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Elena Seoane, M. G. Sanchez, Lucía Loureiro-Porto and Cristina Suárez-Gómez (eds). *Gibraltarians and their Language: 22 Linguistic Biographies*. Vigo: Universidade de Vigo, 2024. ISBN: 9788411880121. 175 pp.

Led by indefatigable linguist Elena Seoane, the research group *Variation in English Worldwide (ViEW)* at the Universidade de Vigo has devoted a huge amount of time and effort to studying the language(s) of Gibraltar and updating the world with the linguistic realities of a place certainly among the most interesting ones regarding language contact. So far, the team's remarkable work has resulted in a good number of articles and relevant academic discussions and seminars – the latest of which was the 2nd Gibraltar International Conference (GIC2), which took place in Vigo in July 2024, following the 1st Gibraltar International Conference, which took place in Cambridge the previous year. Both of these gathered a considerable number of scholars studying the topic the book reviewed here focusses on: the uniqueness of Llanito, the vernacular language traditionally spoken in Gibraltar which is losing appeal among the younger generations. Before discussing this in more detail, it should be mentioned that the group ViEW is in charge of compiling a comprehensive corpus of written and spoken Gibraltarian English, namely *The International Corpus of English – Gibraltar (ICE-GBR)*, as part of an ambitious international project which has already compiled data from places as varied as Jamaica, Hong-Kong or Nigeria. The written corpus of Gibraltarian English is already finished, and is currently available under academic license to be obtained through the group's webpage (<https://view0.webs.uvigo.es/ice-gibraltar>), while Elena Seoane and her team colleagues and fellow linguists, Lucia Loureiro-Porto and Cristina Suárez-Gómez (University of the Balearic Islands), are completing the oral one.

Gibraltarians and their language: 22 linguistic biographies, is another material result of the efforts made by the group. Seoane collaborates here, as in all the group's projects, with Loureiro-Porto and Suárez-Gómez, and the co-editor of the book under review is Mark G. Sanchez, the foremost Gibraltarian writer, whose international renown keeps growing in postcolonial studies circles, and an affiliated member of ViEW. Both a novelist with more than a dozen narrative works to his credit based on Gibraltarian culture, and a scholar (whose PhD dissertation investigated the Anti-Spanish sentiment in English literary and political writings of the Elizabethan period), Sanchez contributes his genuine knowledge of and experience in Gibraltarian matters to the group and research projects.

Written jointly by Sanchez and Seoane, the Introduction explains the volume's motivation and rationale, provides the reader with a very useful overview of the linguistic policies in Gibraltar in the 20th century, and advances some key aspects

in the construction of contemporary Gibraltarian identities which the latter part of the book illustrates in detail, from varied perspectives. The Introduction also exposes the dire situation in which Llanito – and by extension Spanish – find themselves in at the moment in Gibraltar. This is actually the root motive that leads these scholars to undertake a task such as compiling linguistic biographies. It is certainly important to keep record of the linguistic richness of Gibraltar as it has been and as it has been lived by the people. But the project is more ambitious than this, as it aims, eventually, to infuse a burst of energy into the once-blooming linguistic diversity of the place.

The editors have compiled the linguistic biographies of 22 foremost figures in the fields of literature, culture and education of the peninsula. Written in the first person by each of the contributors and organized in chronological form, from the oldest to the most recent Gibraltarian experiences of language, they are all extremely enjoyable pieces, and provide us with a rich tapestry describing, again, the linguistic, but also the cultural and educational realities of the Gibraltar of the last decades. The concept of linguistic (auto)biography was developed by Austrian scholar Brigitta Busch. When referring to the apparently twin term of “*Spracherleben*, the lived experience of language,” Busch explains that

what interests us here is not so much the way linguistic skills are acquired and accumulated along the time axis; instead we wish to be able to trace how, by way of emotional and bodily experience, dramatic or recurring situations of interaction with others become part of the repertoire, in the form of explicit and implicit linguistic attitudes and habitualized patterns of language practice. It is only when we do not reduce language to its cognitive and instrumental dimension, but give due weight to its essentially intersubjective, social nature and its bodily and emotional dimension, that questions about personal attitudes toward language can be adequately framed. (2015: 9)

Busch locates the inspiration for the development of the notion of *Spracherleben* in the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, which “casts light on the often-neglected bodily and emotional dimension of experience and speech” (2015: 9). The emphasis, again, falls on the affective and embodied dimensions of each speaker’s relationship with their own languages. This is precisely what transpires in the 22 personal accounts collected in the book, as they are not limited to descriptive language, but rely much more on the personal perceptions and accounts of the sociocultural context(s) – the plural here responds to the evolving context in Gibraltar along the decades – and the speakers’ emotional responses to their personal linguistic repertoires. Indeed, the format of these narratives incorporates all the emotional and subjective aspects of language, while also, of course, providing us with crucial historical and political information about a territory which remains quite unknown in spite of its undeniable geographical – and in many ways cultural – proximity.

