The 'good' Aranese teacher: socially constructed notions of (il)legitimate language use among teachers

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Camille Marvin*, **, Eva Eppler***
*Université de Mons, Belgium; camille.marvin@umons.ac.be
**Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain; cmarvin@uoc.edu
***University of Roehampton, U.K.; e.eppler@roehampton.ac.uk

Abstract
The Aran Valley is a small region in Catalonia, Spain, where three languages hold official status: Castilian Spanish, Catalan and Aranese, the latter a variant of Occitan. Its official language-in-education policy is that Aranese be the medium of instruction in its primary schools, alongside teaching in and through Catalan, Spanish, French and English. Given the multilingual and complex (with two minoritized languages rather than one) nature of the region's language education project, the Aranese government requires that teachers acquire linguistic competence certifications to work in their schools. We first outline the specific context and preconditions under which primary school teachers either have or must acquire competencies in Aranese and/or Catalan. This article then moves on to ground understanding of these official requirements with an analysis of teachers' everyday practices and policy decisions in relation to constructions of the "good Aranese teacher". Using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of legitimate language as a theoretical framework for analysis, we draw upon data collected from Aranese school observations as well as meetings with teacher trainers and policymakers to argue that certain kinds of pedagogic and linguistic practices are socially constructed as legitimate for teachers in Aran while others are not. These constructions of (il)legitimacy build upon educators' own linguistic trajectories and ideologies and ultimately shape Aranese schools' culture around language use. Small linguistic territories such as Aran rely mainly on schools for new speaker acquisition, so understanding the responsibilities set upon teachers and the impact of their feelings of (il)legitimacy and teaching practices is essential to create conditions for minority-language school cultures that empower speakers.

Keywords*: legitimate language, school culture, language revitalization, medium of instruction, teachers*

Introduction

A key aspect of studies of educational language policy addressing the interplay between language and school culture revolves around the question of "what should be done"? With an understanding of the current conditions of a given sociolinguistic context, policymakers can then determine what should change, and what policy measures should be put in place to engender that change. In the case of minoritized language revitalization projects, the policies enacted often involve teaching and the public education sphere. The decisions around "what should be done" impact the members of school communities, and educators are no exception.

In this article we examine the official policy decisions and everyday language policy realities in Aranese primary schools to investigate the relationship between what is required of teachers in terms of language practices and competences, and how they construct notions of the "good Aranese teacher". As we will demonstrate in our analysis, ideologies around (il)legitimate language in the Aranese school context set limits to what a good Aranese teacher should speak and sound like, be able to do, and beyond that, how

they should be. Such judgments reproduce ideas (pl) of (il)legitimate language in the overall school culture which in turn shape (pl) teachers' language practices even beyond the educational domain.

Exploring the salience of ideologies around legitimate language, and how they enact the construction of "good" language teacher identities, is pressing because schools are discursively framed as spaces where minoritized language can be saved or doomed (challenges to this framing can be found in Baker, 2000, 2011; Dunmore, 2018; Giollagáin et al., 2020; Peace-Hughes, 2022; Smith-Christmas and Armstrong, 2014), and "remain central sites for the definition and reproduction of standard and legitimate language" (Costa, 2015, p. 134). Teachers are assigned with an astounding amount of responsibility for the "survival" of languages, either through the cultivation of new speakers, or the provision of a space where children who speak Aranese at home can further develop their competences. An appraisal of an educator's language or pedagogical competence or the quality of their teaching in the context of minoritized language promotion such as we find in Aran, then is not just a judgment of their pedagogical skills but indeed of their value in the overall project for language revitalization.

Although the characterization of a "competent" and a "good" teacher are not necessarily interchangeable, in this paper's analysis we will take both constructions as they are made manifest through official requirements of teachers and teachers' social play in the school to explore how these two qualifications coalesce around notions of (il)legitimate language. The relationship between constructions of competence and value-judgments of goodness and how they become part of Aranese school culture are further explored in the discussion section of this paper.

The Aran Valley, a small region in the Pyrenees Mountains of Spain, is the context for this study. It is located within the autonomous community of Catalonia and on the border with France. It is officially trilingual among Aranese (a variant of Occitan), its autochthonous language spoken by around 8,000 people (EULP 2023); Catalan; and Castilian Spanish. Historically, the region has been geographically and linguistically isolated, though in the last decades its standing as a premier ski destination in the region has changed this fact. Years of incoming labour migration and seasonal visitors have transformed it into a place with a high concentration of linguistic and cultural diversity. In some ways, a part of the challenge for Aranese language policymakers is to continue to attract tourists to the valley (who, for the most part, are Spanish speakers) while also promoting Aranese, which is decreasing in its number of speakers and its rates of usage.

