



Language revitalization through a social movement lens: grassroots Galician language activism

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Received: 11 November 2023 / Accepted: 6 January 2024
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Abstract

In this article, a social movement lens is applied to examine the dynamics of an urbanbased language revitalization movement in the Autonomous Community of Galicia (North-western Spain). The potential of Resource Management Theory is explored as a way of systematically analysing the dynamics of urban-based language revitalization movements. It does this by identifying factors which both helped fuel the emergence and growth of this Galician grassroots movement as well as those constraining its potential development. Drawing on in-depth interviews and observations collected over six months of ethnographic fieldwork in one of Galicia's main cities, social movement theory is used to analyse the role of Galician social movement activists as social agents in shaping the success of their language revitalization initiative. We argue that a social movement lens provides a useful analytical toolkit to focus on the grassroots efforts of social agents involved in peripheral ethnolinguistic mobilization in minority language contexts such as Galicia. Ultimately, we aim to show that these social movement revitalization initiatives go beyond language as an object and are centred around language-based struggles which not only address strategy dilemmas but also scaffold social relations and ties among speakers as they mobilize within particular institutional fields.

Keywords Language revitalization · Social movements · Language activism · Minority languages · New speakers · Galician

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Introduction

In one of our many fieldtrips to a Galician city in the Autonomous Community of Galicia in north-western Spain, we spoke at length with Xoel, a Galician language activist who was part of a local grassroots language revitalization initiative.¹ This initiative involved establishing alternative Galician-speaking educational as well as recreational spaces in their efforts to live their lives through the Galician language in this urban context. The aim of their project was to create 'breathing spaces' for the language, a notion used by Fishman (1991: 59) in the context of Reversing Language Shift (RLS) to refer to social domains in which minority language speakers did not need to compete with the majority language. The Galician language activists we spoke to sought to create such spaces in what they saw as a predominantly Spanish-speaking and sometimes hostile environment for urban-based Galician speakers such as themselves. Xoel and other activists' efforts to create such spaces responded to a deep-felt dissatisfaction with almost 40 years of official language policies put in place by the Galician Autonomous Government. Galician has had a co-officially bilingual status with Spanish since the 1980s and has enjoyed a generally more supportive language policy environment in a post-Franco Spain following the country's transition to democracy in 1975. Nevertheless, many Galician language activists remain critical of what has been achieved through institutional policy routes in the decades which followed. Xoel and other language activists we spoke to were sceptical of institutional language policies and their ability to ensure adequate provision for the language. As a group, they were deeply committed to dedicating time and resources to their language revitalization project. As Xoel (Activist, 2018) put it: "our work is based on a long-term approach that has relied on a social movement dynamic from the bottom up" (o noso é um trabalho a longo prazo mais baseado pois no que é umha dinâmica de movimento social desde abaixo).

Of significance in Xoel's comments here is his reference to *our* as opposed to his own individual language revitalization efforts and his framing of these collective grassroots initiatives as a social movement. This points to the collective nature of language struggles which go beyond individual investment in a language project and their speaker agency. This prompts a reflection on what a number of scholars see as an overemphasis on the individual in some contemporary sociolinguistic work with less attention to group dynamics (see for example May, 2022). We suggest that the lens of social movement theory may go some way in addressing this (O'Rourke, forthcoming). Xoel's explicit references to the collective investment of the group and to their social movement dynamic bring into focus a number of inter-related phenomena which will be at the centre of our discussion here. These relate to the role of language activism as "an indispensable field of collective action and claims making" (Heidemann, 2015: 72) and the framing of that collective action as a broader social movement. In this article, we use a social movement lens to examine the dynamics of this urban-based language revitalization initiative. In doing so, we

¹ The names of the organizations have been omitted throughout in order to ensure anonymity of our participants.

will explore the potential that social movement theory presents as a way of framing language revitalization work more broadly.

Framing language revitalization as a social movement

In his seminal work on Reversing Language Shift, Fishman (1991) explicitly defined RLS as a social movement noting that while “language revitalisation efforts may very well be an individual activity, even the activity of an isolated individual, such efforts are much more characteristically a socially patterned and organized activity of the type that sociologists refer to as ‘social movements’” (p. 382). In the sociological literature, social movements are defined as intentional collective efforts by activists to transform the social order (Buechler, 1993) and as “collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part” (Snow et al., 2004: 11). As highlighted in this characterization, the general purpose of such movements is to “promote or oppose social change” combining support for “addressing collective problems, producing public goods, or expressing support for some moral values or principles” with “the identification of targets for collective efforts, specifically articulated in social or political terms” (della Porta & Diani, 2006: 21). The Galician language-based movement described above consists of intentional collective efforts by language activists such as Xoel and others to transform a specific social order. This is a social order which is seen to have favoured the hegemonic structures of the Spanish state within which other linguistic groups (such as Galician, Basque and Catalan) became minoritized. Language revitalization movements such as this can thus be understood as particular types of social movements that attempt to transform various elements of the linguistic social order. Social movement actors do this by calling out what they perceive as unequal power structures between different groups wherein language becomes symbolic of such inequalities. While the Franco years instigated social movements to mobilize Galician as a signifier of progressive forces in Galicia, the official institutions set up after the Spanish *Transición* such as the *Xunta de Galicia* (the Galician Government) often dismissed alternative movements (such as the urban-based initiative studied here) and their grassroots language revitalization social movement dynamics. As Urla has noted: “the study of these new identity movements must recognize that new subjectivities are as much a product of the strategies of resistance as it is of domination [...] best understood not as protecting a true or essential identity from power, but as forging that identity in the process of resistance” (1988, pp. 390–391). As a subaltern language, Galician had long become a sign of Galician people’s collective struggles, be it trade union protests, demonstrations against governmental policies, or any other forms of dissent, similar to how Basque is described to function as a “sign of alterity and opposition to the Spanish state and its institutions” (Urla, 1995: 253). As such, Galician social movements and alternative grassroots initiatives such as the one examined here, reassert Galician as a distinctive index of social struggle.

