

A Look At the Catalan Language

By Robert Lindsay

Catalan is a Romance language that is most closely related to *Occitan*. Although *Occitan-Catalan* started forming in 700-800, Occitan and Catalan are usually thought of as splitting from 1000-1300. However, scholars such as María del Candau de Cevallos and others present evidence that Catalan was already breaking away from Catalan-Occitan as early as the 700's-800's.

An alternate method is to see Catalan as part of something called *Ibero-Romance* together with the Romance languages of the Iberian Peninsula and to put Occitan in Gallo-Romance together with *French* and related tongues. It's better to just avoid this and create a whole new category called *Catalan-Occitan*.



The Catalan-speaking world. Catalan is heavily spoken in Catalunya, Valencia the Balearic islands and a small part of Aragon in Spain and also in far southwestern France in Rousillon. The three shaded islands on the map are the Balearics. The tiny shaded area on the island at the far right represents Algherese Catalan spoken in Alghero, Sardinia.

There is a common notion running about that Catalan speakers can understand Occitan. Although surely it differs with exposure, in general, Catalan speakers have a hard time understanding Occitan. Intelligibility between the two languages is 46%, and that is only with Languedocien and Aranese right next to Catalan. But after only a few months of close contact and some intense coaching, they should be able to understand each other pretty well.

Between Catalan and the more distant types of Occitan, surely intelligibility is lower. On this basis, Occitan and Catalan are surely not dialects of a single tongue. However, Catalan and Occitan are two very closely related languages.

The same types of folks (I call them "everyone can understand everyone" people or lumpers) also insist that *Castillian* and Catalan are mutually intelligible. If this were the case, there would be no grounds for a political fight in Catalunya from the Castillian speakers who do not wish to have Catalan shoved down their throats.

The truth is that Castillian speakers can only [understand](#) about 40% of written Catalan. [Some estimates](#) are that spoken Catalan and Spanish have less than 60% intelligibility. The actual figure may be even less than that. Catalan is surely not a dialect of Castillian.

There are claims that Catalan and *Portuguese* are mutually intelligible. This is [not the case](#).

Catalan is also not intelligible with *Aragonese*. In the Medieval Period, Aragonese and Castillian were considered to be unintelligible to Catalan speakers in the Catalan region. Aragonese is not even intelligible within itself. Why would they be able to understand Catalan too?

Catalan, when spoken, sounds like a cross between Castillian and French.

There is a lot of intense language politics swirling around Catalan. It is the language of an autonomous region of Spain called Catalunya. The fascist Franco tried to kill the language by forbidding its use.

Spanish nationalists are just as bad as French nationalists, if not worse, when it comes to minority languages. As an example, there is a tiny part of Portugal that Spain has occupied for hundreds of years. As per a treaty of 1812, Spain was required to hand over this bit of territory. In the 197 years since then, they have flatly refused to do so. An imperialist Spain continues to occupy a few small islands of frankly Moroccan territory off the coast of Morocco in defiance of Moroccan insistence that they are Moroccan territory.

After the fascists were toppled, Spain was arm-twisted into making Galician, Basque and Catalan into official languages. During the dictatorship, Galician and Catalan were referred to as dialects of Castillian. Recently, *Aranese*, an Occitan dialect, was also recognized.

There are other languages or quasi-languages in Spain such as *Asturian*, *Leonese*, *Murcian*, *Andalusian*, *Extremaduran* and *Aragonese*. These are not yet recognized by the Spanish state. Of those, Asturian-Leonese (a single language), Extremaduran-Cantabrian (a single language), and Aragonese are absolutely separate languages by any metric. This case for Murcian and Andalusian being separate languages is much more controversial, so say the least.

There are problems with the Catalan language in Catalunya. At home, about 1/2 the population speaks Catalan, and 1/2 speaks Castillian. However, 95% can understand Catalan, 81% can read Catalan, 78% can speak Catalan, and 62% can write Catalan. The Catalan government, understandably, has been mandating the amount of use of Catalan on billboards, the percentage of foreign films translated into

Catalan, the number of hours of school instruction that must be in Catalan, and the hours of foreign language study in Catalan or Castilian.

For this, Castilian speakers have called the government "fascist," but it's only normal for Catalans to try to save their language, which is not necessarily doing well.

In Andorra, the official language is Catalan, and it is also the most widely spoken language. It is the [only](#) officially independent Catalan speaking country on Earth. French and Castilian are also widely spoken here.

All dialects of Catalan are said to be [mutually intelligible](#).

