The officialization of Spanish in mid-nineteenth-century Spain: the Academy’s authority

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Education is a matter of power: the one who teaches dominates, given that to teach is to form men, men adapted to the viewpoint of the one who indoctrinates.

Antonio Gil de Zárate (1855: 117)

This chapter addresses the role played by language and schools in the history of Spain’s nineteenth-century liberal nation-building project. Both the Spanish language and the public school system were strategic sites where national consensus could be built and, consequently, the achievement of linguistic homogeneity through education became a central goal for the state. These pages examine, in particular, the conditions that favored the linguistic norms developed by the Royal Spanish Academy (henceforth RAE from Real Academia Española) and the debates that surrounded their officialization and imposition in the emerging national school system. While the historiography of Spanish has traditionally described the selection and implementation of the RAE’s norms as if they were undisputed and ideologically neutral (Calero Vaquera 1986; Esteve Serrano 1982; Martínez Alcalde 1999, 2001; Sarmiento 1986), this study will emphasize the political complexity of the standardization process by approaching the archival material with “an ethnographic eye for the real historical actors, their interests, their alliances, and where they come from, in relation to the discourses they produce” (Blommaert 1999: 7).

The officialization of orthography

During the 1840s, teachers associated with Madrid’s Academia Literaria y Científica de Instrucción Primaria (Literary and Scientific Academy of Elementary Education, henceforth ALCIP) – a non-governmental organization – engaged in a process of orthographic reform that, they claimed, would facilitate literacy acquisition in elementary schools. By organizing public debates and circulating newspaper articles – mainly through El Educador, a periodical publication created precisely with the purpose of spreading the ALCIP’s ideas
and activities – the association discussed and publicized the advantages of simplifying the Spanish alphabet. Although the teachers argued first over the specific orthographic features that would better represent the Spanish language, they also debated the most appropriate ways of implementing the reformed spelling system. While some defended a gradual simplification, others preferred a radical and quick reform; while one group of teachers suggested collaborating with the government and the RAE, others defended the legitimacy of the ALCIP to control the implementation process.

The heterogeneity and overwhelming number of proposals given voice in *El Educador* resulted in an intense debate which, in turn, aroused the editors’ fear that the lack of consensus would blur the common interest in spelling reform and strengthen their opponents, “etymologists, bitter enemies of all these reforms” (*El Educador* 1842: 3). Thus, in July 1842 they published an article intended to end the discussion by alerting the teachers to the harm it could cause and by selecting and promoting a single reformed system. However, they were careful to counter the perception of authoritarianism by insisting that *El Educador* had been open to all proposals: “Supporters of [orthographic] reforms cannot complain that the editors of *El Educador* have not shown frankness and understanding by including all the opinions they have been sent on this matter in order to give a platform to the reasons on which the opinions of every person are based” (3–4).

The article concluded by supporting a simplified alphabet drawn from a syllabary composed by the ALCIP in 1822 which reflected “the true pronunciation . . . as the clearest way to achieve a perfect, easy, and eternal orthography” (4). This new spelling system, grounded in the bi-univocal correspondence between phonemes and graphemes, consisted of 24 letters and introduced the following reforms: first, the simplification of pairs of letters representing the same sound, namely \(<c/q>, <c/z>, <g/j>\) and \(<i/y>\), writing *ceja*, *zita*, *jiro* and *lei* instead of *queja* (complaint), *cita* (appointment), *giro* (turn) and *ley* (law); second, the substitution of simple letters \(<r>\) and \(<y>\) for the digraphs \(<rr>\) and \(<ll>\), and of letter \(<n>\) for \(<m>\) before \(<b>\) and \(<p>\); third, the elimination of silent letters \(<h>\) and \(<u>\) in the combinations \(<qu>\) and \(<gu>\), writing *anbre* and *gera* rather than *hambre* (hunger) and *guerra* (war); fourth, the replacement of \(<x>\) for the letter \(<s>\) and the combination \(<cs>\), in pre-consonantal and intervocalic positions, respectively; finally, the modification of the names of some letters so that the designation of the sounds would be homogenized (for instance, letters \(<m>\) and \(<r>\) would be renamed *me* and *re* (pronounced \(/ɾe/) instead of the traditional *eme* and *erre*).