A bit of history: It was in the 1940s when English was solidly reinforced as the sole medium of education by a Governor General who saw the need to do so in the view of “the widespread prevalence of Spanish” (Seoane *et al.* 2024: 13) tradi-

tional in the place. Not long afterwards, the increasing ascendancy of English was reinforced with the return of the hundreds of Gibraltarian families evacuated to London during the Second World War. For many whose English had been precarious or inexistent before, the experience had necessarily meant a change, and mostly they would, at least, “pick up a smattering of English”, as Charles Durante explains his own Gibraltarian mother did (Seoane *et al.* 2024: 23). Besides this, a relevant factor in the replacement of Spanish and Llanito with English as the predominant language of the population was the Spanish border closure in 1969. This political movement by Franco’s regime was carried out with the intention to strangle Gibraltar’s economy and put pressure on the British government, yet, paradoxically, “the sixteen years of frontier closure were instrumental in the political, cultural, social and economic development of the Gibraltar that we know today,” as we read in a historical booklet issued not long ago by the Government of Gibraltar (*Fifty Years*). Contributor Jamie Trinidad explains that even if “bilingualism was still the norm when I began my formal education ... in 1982” (107), the trauma that the closure left in Gibraltarian people was to endure, as “it had left deep wounds” and a strong anti-Spanish sentiment “that hung in the air.” In the past century, as one can see, policies and events which gradually diminished the primacy of Spanish and Llanito as the Gibraltarian people’s first language followed one another. In our times, as advanced above, the situation has worsened regarding the coexistence of languages in the Overseas Territory, and this seems to be due, as well, to the use of the internet, besides, of course, the monolingual education which keeps being the norm. As it happens, in some families there is a serious mismatch between generations regarding the two languages: some contributors explain that this amounts to grandparents not being able to properly communicate with their grandchildren. The former are still Llanito speakers, English being for them merely the language of administrative tasks, not that of emotions, whereas the younger ones speak Llanito or Spanish with difficulty – if they do at all.

As human experience tends to be modelled by context and structure as much as by individual agency, certain recurrent patterns and topics emerge once and again in these accounts, whose authors’ ages range from around 77, in the first linguistic biography, to 21, in the closing one. These include the contrast between the linguistic atmosphere at home and the one at school; a similar contrast between the languages spoken and heard in the classroom and in the school playground; the shift between languages depending on the social pragmatics of the situation in question; the stupefaction when travelling to the metropolis to discover that they were (or are) considered outsiders because of their accent; the mixed feelings towards Spain, which complicate the situation when it comes to the aggressive policies of mostly conservative governments or to the many cross-border family relations and friendships; the (very postcolonial matter of the) choice of language when it comes to literary creation... These are only some of the recurring motifs. Altogether, they provide the collection with rare consistence, considering the amount of diverse narrators.

All in all, this broad arch of contributions manages to solidly illustrate the fact that both Gibraltarian Spanish and Llanito are at risk of disappearing. They have

been so effectively marginalized in the public and socio-cultural life of the place that at present they are all but ready to be gone. Of course, this institutional marginalization goes hand in hand with the global consolidation of English as the international language of communication and prestige. That is, the fact of English becoming the privileged language of education is not restricted to Gibraltar, not even to the postcolonial areas of the British Empire (such as countries in South Asia, in the Caribbean archipelago, or in the African continent). Rather, it is a reality expanding worldwide. In any event, Gibraltar remaining a British Overseas Territory, the linguistic cocktail was served. It was seen as legitimate from the point of view of those in power that English should reign supreme, and that Spanish and Llanito should be regarded as plain, uneducated, and worthless of academic or institutional attention. And the rich polyglossia of the place has paid its toll. However, and to conclude, perhaps not all is lost, if attending to this pioneering and valuable volume and other efforts currently being made by ViEW and by a notable flock of international scholars worldwide, and of course by some Gibraltarian individuals and associations (such as “Gibraltarians for a Multicultural Society”) As Sanchez and Seoane suggest, “Llanito may be currently flatlining, but if we all unite and work towards a common goal, it may, just may, stutter back to life again” (p. 22).

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