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**Brexit – and now what?  
A post-referendum survey into linguistic  
and national attitudes in Gibraltar**

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**Abstract**

The present paper sets out to gauge the post-Brexit referendum attitudes of Gibraltarians concerning language and political outlooks. A survey was created in order to gather the necessary qualitative and quantitative data. It was spread using Facebook groups and a total of 38 questionnaires were collected. The results of the research suggest that Gibraltar is still highly conflicted over Brexit, there is an ongoing attrition of Spanish, and English seems to be continuously gaining linguistic ground. More detailed research is, however, needed to evaluate the ongoing changes with greater certainty.

**Keywords**

Gibraltar, Brexit, sociolinguistics, survey, identity

## **Brexit – i co teraz? Badanie ankietowe językowych i narodowych nastrojów po referendum na Gibraltarze**

### **Abstrakt**

Niniejsze badanie miało na celu zmierzenie nastrojów politycznych i językowych na Gibraltarze po referendum dotyczącym Brexitu. W celu zebrania odpowiednich danych zarówno jakościowych, jak i ilościowych została utworzona ankieta, którą później rozpowszechniono przy użyciu Facebooka. Badanie zainteresowało 38 respondentów, którzy wypełnili kwestionariusz ankiety. Dane w ten sposób uzyskane pozwalają zauważyć następujące trendy: Brexit jest wciąż tematem debaty wśród mieszkańców Gibraltaru, język hiszpański wydaje się być w całkowitym odwrocie, a w jego miejsce wkracza język angielski. Jednak potrzebne są bardziej szczegółowe badania, aby z większą dozą pewności określić zmiany zachodzące na Gibraltarze.

### **Słowa kluczowe**

Gibraltar, Brexit, językoznawstwo, społeczeństwo, tożsamość

## **1. Historical overview, socio-political and linguistic situation of Gibraltar**

### **1.1. Gibraltar: A brief history**

Gibraltar, also known as “The Rock”, is a tiny speck of land southwest of the Iberian Peninsula, overlooking the Straits of Gibraltar between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Not surprisingly, with such a strategic location comes a tumultuous history. Its name derives from the Arabic *Jabal Tariq* ‘mountain of Tariq’, referring to the general who launched the Muslim conquest of Iberia in 711. Muslim rulers retained control over Gibraltar for the next 750 years, before losing it to the Duke of Medina Sidonia in 1462 (Howes 1946).

A long period of stability followed in Gibraltar which, however, came to an abrupt halt with the onset of the Spanish War of Succession (1702–1713). Following the death of King Charles II of Spain, two contestants claimed the throne, namely Duke Philip of Anjou and Archduke Charles of Austria. The British decided to support the Archduke, since Duke Philip's victory would have given the Bourbons a dominant position in Europe. An alliance was formed to support the Habsburgs, and an Anglo-Dutch fleet conquered Gibraltar in 1704. The war itself lasted almost another decade, until the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, which, in article X, formally declared Gibraltar a British property:

The Catholic King does hereby, for himself, his heirs and successors, yield to the Crown of Great Britain the full and entire propriety of the town and castle of Gibraltar, together with the port, fortifications, and forts thereunto belonging; and he gives up the said propriety to be held and enjoyed absolutely with all manner of right for ever, without any exception or impediment whatsoever.

This loss was not taken easily by the Bourbons and Spain, and many attempts were made to regain Gibraltar. The last Spanish effort to take Gibraltar with the use of military force, known as the Great Siege, lasted from 1779 to 1783. The Spanish defeat generated immense national pride among the British and helped offset their losses in the American War of Independence. Thereafter, the British population increasingly shared in the sentiment of keeping Gibraltar “British” (Constantine 2013).

The First World War brought no significant unrest to Gibraltar, as Spain was neutral in the conflict, but the Second World War had important effects on Gibraltar that cannot be overlooked. As the position of Gibraltar was of paramount importance for British military operations, it became highly perilous for the civilian population, much of which had to be relocated to the United Kingdom or other Crown dependencies,

such as Jamaica. Many people were exposed to native use of the English language and the British education system for the first time, which in turn promoted a sense of British national identity among Gibraltarians (Levey 2008). The war also inspired important political changes due to the fact that the process of repatriation was fraught with difficulties: some evacuees managed to return to Gibraltar by 1944, but others had to wait until as late as 1949. Some Gibraltarians felt ill-treated by the British authorities and called for some measure of local independence. The first Gibraltarian political party, the Association for the Advancement of Civil Rights (AACR), came into being and succeeded at dominating the political scene for the next forty years (Constantine 2013).