Despite showing clear alignment with definitions of what can be understood as a social movement in the broader social movement literature, surprisingly, language-based movements have remained largely absent from such sociological discussions. They have also been largely absent from contemporary theorising of strategies around collective protest (Urla, 2012). Instead, as Fishman (1994) noted, language revitalization movements have often been framed as irrational entities, negatively associated with regionalism and sometimes, violent ethnic nationalism. As many scholars have shown, however, contemporary European minority language activism can also be very clearly connected with wider waves of progressive identity politics and ethnonationalist mobilization. A framing of language activism within progressive identity politics situates language revitalization movements within a new branch of social movements that developed during the waves of protest and decolonization processes of the 1960s and 70s (Harguindéguy & Cole, 2013; Heidemann, 2014).

While language has been identified by many scholars as a socially and politically contentious site for cultural difference in the modern world (Brubaker, 2015), attempts to develop language activism as a coherent field of study are nonetheless relatively recent (Combs & Penfield, 2012; De Korne, 2021; Florey, 2008). As such, there has been limited systematic application of social movement theories as a way of framing grassroots language revitalization initiatives. There have of course been notable exceptions. Hourigan (2004) used the lens of social movements theories to examine various indigenous minority language media campaigns in Europe focusing specifically on the dynamics of grassroots activists as key social movement actors in these campaigns. Heidemann (2012) has drawn on social movement theories in his analysis of Basque language revitalization in France. Urla's (2012) longstanding work on the Basque language movement in Spain has explicitly examined language activism from the perspective of contemporary social movements as "forms of domination that are cultural in nature" (p. 5). O'Rourke and Ramallo (2015) and O'Rourke (2018) touch on social movements in their framing of Galician new speakers as an *active minority*. They draw on Moscovici's (1976) notion of *active minorities* which is used to describe individuals or groups, who through their behaviour, attempt to influence both the attitudes and practices of the majority and in doing so, bring about social change. They classify *neofalangismo* (literally neo-speakerism or a new speakerist movement) as an active minority, similar to environmentalist, squatters, feminist and nationalist movements. Costa (2017) has also hinted at social movements in his work on Occitan in France, arguing for an "approach to the study of language revitalisation that relies on the repoliticisation of the processes at stake, by considering them primarily as social movements in which language plays a central part" (p. 58).

In his systematic application of social movement theories through his analysis of Basque language revitalization in France, Heidemann (2015: 73) draws on one particular strand of social movement theory known as Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) (Buechler, 1993; Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; McCarthy & Zald, 1987) "which postulates that the success of a social movement is shaped by the strategic capacity of social actors to draw on symbolic and material resources within a broader environment of opportunities and constraints". Combining

several strands of RMT (Jasper, 2004; Kriesi, 2004; Melucci, 1995; Tilly, 2010), Heidemann (2015) proposes a two-pronged framework along two main axes. The first axis involves the examination of what he refers to as *positive factors* influencing processes of mobilization which he categorises as either intersubjective strategies (at a microsociological level) or structural opportunities (at a macrosociological level). The other looks at *negative factors* which can be seen to constrain processes of mobilization, involving either intersubjective dilemmas (at a microsociological level) or structural obstacles (at a macrosociological level).

In what follows, we explore the potential of a social movement toolkit and specifically Heidemann's Resource Management Theory Framework as a way of more systematically exploring the dynamics of urban-based language revitalization movements. In line with contemporary developments in Language Policy and Planning (Tollefson & Pérez-Milans, 2018) as well as in sociolinguistics and social theory more broadly (Heller, 2014), we also show how this framework can benefit from further conceptual work which moves beyond a micro–macro dichotomy, bringing us closer to an understanding of social movement activity as situated social action. In this article, we draw on and adapt key elements of Heidemann's framework to understand what factors helped fuel the emergence and growth of the Galician grassroots initiative presented above and identify factors that may have constrained its potential development. We begin with a brief overview of Resource Management Theory (RMT). We then go on to use RMT as a way of framing our analysis of Galician social movement activists and their role as active social agents in shaping the success of their language revitalization initiative. We draw on in-depth interviews and observations at a number of fieldwork sites involving six months of ethnographic engagement in one of Galicia's main cities.

Resource management theory framework

Resource Management Theory (RMT) is a strand of social movement theory which developed under the rubric of 'resource mobilization' (RM) in the 1960s and which put forward the idea that resources and political opportunity were key to understanding social movements (Gamson, 1975; McCarthy & Zald, 1973; Oberschall, 1973). A Resource Management approach moved away from classical social movement theory (Smelser, 1962) which had been established to study 1920/1930s social movements such as civil and labour rights movements and depicted collective action in negative terms and as an irrational endeavour. New civil rights movements in the 1960s, however, brought with them a new wave of collective action, discrediting the tenets of Classical Social Movement Theory.

