

Reflections of an observant linguist regarding the orthography of *A Fala de Us Tres Lugaris*

Miroslav Valeš

Technical University of Liberec

A Fala has never had a standardized orthography as it is a language of oral tradition and almost all written documents have always been produced only in Spanish. The few documents which exist in A Fala use orthographies that vary considerably, especially when indicating the phonemes which are absent in standard Spanish. However, in the past decades there have been signs of an increasing interest regarding the language and cultural identity in the three villages and there have also been attempts to establish organizations to promote the language, such as *A Fala y Cultura*, *U Lagartu Verdi*, and *A Nosa Fala*. This increase in language awareness leads inevitably to situations, when the speakers want to express their linguistic identity in written form and the lack of written standard makes this task rather difficult. The objective of this paper is to analyze the public inscriptions, direction signs and street names written in A Fala. The appearance of these signs expresses the willingness of the speakers of A Fala to claim their linguistic identity. At the same time, their inconsistent orthography reveals the problems that arise in the course of writing their language. There are two main causes of these difficulties: The influence of Spanish, as all the speakers are bilingual in Spanish, and variation within the language itself. Regarding the first cause, the main issues include the uncertainty how to write the phonemes that do not exist in standard Spanish, and also whether the phonemes that do exist in Spanish should be written in the same way or not. In respect of the second cause, the signposts and street names reflect the three main varieties: Valverdeñu, Lagarteiru and Mañegu. They also partially reflect the ideas of those who created them and testify to a certain evolution in time. In general, the linguistic data in the form of street names and direction signs provide relevant information about the options for writing those phonemes which do not have an equivalent in Spanish, as well as geographical (diatopic) variation, and the changes of ideas regarding the orthography. This paper will use this valuable linguistic material to reflect on the issues that are involved in the establishment of an orthographical standard.

1. INTRODUCTION. *A Fala de Us Tres Lugaris* is a language spoken in three villages in Extremadura: Valverdi du Fresno (Valverde del Fresno), As Ellas (Eljas), and Sa Martín de Trevellu (San Martín de Trevejo), in Sierra de Gata on the border between Spain and Portugal. According to Ethnologue there are about 5,500 speakers (Lewis et al. 2014) of the

language. The legal status changed in 2001 when A Fala was declared “bien de interés cultural”, yet, in the latest *Status of Autonomy of Extremadura*, A Fala was still not mentioned. Regarding its classification and origin, A Fala forms part of the Ibero-Romance subgroup of Romance languages. There are various theories affiliating A Fala with Portuguese, with Astur-Leonese and Galician. According to the most recent investigations carried out by Costas González (2011), Galician seems to be the closest “relative”. However, A Fala is clearly an independent language, not a dialect of some of those previously mentioned languages, and its origin will not be the topic of this paper.

The objective of this paper is to analyze the public inscriptions, road signs, and street names written in A Fala and, in general, to discuss the various ways of writing the language. Before I start with the specific examples and problems that we encounter when thinking about the orthography, I would like to mention the sociolinguistic situation of the three villages. First of all, each of the three places has its own variety and their differences are quite considerable. At the same time, however, the speakers are aware that they share the same language, as they sense a common identity. The largest of the three villages, Valverdi du Fresnu, has always served as a kind of local “metropolis”; it has had more contact with the outside world and its variety, Valverdeñu, has received more influence from Spanish. It also seems that in Valverdi the proportion of people who use A Fala in their daily routine is lower than that in the other two places. The variety of Sa Martín du Trevellu is called Mañegu. Sa Martín is a beautiful, picturesque village and its variety has some specific features not shared with the other two villages. The variety of As Ellas is called Lagarteiru. As Ellas seems to be a largely traditional place and most people, even children, use the language on a daily basis. The linguistic situation of the three places can be defined as diglossia, according to the definition of Ferguson (1959), where A Fala represents the low (L) variety while Spanish the high (H) variety. For the purpose of my observation it is relevant to stress that all or almost all the speakers of A Fala are bilingual. They have received their school education in Spanish, and this considerably influences their ideas on how to write the language.