This system was eventually selected by the teachers’ association for implementation in Spain’s elementary schools. Soon after its publication in *El Educador*, the ALCIP printed it as an independent pamphlet intended to publicize
both the system itself and its advantages for education.¹ A significant part of that pamphlet was devoted to a list of strategies to promote the reformed spelling system, among which the following are particularly salient: members of the ALCIP would write all official correspondence and their announcements in all newspapers using the new alphabet; they would also teach it in their schools; instructors would be urged to compose textbooks using the simplified orthography; and, finally, the ALCIP would inform both the Comisión de Instrucción Primaria and the RAE of the orthographic simplification in order to seek their endorsement.

Following these recommendations, on April 24, 1843 the RAE was sent six copies of the pamphlet together with a letter requesting its collaboration. The minutes from the RAE’s meeting held three days later briefly recorded that the corporation had received the documents from the ALCIP and decided to have the secretary convey to the teachers the institution’s decision to not support the new orthography, claiming that “such an innovation” would bring “serious inconveniences and no advantages.”

The RAE’s negative reaction to the ALCIP’s project went, indeed, well beyond disapproval of the proposed orthography and even involved a request for the queen to intervene and stop the implementation of the simplified alphabet in elementary schools. This petition was not made directly by the RAE but by the Consejo de Instrucción Pública [Council for Public Instruction], an advisory body recently created to oversee the public education system. Nevertheless, the bonds between the two organizations were numerous and important: Antonio Gil de Zárate (1796–1861) – whose views on education as a form of power opened this chapter – was a prominent member of the RAE as well as General Director of Public Instruction, and at least five other academicians held positions of responsibility in the Council at the time of its creation in 1843.²

Bearing in mind the RAE’s opposition to the teachers’ proposal and considering the institution’s privileged relation to and multiple connections with the government, it can be concluded that a number of academicians taking part in the public administration of instruction asked Queen Isabella II to ban the system devised by the teachers’ association from schools and to officialize the RAE’s orthographic norms. The queen agreed and on April 25 and December

¹ A copy of this pamphlet is kept in the RAE’s archive. Together with this document the institution holds both a letter asking for the academicians’ support for the reform project (dated April 24, 1843 and signed by the secretary of the teachers’ association, Manuel María Tobía) and a duplicate of the corporation’s negative response to the ALCIP’s project (dated May 4, 1843 and most likely written by Juan Nicasio Gallego, the RAE’s secretary).

² Manuel José Quintana, Eugenio de Tapia, Martín Fernández Navarrete, Juan Nicasio Gallego and Javier del Quinto, all members of the RAE at the time of the officialization of orthography in Spain, also took part in the inaugural session of the Council on January 1, 1844 (Ceprián Nieto 1991: 437–9).
1844 signed two Royal Decrees that respectively mandated the exclusive use of the institution’s orthography and spelling textbook (*Prontuario de ortografía de la lengua castellana* [Handbook of orthography of the Castilian language], 1844) in Spain’s elementary instruction.

**Public debate over the officialization of orthography**

These events have been usually described in the historiography of Spanish through a narrative that explains the officialization, first, as a necessary response to a radical proposal that could have had negative effects, second, as a legitimate reaction against the teachers’ association’s meddling in the ongoing standardization process planned by the RAE, and, finally, as the closing point of the old controversy over spelling (Esteve Serrano 1982; Real Academia Española 1999; Vilar 1999). However, the material gathered for this project reveals that the queen’s signing of the legal document that established the officialization stirred, rather than ended, the public debate. In the discussion that follows, I draw on the language-ideological debate (Blommaert 1999) that surrounded the officialization, aiming at a better understanding of the reasons behind the teachers’ drastic intervention in a linguistic matter, the RAE’s and the government’s authoritarian responses, and the loud resistance to the imposition of an official orthography in schools.

