e. Catalan/Castilian for these purposes] at the same time as they envy its prestige is fully understandable. In a number of cases, this resentment has caused them to break with the H culture, often with such strong ideological backwash that any possibility of modeling the new standard L [the lower-prestige*

language, i.e. Aranés] *after H is rejected out of hand; any borrowing or traces of imitation from H already present in L may, if caught, be extirpated.*<sup>12</sup>

If there are still problems with the standardisation of the written language, it is remarkable how different the spoken language can be. As the narrow transcriptions recorded by Winkelmann prove, pronunciations can differ vastly from village to village. One sees, for example, the word *father* (Aranés orthography *pair*) is pronounced as [pàj] in Canejan, the hamlet nearest the French border to the north of Les, and [pàre] in Arròs, a village about halfway between Es Bòrdes and Vielha, despite the fact that Arròs is only about 13 miles along the road from Canejan.<sup>13</sup>

The question remains, however, why should the *OFE* see corpus planning as a central part of its work? Although standardisation is referred to in the Ley d'Aran, it is not mentioned in the title of the *OFE*. Their aim in standardising the language is to create a grammar that is 'easier' for people to learn and this would also help to explain why there has been little attempt to standardise speech.

Is what the *OFE* has developed a 'standard language' yet? If one takes Joseph's nine criteria [1987: 6], it would appear so. In particular, there are non-standard

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph [1987: 55]

<sup>13</sup> Winkelmann uses the transcription system of the *Atlas linguistique et ethnographique de la Gascogne* but I have reworked his transcriptions in the IPA standard for narrow transcriptions. The speakers here are both women, aged 20-39.

Source: Winkelmann [1989, Canejan p. 313, Arròs p 335].

Orthography Source: [450 mots](#) [p. 34].

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versions, with the *OFE*'s version more prestigious among speakers; it has been codified in textbooks with a regular writing system; the *OFE*, and particularly early members such as Cases Andreu, are held in high regard in the society and it is regularly intertranslated with Catalan and Castilian.

Finally, it is worth noting that the process of Aranés standardisation seems to have been very similar to that used for Catalan, despite the fact that one was not based on the other. Webber [1991: 86-87] describes the latter as having a compromise standard, based on all dialects, with one body (the *Institute of Catalan Studies*) in control of the process. Unity is considered vital, and any variants from the standard must be attacked. She continues by highlighting areas in which the *ICS* consider that there is still progress to be made, seeing legislation as the key to imposing this. But beyond this – and, it might be argued, Aranés has not yet reached this stage completely – the Catalan language planners see adult ‘education’ as important, through the *Campanya de Divulgació de la Llei de Normalització Lingüística*, and other methods (cf. Webber [1991: 31]).

## 5. Teaching

### 5.1 Schools

In the matter of teaching, too, much has changed in the valley since the studies of the mid-1980s. Following the publication of the first set of *Normes* in 1983, a debate started as to how to teach Aranés in the schools in the valley. Most large villages have their own primary school, with a large secondary school in Vielha. There is no University in the valley: the nearest one is Lleida and this is the only one where Aranés is available as part of the Occitan course.<sup>14</sup>

### 5.2 The school system

In 1988, schools started to teach Aranés alongside the two other official languages: Spanish and Catalan. From 1990, primary schools were only allowed to teach in either Catalan or Aranés for the first three years, with Castilian being introduced around the age of six. Today, the first three years are devoted solely to Aranés (although there is an allowance for a small amount of oral work in Catalan and Castilian). Thus, learning the alphabet and initial reading practice take place in a monolingual environment: Aranés. After the age of seven, primary school children are taught two hours / week in each of Aranés, Catalan, Castilian and French. Other subjects are taught in the language assigned to them by the *OFE*. From the fifth year of primary school, an additional two hours / week of English lessons are added to the

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<sup>14</sup> This information was obtained on a visit to the *OFE* in Vielha.