A Fala is a language of oral tradition. It has never had any standardized orthography, and practically all written documents have always been produced only in Spanish. It is some kind of general belief that A Fala is for speaking while Spanish is for writing. In the past, speaking A Fala used to be a source of prejudice and its speakers were a target of ridicule. However, in the last decades the situation has been changing. Most people appear to be proud of their own specific language and identity. There have also been indications of a growing interest regarding the language and attempts to establish organizations to promote it, such as *A Fala y Cultura*, *U Lagartu Verdi* and, most recently, *A Nosa Fala*. This increasing awareness of the language inevitably leads to a desire for the speakers to express their linguistic identity in written form, yet the lack of a written standard makes this task quite difficult.

The first time I visited the three villages I was searching for some written documents in A Fala and was surprised that I could find hardly anything. I had been expecting to come across some posters advertising local celebrations, announcements of the local authorities but I was surprised that there was nothing, or almost nothing of this nature. The few documents I could find in A Fala were primarily linguistic descriptions and these used orthographies that varied considerably, especially when indicating the phonemes that do not exist in standard Spanish. These descriptions were also influenced by the theoretical point of view of their authors regarding the origin of the language. For this reason some tried to highlight the relationship with Portuguese, others, the relationship with Galician

and so on. It seems that the most important question in the existing literature is the history or origin of the language. When I entered this field of study I had the advantage of not being influenced by any of the theories and, to this day, I consider the future of the language more important than its past.

2. ORTHOGRAPHY ISSUES. When searching for A Fala in its written form I encountered it most frequently in the street names and direction signs. I believe that the appearance of these signs expresses the willingness of the speakers to claim their linguistic identity and to show the visitors and the rest of the world that A Fala exists. At the same time, however, the inconsistent orthography reveals the problems that arise in the course of writing the language. As I will try to demonstrate the difficulties have two basic causes: First, the transcription of phonemes that do not exist in standard Spanish, and second, the language variation itself. It should also be noted that there are both genuine difficulties, by which I mean problems for which there is no easy solution, as well as “artificially created” difficulties. I will describe both of them.

I will start with the most serious problem, which is one of the genuine ones. A Fala has four sibilant phonemes that do not exist in Spanish: The voiced alveolar fricative /z/, the voiceless postalveolar fricative /ʃ/ and the voiced postalveolar fricative /ʒ/ and also the voiced postalveolar affricate /dʒ/ sound. There are various options when it comes to representing these four sounds in written form.

The first mentioned, the fricative voiced alveolar /z/ is the voiced equivalent of the voiceless alveolar /s/. It is an “occasional phoneme” as there seems to be only one distinctive pair, but the sound is rather specific, and when people write in A Fala, they usually try to mark it in some way, to highlight that the sound is different from Spanish. It used to exist in Spanish as well, but here it lost its distinctive function sometime at the end of the 16th century. As it used to exist, it also had its written form, the most frequent of which was double <ss> for the voiceless /s/ and one <s> for the voiced /z/ in intervocalic position: *passo* /pasol/ (“step”) – *casa* /kaza/ (“house”). On the street name signs we can find various possible options concerning how to reflect this sound. One of them is the “historical” spelling *casa* /kaza/ (“house”) with one <s>, the other is a combination of letters <sh> *cash* and the last one is an underlined <s> *casa*. Each of the three solutions has its advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantage of the first one, the historical solution, is that it would be necessary to write all intervocalic /s/ sounds as double <ss>, which is quite easy to consider but much more difficult to carry out. This is the solution that Frades Gaspar (2000) uses in his book *Vamus a Falal*, which is a respected manual of A Fala. However, there are many errors in the book itself which only goes to show that it is not easy to comply with this orthography. Another disadvantage is that the voiced alveolar /z/ sound written with one <s> “invites” to read it as the voiceless /s/ to all the people who are familiar with Spanish. The specific nature of the sound somehow disappears. Yet another problem is the fact that in Valverdeñu, for example, the word *casa* (“house”) is pronounced with voiceless /s/ and for this reason it would be rather confusing to write it with double <ss> while the other varieties would use one <s>. The <sh> solution ignores the fact that <sh> is frequently used to mark the sound /ʃ/ in other languages, however, it seems to have support of many community members. The positive aspect is that it expresses that there is a “different” sound. The solution with an underlined <s> also expresses well that this sound is different from standard Spanish. However, when it comes to writing it is rather bothersome to use letters that do not exist on a standard keyboard and you have to find them elsewhere. It would probably discourage the users and make them look for some

other solution. The most frequent solutions are the first two, the first one being promoted by Domingo Frades in his early publications and the second one by *U Lagartu Verdi* in their magazine *Anduriña*, a magazine written in A Fala.