In 1967 the first Gibraltarian national referendum was organized following a request made by the United Nations General Assembly in 1965. The referendum was to establish whether the people of Gibraltar preferred to remain British or wanted to accept Spanish sovereignty. The results sapped Spanish pride immensely as 12,138 citizens of Gibraltar voted to remain under British rule compared with just 44 votes for Spain. Political tensions followed in the wake of the 1967 referendum, when Spain instituted a blockade of the land border. Border activity was stopped overnight in order to diminish the role of Gibraltar and destroy it both economically and morally. The real impact of the blockage was quite the opposite, however, as Gibraltar flourished with British help, while the bordering Spanish *Campo area* suffered heavily. Owing to the lack of everyday influx of Spanish labor into Gibraltar, the role of the Spanish language diminished and it became endangered (Levey 2008). The blockade ended in 1982, but cross-border movement and activity has still not returned to its original levels.

## **1.2. Sociolinguistic studies of Gibraltar**

As might be expected from the short historical overview in section 1.1, the demographics of Gibraltar reflect its rather

colourful history. These days, The Rock is inhabited by approximately 30,000 people, mainly of Spanish, Italian, English and Portuguese ethnic backgrounds. Other important minorities, amongst them Jews, Maltese and Moroccans have also left an indelible mark on the culture of Gibraltar (Kellermann 2001).

Despite a wealth of sociolinguistic research possibilities, surprisingly little scholarship has been done in the area of language variation and code switching in Gibraltar. Weston (2011) suggests that this might be due to Gibraltar's status as a colonial remnant, which may make it unworthy of study in the eyes of numerous linguists. The only monographs devoted to the sociolinguistic situation in Gibraltar are Cavilla (1978), Kramer (1986), Kellermann (2001) and Levey (2008). In addition, there also exist several unpublished theses and articles such as Alameda Hernández (2006), Ballantine (1983), Lipski (1986), Moyer (1993) and Weston (2011). The status of Gibraltar as a relative blank spot on the map of postcolonial varieties of English may be illustrated by its absence from such authoritative recent references on world and postcolonial dialects of English as Kortmann and Schneider (2008) or Schreier et al. (2010), or its omission from Trudgill's groundbreaking study of new dialect formation in the English-speaking world (Trudgill 2006).

The research project conducted by Kellermann (2001) found that there existed a general distrust towards Spain, which in turn had an immense influence on the linguistic situation. The survey showed no integrative attitudes towards Spain: 43% of the people were pro-British, 34% felt Gibraltarian, and 23% both British and Gibraltarian. Kellermann (2001: 122) present data which suggested that *mother tongue* in Gibraltar cannot be equated with *first language*, as more than 50% of the respondents perceived English as their *mother tongue* but only about 10% gave it as their *first language*, with Spanish being the declared first language of almost 80% of the participants. English also seemed to be on the constant upswing, with

Spanish losing ground because of the deep distrust towards Spain in Gibraltarian society.

More recent studies, however, suggest that it is specifically the local variety of English that is gaining prominence due to the growing integrative attitude towards Gibraltar. The study conducted by Levey (2008) focused on the phonetics of Gibraltarian English, and concluded that Gibraltarian English seems to be following British norms but adding a layer of its own peculiarities. He also observed that Yanito and Spanish still seem to be dominating the informal linguistic scene of Gibraltar, and many children come into their first contact with English only upon entering the education system. Yanito is defined by Levey (2008) as:

[...] an Andalusian dominant Spanish form of oral expression which integrates mainly English lexical and syntactic elements as well as some local vocabulary.

Further research into the situation of English and Spanish is clearly necessary, as at the time of Levey's study it was mostly children (9-12 years old) who felt the most comfortable speaking English, suggesting an ongoing process of language shift.

### **1.3. Current political status of Gibraltar**

The socio-political and linguistic spheres in Gibraltar have become even more complex due to the Brexit referendum held in 2016. Gibraltarians voted overwhelmingly in favour of the "Remain" camp (96%) and now may be forced to leave the auspices of the European Union against the will of an overwhelming majority of the local population. The way the campaign before the referendum was conducted was completely different to that seen in the United Kingdom, as Gibraltarians have always felt more positive towards the idea of the European Union. This may be reflected in the fact that

they willingly change their registration plates and IDs, something which never happened in the UK (Garcia 2016).

The fear of Spain harnessing more political power swept through Gibraltar when the results of the referendum were announced, as Spanish foreign minister Alfonso Dastis declared that if Gibraltar decided to stay within the EU, the solution could be shared sovereignty (against which Gibraltar voted in the referendum of 2002). Additionally, he failed to assure Gibraltarians that Spain would leave the borders open, thereby conjuring up fears of a repeat of the blockade of 1969-1982 (Garcia 2016).

Such events are called Events X by Schneider (2007) and may be defined as moments at which the citizens of a subordinate territory realize that the importance they ascribed to their motherland is not reciprocated. Usually, at the beginning, the subordinate territory may feel abandoned and confused; later on, however, those feelings might be transformed into a struggle for independence. It is suggested by Weston (2011) that Gibraltar had already been through such events, but that none of the previous events had turned out to be significant enough to create a strong sense of separate local identity.