Early theorizations of RM also came under criticisms of their own for their overemphasis on an instrumental-rational model of social action. In this model, individual agency tended to be based on a utilitarian model which overstated the role of economic resources in social movement mobilization. In response to these criticisms, a new lens to approach RM emerged in the 1980s (McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 1988) which paid more attention to small-scale collective action (such as the Galician urban-based language revitalization project at the centre of our

study) and political opportunity, questioning the focus on economic resources which the previous wave of RM had identified. These later theorizations of RM thus moved away from more static approaches which had focused on identifying existing economic resources held by social actors, to more dynamic interpretations, with a greater emphasis on the agentive resourcefulness of social actors themselves (Heidemann, 2015). This as we will see is played out by Galician social actors through the creation of spaces of linguistic sustainability in the Galician urban context. These social actors do this at the peripheries of the broader Galician language revitalization movement and without any official institutional support (O'Rourke & Dayán-Fernández, 2024).

Heidemann's RMT framework and its application to language-based movements aligns with this dynamic approach to resource management, focusing not only on what he terms 'macro-level' but also on 'micro-level factors' and the role of social movement activists as active social agents in shaping the success of the social movement. Heidemann (2015) develops a framework which brings together both macro and micro-sociological factors, identifying four sub-factors within each of these which he argues can be seen to positively or negatively influence mobilization amongst social movement actors. In Heidemann's framework, macro-sociological factors include: (a) structural opportunities and (b) structural obstacles in the external environment while micro-sociological factors relate to (c) intersubjective strategies and (d) intersubjective dilemmas within the group itself. Micro-sociological factors can be linked to both positive and negative macro-sociological factors which originate outside of the movement itself and which can be seen to facilitate or hinder processes of mobilization. While social movement scholars have invariably looked at all of these factors in their work, Heidemann's RTM framework brings them together to produce a more unified analytical tool which can be used to predict the success of a social movement.

Drawing on the work of social movement scholars such as Kriesi (2004) and Tilly (2010), in Heidemann's (2015) framework, 'structural opportunities' constitute the symbolic and material factors which facilitate and support the mobilization efforts of social movement actors. These can encompass fixed features in the external environment such as institutional designs of state-based governance. They can also refer to fluctuating features such as political or economic changes and crises. 'Structural obstacles' on the other hand are seen to constrain mobilization efforts and can include for example pressure by political authorities to suppress the movement. At the micro-level in Heidemann's framework, intersubjective strategies refer to those strategies used by social movement actors themselves to advance their cause while intersubjective dilemmas, on the other hand, refer to the negative effects of such things as physical and emotional burn-out among activists as well as ideological differences within the movement.

While the so-called 'macro' and 'micro' dichotomy used in Heidemann's framework above has been used in social science to separate out different levels of social structures, organisation and processes, this dichotomy has come under scrutiny over the past number of decades with many social scientists questioning its continued productivity (see for example Cicourel, 1978; Collins, 1981; Mehan, 1987). Such scrutiny has been based on the much-debated question around how to

link macro and micro levels of social structure. Building on this work, Heller (2014: 12) has also advocated for “undoing the macro/micro dichotomy” in sociolinguistics (for a more recent discussion see also Spitzmüller, 2022), a dichotomy which Heller suggests does not bring us any closer to understanding how the language practices we observe in social life in the here and now, are linked to durable patterns which lie beyond the awareness of individuals. This has parallels with other popular but also increasingly contested dichotomies in Language Policy and Planning research such as top-down/bottom-up distinctions (see Tollefson & Pérez-Milans, 2018).

Although ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ factors are presented as separate entities and discussed individually in Heidemann’s framework, he does make it clear that they are of course in many ways inter-related and that this inter-relatedness can in turn affect the extent to which positive or negative outcomes for a social movement and its actors can be achieved. For example, while at a micro-level social movement actors may put in place strategies to advance their cause, these strategies may be hampered by macro-sociological factors brought about by political or economic changes which are external to the group, but which may nonetheless have an important impact on the internal goals which the social movement wishes to attain. Similarly, and as Heidemann (2015: 74) suggests, seemingly negative macro-sociological factors which act as external obstacles to the success of the social movement can sometimes have a positive effect on mobilization and can in fact create greater solidarity amongst social actors and a desire to bring about change. As such, in Heidemann’s framework there is clearly an emphasis on the inter-related relationship between the practices of social movement actors, observable in their day-to-day activities and the broader overarching social patterns beyond their awareness. To further emphasize this inter-relatedness, we move beyond a micro/macro binarism in our analysis below, drawing instead on Giddens’ (2004) notions of ‘structure’ and ‘action’. In doing so, we attempt to more explicitly underline their inter-related and dialectical relationship. As we will demonstrate, this relationship exists as observable patterns of situated social action, played out in the everyday practices of social movement actors on the ground.

Context and method

Our analysis of social movement dynamics draws on a case study of one particular language revitalization initiative in a Galician city situated within the Autonomous Community of Galicia in north-western Spain. It constitutes a grassroots initiative which was set up by a group of urban-based Galician new speakers, a category of speaker often referred to locally as *neofalantes* (literally neo-speakers). This category of speaker aligns in various ways with the more generic new speaker concept. This concept is used by some minority language sociolinguists and language revitalization scholars to describe the growing number of ‘non-native’ speakers of European minoritized languages who were not brought up speaking these languages in the home but acquired them through the education system, in the community or through language revitalization projects (see O’Rourke et al., 2015 for an overview). The neofalante label can also be used to designate a Galician

speaker who was not brought up speaking the minority language in the home but acquired it mainly (although not always exclusively) through the education system and made a conscious decision to 'become' a Galician speaker, at times displacing the use of Spanish altogether (O'Rourke & Ramallo, 2013). Some of the neofalantes in our study came from homes in which extended family members, including parents and grandparents, used Galician amongst themselves. As such these neofalantes had a passive knowledge of the language growing up but did not tend to be active users. Other neofalantes in our study came from predominantly Spanish-speaking households with very little passive exposure to the language either within the home or from the predominantly Spanish-speaking urban context in which they lived. A smaller number of neofalantes in our study came from outside of the Autonomous Community of Galicia. These neofalantes had acquired the language as adults when they moved to Galicia from other parts of Spain or from other parts of the world.