This paper will first establish the background for this study, the Aran Valley, particularly as it pertains to its official language-in-education policy. It will then go on to review Pierre Bourdieu's concept of legitimate language, as well as to contextualize this study in the body of literature discussing teachers' roles and agency in language-in-education policy. The third part will detail the methodology used by the authors in their respective data productions, while the following section will analyse excerpts from Camille's data to demonstrate how official competence requirements of teachers, as well as teachers' constructions of the "good Aranese teacher", reproduce ideas of legitimate language. In the discussion and conclusion, we further explore these findings as well as present potential consequences of legitimate language ideologies and their reproduction in school culture.

Language-in-education policy and teaching in Aran

In this section we examine the language policy framework in Aran to contextualize language practices in the community's school culture and how they are positioned as (il)legitimate. We include the (il-) prefix here to underline the fact that there can be no legitimization of a language form, practice or speaker without the delegitimization of the other. As we will see in the analysis, these policies create the parameters in which educators can enforce, resist or manage the language norms in their teaching and beyond.

Much of the discourse about language and school culture in Aran revolves around the concept of Aranese as their *lengua veïcularа* (vehicular language, or medium of instruction). Aranese is a variant of

Occitan and is one of the five official languages of Spain. In terms of the historical development of the official language policy of Aran, Aranese has been an object of special protection and included in teaching since 1979 (Estatut d'Autonomia de Catalunya, Ley Orgánica 4/1979). The *Lei de Normalizacion Linguistica* (1983) proclaimed Aranese as *lengua pròpria*, roughly translating to 'language of the territory', of Aran four years later. In 1990, Aranese became the official *lengua pròpria* of Aran (Lei de regim especiau dera Val d'Aran 1990), which gave the Conselh Generau, its local government body, the authority to make language policy in the public sphere, including in education. From 2023, "Aran's educational centres' *Projecte Lingüístic de Centre* (center's linguistic project) must grant the learning and regular curricular and educational use of Aranese as the territory's own and vehicular language" (Law 8/2022; our translation from the original Catalan). Since then, the Aranese school system is officially trilingual (Aranese, Catalan and Spanish), as Law 8/2022 applies to all schools in the Aran Valley.

According to official policy, Aranese is the medium of instruction during pre-school and primary education, with Catalan and Spanish as taught languages. In practice, it is up to each school to determine how to interpret and manage this policy. In secondary and high school, Catalan is the official medium of instruction, with Spanish and Aranese used freely depending on individual teachers' choices and language competence. In practice, this "represents a smaller presence of Occitan in favour of the other two languages" (Suïls & Torres, forthcoming). In terms of accountability and governance of language-in-education policy, there is no specific inspection for the Aranese territory (*ibid.*) and consequently no evaluation of the pedagogical distribution of the three languages.

In relation to teacher training and certification, primary school teachers are predominantly trained at the University of Lleida, and sometimes at universities in Barcelona. As a subject, studies of the Aranese/Occitan language are absent from the curriculum of the Primary Teacher Education Degree. It is instead offered as an elective in Lleida, alongside theoretical background courses such as Linguistic Planning and Management of Multilingualism (Suïls, Eva's personal communication). Teaching at the secondary level requires specialized master's degrees, such as history, biology, philology; practitioners are trained all over Catalonia and Spain. To the best of our knowledge, the only MA in Occitan is offered at the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, France (Duran Eppler, 2025).

School leavers from one of the educational centres in Val d'Aran have prior knowledge of Aranese through participating in the trilingual school system when they take up a teaching position in Aran (approx. B2 according to a community consultant, Eva's personal communication). In primary education, a large proportion of staff members are of Aranese origin. Most Aranese teachers in secondary education are not of Aranese descent and did not go to school in Aran. Knowledge of Aranese is a merit (not a requirement) for accessing a position as a secondary school teacher in Aran. In practice, however, practitioners' knowledge of Aranese is usually minimal, "equivalent to that of languages for which a practical application to teaching is not envisaged" (Suïls, Eva's personal communication 12/03/25). Because the pool of subject-specific secondary teachers is smaller than that of primary school teachers, their professional mobility tends to be much higher. In addition, junior teacher candidates with lower seniority or fewer educational qualifications are frequently appointed to schools in Aran. Rather than declining an assigned position there, which incurs a professional penalty, they often accept the position temporarily but move on when an opportunity arises (see also section 1, Suïls & Torres, forthcoming). Conversely, even those who wish to remain may be forced to leave if reassigned elsewhere. Ultimately, these systemic dynamics present considerable bureaucratic hurdles for teachers attempting to acquire and maintain the linguistic competence required to teach in Aranese.

A specific administrative hurdle to becoming an Aranese teacher is that a certificate of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) level C1 or C2 of the language is required—even if candidates have sufficient knowledge of Aranese. CEFR C1 in Aranese is not automatically awarded upon graduation from high school in Aran with a Catalan Batxillerat / A-level (unlike CEFR C1 in Catalan). The C1 Aranese language courses run by the Conselh Generau d'Aran that lead up to this certificate are frequently

oversubscribed, and often with a limited schedule. According to some student sources, people willing to learn Aranese are faced with too many hurdles in the obtention of a place in the CEFR courses and exams. A spokesperson of the Conselh Generau d'Aran (Eva's personal communication) stated that they were willing to provide more learning opportunities but are confronted with a shortage of qualified Aranese tutors to teach the Aranese CEFR courses.

