2.1. Looking Back: The Birth of a Spanish Language and a Spanish Nation

From a historical perspective, the development and diffusion of the Spanish language has been plagued by conflict and turmoil. In its origins, Castilian, which later evolved into what we know today as Spanish, was just one of the Hispano-Romance dialects spoken in the Iberian Peninsula, specifically in the Burgos area of southern Cantabria. Compared to the other varieties of Hispano-Romance speech, it was considered “abnormal” because it did not share many of the features that were common in most of those varieties. Nonetheless, Castilian had the greatest territorial and cultural success in the Christian Reconquest of the Peninsula from the Moors. As Penny (1991, p. 14) explains, “Castilian linguistic characteristics were carried south, southeast, and southwest, in part by movement of population, as Castilians settled in reconquered territories, and in part by adoption of Castilian features by those whose speech was originally different.” By 1035, Castile was declared a kingdom, and when Toledo was captured in 1085, the prestige of Castilian had already been noticed. “By the mid-thirteenth century, ... Castilian had expanded to comprise something over half of the Peninsular territory and Castilian speech was on the way to displacing its competitor, Arabic and Mozarabic” (Penny, 1991, p. 14). The Reconquest ended in 1492 with the expulsion of the Moors from Granada.

During the Reconquest, the Castilian dialect flourished in terms of its functionality and power. Alfonso X the Learned (1221–1284), the first king to rule over a somewhat unified Christian Spain, oversaw a major project to translate into Castilian an enormous amount of songs and scientific, legal, literary, and historiographical documents originally written in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew. This gave Castilian a great deal of prestige over other
Hispano-Romance dialects like Leonese and Aragonese, and the emphasis on “correctness” that was enforced by Alfonso X fostered the creation of a standard form of Castilian (Penny, 1991, p. 15). Solé (1992, p. 56) calls this the first act of “Hispanic linguistic nationalism.” Later, with the unification of the Aragon and Castile kingdoms in 1479, Castilian gained even more prominence in the region.

Under Alfonso X’s reign, Castilian also became the language of administration. In such times of political instability, and by contrast with Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew, Castilian was considered a religiously neutral language, which led to more and more acceptance by the populace. All the documents issued by the Royal Chancery were written in a form of Castilian that showed an increasing level of correctness and linguistic consistency that was copied and imitated, which led to an eventual standardization (Penny, 1991, p. 16).

Meanwhile, speakers of other Hispano-Romance dialects continued to use them. They did not yet consider themselves part of the Spanish “nation” that was emerging. However, by the end of the fifteenth century and beginning of the sixteenth century, Aragonese had significant influence from Castilian, and Leonese was associated with peasant speech. In this period, writers whose first language was not Castilian began to use this language as a vehicle for literary expression (Diez, Morales, & Sabin, 1977, p. 199).

The year 1492 is also important for the development of Spanish because that was the year in which Antonio de Nebrija (1441–1522) published the first grammar of the Spanish language, the first of any Romance language, and the first Latin-Spanish dictionary. This was the first attempt in history to put together the rules that describe the usage of what we know today as Spanish and the first publications that elevated Castilian to the category of full-fledged language, a language of power that deserved an explanatory grammar. Nebrija’s work, however, is also relevant for political reasons. In the prologue of his grammar, he said: “Language has always been the companion to empire.” This confidence in the strength of the Spanish language was echoed by Hernando de Talavera, who, when Queen Isabella of Castile questioned the usefulness of Nebrija’s grammar, intervened and said: “After Your Highness has subjected barbarous peoples and nations of varied tongues, with conquest will come the need for them to accept the laws that the conqueror imposes on the conquered, and among them will be our language.” Nebrija’s and Talavera’s words reflect the expansionist and

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