The controversy was not, interestingly enough, the first or even the most intense public debate involving the teachers’ association and governmental institutions in charge of developing public instruction. It took place, indeed, amidst a broader and deeper struggle to control teacher training – one of the chief domains of the ALCIP. The teachers’ association’s monopoly of this activity had come to be jeopardized by the creation of normal schools – a project devised by Pablo Montesino and Antonio Gil de Zárate, and first put into practice in Madrid in 1839. The ALCIP, which, according to Gómez R. de Castro (1983: 50), aimed at monopolizing Madrid’s public instruction, challenged the implementation and power of the normal schools by refusing to accept the supremacy of instructors trained in such institutions, by continuing to organize seminars for teachers and by spreading its critiques to Spain’s educational policy through journals such as *El Educador, Semanario de Instrucción Pública* and *La Academia* (Melcón Beltrán 1992: 135–43; Molero Pintado 1994: 39–47).

It was, thus, not surprising to find that this broader context of struggle between the ALCIP and the central government permeated the debate over Spanish spelling. The legal documents emerging from the academicians’ reaction to the teachers’ association, for instance, reveal its political nature. The queen justified the government’s intervention by identifying orthography as an issue of national interest: “all nations always proceed with extreme caution
in such a delicate matter, preferring the advantages of a fixed and uniform orthography understood by all” (qtd. in Villalaín Benito 1997: 99–100). Having been declared “a concern of the state” (Rosenblat 1951: cxxiv), the Spanish language should remain in the state’s hands and, therefore, be managed by an institution tied to the central government: the RAE. Following this rationale, the Royal Decrees empowered the institution as the corporation most authorized to judge linguistic matters, representing its members as the voices most qualified to dictate the norms of the national language (qtd. in Villalaín Benito 1997: 101).

The reaction from the teachers was loud: the ALCIP organized, in October of the same year, a public meeting to criticize the crown’s imposition (Academia Literaria 1844), while some of its members wrote pamphlets against the RAE’s norms and authority (Hernando 1845; Macías 1846). If the legal documents justified the government’s intervention with political arguments, the teachers relied on their professional experience to claim control over decision-making in educational spaces. In his refutation of the RAE’s orthographic textbook, Victoriano Hernando wondered: “Is it likely that the government knows, understands and sees this situation? No sir, because it doesn’t practice this profession. And what about the Council for Public Education? They do not either, for the same reason. And the Academy of the Spanish Language? They do not, unless some of its members have practiced teaching” (Hernando 1845: 21). Seniority in education would become not only a source of reaffirmation of the teachers’ association’s authority but also, as Hernando’s quote clearly states, a means to delegitimize novel central institutions.

There is still another salient strategy employed by the teachers in order to discredit their opponents: the negative portrayal of the imposition as a despotic and immoral (or even illegal) maneuver unbecoming to a democratic state. Manuel María Tobía, the secretary of the ALCIP, made this point in a straightforward way: “the government has just prohibited instructors to teach [the reformed system] under threat of a terrible punishment, despite the fact that such a mandate is openly opposed to the laws and regulations that govern us” (Academia Literaria 1844: 16). The accusation of excessive authoritarianism became, at times, extremely passionate and politicized. During the public meeting organized by the ALCIP a few months after the officialization, on October 3, 1844, the president of the teachers’ association even needed to call the audience to order when they loudly applauded and encouraged a Mr. Bona as he stated that “when governments speak they are not always right” (1844: 30). Regardless of the president’s warnings, the speaker went on to stress the government’s responsibility in political and popular uprisings because, he argued, “people that are happy do not revolt; and the best way for them to be happy is to give them freedom to secure their own education, the exercise of all their rights and their well-being through all possible means” (1844: 31).
This Mr. Bona, who so aggressively called for resistance to the government, was most likely Juan Eloy Bona y Ureta, a prominent Catalan economist, journalist and determined supporter of free trade. An honorary member of the ALCIP, he became – once settled in Madrid in the 1840s – a member of the city’s Sociedad Económica Matritense, director of the widespread journal Eco del Comercio and co-founder of Madrid’s Sociedad Libre de Economía Política (Román Collado 2011: 700). His words in the meeting organized by the teachers to publicly oppose the imposition of the RAE’s orthographic norm were praised by Francisco Salmerón y Alonso, another highly politicized participant, passionate supporter of freedom of instruction and fervent detractor of the state monopoly of education (Melcón Beltrán 1992: 142). Mr. Salmerón expressed his liberal ideas in a journal that he co-edited, La Academia, a periodical publication that took the wheel from El Educador and Revista de Instrucciones Públicas and that would be accused of promoting ideas related to utopian socialism. This political activism at the heart of the educational debate is, according to Melcón Beltrán (1992: 143), a case where old-fashioned sectors of education and political radicals would join forces to attack the moderate government’s policy.