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curriculum. In compulsory secondary education, up to the age of 16, there are two hours in each of the three official languages.<sup>15</sup>

Before this system became imposed, Viaut [1986: 16] and his team made a study of teachers' opinions on this issue. Although 36% thought Aranés should be the main language of teaching (about the same number as that for teachers who were originally Aranés, which was 38.5%), only 18% wanted it to be the sole language of instruction. At least in the case of early primary school teaching, therefore, what the Conselh has imposed was against the majority of teachers' wishes. Whilst all the teachers met by the author were Aranés (perhaps indicative of teachers from other areas having to leave the valley because of the need to know Aranés), it would have been interesting to discover the reaction of the teachers who were teaching in the valley in 1984 who came from outside Catalonia: about a quarter of the teachers employed in the valley at that time.

It is worth adding a noteworthy anecdote at this point: On visiting the school in Les, the students were asked, in Castilian, about their background and languages spoken. The children understood perfectly and had often started to answer the question in Castilian. The teacher in charge, however, felt unable to accept this and so insisted on interpreting the questions into Aranés, forcing the students to answer in Aranés, and then interpreting what they said back into Castilian for the researcher. Thus, the teacher was putting policy before efficiency, by trying to make Aranés seem useful, despite the presence of a foreigner.

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<sup>15</sup> Cases Andreu [2000b: 1].

### 5.3 Other examples of Aranés teaching

Further proof of the importance of Aranés in the education system may be seen in the annual *Certamen Redaccion Infantiu Occitan-Catalan*, in which the young people of the valley were encouraged to write in one of these two official languages about the valley. In the first competition, in 1993, the entries seem to have been predominantly in Aranés and many include some statement regarding the importance of the teaching and protection of the variety. For example:

*'Era tua lengua per aquerò no l'auen de perder.'*<sup>16</sup>

Equally, there is a small selection of children's books, published by private companies (although with the aforementioned assistance from the Conselh), now available in Aranés.

It is also notable that the official *OFE* textbook for adults, Cors, contains exercises which may be photocopied and returned to the *OFE* for correction, free-of-charge.

### 5.4 How the demographics affect school teaching

It is clear, however, that such a complex education system which encourages the young to learn Aranés from such an early age will inevitably be of little value unless they actually speak it in non-academic contexts, with their friends, for example.

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<sup>16</sup> Boya Busquets, M. (aged 13), 'Val d'Aran' in Agulló Teixidor [1994: 8]

As has already been amply demonstrated, there has been significant immigration into the area in recent years. Consequently, many pupils in the schools are not children of *bona fide* locals but of parents from other areas. This leads to a situation where very few children will speak Aranés at home, since their parents may well only have a basic, if any, knowledge of the variety.

It was partly because of this situation that the Conselh imposed the teaching of Aranés from such an early age: they hoped that the children would grow up only learning Aranés in the school and thus Aranés should have gained prestige, leading to the children talking it amongst themselves in the playground.

To find out whether this worked, a visit was made to a small primary school in the village of Les, in the north of the valley only 3.2 miles from the French border. In the playground, all that could be heard was Castilian and the teachers confirmed that this is the norm since Castilian remains the prestigious language amongst children in the area. According to them, Aranés is only really used in the classroom and almost never at home.

The table below shows the languages spoken by the nine and ten year-old children in the school to their parents. (This age group was chosen as, by this stage, they have been educated in all five languages that they will learn: Castilian, Catalan, Aranés, French and English). The children are the same as the ones used above (on page 10) to illustrate the area's demography, and so the tables can be directly compared.

**Table 2: The languages used with their parents by children in Les**

<b>Child number:</b>	<b>Mother:</b>	<b>Father:</b>
1	Aranés	Castilian / French
2	Aranés	Aranés
3	Castilian	Castilian
4	Catalan	Castilian
5	Castilian	Castilian
6	Castilian	Castilian
7	Castilian	Castilian
8	Catalan	Castilian
9	Aranés	Castilian
10	Castilian	Castilian / French
11	Aranés	Catalan

Obviously, this is a very small sample size and so a large margin of error must again be allowed for any conclusions drawn from it. It will also be inaccurate as there will almost inevitably be some code-switching in the multi-lingual families and many of the children admit to using some Aranés words at home as their parents are often interested in learning something about the language. These are only the languages which the children say their parents use most of the time at home. One further note must be added: the two fathers who are shown as French speakers do not speak French to their children (they both speak Castilian) but these are the parents who mainly speak French for their work. Both work in the tourism sector.

