Languages, ideologies and public space: graffiti and the role of active minorities

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Graffiti is an important space for critical sociolinguistic analysis. In minority language communities, graffiti is usually a strategic resource for active minorities seeking to alter the underlying social order. In these contexts, graffiti writers, with their practices, help reproduce non-dominant ideologies, first through social criticism and social protest and, secondly, by strategically occupying public spaces, by which we mean ideological spaces that exhibit complex sociolinguistic dynamics. In this paper we address the use of languages in the urban space of Galicia, where graffiti has become an essential way to understand the dynamics of a double conflict. On the one hand, there is a conflict between languages with two special features: (i) the presence of Spanish and Galician is inversely proportional to the social prestige of each of these languages, and (ii) in each language different contents converge, with the predominance of messages in Spanish that are more individualistic and poetic as compared to texts written in Galician that frequently express social protest. In addition, there is a conflict between the two different written varieties of Galician, the official variety and the reintegrationist variety, a form which is closer to the Continental Portuguese Standard. Both take a position that rejects the dominant sociolinguistic order that they seek to overturn, but they each choose a different language norm to follow in order to achieve this. This research is based on a representative corpus of 800 graffiti found in Vigo, Galicia’s largest city, between March and September of 2013.

Keywords: Galician language, ideology, Graffiti.