According to the coordinator of the *Conselh Consultatiu der Occitan Aranés*, an advisory body to the *Conselh Generau d'Aran* on issues of language policy, however, teacher provision in Aran is "sufficient". The same source contextualizes this statement by emphasizing that teacher provision in Aran "at least isn't lower than in other places [in Catalonia]" where "the public school system…suffers from a structural shortage of teachers". Nevertheless, attracting teachers to positions in remote rural areas such as Aran poses difficulties for teacher provision.

All consulted sources agree that there is a dichotomy between practitioners who see a teaching position in Aran as a long-term job and those who do not. The former tends to come from nearby areas, have prior knowledge of Aranese and prefer pre-school and primary level; the latter, including substitute teachers and temps, tend to be less invested in the Occitan language and culture and frequently move out of the region within a year or less. Jordi Suïls (Eva's personal communication, 12/03/25) summarized teacher provision in Aran with "so, yes, there are enough teachers but no, they don't respond to the needs in terms of minority language".

Studies on the Aranese case of language policy have, for the most part, centered on describing *de jure* policy or carrying out measurements of language competences among students (e.g. Arenas e Sampera, 2001; Suïls and Furness, 1999; Suïls and Huguet, 2001; Suïls and Huguet, 2003; Suïls, 2011). The first ethnographic study on Aranese language education policy in practice (Marvin, 2019), established that teachers and students constructed their own language policies centered on ideologies of mutual communication, sometimes in incoherence with the official policy that upholds Occitan as the *lengua veïcularа*. Marvin (2019, p. 107) concluded, "these findings also impart a clearer image of the challenges that face language revitalization efforts, and the (in-)effectiveness of language education policy as a means of surpassing minoritized status for speaker communities."

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of legitimate language

In this paper we draw upon Pierre Bourdieu's theorization of legitimate language to analyze the emic constructions of "good Aranese teacher" subjects among educators. Because Bourdieu highlights language as a "powerbroker" in school pedagogy, his concepts serve as a worthwhile means of investigating the conscious and unconscious value-making and devaluing practices that teachers enact around language (Flynn, 2015, p. 20). Bourdieu theorizes that legitimate language is the language imbued with authority, through its utterance via the correct speaker, in an appropriate situation, and in the accepted legitimate grammatical form. The contextual construction of legitimate language functions as a code in the regulation and governance of linguistic practices (1977, p. 650; 1991). Public education systems reproduce legitimate language, "which has to be sustained by a permanent effort of correction, a task which falls both to institutions specially designed for this purpose and to individual speakers" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 60). The performance of legitimate language, spoken by the dominant class, simultaneously defines illegitimate language, and consequently reproduces inequality of capital in the linguistic market (*ibid*.; Bourdieu, 1977). The concept of legitimate language is interconnected with the concept of language ideologies, which is defined by Kathryn Woolard (1998, cited in Woolard, 2016, p. 7) as:

> socially, politically, and morally loaded cultural assumptions about the way that language works in social life and about the role of particular linguistic forms in a given society.

Ideologies of language legitimize power hierarchies (Bourdieu 1979, 1982, cited in Martin-Jones and Heller, 1996, p. 129) and uphold the idea that there can only be one legitimate way of using language (Jaffe, 2007). The language repertoires and practices that fall outside the bounds of legitimacy, as defined by individuals' and groups' language ideologies, become what we know as patois, dialects, and accents, which index lower social capital (Lane et al., 2017). The context-specific norms that make up (il)legitimate language also create (il)legitimate producers of language, and determine who can claim linguistic expertise, authority, and belonging to a linguistic community (Costa, 2015). Legitimate language, then is a dynamic phenomenon in that its power is not given but rather created through interlocutors' consistent and collective acceptance, enforcement and performance.

The school represents an institution where children are socialized into the norms of (il)legitimate language usage (Bergroth and Palviainen, 2017). Though Bourdieu perhaps underestimated individuals' agency in their engagements with language norms and policy (see Saxena and Martin-Jones, 2013), children indeed receive information around language and its correct use in a way that can result in their unconscious acceptance and reproduction of these norms (Grant and Wong, 2008). In the following section, we will survey current scholarship that explores how teachers' implementation and creation of language policies play a central role in the linguistic socialization of children and the making of a sociolinguistic school culture.

Teachers' role in language revitalization

Teachers are the central agents in the interpretation, negotiation and implementation of language policy (Chang-Bacon, 2022; Ricento and Hornberger, 1996; Skilton-Sylvester, 2003). Scholars have even gone on to demonstrate that teachers create their own language policies in their educational spaces, within the governance of official policy discourse (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017; Menken and García, 2010; Marvin, 2025). It is essential that policymakers recognize the importance of teachers in this work and not just treat them as intermediaries for delivering "effective" policy: such framings result in the epistemic consideration of teachers as mere factors of policy rather than agentic knowledge-creators of their teaching practice (Biesta, 2023; Kincheloe, 2003; Priestley and Philippou, 2018).