Taking all of the facts and recent developments into consideration, it seems that a new sociolinguistic research project needs to be conducted in order to scrutinize the processes of code switching and language shifting currently taking place in Gibraltar. The remainder of the present paper describes the results of an online survey conducted to determine whether such changes are indeed taking place in the sociolinguistic landscape of Gibraltar.

## **2. Data analysis**

### **2.1. Methodology**

The data was collected using a questionnaire designed to gather information on attitudes towards the languages spoken

in Gibraltar and post-Brexit attitudes toward international relations. The survey was supposed to take no more than 5 minutes, as people using the Internet might quickly become indifferent and bored. Later, it was posted on Facebook groups associated with Gibraltar. A total of 38 questionnaires were collected. One questionnaire had to be excluded from the general statistical analysis as the author deliberately provided nonsensical information. The number may seem unimpressive, but one has to bear in mind the total number of Gibraltar's inhabitants (about 30,000), which is similar to the population of a small town in a typical European country.

## **2.2. Analysis**

68.4% of the respondents were male and 31.6% were female. The respondents were divided into 4 different age groups:

- below the age of 19: 4 respondents,
- 19 – 28 years old: 5 respondents,
- 29 – 50 years old: 11 respondents,
- 51+ years old: 18 respondents.

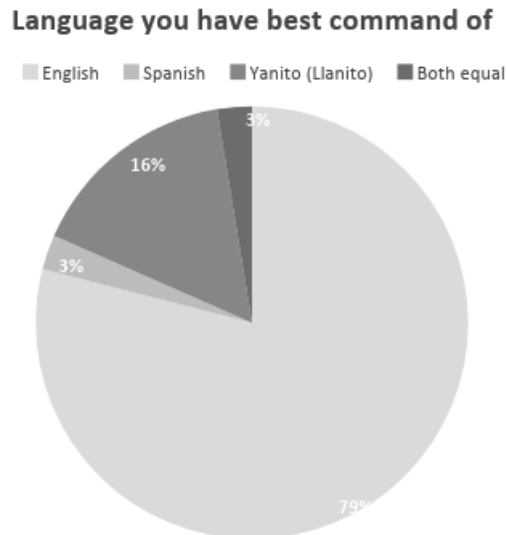
Interestingly, the questionnaire managed to reach people who normally seem to be underrepresented on the Internet, namely people 51 years of age or older. It is important to note that this group came of age during the blockade of 1967-1982, so the people in this age group are likely to remember the event well and thus may have a different perspective on the current developing situation.

Most people taking part in the survey claimed to have a secondary (50%) or tertiary education (42%). Most of the respondents were born in Gibraltar, and all of them were officially recognized residents.

As far as declared mother tongue, 73.7% of the respondents claimed English, 21.1% Yanito (Llanito), and the remaining 5.3% chose Spanish. The data overlapped quite well with the



answers provided to the question concerning the language whose command was the best (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1**

Interestingly, only one person declared Spanish as the language they can speak best. This aligns with Kellermann's (2001: 131) findings, which suggested that Gibraltarians generally feel highly insecure about their variety of Spanish.

The first question was concerned with the change of attitudes towards Gibraltar's political situation after the Brexit referendum of 2016. The question was motivated by Schneider's Events X as the referendum could potentially push Gibraltarians towards feeling a greater sense of local identity and pride. The answers provided can be divided into four basic groups: positive (3 respondents), negative (11 respondents), other (6 respondents), no change/no opinion (10 respondents). It is important to pay close attention to the answers which indicated a perceived change in people's attitudes. The survey indicates that many people feel generally insecure about the new situation in which they now find themselves:

- “I feel unprotected by my mother country UK, leaving the EU, we are less protected by the law”;
- “It is more important than ever to ensure we have stable, effective government”;
- “I consider we are due for some problems once Brexit occurs”;
- “We are powerless”;
- “Made me worry about my future”.

Some respondents also alluded to the distrust towards Spain pointed out by Kellermann (2001), e.g.

- “Spain’s belief that Brexit meant that Gibraltar would revert back to them”;
- “That the EU granting a veto to Spain was a betrayal to Gibraltar”;
- “Spain has expressed its interest in Gib (Gibraltar) many times but now it’s trying to go a step further, making the government more responsible and slightly volatile”.

The second question attempted to collect people’s opinions on whether their attitude towards the role of English in Gibraltar has changed after Brexit, and if so, how. This was also motivated by Schneider’s aforementioned (2007) concept. Some respondents seemed confused and failed to understand that the question pertained to the English language, not the English (British) people. Quite a few people, however, mentioned the growing importance of English in Gibraltar:

- “English is taking over, the youth will only speak English”;
- “No, there’s actually more English speaking people here recently since a lot of Indians and people from other British Commonwealth countries started to come here for work”;
- “My attitude to English hasn’t changed. If anything, I feel that it’s becoming more important due to globalisation”;
- “It is good to know a 2nd language or more, but our identity is British, therefore English is on the ascendancy with upcoming generations”.