It is clearly seen that the vast majority (82%) speak Castilian to one or more parents, compared with just 36% who speak Aranés to one or more parents and 18% in the case of Catalan. Only one student spoke Aranés to both parents.

Comparing this table with the table of demographics (page 10), we can make some interesting observations. Firstly, note that child three speaks Castilian to both parents, although they are both Aranés. Likewise, children five and six both have

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mothers who are Aranés and yet speak to them in Castilian. This may well be due to the fact that until the 1980s Aranés was not taught and so the parents might never have learnt it, especially if their parents were not originally Aranés *de souche*. There are three French parents but no child speaks French at home: two of the French parents have learnt Castilian, whilst one has learnt Aranés (the mother of child eleven). This is an exception, however: the most notable fact is that where one or more of the parents are not originally from the Val d'Aran or the rest of Catalonia, Castilian will almost inevitably be spoken. Consequently, due to the area's demographics, the fact that only two out of eleven fathers speak a language other than Castilian to their children suggests that this is still the prestigious language.

A counter argument which might be proposed, however, is that, thanks to the recent changes in the status of the valley, the children's parents have been made aware of the area's culture, and are keen to promote this. Like most parents, however, they are also acutely aware that most of the children will inevitably leave the valley and will need to find jobs elsewhere. For this, they will, of course, need to speak Castilian. This has, therefore, become a priority for the parents to teach at home, whilst the job of teaching the culturally important language, Aranés, falls to the school.

A child's first words are, therefore, likely to be Castilian and they will initially learn Castilian orally at home. When they eventually go to school, they will learn to speak, listen, read and write in Aranés but they will still go home at the end of each day and speak Castilian. Thus we can see two education systems running in parallel, with the school teaching Aranés for political and cultural reasons, whilst the parents teach Castilian, outside the official framework, to ensure that their children will have

the possibility of finding a job elsewhere in the future, safe in the knowledge that they do not need to feel guilty for not enforcing the cultural heritage as this is done by the formal education system.

Assuming this hypothesis to be correct, it is somewhat opposed to the findings of Lagarda's study (carried out in 1984, and so before the use of Aranés as the main language for teaching was imposed). He suggests that the mother was, in that year, largely responsible for the teaching of Aranés. He describes [1986: 51] how, in the sixty-nine cases he found where only one parent was from the valley, there were thirty-nine cases where it was the mother who was Aranés and thirty where it was the father. Nevertheless, where the mother was Aranés and the father was Castilian-speaking, three children spoke Aranés at home, compared with none if the father was of Aranés origin and the mother was from non-Catalan Spain. He explains this by the fact that it is the mothers who have the main responsibility for teaching their children the language:

*'Per las maires, 108 (mai 6 consurièras a domicili) demòran a l'ostal (62%), signe de perpetuacion linguistica possible, mas que rend sustot capitala la causia linguistica que fan.'*<sup>17</sup>

If a change has taken place in the reduction of the use of Aranés within the family unit, it might be argued that the adoption of compulsory teaching in Aranés has been

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<sup>17</sup> Lagarda [1986: 39]

counter-productive, since the importance of the maternal influence has been shown by Lagarda to be vital in this community.

What is unusual is that Aranés is taught but rarely used. In most places (such as Catalonia), the taught language can be used, both in the streets of Barcelona and in the small villages. Aranés, and particularly the written form, has little support because of the lack of understanding in the middle generation (that is to say the parents) and also because of the unlikelihood (for economic reasons) that the majority of the pupils will eventually work in the valley. Even if they do, they will probably work in tourism and so need to speak Castilian and/or French. So why don't the parents vote against such autocratic teaching in the schools? The answer seems to be in the idea of '*es un patrimonio cultural*', which the constitution (page 2) says must be protected, even if this is contrary to Edwards'<sup>18</sup> ideas:

*'Non-standard dialects are maintained and valued mostly for reasons of heritage – a connection to the past, not to the future... Edwards feels that ethnic identity can be maintained and will be maintained in the absence of language maintenance; that the latter is too costly to contribute to the ultimate social good.'*

Therefore, the language is in the hands of the students. As Webber [1991: 20] has put it, with reference to Catalan:

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<sup>18</sup> Edwards, J.R., 1985 *Language, Society and Identity* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford) paraphrased in Joseph [1987: 48]