However, people say that about the Occitan lects, about *Dutch* and *German*, about the Scandinavian languages, about Spanish and Portuguese, on and on, so that is not very reliable.

Further, there is a strong politicization movement in Catalan similar to Occitan whereby a language in trouble wants to see its various lects as unified under a single language. The notion is that splitting will further endanger a troubled language. Hence, there is a tendency for Catalan nationalists to say that they can easily understand every variety under the sun. That's ultimately a politicized response, and it is not scientific.

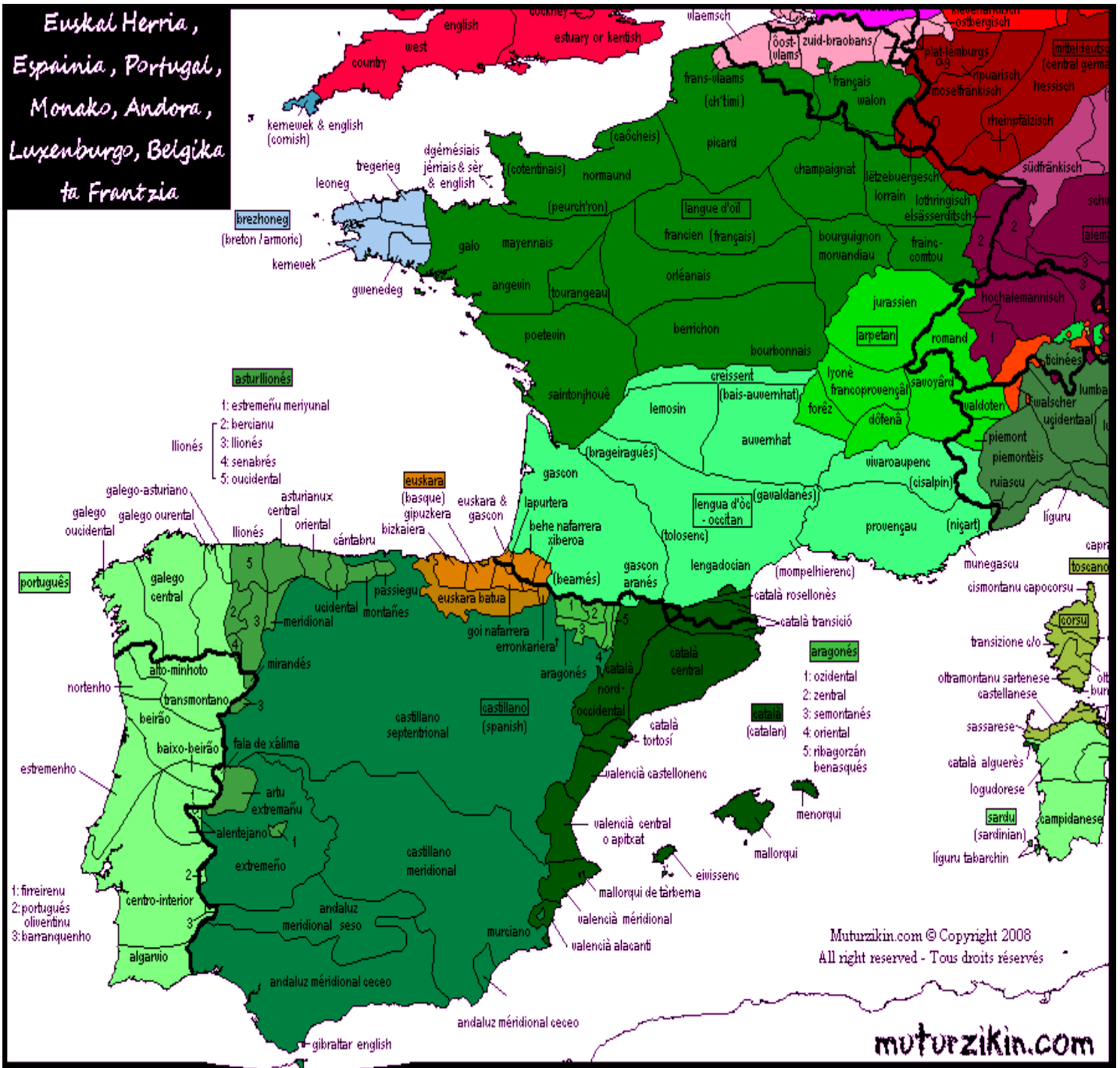
It's only natural to wonder whether Catalan is more than one language, so an investigation was undertaken.