The other two problematic sibilants – the voiceless postalveolar fricative /ʃ/ and the voiced postalveolar fricative /ʒ/ are usually written in the same way. Even though they are “occasional phonemes” (i.e. there is only one pair which is distinctive in one of the three varieties), it is sensible to write them in the same way, as there is considerable variation between the two. There is also the voiced postalveolar affricate /dʒ/ sound that seems to be a positional variant of /ʒ/ in Mañegu but a phoneme with only one distinctive pair in Lagarteiru. This sound is also usually written in the same way as the previous two. On the street names and direction signs it is possible to find three potential solutions concerning how to mark these sounds. One is <sh>, as in *aishuntamentu* (“city council”), the other is <x>, as in *baixu* (“small”), yet another is an underlined <x>, as in *calexa* (“alley”). The <sh> solution is sensible as the phoneme /ʃ/ is marked in this way in other languages. However, then it is not possible to use <sh> for the /z/ phoneme and it is necessary to find other reasonable solution to mark this sound. The <x> solution is not a bad option either, but the same symbol marks the sound /ks/ as in *examen* (“exam”), /s/ as in *ixtranjeru* (“foreigner”), and also /x/ as in *México* (“Mexico”). The one grapheme <x> thus comes to represent a number of different phonemes. Nevertheless, this solution enables us to use <sh> for /z/. The underlined <x> is similarly problematic as the underlined <s>, it is not entirely “user friendly”. Out of the three, the most frequent solution is probably <x>. On the other hand, there is not much consistency in the writing and authors often become confused when writing the sibilants due to the influence of Spanish, for example when they write: *coisha* (“thing”) with <sh> and *ixenti* (“people”) with <x>, even though they contain the same phoneme /ʒ/. The logical question regarding the sibilants is: What is the best solution? As mentioned before, sibilants are one of the real problems, which implies that every viable solution will nevertheless have some disadvantages.

Turning now to an example of a problem that is not a “real one”, we can have a look at the palatal lateral approximant /ʎ/. The same phoneme exists in Spanish, even though it sometimes appears in different words. It also exists in Portuguese. It is not certain that the Portuguese sound is exactly the same, but the Spanish and A Fala sounds coincide. Spanish uses double <ll> to mark this sound while Portuguese uses <lh>. On the signs, the Spanish solution was much more frequent, but I could also find the <lh> orthography. The latter tries to highlight the relation with Portuguese and at the same time it makes the written form different from Spanish. However, since all speakers of A Fala are bilingual and they were schooled in Spanish it seems rather illogical to use <lh> for the sound the people have always been accustomed to write with double <ll>. In my opinion the orthography should be as easy as possible to serve the users well. The <lh> orthography only reflects the opinions regarding the origin of A Fala, but it makes the writing more complicated for the users. A similar situation can sometimes be found with the nasal palatal phoneme /ɲ/. The Spanish orthography is <ñ> while the Portuguese is <nh>. Likewise, this leads to inconsistencies in representing the sound in written form. However, I could not find any <nh> in the street names and public inscriptions, only in older issues of *Anduriña*, as well as on some web pages.

The second cause of difficulties that I mentioned was the language variation. The variation can be of different kinds but first I would like to mention the diatopic or geographical variation. The three main varieties, Valverdeñu, Lagarteiru and Mañegu, were also reflected in the signs that were the subject of my study. For example, the definite article in Mañegu is

o /o/ while it is *u /u/* in Lagarteiru, and Valverdeñu. The street names reflect this variation: *Calli o Corchu* in Mañegu, *U Petril* in Valverdeñu, *Calexá do Portu* in Mañegu and *Calli du Portu* in Lagarteiru. Similarly, there is considerable variation in the sibilants that were mentioned previously. We can also find variation on a lexical level, *Centru médicu* (“medical center”) in Lagarteiru and *Centru mécu* in Mañegu or *Calli Currieira* in Lagarteiru and *Calli Correeira* in Mañegu. The diatopic variation that is reflected in the signs gives us an idea about the range of differences between the three varieties.