In this article, we explore the competencies and competence-acquiring processes required of teachers in Aran and how these connect to constructions of the "good Aranese teacher" and finally show that the expectations set on teachers go beyond their pedagogy and purely linguistic competences to make judgments on their value in the Aranese speaker community. Drawing on Gert Biesta (2015, p. 3), who explains that the term "competence" in teaching encompasses not only what a teacher should know and do, but also what or how they should be, we note how this characterization persists in policymaking to strictly define who is authorized to enact language-in-education policy. Because curricula are often designed for the "ideal" student and teacher, constructions around good and competent teachers can reveal much about the underlying language ideologies in each schooling system (Veliz et al., 2025).

The ideology of native-speakerism is rampant in policies and discourses around language education policy and who makes a "competent" and "good" language teacher. This is because minoritized language revitalization projects are not immune to the mechanization of hegemonic language ideologies in internal language policing (Kaveh, 2023), despite such projects frequently being motivated by issues of linguistic justice. The erroneous insistence that native-speaker teachers are better at teaching their language neglects the positive qualities of non-native speaking teachers, such as their "multilingual proficiency" (Brutt-Griffler, 2020). These ideologies determine what counts as legitimate language and therefore what kinds of language practices outside the accepted bounds of legitimacy must be policed (Creese et al., 2014). The persistence of these ideologies within minority-language promotion is not uncommon and indeed tied to the ambiguous nature of language policy (Hawkey and Horner, 2022) and daily "frictions" between official policy and practice (Jaspers, 2015, p. 112; Redinger, 2010).

Some of these frictions are baked into official language-in-education policy, which often claims to promote multilingualism, while simultaneously expecting teachers to teach and assign value to monolingual and standardized models of language and language use (Jaspers, 2022). What are teachers meant to do with these contradictions? Should we be surprised that they make judgments against their own teaching and language practices given difficult and paradoxical tasks set before them? Elena Shohamy (2006, p. 80) claims that educators' policing of illegitimate language in their language teaching is partly due to a lack of training in theories of applied linguistics and language acquisition. Rather than transferring sociolinguistic awareness and taking a descriptive approach to language use, teachers often impart prescriptive norms associated with the languages' standard varieties (*ibid*., p. 80).

Teachers' positioning of themselves with relation to the identity construct of the "good Aranese teacher" and how they may use language, given teachers' fundamental role in the reproduction of language ideologies and norms, contributes to the overall school culture of a given educational centre. This relationship is not unidirectional, however: Aranese school culture and discourse simultaneously shape teachers' enacted language ideologies and practices (Hongboontri and Keawkhong, 2014). Addressing how it functions in the context of education, Frederick Erickson (1987, p. 19) writes that culture is ontological, and "defines what is in the world, what exists and what does not". This holds true as it relates to legitimate language: the legitimate form and use of language take up space in pedagogy, while what is illegitimate must be corrected and erased. This of course applies to teachers' own language policy processes, which we can investigate as a social practice of power: they determine what is real, govern behaviour and sometimes determine the allocation of resources in a school community (Levinson et al., 2009). Educators' training, linguistic trajectories and individual ideologies all play a part in their impact on everyday classroom dynamics, including in the amplification of inequalities among groups of students (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017). This kind of shaping of school culture also happens in more 'informal' language practices, such as the social interactions that occur between teachers, students, administrators and families outside of official curricula (Dołowy, 2023).

Methodology

This article draws upon data produced separately by the two authors, in their respective research projects. Eva's data comes from meetings with policymakers (representatives of the Conselh Generau d'Aran), academic advisors to the Conselh Generau d'Aran, curriculum designers for Aranese teachers, and trainers and examiners of Aranese teachers in the context of the Horizon Europe Project RISE UP as well as several of their students. Her methodology consisted of a literature survey, fieldnotes taken during informal meetings and interviews as well as email exchanges with the above-named stakeholders, many of whom hold two or more of the mentioned roles.

Camille's data was produced during an on-site ethnography of an academic year in the primary schools of the Aran Valley in the context of her doctoral research. By now, ethnography is well-established as a valid and reliable methodology to investigate processes and practices of language policy. Its focus on participant observation, in particular,

> …enables us to see the practice that goes into creating and sustaining the sedimented common sense of policy. It also enables us to see the practice of policy appropriation, for which local interests and meanings…provide the basis (Levinson et al., 2009, p. 788).

Therefore, it is a worthwhile method to explore how teachers' internalized ideas of (il)legitimate language shape school culture. Monica Heller, also drawing upon Bourdieusian theory, claims that interrogations of language use in social interactions can illuminate the relationships between "different dimensions of legitimate language" (1996, p. 140).