The decision to 'become' a Galician speaker is often politically motivated with a strong activist stance (O'Rourke, 2011). Many of the social movement actors we spoke to had previously transitioned to Galician several years before, often in late adolescence and early adulthood. Disillusioned with what they saw as insufficient Galician in the educational system and the lack of opportunities to use Galician in the urban environment in which they lived, their language revitalization initiative provided alternative educational and recreational spaces for children and parents entirely through the medium of Galician. The founders of the initiative were also members of a larger cultural project linked to a *centro social* (social centre) in the city. This social centre and others like it, constituted spaces where alternative living arrangements, social and educational events and political campaigns are hosted (Yates, 2015). Language revitalization was central to the ethos of the *centro social* with a focus on reviving and reinventing Galician customs and traditions, including the Galician language. Members of the social centre were politically to the left and tended to adopt an anti-capitalist, anti-globalization stance with strong discourses around social justice, equality and human rights. Their activist position in relation to minoritized languages such as Galician was linked to these broader set of values and ideologies.

As O'Rourke (2018, 2019) has discussed in more detail elsewhere, these alternative educational and recreational spaces allow social movement actors to create 'breathing spaces' for the purpose of language revitalization efforts, providing positive environments to encourage the use of the minority language. These spaces often play a particularly important role in cities where urban-based new speakers sometimes see the need to carve out new spaces of interaction both symbolically as well as more concretely through permanent places including alternative bars, social centres and immersion schools (see O'Rourke, 2022). A broadly similar dynamic can be found in other language revitalization contexts: *Ciorcail Chomhrá* or Conversation Circles which form part of Irish language revitalization efforts have been found to function as 'safe spaces' for new speakers of Irish (O'Rourke, 2015; O'Rourke & Walsh, 2020) and we also find other examples of 'safe spaces' in more recent work in Catalonia (Puigdevall et al., 2022).

Over a period of six months, we used these educational and recreational spaces as anchors through which to gain access to language activists. Where possible and

practical, we interviewed language activists in person, either in their places of work, at home, or in public settings. We conducted 18 in-depth interviews of approximately 60-min. duration. In addition, we convened three focus group discussions which included group leaders as well as others social movement actors. We also availed of opportunities to observe activists in meetings and discussions and recorded fieldnotes on those observations that informed our growing understanding of activist culture and discourse. Official standard Galician was used for transcribing purposes but some of the quotations included here are transcribed in the Galician–Portuguese standard promoted by these organizations and by some of their members. These educational and recreational spaces also displayed alternative understandings of Galician beyond the standardized forms used in official institutional contexts. Other varieties such as *reintegrationist* varieties of Galician which align closely with Portuguese orthography and spelling were also promoted. Some of the language activists connected to these language revitalization projects advocated for closer alignment between Galician and Portuguese and the establishment of greater links between Galician cultural practices and the wider Lusophone world (for an overview of the standardization debate see Samartim, 2022; Dayán-Fernández & O'Rourke, 2020; Monteagudo, 2019b; Salgado & Monteagudo, 1993).

The data was coded following a mixture of evocative, descriptive, and thematic coding (Saldaña, 2015) and analysed in NVivo drawing on Bazeley and Jackson (2013) to look for themes and patterns across a highly rich dataset. The data was then interpreted through a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; McCarty, 2015; Pavlenko, 1998; Tse, 2000) of the factors which may be shaping the social movement dynamic. In the next section, we will examine these factors, discussing the strategies used by social movements actors to address both external and internal opportunities and constraints.

Structural opportunities and constraints in the language-based social movement

Structural factors can be seen to both empower and disempower social movement activity creating both opportunities as well as constraints. In our analysis of this Galician language-based movement, we identified a variety of social factors which were linked to large scale transformations in Galicia's socio-political environment, and which would seem to have shaped the mobilization efforts of these Galician social movement actors. Social movement scholars have investigated the emergence of turning points in social movements across a variety of contexts (Heidemann, 2014). These include strategic measures deployed by the black civil rights movement (Morris, 1999) or feminist movements (Taylor, 1989), amongst others. As Heidemann (2014: 350) suggests, turning points can come about in social movements as a result of external “shocks” such as political or economic crises (Ramos, 2008) or “critical events” (Staggenborg, 1993) causing significant changes within the social movement itself. From discussions with Galician social movements actors, we identified a number of key events which seemed to have shaped their mobilization efforts.