One participant in particular claimed that there seemed to be more children in Gibraltar who speak neither Spanish nor Yanito; however, the person added that they were commenting on the situation prior to Brexit, therefore implicitly suggesting that the situation may be affected by Brexit.

The third question checked whether people's attitudes towards the role of Spanish have changed after the Brexit referendum. As Kellermann (2001) pointed out Gibraltarians generally felt great distrust towards Spain and thus, also towards the Spanish language. The referendum and the realisation of Gibraltar's lack of political power might have provided a positive push towards Spain and its language. As with the second question, this seems to have also been misinterpreted by some respondents as a question about Spanish nationals, rather than the Spanish language. A considerable number of participants pointed out the degeneration of Spanish in Gibraltar:

- "(...) I think more kids who don't speak Spanish and more shops where the staff only speak English";
- "I am concerned that the quality of Spanish is very low and dropping fast".

Again, the distrust towards Spain could be sensed in some of the answers provided:

- "The Spanish have NO role to play in Gib (Gibraltar) today or never";
- "Gibraltar will never be Spanish [...]";
- "Spain is lights [years] away from democracy".

It is especially interesting to look at the following position, which draws a comparison between the current Spanish government and General Franco:

- "Yes, the new far right PP Spanish government is awful, and most people here are terrified of them like they were of Franco. The few Spanish people who do live here in Gibraltar are

mostly refugees from the Franco dictatorship, so they're rather concerned about recent statements coming out of his descendant party, the PP."

The fourth question was concerned with the role of Yanito in post-Brexit Gibraltar. The researcher felt it was important to inquire about the state of Yanito as Levey (2008) suggested that, together with Spanish, it was still claiming dominion over the social and informal scene of Gibraltarian life. Most people suggested that there was no change, but it is important to take a closer look at some of the answers:

- "Not really, it's becoming more popular that's it";
- "I think so yes. Llanito needs to be fostered and encouraged. We mustn't lose it";
- "No change, it is part of our identity".

These respondents seem to suggest that Yanito is still used as an act of identity, as described by Levey (2008). Some, however, claimed the contrary:

- "As with Spanish, in 2 generations Llanito will barely exist in Gibraltar";
- "Shame to lose it but it's archaic anyway. Nobody really uses it anyway".

An initial hypothesis was formulated that older respondents would be more likely to claim Yanito as their mother tongue. The data, however, fails to support such a claim, as the distribution of Yanito proved to be unrelated to age: the chi-square statistic is 0.3046, the p-value is .858732, and the result is not significant at  $p < .05$ . Interestingly, however, the combination of the two youngest groups (up to the age of 28) unanimously chose English as the language they have the best command of. The other two age groups together tended to have slightly more variation (20% Yanito), with one respondent choosing both English and Spanish, and one respondent opting for just Spanish. The correlation between these two age

groups and best-spoken language returns a  $p$  value of 0.07616, which is not far below the threshold of statistical significance.

### **3. Conclusions**

Despite the low number of respondents and its being conducted online, the questionnaire described above was able to detect certain important sociolinguistic and socio-political processes taking place in Gibraltar. English is apparently taking over in the official linguistic sphere of Gibraltar. It is, however, important to gather more data on what is happening in unofficial contexts, as some answers suggest that Yanito may still covertly enjoy high prestige.

Growing distrust towards the contemporary Spanish government seems to go hand in hand with the attrition of Spanish, which according to the data has lost the status as a first language of the majority which it once had. Nevertheless, one cannot treat the results of the data as conclusive and more work has to be done offline with fieldwork on the ground.

It seems that Gibraltarians are still highly conflicted over Brexit; as was pointed out by one of the respondents: “It hasn’t affected me that much as I haven’t noticed anything different yet.” Even more than the inhabitants of the United Kingdom, the Gibraltarians cannot yet fully grasp the consequences of the ongoing Brexit negotiations. Thus, it seems vital to pay close attention to the situation in Gibraltar, as the more the local population learns about the inner workings of Brexit, the more likely it is that public opinion will change.

Given how volatile the current state of affairs is, a new sociolinguistic project should be conducted in Gibraltar as soon as possible to determine the relation between these developments, the growth of local identity, and language use. If Gibraltarians are forced to leave the European Union against their will, their affiliation with the United Kingdom may be severely weakened, and this, in turn, may lead to the higher status of local language forms and the increased frequency of local code-switching discourse. These changes are taking place

in a unique speech community, the sole British colony in continental Europe, and it is high time for researchers to turn their attention to Gibraltar.

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