Observing the differences and considering that the three varieties are of the same status, we easily draw to a very important conclusion: It is not possible to have one standardized orthography for the three varieties. In general, it is possible to standardize the match “sound-symbol” so that the same sounds are written in the same way, but it is not possible to write the words in the same way in all the three varieties. The three varieties need to be written in different ways and it is a positive feature that the inscriptions mostly follow the local way of pronunciation.

Moreover, the variation in the writing and pronunciation of /l/ and /r/ is an example of diastatic/social variation. It seems to result more from the individual preferences and situation of speech rather than from belonging to one of the three varieties. We can find people pronouncing [pláθa] and [práθa] (“square”) in all three varieties. The <r> pronunciation or the one that is different from Spanish is sometimes considered more appropriate to A Fala and so it has certain “covert prestige”, while the <l> pronunciation or the Spanish-like is considered to be the influence of Spanish and it has the “overt prestige”. The variation works the other way round as well: *árbol* – *árbuli* (“tree”) where the Spanish-like form is always considered the influence of Spanish, while the other is considered more traditional. Nevertheless, most speakers use both pronunciations and the signs reflect both forms as well. We can find *Plaza* and *Praza da Constitución*. Other street names sometimes reflect the traditional and others the Spanish-like pronunciation: *Calli Castelu Artu* but *Calli a Plaza*. The street signs also reflect the changing opinions on the <l/r> writing. An example is *Calli du Par/lqui*, one sign with <r>, the other corrected for <l>, to distinguish it from Spanish.

Another topic regarding the orthography that can be observed from the street names is the use of <y> and <i>. These two symbols can represent the semi-consonant /j/. It is evident that at the moment of writing there are no linguistic reasons for using any particular one of the two. The only criterion is the similarity to Spanish or differentiation from Spanish. In the inscriptions we can find both solutions, the Spanish-like but also the attempts to write in a different way. For example, *Calli Ier de Maio* prefers the differentiation (it is to be observed that in Valverdeñu, it should in fact be *Ier de Maiu*, with the final <u>). However, we can find both solutions with *ay/iuntamentu* (“city council”). In general, the use of <i> instead of <y> is more frequent. It seems that the people who write in A Fala like the idea of making it look different to express their particular identity.

The apostrophe is another feature of A Fala orthography. In general, the apostrophe sometimes tries to indicate that the author of the sign considers something to be “missing”. However, the use of apostrophes is rather chaotic and thus we can find the sign *Casha d'a cultura* (“house of culture”) right next to the building where we can read the same word without an apostrophe. In another sign the author was so confused by the apostrophes of *Bar d'us Jubilaus* (< de us) and *Parqui d'u Castelu* (< de u) that he or she wrote *Centru d'e Día* (“day care center”) where we would expect simple *de* as nothing really disappears. In another sign there occurs *Camiñu d'u Portu*, to be compared with *Calli du Portu* without an apostrophe. However, most signs and street names avoid apostrophes altogether. By

contrast we can find apostrophes frequently in the few written documents (older issues of *Anduriña* and some web pages). In general, the apostrophes make the writing rather complicated and it is very difficult to be consistent and always use them in the same way.

3. CONCLUSION. To summarize, the linguistic data in the form of street names and direction signs reflect most of the general problems of A Fala orthography. These problems are caused primarily by two factors: The use of phonemes that do not exist in Spanish and for that reason they do not have any habitual written form and, second, the variation inside the language, whether diatopic or diastratic. At the same time, the signs also bring relevant information about possible solutions concerning how to write the phonemes that do not have a parallel in Spanish and they also give us information about the variation of the language. A Fala has survived over centuries in oral form, without being written, but it is not certain that it can survive further centuries in the same way. The written form would definitely help to promote the language and it would make it stronger with more possibilities to survive. It has not been the objective of this paper to give the guidelines how to establish a standardized orthography. Nevertheless, when considering the orthography of A Fala, it is important to concentrate on the genuine problems. It is also necessary to realize that it is not possible to unify the three varieties. For this reason each of them will need its own written form, slightly different from the other two. The most important consideration is that the final orthographical standard should make the writing as easy as possible because only “user friendly” orthography will motivate the speakers to write in their own language.

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Miroslav Valeš
miroslav.vales@tul.cz