A key structural constraint identified by social movement actors more broadly was the perceived lack of official government support for the language. Galician was given co-official status in the 1980s alongside Spanish following Spain's transition to democracy in 1975. Similar to other historically minoritized languages in Spain including Basque and Catalan, Linguistic "Normalization" Laws were put in place in the 1980s to mitigate the process of linguistic substitution to Spanish. While similar laws in Catalonia and the Basque Country have led to a greater presence of their respective minoritized languages in the public sphere, according to many commentators, this has been less successfully achieved in the Galician context (Monteagudo, 2019a, 2019b; Williams, 2023). Language policy interventions in Galicia have often been described as lukewarm with an overall lack of officially required legal stipulations implemented on the ground (Lorenzo Suárez, 2005; Nandi et al., 2023). The 1983 Linguistic Normalization Law stipulated that a minimum of fifty percent of the school curriculum should be taught in Galician. However, this stipulation was generally not adhered to, particularly in urban schools where Spanish tended to be more widely used (Silva-Valdivia, 2010). The minimum fifty percent requirement was thus often interpreted as a maximum threshold. The 2010 *Lei de Plurilingüismo* (the Plurilingualism Decree) replaced the bilingual Spanish-Galician model with a trilingual Spanish-Galician-English one, further reducing the ratio of Galician within the education system. Consecutive centre-right wing Galician governments have adopted a *laissez-faire* approach to language matters that implicitly promotes the idea of "harmonious" bilingualism (Tenreiro, 2001) or what has more recently been termed "friendly" (cordial) bilingualism. This promotion foregrounds the non-conflictual co-existence of Spanish and Galician within the community, framing Galicia as a site of what is understood as 'balanced bilingualism' in which individuals are free to use either language in any context but where neither is seen to be used to the detriment of the other. The Galician Government's language policy was thus seen as promoting a false 'harmonious bilingualism' which was seen to further reinforce the existing hegemony of Spanish. Core activist members noted that the Galician public education system remains constrained by Spanish educational law, which means that realistically any aspiration to implement a decisively pro-Galician model will be truncated. Thus, they present themselves as an organization operating in the margins against a Spanish centralist system that renders them invisible and which can rely solely on the voluntary militant investment of their adherents.

Social movement actors were highly critical of these policy changes during one of our focus group discussions, describing the 2010 law as a 'premeditated policy' (política premeditada) on the part of the Galician government who they saw as engaging in the 'destruction of the language' (destrución do idioma). Labelling the new law with terms such as 'plurilingualism' (plurilingüismo) which on the surface seemed to advocate for linguistic diversity and inclusivity, was described by social movement actors as 'false' (falsidade), seeing this policy change as further attempts by the Galician government to 'annihilate' the language (aniquilación do galego). While low intensity language policies in Galicia were not conducive to the pro-Galician agenda that social movement actors sought, these constraints and the further diluting of existing language

policies through the new 2010 Law provided what Staggenborg (1993) refers to as a transformational trigger, resulting in an increased drive for mobilization. This led to greater commitment and solidarity amongst these social movement actors, culminating in the eventual establishment of their language revitalization project. This involved setting up alternative educational and recreational spaces in which Galician would be the main language.

While the language policy landscape and institutional support (or lack of it) were key mobilizing factors for social movement actors, the dynamics of the group were also influenced by other social factors that went beyond a purely language revitalization agenda. Language rights and demands for social justice for Galician speakers as a linguistic minority were part of a broader ethos around social justice to which many of these language activists prescribed. This included other forms of activism such as climate change, feminism, anti-globalization and environmentalism amongst others. These social movement actors engaged in what they referred to as ‘multi-activism’ (multiactivismo) pointing to the simultaneous involvement in several strands of activism and social justice agendas. In our discussions with language activists, they identified the 2002 environmental disaster brought about by the oil spill off the Galician coast (known as “Prestige”, see: Aguilar Fernández & Ballesteros Peña, 2010 for an overview) as an important turning point in their language revitalization project. Many of these language activists had been involved in the protest movement *Nunca Máis* (Never Again, in Galician) which the disaster had sparked. In this and other collective struggles in Galicia, the use of the Galician language had long become a sign of protest, be it trade union protests, demonstrations against governmental policies, or other forms of dissent. Not only did Galician function like other minority languages such as Basque “as a sign of alterity and opposition to the Spanish state and its institutions” (Urla, 1995: 253), but many language activists also used Galician as the language of protest against the local Galician government and their policies. As such, even though language revitalization and language rights have not been the central focus of environmental and other political protests, the Galician language came to be symbolic of broader socio-political and socio-economic struggles in Galicia.

Leading figures from within the language-based social movement at the centre of our study pointed to the *Nunca Máis* movement as a critical point in wider grassroots mobilization in Galicia. This was something that they emphasised also had a strong influence on future mobilizations linked to their own language revitalization efforts. This is captured in the following excerpt from one of our focus group discussions:

...há umha série de persoas na minha geração que coincidimos no movimento Nunca Máis [...] é um momento dramático, um momento de crise ecológica, política, pero que estabeleceu laços afetivos e a forma de trabalhar naquele momento, penso que condicionou despois muito o nosso trabalho como ativistas.

(Activist, 2018)

... there are a variety of people of my generation who met during the *Nunca Máis* movement [...], it was a dramatic moment, a moment of ecological

and political crisis which established emotional ties; and the way of doing things back then, I think predetermined a lot our work as language activists today (our translation)

Some commentators regard *Nunca Máis* protests as a key milestone in the formation of a transversal social movement in Galicia (Herrida González, 2015). The *Nunca Máis* movement was also seen as an important turning point in the reconstruction of Galician civil society (Diz Otero & Lois González, 2005), leading to unparalleled levels of mobilization in Galician history. The demonstrations led by the *Nunca Máis* movement at the time focused on publicly criticising both Galician and Spanish governments' management of the environmental disaster while at the same time using this protest movement as a way of seeking justice for Galicians and wider struggles including those linked to the historical minoritization of the Galician language within the Spanish state.