Camille's methodology consisted of participant observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, school administrators and policymakers, as well as textual analysis of official policy documents and artefacts. In the scope of this article, we will draw solely upon her fieldnotes from classroom observations and excerpts from her interviews with teachers and administrators. Most of these observations and interviews took place at one central primary school (the major site for her fieldwork), but others came from neighbouring smaller primary schools in Aran. In the hours (distributed over 94 days recorded in her field journal) Camille spent in the classroom, she interacted with the students and was very involved in the everyday school goings-on, including spending a lot of time alongside the teachers.

After spending several weeks participating and observing in each classroom, Camille then conducted follow-up semi-structured interviews with the respective teachers. There were also interviews conducted with school administrators, to make a total of eleven audio-recorded and transcribed interviews that served as the data corpus for this paper, in addition to the recorded fieldnotes during observations. All the names of participants (adults and children alike) in the observations and interviews have been changed to pseudonyms, in addition to occasional gender changes to better protect their anonymity.

The "good" Aranese teacher

The theme of the "good Aranese teacher" emerged throughout the analysis of the ethnographic data produced in Aran's primary schools and most often in conjunction with emic evaluations of (il)legitimate language practices. During an interview with Arturo, a principal of a primary school, Camille asked whether administrators and teachers ever heard criticisms regarding their implementation of Aranese language-in-education policy. The following is an excerpt from his answer:

interview excerpt 1

ARTURO: …ehm, ei cert qu'era situacion der aranés actualment ei complicada. sí? e ei molt facil per part des politics dider qu'era escòla ei era responsable. Era faena que an hèt es mèstres...non digui ara eh? De hèr més de 30 e 40 ans, eth trabalh qu'an hèt damb er aranés. Se non auesse estat per aguest trabalh, aué en dia ena Val d'Aran no se parlarie er aranés. Ei gràcies ara escòla que se mantén er aranés.

ARTURO: …ehm, it's true that the situation for Aranese is complicated right now. yes? and it's very easy for politicians to say that the school is responsible. the work that teachers have done…I'm not saying now, eh? going on more than thirty and forty years, the work that they have done with Aranese. if it wasn't for this work, today Aranese wouldn't be spoken in the Aran Valley. it's thanks to the school that Aranese is still spoken.

Arturo's response begins with an introductory phrase that was ubiquitous in conversations with policy stakeholders in Aran: an acknowledgement that the status of Aranese, with regards to its usage, is problematic. This diagnosis usually varied from something like Arturo's claim of the situation being "complicated" to more alarmist discourse around the "disaster" or "crisis" of Aranese. The culture surrounding the decisions and practices of Aranese language-in-education policy, then is one of mitigating and treating the universally acknowledged precarious situation for Aranese. This, according to Arturo, contributes to a framing in which politicians place both the responsibility for and the blame of the current situation on teachers, thus also assigning them with the burden of working to improve Aranese's status. Arturo claims that it is thanks to the past decades of teachers' contributions alone that Aranese is still spoken in the valley. This perspective stands in contrast to scholars' work that demonstrate that school education cannot act alone in reversing language shift efforts (see Baker, 2000, 2011; Dunmore, 2018; Giollagáin et al., 2020; Peace-Hughes 2022; Smith-Christmas and Armstrong, 2014; Jones, 2025). Arturo's

statements underline, however, the perceived heaviness of the responsibility that teachers carry in the Aranese revitalization movement. This burden is made to be particularly significant for teachers in Aran when considering that at any given point in the school year there will be substitute or otherwise temporary teachers that come from other parts of Catalonia and therefore do not speak Aranese. In Aran there are simply not enough teachers certified to teach Aranese to fill all positions, so those that cannot and are brought in from other places are exempt from the responsibility to promote Aranese. A "good" Aranese teacher is therefore constructed as a teacher that assumes this responsibility and pushes the language forward with her actions and teaching (Dołowy, 2023). What 'pushing the language forward' consists of, as we will further see in this analysis, has a lot to do with community members' held ideologies around (il)legitimate language.

Although educational centers in Aran take differing approaches to the official policy of Aranese as the medium of instruction, during Camille's fieldwork, the division of school subjects and languages always followed a monolingual model, even with a school's inclusion of multiple languages in its curriculum. Students' mixing of different linguistic repertoires in their languaging was delegitimized and was mostly prevented by the pedagogical structure of the classes, which never assigned more than one language to a class subject. In any case, translanguaging was discouraged and sometimes even admonished by teachers. The teachers at the observed primary schools would also demand the same monolingual practices of themselves as they did of their students in their teaching. More than once, Camille recorded that, when teachers spoke in Aranese during a class that was not meant to be taught through Aranese, they would catch themselves and correct what they had said to the target language. At times they would even apologize to the class for not adhering to the official medium of instruction, as Camille recorded in one of her field notes:

> *vignette 1*
>
> Later on, at the start of math class, Teresa started speaking to the class in Aranese, then said *"perdón, este es en castellano"* (SPANISH: sorry, this is in Spanish), then switched to Spanish.