*'But motivation remains crucial. The non-Catalan population must feel the inducement both to learn and to use Catalan. In nearly all schools, motivation to learn Catalan has established a significant momentum, both because knowledge of Catalan is widely considered by non-Catalans as a way of enhancing job prospects and because the increasing use of Catalan as a vehicle of instruction makes it immediately relevant.'*

The problem, then, for Aranés, is that it is not seen as enhancing job prospects (most children seem aware that they will eventually have to leave the valley to find work) and so, even though it is used as the 'vehicle of instruction', the Aranés children are not, generally, motivated enough by it to use it outside the classroom.

## 6. 'Protection'

### 6.1 What is 'protection'?

'Protection' is the wish of a body, such as the *OFE*, to preserve a language. This may generally occur if a language feels threatened (as is undoubtedly the case here, with the predominance of Castilian Spanish) or if such a body feels that the language has somehow reached a state of perfection. It may also occur if the language becomes linked to a culture which is also under threat, in the hope that the combination of language and culture may strengthen the region's identity, which is, according to the *OFE*, the primary concern in the Val d'Aran, which has many unique cultural traditions.

In writing this dissertation, it has been decided that the word 'protect', one of the fundamental objectives of the Conselh, should be put in inverted commas, since to 'protect' a language is almost inevitably to fossilise it and prevent its natural future development. Modern written French is an example of a previous attempt at 'protection' and it can be seen to have moved away from its spoken counterpart. A fossilised language can no longer easily adapt to new technologies or situations, for example, and therefore it is more likely to cease to be a useful means of communication compared with other languages which have not been 'protected'.

### 6.2 'Protection' through teaching and standardisation

One of the most obvious ways of 'protecting' a language is through making it widely spoken. This is the main aim of the Conselh in its recent attempts to enforce Aranés as the main medium of teaching, as described in section 5 (page 18). In order

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to teach a language it is considered preferable to have standardised grammar rules and, a reasonably phonemic orthography to help in the learning process. This is the aim of the standardisation process, described on page 12, although it has already been noted there that the process is not yet complete, if it ever can be.

### 6.3 'Protection' through use in official contexts

An example of an attempt to protect Aranés is seen in the bilingual use of both Aranés and Castilian in almost all documents released to the public by the local *Alcades*. But, as the statistics below show (cf. Figure 2: Official Aranés use statistics, page 31), understanding of Aranés amongst the general population is thought to be about 90%. According to Viaut [1986: 13], in 1986 his team found comprehension of Castilian to be 97.9% in the valley (94.3% among Aranés speakers). If these statistics are correct, surely it is a waste of resources to make all such documents bilingual, especially given the Spanish constitution's view that all Spanish inhabitants have a duty to understand Castilian?

### 6.4 'Protection' through regular use in other contexts

If the central key to protection is regular use, however, simple regular use in administrative contexts cannot be sufficient, as this will account for just a small percentage of the total language use for any given person. It is, therefore, necessary for the *OFE* to ensure that the language is used elsewhere, too.

An example of this might be in the media, and there are local radio and television stations in the valley which do broadcast one or two hours per day in Aranés, but it is

notable that there are no broadcasters for whom this is the main medium of speech. However, despite the less favourable conditions for local languages in France's Béarn region (which will be described under section 7.2 on page 32), *Radio Pais* is able to broadcast predominantly in the Béarnais variety of Occitan.

Another example might be church services, since in this remote area these are still a significant part of village life. In the case of the churches in Vielha, Gausac and Betren<sup>19</sup>, there are three services per week, one in each language, but feast-day services are only in Catalan and Castilian, and this is perhaps indicative that Castilian is still considered a more prestigious language. That said, churches cannot be a reliable source as history shows repeatedly that religion is often very conservative in its choice of language.

#### 6.5 'Protection' through awareness.

In addition to ensuring the school teaching of Aranés, the *OFE* also sees itself as responsible for ensuring that adults are made aware of the language. Certainly nobody the author met was ignorant of the existence of the variety, which might be a possibility in an area with such a large proportion of immigration.

If the population is aware of the language, through cultural events and adult evening classes (which are also run by various groups in the valley), then there must be a greater chance of it actually being spoken on a daily basis.