According to Galician language activists, the *Nunca Máis* movement created a sense of solidarity and a set of common goals. It also forged emotional ties with other social movement actors. Indeed, numerous scholars have identified emotions and affect as key factors in social movement formation (see for example: Jasper, 1998, 2011; Goodwin & Jasper, 2006; Goodwin et al., 2001, 2004). Emotions have also been identified as accelerators and amplifiers of collective action (Demertzis, 2021), with recent examples such as the Black Lives Matter movement (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022), mobilizations against climate change (Mataityté, 2021), or the Arab Spring (Coşkun, 2019). Language activists made frequent references to affection and to the emotional ties which were seen as constituting fundamental pillars of how different social movements were starting to interconnect. As such, the 2002 environmental catastrophe, built solidarity amongst activists across different social movements (including language revitalization movements), going beyond the environmentalist agenda within which the *Nunca Máis* movement had been formed. The following excerpt from focus group discussions with language activists sums this up well:

...tede en conta o aspecto emocional, ideas, comportamentos e emocións, é o que nos leva *pa* diante. A xente móvese por emocións, por afectos e sobre todo pola esperanza de que o traballo que facemos ten consecuencias. Eu vivino na cadea humana da marea negra, hai moito tempo, cando vin que 40.000 rapaces e rapazas, profesores e profesoras xuntaban as súas mans ao longo da costa galega [...] e os que vivimos iso, vivimos algo moi impresionante. Esa xente somos os que hoxe estamos defendendo a lingua tamén.” (Activist, 2018).

...consider the emotional side of things, ideas, behaviours and emotions, it is what keeps us going forward. People act through emotions, through affection, and, above all, in the hope that all the work we do will have consequences. I experienced this during the human chain of the black tide [referring to the oil spill], a long time ago, when I saw that 40,000 young people, girls and boys and teachers held hands together all along the Galician coast [...] and those of us who lived through this, we experienced something really impressive. We are the same people who are also defending the language today. (our translation)

The human chains referred to above not only had symbolic but also material repercussions on how connections between activists working across different areas of mobilization were forged. This led to the materialization of other social projects over time including the urban-based language revitalization initiative discussed here.

Intersubjective dilemmas, strategies and actions

While the multi-activism described above provided structural opportunities which strengthened the mobilising power of this urban-based language revitalization movement, it also led to intersubjective dilemmas amongst social movement actors including physical and emotional burn-out. Several activists talked about how exhausting such multi-activism often became:

Ao final somos pouca gente e o trabalho reparte-se, mas si que as nossas energias som limitadas. (Activist, 2018)

At the end of the day, we are only a few people and work is shared, but it is true that our energies are limited (our translation)

While language activists shared broadly similar values and prescribed to an overarching agenda of social justice for all, intersubjective dilemmas also arose out of inter-group tensions. Ideological differences led to certain frictions within the group as well as a lack of consensus around how their goals should be reached. Key amongst these were, on the one hand, how to strike a balance between growing their language revitalization initiative and getting more people on board and on the other hand, ensuring that they retained the core objective of the language revitalization project, which was to create a Galician-speaking environment that could serve as a ‘breathing space’ for the language in Fishmanian terms as described above. All of the language activists we spoke to were acutely aware of the need for human capital in order to sustain and grow their language revitalization project, without which its longevity would be threatened. However, this led to various points of contention amongst social movement actors with differing views on whether or not this meant opening up the space to children from predominantly Spanish-speaking families as well. Some social movement actors recognized that in order to grow the project, a critical mass was required and supported the idea of including what could be described as ‘potential’ new speakers of Galician (Ramallo & O’Rourke, 2014). While not active speakers of Galician, these potential new speakers had an ability to speak the language, an ability which they had acquired through the educational system or through passive exposure to the language at a community level. Their desire to be part of the language revitalization project was also testament to their commitment to investing in a pro-Galician agenda and greater use of the language by their children. Others however saw the inclusion of these (as yet) non-Galician speaking families in the project as a potential threat. There were fears that an open-door policy could dilute the Galician ‘safe space’ that the proponents of the project had sought to establish in the first place as a way of counteracting what they saw as a predominantly Spanish-speaking urban environment (O’Rourke,

2019). In our discussions with social movement actors, some members were reported to have abandoned the project in its early stages because such policies were seen as exclusionary. This was a constant point of contention within the group's general assembly and was also debated in focus group discussions which we organized as the following excerpt illustrates:

Nós vivimos nunha constante precariedade, quero dicir [...] que nos gustaría poder aceptar a todo o mundo, porque iso foi un gran debate tamén dentro do grupo [...] un problema que temos é a pouca militancia, é dicir, necesitamos máis capital humano. Necesitamos máis persoas *i non sei*, eu son crítica [...] O proxecto *se mantén* por afectividade, por emocións, porque algo te enche *i eu creo* que esa parte nos preocupa tanto o día a día, a cuestión económica, que hai que facer non sei que [...] que non coidamos a veces as relacións humanas, que é a única maneira de medrar, eu creo, medrar humanamente, porque aquí hai cabida para todo o mundo [...] *i dedicamos pouco ao lecer conxunto.*

(Activist, 2018)

We are in a state of constant precarity, I mean [...] of course we would love to accept everyone, and that was a huge debate also within the group [...] a problem we have is our scarce militancy, that is, we need more human capital. We need more people and I don't know, I am critical [...] The project *is sustained* through affect, emotions, and because something fulfils you *and I think* that part is what concerns us so much on a day-to-day basis, the economic question, that we need to do this and that [...] sometimes we don't look after our human relationships, which is the only way to grow, I think, to grow on a human level, because there is room for everyone here [...] and we don't devote enough time to leisure activities together (our translation).