Because of the first author's presence in the classroom, it is impossible to know whether the teachers also made these kinds of corrections when she was not there. What we analyze here as educators' self-policing to perform as the good Aranese teacher — whose language habits do not stray from the monolingual norm set by the school schedule — needs to account for the ethnographer's positionality in the interactions, who despite her intentions may represent external linguistic authority and surveillance.

The teachers in the primary schools also made judgments toward themselves concerning the contradictions that emerged between their linguistic practices and their constructed subjectivities of Aranese identity. These contradictions took shape around ideologies of authenticity (Gal and Woolard, 2001, cited in Woolard, 2016), according to which Aranese is the most authentic expression of the essence of Aran as a place and the Aranese people as a community. To be a legitimate and authentic member of the Aranese speaker community is therefore to express oneself in the authentic language. Pilar, a second-grade teacher at one of the larger Aranese primary schools, for example, explained to the first author that her family often complained about the fact that she and her partner, who were both born and raised in Aran, spoke to each other in Spanish, and that people in her family *"s'enfaden"* (ARANESE: get angry). Among Aranese couples this was not a unique phenomenon. Another teacher in the same school, Luisa, who was also born to an Aranese-speaking family, also spoke to her partner in Spanish.

Yet another teacher at the same school, Sandra, first justified her and her husband's marital linguistic practices during our interview before she confessed that her personal habits of language use perhaps conflict with the linguistic expectations, she places on others who have grown up in Aran:

interview excerpt 2

S: e jo damb eth mèn òme parlam en castelhan perque mos coneishérem en castelhan. jo sò era prumèra culpable
CM: [laughing] no no, culpable no
S: mès jo damb es mainatges parli en aranés. e eth mainatge gran a còps parla per telefon e me digui, 'però perqué vos parlatz en castelhan?' digues, 'se vos podetz'–'ja mama però ei que'… alavetz l'ac digui, 'pues dilhèu cambies entà parlar en aranés'. ac saben de parlar. conèishen era lengua. [xxx] mès non sai. m'imagini qu'eth ei pues un shinhau coma asociau o…[trails off]
CM: ja. ja, ja. ei açò que campi també. sí és–encara que è coneishut adolescents que son diguessim es més militants pera lengua aranesa qu'en aquest ah projècte–
S: mès ua causa ei era militància. que hèm de [xxx]-
CM: òc
S: –e dempús i a auta causa qu'ei era practica que hèm.

S: and I with my husband we speak in Spanish because we met each other in Spanish. I am the first to be guilty
CM: ((laughing)) no no, not guilty
S: but I speak with [my] kids in Aranese. and my oldest kid sometimes speaks on the phone and I say to myself, 'but why do you speak to each other in Spanish?' You say, 'if you all can'—'yeah mom but it's that'…so I say it, 'well maybe switch to speaking in Aranese'. they know how to speak it. they know the language. ((xxx)) but I don't know. I imagine that he's well a little like asocial or…((trails off))
CM: yeah. yeah, yeah. That's what I see too. It is–even though I've met teenagers who are let's say more militant for the Aranese language than in this project–
S: but one thing is militancy. that we have to ((xxx))–
CM: yes
S: –and then there's another thing which is the practices we do.

Sandra assigned blame and culpability to herself. The ideology of authenticity tying Aranese usage and Aranese identity together delegitimizes language habits that conflict with the image of the authentic Aranese speaker. In Aran, this contradiction is especially marked when it comes to the use of Spanish, and carries a value-judgment, as noted by Jordi Suïls and Helena Torres (forthcoming):

> Identifying with Spanish as one's own language is often associated with an expression of indifference and even rejection towards Aranese; this is based on the argument that Aranese is a dispensable language in terms of socio-professional advancement.

It is noteworthy that Sandra attempted to qualify this contradiction and distance herself from any kind of identification with Spanish as 'her' language by mentioning her decision to speak to her children in Aranese, as well as her insistence that they implement linguistic practices that promote a future for the language. She claimed that there was a clear distinction between militancy — a positive and public discursive stance toward Aranese and its promotion — or language activism and "our practices", the actual enactment of this stance in day-to-day life. This border drawn between the purported language activists and rejectors of the revitalization project emerged often in the authors' data and was often characterized by participants as a binary between two mutually exclusive extremes (something along the lines of 'you're either with us or against us'), with not much room for ambivalences. Within this ideological binary, a teacher in Aran whose habitual language practices are heterogeneous between Aranese and

other languages (6.6% of the Aranese population, as of 2023; EULP 2023) is not a legitimate militant and is therefore 'holding back' rather than 'pushing forward' (Dołowy, 2023) Aranese. The judgment Sandra enacts toward herself was also echoed in her narration of interactions with her son: she seemed to rationalize the strangeness between his knowledge of and competences in Aranese and his choice to not speak it as "asociality". According to Sandra, a lack of language or social competence would be the only legitimate 'excuse' to not speak Aranese. Furthermore, this framing dictates that legitimate belonging to the Aranese speaker community and investment in its future consists of a coherent and consistent use of the language with no room for heterogeneity, fluidity, or in-betweenness.