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<sup>19</sup> Information found on a sign in the porch of the church in Vielha

## 7. Use of Aranés

### 7.1 Use of Aranés

Obviously, this is all of little use if people are not actually using the language. One has already briefly noted that primary school children do not tend to use Aranés in the playground but it is vital to look at the statistics for the wider population.

Over the years, there have been many studies which have sought to discover which languages the population in the Val d'Aran claim to be able to use, in terms of their general understanding, ability to speak the language, to read it and to be able to write it.

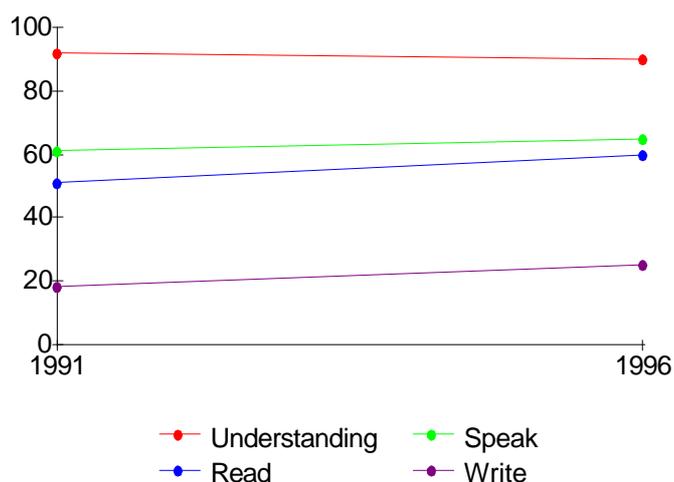
Two such recent, official, studies<sup>20</sup> have been combined in the graph below. In it, one can see the percentages of inhabitants who claim that they are able to understand Aranés, to speak it, to read it and to write it. From this, it appears that the ability to use Aranés is increasing (although it is, of course, difficult to draw conclusions from such limited data) but understanding is decreasing! This may, however, be due to the process of standardisation: in 1991, it may have been that Catalan speakers would have said they could understand Aranés due to the similarities with their tongue, whereas, in 1996, they did not feel they could say this if they had never studied the grammar.

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<sup>20</sup> Sources:

1991 – Quoted in Cases Andreu [2000a: 32]

1996 – Quoted in Conselh Generau d'Aran, Er Aranés: La lengua del Valle de Arán [p. 7]



**Figure 2: Official Aranés use statistics (Percentage of population / Year)**

The greatest advances have been made in reading and writing, which is what we might expect where it has been imposed through the education system. Although direct comparisons cannot be made (since these statistics are for the entire population but Viaut only gives statistics for the people who were born in the valley), it is interesting to note that he says [1986: 13] that only 8.9% of the Aranés population said that they were able to write in the language in 1986.

## 7.2 Use of other Occitan varieties

It is almost without doubt that Aranés would have a greater chance of continued survival if it were to be supported by other similar varieties from a wider area.

It has already been explained that the *Institut d'estudis occitans* has played a significant rôle in assisting the *OFE* with the standardisation of Aranés but imagine if the cross-border cooperation were to be even greater: a situation where the supermarket shoppers from Haute-Garonne, itself a former Occitan-speaking area,

would come and do their shopping in their local version of Occitan (which would doubtless be comprehensible), rather than French.

This is entirely hypothetical, however. Two centuries ago, this might very well have happened but Aranés has also been affected by French politics. The revolutionary ideal that the whole of France should speak a standardised language produced, in the nineteenth century, an education system which saw the local *patois* as rustic and un-educated, thus quickly causing it to lose prestige.

Although there are now bodies which attempt to promote local languages in France, the wider population still has a sense that one has to speak French to be French. Local languages do not (except perhaps in Corsica) have the status that Basque, Catalan and other regional languages share in Spain. If one sees Aranés as a variety of Gascon, itself a variety of Occitan, of which almost all other varieties are found in another country which has less regard for regional languages, it is a logical realisation that Aranés would have far more support and reason to survive if the other varieties were also widely spoken. But it is hard to imagine the authorities in Paris giving the people of Béarn enough de-centralised power to allow an education system similar to that used in the Val d'Aran to be created.