The lack of human capital referred to above relates to the group's perceived inability to counteract the potentially negative effects that more Spanish-speaking families might have on their already fragile Galician-speaking environment. In earlier work on the dynamics of 'breathing spaces' for Galician new speakers, O'Rourke (2019) noted that:

...while the separate spaces that Galician new speakers sought to construct and their other efforts made sure that Galician was no longer in direct competition or conflict with Spanish, the majority language, and while these creative acts supported experiences of emancipation and empowerment, these new speakers at the same time constructed their own and others' speech as a battlefield for purity. This subsequently invited a growing anxiety, and even feelings of unsafety, over language within the spaces that were to promote an unencumbered use of Galician (O'Rourke, 2019: 117).

Indeed, key challenges that language-based social movements face relate on the one hand to creating 'safe spaces' for the language while on the other, a recognition that to grow, these spaces must be accessible to a broader

pool of individuals regardless of their linguistic background. The need for greater inclusion was driven by pragmatic concerns such as ongoing resource scarcities, particularly in terms of human capital. Some activists connected what they perceived as the lack of human capital with a struggle to improve the affective and emotional side of their collaborations which points to a fundamental activism conundrum: a lack of human capital translates into insufficient militancy. Key activists are then burdened with overwhelming responsibilities, putting pressure on the group to increase their economic capacity to make up for a lack of sufficient volunteer work, thus unintentionally overlooking crucial human relationships and collective wellbeing.

To address the various dilemmas they faced, Galician social movement actors developed clearly defined strategies and actions. These included organizational strategies to enhance the effectiveness, stability, cohesion, and efficiency of the movement, practices which as Heidemann (2015: 86) notes, are associated with the concept of “mobilizing structures” used by McCarthy and Zald (1987) in the field of social movement studies. The Galician social movement actors we studied used mobilizing structures such as organizational frameworks to better coordinate their actions and decision-making processes. One of the key organizational strategies adopted by the group was the implementation of an associative structure. This drew heavily on a horizontal system of leadership and division of labour that encouraged greater participation and volunteerism among members. In contrast, a hierarchical model of vertical leadership that vested decision-making power in a small group of individuals was largely rejected. The strategic reliance on a robust horizontal structure of what they referred to as an ‘*iniciativa popular*’ (popular initiative) and as a non-profit group, was a defining feature of the movement’s organizational identity. There were nevertheless underlying tensions around the relationship between militant and professional roles within the social movement. For example, one of the founding members of the group, spoke vividly about the need to separate out activist and technical roles, with the latter involved in managing the revitalization project as an organization, complete with a professional and stable leadership structure.

As the group expanded in size and scope, it increasingly relied on ‘*assembleas xerais*’ (General Assemblies) to convene its members and engage in collective deliberation and reflection. This committee-like structure is not uncommon in the grassroots activist world and “reflects the way that language revival was seen as an integral part of being politically progressive” (Urla, 2012: 175). From our observations of these assemblies, attendees engaged in critical evaluations of how their language revitalization project was reaching its goals (or not) as well as making crucial decisions on a range of issues, such as designing new curricula for immersion schools, training teachers, and overcoming financial constraints. Important decisions concerning the planning of protests, the content of publicity campaigns, and how strategies to grow their language revitalization initiative were also made during these meetings. While such assemblies sometimes exposed ideological differences and led to frustration among activists, collaboration and coordination were ultimately facilitated in a manner that was widely regarded as inclusive and equitable.

As Heidemann (2014) notes, collaboration and group cohesion can also be built through what Tilly (2010) refers to as *performative strategies* as a means of fostering

a sense of unity and dedication among activists themselves and creating ties with the general public. This involved presenting their project at festivals and participating as a collective in protest events. Social movement actors participated in annual local events which coincide with traditional festivities such as the Galician *entroido* (carnival) as well as street marches on key dates in the national calendar such as *Día das Letras Galegas* (Galician Language Day) and other national celebrations such as Galicia's National Day on the 25th of July, celebrated both by public institutions and the grassroots movements. Many of these events feature the wearing of traditional Galician costumes and displays of traditional music and dance. Having stands at different festivals and fairs was also another way of getting people to know about the project and to raise awareness about the language. They raised visibility of the group through information leaflets and other merchandise including t-shirts with a specifically designed logo of the group as well as crafts and homemade food items donated by social movement members. While giving prominence to the group and its activities, this was also used to raise funds for the group's activities, allowing them to further expand their reach.