As the ethnographer producing data at Aranese primary schools, Camille was also enmeshed within the processes of creating subjectivities of legitimate Aranese teachers. The following ethnographic vignette records a private conversation between her and Pilar, a second-grade teacher.

vignette 2

> Pilar told me that she and the other teachers talk about me sometimes because I am one of the "*bones*" (ARANESE: the good ones). Upon seeing my look of confusion, Pilar elaborated that I was one of the adults in the school that actually speak Aranese. She then said "*entre tu e jo, aciu i an profes que non ac parlen*" (ARANESE: between you and me, there are teachers here who don't speak it). She then elaborated that when she speaks in Aranese very few of her colleagues respond in the language. When I asked her if she felt comfortable talking about responsibilities of speaking Aranese with her colleagues, she hesitated before replying that everyone does as they see fit and she's not going to look for "*mal rollo*" (SPANISH: conflict) with her friends.

Camille's background as an "outsider" (born in the United States) in Aran and someone that learned Aranese as a foreign language, in adulthood, enacted a notion of willingness and motivation (referred to as *'volontat'* in Aranese) around her language practices. Indeed, as argued by James Costa (2015), the concept of a "new speaker" of a minoritized language is impossible to separate from the opinions and evaluations that others have for the new language user. This, combined with her everyday participation in classes, almost always in Aranese, and teachers' insistence that their students address her in Aranese resulted in the construction of a researcher-subject with a value-judgment of "goodness". Even when she was not physically with the teachers, Camille's "spectre" (Deumert, 2022) as a "good" language user still created boundaries between them—those who personified 'volontat' and made the effort to speak in Aranese (supposedly like Camille), and those who did not. When Pilar divulged her guarded secret that some of her colleagues do not make a practice of speaking in Aranese, her utterance of "*entre tu e jo*…" (between you and I) separated Camille and her as two subjects joined together in their willingness to speak Aranese. According to Pilar, such willingness should be made self-evident through her colleagues' linguistic practices and should not require an explicit conversation or request, especially to avoid potential conflict.

In the final ethnographic event for analysis, Camille attended an end-of-course department meeting at one of the bigger primary schools in Aran.

vignette 3

> I went to the meeting of the *segòn cicle* (grades 4-6) teachers. Marcela, the coordinator, spoke in Catalan. They created a Google document together as a department to take notes, which they projected onto the screen. Marcela typed:
>
> 4A no funciona

> Laia, one of the teachers present, said out loud *"falta eth 'n' finau"* (CATALAN & ARANESE: it's missing the final 'n') on "no" to make it "non", and therefore be written in Aranese.
>
> 4A non funciona[1]
>
> For the following several minutes of the meeting, Laia dictated what would be written in the document spelled correctly in Aranese even though the teachers were speaking in Catalan and Spanish. Some of them eventually switched their speaking to Aranese.

It is probable that Camille's positionality as an observer and potential "linguistic police" (despite her best intentions) had real effects in the events of the interaction and revealed what were the expected norms for their work and communication among themselves. The conversations between teachers, even when carried out mostly in Aranese, almost always featured heterogeneous production of the other two official languages of Aran. In this instance, the teachers were having their discussion in a mix of Catalan and Spanish, yet Laia's understanding that I was observing the meeting led her to instruct that the dictation of notes be done according to the norms for legitimate language as teachers in an Aranese school—in other words, in correctly-written Aranese. The policy expectations set on the educators, to maintain and enforce Aranese as the *lengua veïculara* of the school, often conflicted with their linguistic reality of playing with the language repertoires in their environment, especially when students were not present. This conflict between legitimate language practices for Aranese teachers and their day-to-day lives transformed into self-judgments, and like in this vignette, a change in their linguistic behavior.

Discussion

In the case of Aran, public schools are discursively framed as the main site for Aranese language promotion. The official language-in-education policy in Aran is strategically ambiguous (Marvin, 2025; Hawkey and Horner, 2022) to allow for administrators and teachers to have significant autonomy in implementing the trilingual (Aranese, Catalan, Castilian/Spanish) language policy to meet the context and needs of their school communities. When the stakes are so high (the future of the Aranese language) and so much responsibility rests on the educational sector, every aspect of teachers' work is imbued with responsibility toward the language revitalization project and serves as a potential source for blame and judgment. Throughout the analysis, and in conjunction with the official requirements of teachers in Aran, many contradictions emerged. Primary-school teachers must obtain and prove an advanced level of Aranese competence so that they can maintain the *lengua veïculara* policy (see introduction), yet the Aranese government is challenged to recruit instructors for the course that qualifies teachers to teach in educational centres in Val d'Aran (the CEFR C1 and C2 courses), and depends on temporary teachers from other parts in Catalonia who do not speak Aranese. Teachers in Aran live multilingual lives (after all, the valley is officially trilingual) and teach a highly linguistically and culturally diverse student body who may hear Latin-American Spanish, Romanian, Arabic, and Bulgarian, among other languages, at home. Notwithstanding, policy demands that only Aranese be the official medium of instruction in primary schools. We do not say this to criticize the expectations set on teachers, but rather to point out that these discrepancies exist, and it is the educators that must manage them, sometimes resulting in self-judgment.