Method: Literature and reports were examined and Catalan-speaking informants were interviewed to determine the intelligibility of the various dialects of Catalan. >90% intelligibility was considered to be a dialect of Catalan. <90% intelligibility was considered to be a separate language. The emphasis was on intelligibility rather than

structural factors. Overtly political argumentation was ignored.

Results: **The result of this investigation was to split Catalan from 1 to 2 languages.** Below, separate languages are in bold, and dialects are in italics.

Discussion: Catalan is a very tight-knit language family. The vast majority of Catalan lects can more or less understand each other with few problems. The Blaverist Movement is politically motivated and is not linguistically justified.



An excellent map of the languages of southwest Europe. Catalan languages and dialects are in dark green.

There are many dialects of Catalan.

Some are: Rousillonese (Northern Catalán), Valencian (Valenciano or Valencià), Balearic (Balear, Insular Catalan, *Mallorqui*, *Menorqui* and *Eivissenc*), Central Catalan, Algherese, Northwestern Catalan (Pallarese, Ribagorçan, *Lleidatà* and Aiguavivan).

Northern Catalan is actually spoken in France by about 100,000 speakers. It receives no support from the French state. Northern Catalan is a very divergent Catalan dialect, although Catalan speakers say that they can understand it [well](#). It has a lot of French influence in the lexicon. Northern Catalan sounds very much like French to Southern Catalan speakers. About 40% of the population can speak the language.

Rousillonese is the main dialect of Northern Catalan spoken in France. It's in better shape than many say it is, but the future prospects are probably not good.

Rousillonese is [close](#) to the Occitan language *Languedocien*.

There is a tremendous to-do over *Valencian*. Valencian activists, the Blaverists, insist that Valencian is a separate language from Catalan. This is a political issue, not a linguistic one. Linguistically, it is long settled. Valencian is simply a dialect of Catalan, and the two varieties have a measured 94% intelligibility. There are no scientific grounds for splitting Valencian into a separate language.

Balearic, Algherese and Rousillon (Northern or French) Catalan are [much further](#) from Central Catalan than Valencian is.

Balearic, spoken in the Balearic Islands, is said to be quite different. Central Catalan speakers say they go to the islands and communicate without problems. Central Catalan has 95% intelligibility of Menorchan and Ibizan and ~90%+ of Majorcan, which is the hardest Balearic lect for other Catalans to understand.

Central Catalan is the main variety and is the most widely spoken. This is the variety of Barcelona, and the literary language is loosely based on it. Catalan TV usually uses this dialect.

Northwestern Catalan is quite different, but Central Catalan speakers say they have 98% intelligibility of all of this group.

Ribagorçan is transitional to the Aragonese language, and is sometimes called a dialect of Aragonese. The truth is that the eastern part of Ribagorçan is Catalan transitional to Aragonese, the western part is Aragonese transitional to Catalan, and the central part is Benasquese.

Pallarese is also spoken in the same area and is said to be very different.

Aiguavivan is spoken in high valleys of Pyrenees and is very different. Related varieties called [Chapurriau](#) are spoken in Castellote, Torrevelilla and [Matarraña](#) nearby in Aragon and across the border in Valencia. These are [mixtures](#) of Old Castilian, Castilian, Valencian, Aragonese and a bit of Catalan. The Valencian element predominates. Although these lects are [intelligible](#) with Catalan proper, the speakers insist that they [do not](#) speak Catalan.

Benasquese is spoken in the same region as Aiguavivan and is often said to be a Catalan dialect. It is not. It is either a transitional lect between Catalan and Aragonese, a divergent Aragonese dialect, or a separate language in between Aragonese and Catalan. At any rate, however we wish to characterize Benasquese, it is not a Catalan dialect.

All of NW Catalan is intelligible with the rest of Catalan.

Algherese is spoken in Sardinia in the town of Alghero. This language is dying out, but there are still 20-30,000 speakers, mostly older people.

Structurally this is by far the most divergent variety of Catalan, created when Catalans landed on the island over 500 years ago. Algherese has been split from Catalan for over 500 years now. The lect sounds like Medieval Catalan, and furthermore, a lot of Sardinian language has gone in. Catalan speakers say it sounds like Italian.

The venerable *Encyclopedia of Endangered Languages* [treats](#) Algherese as a separate language, as all of the lects listed are treated as languages.

Algherese probably has the lowest intelligibility of any Catalan lect. Catalan speakers say they can only understand ~65% of Algherese.

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