While actively engaging with Galician traditions, social movement actors reinvented them, making them into what they referred to frequently as *espazos de resistencia e transformación* (spaces of resistance and transformation). They saw these spaces as a way of challenging conservative narratives around Galician culture and identity, deconstructing and transcreating them in the context of today's urban landscape. One example of this is the reinvention and reappropriation of the Galician tradition of singing in verse called *Regueifa* (similar to slam poetry). While traditional *Regueifa* practices were often associated with older rural men and machismo, its modern form has been reinvented through a feminist lens, giving special prominence to women, as well as moving away from the patriarchal lyrics that used to be central to the practice. Within this grassroots social movement, we saw a noticeable push towards themes choosing themes aligned with issues of social justice, environmentalism and anti-consumerism, similar in many ways, as Prego Vázquez (2012) suggests, in relation to other social movement protests, manifested for example through Afro-American hip-hop (Ibid: 246). These practices are also reminiscent of modern-day practices of the *Bertsolaritza* tradition of singing in verse in the Basque context, which Urla (2021) has pointed to as spaces of "dialogic co-creation" (p. 34). In the grassroots social movement at the centre of our study, performativeness, through reinvented traditions, such as *Regueifa*, was a key part of the group's strategic goals to promote their values and progressive worldviews.²

² The specific ways in which *Regueifa* is used by social movement actors as a tool for fostering collective action will be addressed in a future analysis.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Language has been identified as a key socially and politically contentious site for cultural difference in the modern world but attempts to develop language activism as a coherent field of study are relatively recent. There has been a lack of systematic analysis of what Heidemann (2012: 200) refers to as the “how and why civil society actors engage in collective action and make rights-based claims upon educational and political authorities in the name of language vitality”. In this article we have used a social movement lens to examine the dynamics of an urban-based language revitalization initiative. In doing so, we have explored the potential that a social movement toolkit presents as a means of framing language revitalization work more broadly.

While very clearly aligned with how social movements are defined in the broader sociological literature, references to language revitalization movements in this extensive literature have been largely absent. The framing of language revitalization and attempts to reverse language shift as irrational with negative connotations linked to violent ethnic nationalism has meant that the highly rational, strategic, as well as progressive approaches taken by social movement actors involved in language-based struggles are often overlooked. Far from being irrational, language revitalization movements, as our study of Galician language activists has shown, are highly rational entities in which as Urla (2012) has previously pointed out: “language advocates often look to forms of expertise in the fields of marketing, entrepreneurialism, and quality management as a way of becoming more efficient and effective in their efforts” (p. 140). A social movement lens thus provides a useful analytical toolkit to focus on the grassroots efforts of social agents involved in the type of peripheral ethnolinguistic mobilization we find in our Galician case study. This can, we argue, help us better understand the dynamics of revitalization initiatives that focus on language-based struggles which forge social relations and ties among speakers as they mobilize within particular institutional fields (Heidemann, 2012, 2014, 2015). We would argue that language activism as social movement provides a promising framework within which to examine the dynamics of language-based movements and to systematically explore the structural opportunities and dilemmas which shape ethnolinguistic mobilization.

In our study, we used the lens of social movements to make sense of the external and internal sociological factors that, while appearing disjointed on the surface, had an important influence on the development of the urban-based language revitalization movement at the centre of our analysis. Our analysis shifts the contemporary focus in some sociolinguistic work on the individual back to the collective nature of language-based struggles. This case study also adds complexity to accounts of language revitalization movements as purely based on disputes within the group over categorization, legitimization, and classification struggles (Bourdieu, 1980; Costa, 2017) or as merely processes of acculturation that seek to emulate the institutions of modernity that the majority groups possess (Costa, 2024). Instead, following Urla (1995), we argue that grassroots language

revitalization movements such as the Galician language revitalization project presented above, engage in the creation of alternative forms of culture in which new collective linguistic futures are formed. This perspective also underscores the agentive leeway that ethnolinguistic mobilization can attain within the structural constraints imposed by majority groups (Linn & Dayán-Fernández, 2024) and how, in Heidemann's words (2014), social movement actors transition from "seeing" to "seizing" structural opportunities.

Similar to many language-based movements in other parts of the world, the Galician language revitalization project presented above highlights what De Korne (2021: 10) notes, following Ferguson (2010), Hinton (2013), Hermes et al. (2012), Henne-Ochoa et al. (2020), Meek (2010), and others, that is, the importance of language activism as a way of undertaking a sustainable relationality to the collective which is focused on social relations rather than abstractable notions of language as an object. As she puts it:

"They note the crucial links between language, place, and identity, while highlighting that it is not a linguistic object that makes these links but rather communication as social action and as process. Consequently, they argue for an approach to language reclamation centered around social relations" (Ibid.).

Our analysis of this language revitalization movement as a form of activism sits within a complex matrix of social movement activity in which social actors are seeking social justice around interconnected causes. As we saw in our study, language activism was intertwined with other forms of activism in response to political crises and environmental disasters. This feeds into an emerging literature in this area which brings into focus such connections. These include for example studies that have looked at the interconnections between the impact of climate change and the preservation strategies of Northern Ghana's minoritized languages (Addaney et al., 2022), the loss of biocultural terms in the Māori context in relation to the current climate emergency (Aitken et al., 2021), or the intertwining of environmental and language activism in Corsica (Mendes, 2020). We would like to suggest that the systematic application of definitions and theories from the broader social movement literature can thus allow us to better understand how these critical events bring about transformative strategies of mobilization over time and how these in turn impact the collective agentive role of social movement actors in their handling of everyday dilemmas and subsequent strategies to address these.

Funding The research reported in this article received funding from the Smithsonian Institute for Folklife and Heritage and was part of a larger research project entitled *Sustaining Minoritized Languages in Europe (SMiLE)*. *Data analysis and the writing up of this article was undertaken during a British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship awarded to Bernadette O'Rourke in 2023 for the project entitled New Geographies of Language in Minority Language Sociolinguistics. We wish to thank our research participants for welcoming us into their community and sharing their experiences with us.*

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