The findings show that teachers enacted notions of (il)legitimate language, and that it is difficult to disentangle these from notions of (il)legitimacy of a teacher's role in a language revitalization movement. These phenomena reinforce each other: ideas of (il)legitimate language influence the construction of the (il)legitimate language teacher while the construction of legitimate language depends on the legitimacy

[1] In Aranese the correctly written phrase should read: *4A non funcione*

and authority of the persons that speak it within the school context and outside. The legitimate language which holds value in the communication and culture of Aranese schools is Aranese, which is indexed as the language of "authenticity" in the territory (Woolard, 2016). Legitimate Aranese is monolingual and standard, with little to no influence from Spanish or Catalan. It must be used in all parts of school culture, including at times when no students are present. Moreover, legitimate language must be performed especially when observation is happening, as we have seen in vignette 3. To hold legitimacy and authority as someone advancing the status of Aranese involves more than using legitimate language, however. In addition to the ability to speak Aranese and in the "legitimate" way, a teacher must be perceived as a language activist (see 'militant' interview excerpt 1). This means that she uses and promotes Aranese in all aspects of her life, beyond teaching, with no exception and no room for ambivalences. Furthermore, she must exhibit *volontat* (see vignette 2), a willingness to learn or speak the language. It is noteworthy that in comparison to a new speaker like Camille, who has *volontat* attributed to her actions by her mere presence as an outsider who learned and uses Aranese, teachers must do more to prove this willingness. Teachers' having learned Aranese at a young age or so that they could work in Aran does not lend the same degree of *volontat*. Teachers enact these judgments on their own language habits, trajectories, willingness and commitment to the language revitalization project to construct themselves as (il)legitimate language users and community members.

What does this mean for the culture that develops in Aranese schools? The official language policy of Aran, with teachers' communication practices and enacted ideologies around (il)legitimacy, contribute to a school culture that distinguishes between the 'competent' Aranese teacher and the 'good' Aranese teacher. The competent Aranese teacher has overcome bureaucratic hurdles to obtain the language certifications that are required of her and is able to express herself and teach in Aranese. The competent teacher also follows the rules set by the school's linguistic project to maintain Aranese as the medium of instruction (Law 8/2022, see introduction). The "good Aranese teacher" construction differs from that of the competent teacher in that it also carries a value-judgment. The good teacher must be competent, of course, but must also hold legitimacy in her role in the Aranese speaker community, which is inseparable from her demonstrable commitment to the promotion of Aranese. This commitment is performed through a pervasive use of Aranese in all parts of the teacher's life but also by the activism, militancy and motivation that she is perceived to have. The construction of the good Aranese teacher is created through the ideological work and judgments the teacher enacts on herself and on others. To be a good Aranese educator, then, says more than just your competences or the quality of your teaching. It also speaks about who you are in a community and school culture centered around the promotion of Aranese.

Conclusion

This paper examined the interplay between language education (policy) and school culture in the context of the Aran Valley. In Aran, the official language policy is trilingual (Aranese, Catalan, and Castilian Spanish), with Aranese designated as the main medium of instruction in primary schools. The policy and associated curricula are flexible enough to allow administrators and teachers significant autonomy to adapt implementation to the needs of their school cultures and communities.

Within this context, public schools are discursively framed as the primary site for the creation of new speakers and the promotion of Aranese. This framing generates socially constructed ideologies around (il)legitimate language use. These ideologies drew on educators' own linguistic trajectories and beliefs, shaping perceptions of what constitutes a "competent" and "good" Aranese teacher and ultimately influenced school culture around language use. A good Aranese teacher thus not only uses the Aranese language across professional and social contexts but also commits to Aranese language maintenance and revitalization. Being a good Aranese teacher therefore involves more than linguistics and pedagogical

competence; it also reflects one's identity and role within a community and school culture centered on promoting the language.

Although this study focuses on a specific context, its insights can inform other minoritized language education settings. Understanding the expectations and responsibilities placed on teachers, as well as the impact of their feelings of (il)legitimacy of language use on their teaching practices, is essential for developing minoritized-language school cultures that empower speakers. One key lesson is that language policies are often designed for ideal speakers and situations, yet their implementation ultimately depends on how language users interpret them. And while this paper focused on teachers' communicative practices, students should also be central to these discussions, as they are the first impacted by language-in-education policy and it is their linguistic behavior that is under negotiation and control. Future research on the educational role of language should therefore examine students' communicative practices and their perspectives on language-in-education policy and school culture.

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