Indeed, in comparison with other local varieties in the area, Aranés appears surprisingly successful. The *Institut d'estudis occitans's* Toulouse regional office website<sup>21</sup> quotes an estimated figure of two million regular speakers from a

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<sup>21</sup> Institut d'estudis occitans, <[http://www.ieotolosa.free.fr/VF/occitanVF/occitan\\_navig.htm](http://www.ieotolosa.free.fr/VF/occitanVF/occitan_navig.htm)>.

population of thirteen million, a total of only about 15%, although it concedes that no real studies have been done across the entire area. Furthermore, it adds that only 90 000 pupils are educated in an 'Occitan variety' in the entire area (190 000km<sup>2</sup>), of which we know about 2000 to be in the Val d'Aran.

*'En France, l'occitan est considéré comme "langue régionale". Avec ce statut, il peut (mais ne doit pas) être enseigné dans les établissements scolaires. Mais il faut savoir que l'administration est souvent hostile, et que les lois sont en plus ambiguës et contradictoires - notamment l'article 2 de la constitution modifié en 1992 pour y ajouter que «seul le français est la langue de la République française.»*<sup>22</sup>

What this shows is that the largest Occitan-speaking area has great difficulty in promoting its language. There is only one other small area outside of France where a form of Occitan is spoken, and that is the collection of nine valleys just on the Italian side of France's south-eastern border. It is interesting to note that, here too, the Val d'Aran's experience has been seen as a success and a standardisation system, similar to that created in Vielha, was introduced there in 1999, with new laws on education and other aspects expected to follow.<sup>23</sup> The situation in the Val d'Aran is also being closely monitored in Aragón, where efforts to promote Aragonese have been hindered

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<sup>22</sup> OccitaNet, <<http://occitanet.free.fr/fr/lei.htm>>.

<sup>23</sup> OccitaNet, <<http://occitanet.free.fr/fr/lei.htm>>.

by the government's refusal to accept that language as official (presumably because it is seen as more of a 'threat' to Castilian than Aragonese).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Foundation for Endangered Languages,

<<http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/Philosophy/CTLL/FEL/i1/iatiku06.htm>>

## 8. Conclusion

The problem the language is facing seems to be predominantly socio-demographic. Aranés used to be supported by Gascon, another Occitan variety present just over the Pyrenees in the South-West of modern France. In more recent times, however, the French government has succeeded in imposing French there, to the detriment of Gascon forms. This means that the support for Aranés is no longer present. For example, if the many visitors from southern France spoke their own variety of Occitan still, this would almost certainly strengthen Aranés. Thus Aranés, which once identified itself as part of the Occitan world, is today seen as remote.

The problem is also, therefore, the modern concept of the nation-state. The valley lies facing north, towards the French Occitan region, but for much of post-Roman history, the presence of the border and the governments in Madrid and Barcelona have made the valley turn its eyes southwards. This is especially true now that the area has a permanent year-long link to the rest of the country, in the form of the Vielha tunnel, completed in 1948, which goes under the snow-covered mountains which once cut the valley off from Spain for a few months each year.

The *OFE*, the official body set up by the Conselh Generau d'Aran to accomplish the tasks set by the Catalan central government: namely the teaching, protection and standardisation of the language, has been working hard in the two decades since its creation to ensure the continued survival of this Occitan variety which they see as endangered by the predominance of the Spanish national standardised language. Nevertheless, anything that it does can only ever bear fruit if the language becomes widely used outside the classroom and, it has been argued, there is some evidence to

suggest that usage in this environment is actually decreasing, so potentially further reinforcing Castilian as the main language in the area.

Political considerations are important as well. One recalls that it was the Catalan government which created the Aranés institutions, as it saw them as a way of preserving the Catalan culture, a very emotive issue. It has also been demonstrated how the language has to be used, for legal reasons, in administrative and educational contexts, even if this is not efficient.

Despite this, however, Aranés has become the Occitan variety with possibly the brightest future, due largely to political decisions made in France which hinder the promotion of other varieties, although one can still not predict any long-term success for the language.

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I hereby declare that the submitted dissertation Language Planning in the Val d'Aran is my own work. I give permission for it to be consulted in the Faculty Library.

Dominic Smith,

10<sup>th</sup> October 2003.