The ALCIP fought, precisely, to win the battle over educational market niches and decision-making power against the emerging national public school system and administration. In that process the teachers displayed a number of strategies to resist the centralization intended by the government: from the organization of public debates to the circulation of their dissidence in a number of newspapers, and even through the sabotage of governmental institutions and measures. And, as we have seen, they did not even hesitate to align themselves with political opposition to the government coming from revolutionary groups.

The previous contextualization of the public debate over orthography challenges the traditional understanding of the teachers’ reformed system as a spontaneous and radical proposal, and the corresponding explanation of the government’s response as a legitimate reaction to the instructors’ unacceptable interference in a field outside their competence. On the one hand, both the teachers’ intervention in this linguistic matter and their deep and loud resistance to the crown’s imposition of the RAE’s spelling system can be seen as further strategies to exacerbate public confrontation and to challenge the government’s increasing accumulation of power and monopolization of educational spaces. On the other hand, the compelling response to the teachers’ independent initiative from the Council for Public Instruction was an effective measure to secure control over the standard language in education and, furthermore, became a display of the government’s strength against decentralizing forces that would hinder the nationalization of public instruction.
The officialization of grammar

In addition to the spelling system, the RAE’s grammatical norms were made official in Spain’s schools in the central decade of the nineteenth century. Despite differences from the process that led to the officialization of orthography, the rationale behind the deliberate pursuit of an official recognition of grammar also responded to the centralization of education and control of the linguistic market. However, in this case, the RAE’s struggle to become the recognized linguistic authority was fought not against the teachers’ association but against a number of competing grammars that had gained public acceptance and taken over the textbook market.

The RAE’s intense grammatical work in the eighteenth century contrasts with the lack of productivity in this area in the first half of the nineteenth century (Fries 1989; Sarmiento 1979, 1986). By 1854, when the new edition of the RAE’s grammar finally appeared, the prestige of the 1796 edition had considerably diminished and other grammars had filled the vacuum (Gómez Asencio 2002). The vitality of texts such as the Gramática de la lengua castellana segun ahora se habla [Grammar of the Castilian language as it is now spoken] (Salvá 1831) and the Gramática de la lengua castellana destinada al uso de los Americanos [Grammar of the Castilian language for the use of the Americans] (Bello 1951 [1847]) made it evident that the RAE was losing its hegemonic position. Moreover, the criticisms in those texts both of the institution’s static norm and of its members’ lack of concern for the improvement of their grammar came to intensify the RAE’s discredit: “the wise men who have constituted that corporation [the RAE] for the last sixty years” – stated Salvá reproving the academicians’ “lack of perseverance” and devotion to “more pleasant and glory-giving tasks” – were unable to fill “the many gaps of their Grammar until the present day” (Salvá 1831: XI).

The prominence and reputation of Salvá’s and Bello’s work had a tremendous impact on the Academy, so much so that they played a significant role in the revitalization of the grammatical activity within the institution and, therefore, in the resulting new edition of its Gramática de la lengua castellana (1854) and in the publication of its Epítome (1857b) and Compendio de la gramática castellana (1857a). The records from the academicians’ meetings themselves reveal the pressure they felt to work on a new improved grammar. In the notes from the meetings held during the first part of the nineteenth century, we find two moments of intense discussion over the necessity to take up the revision of the 1796 text again. The first one followed the publication of Salvá’s grammar. Only six weeks after Diego Clemencín’s depiction of Salvá’s work as “judicious and appreciable,” the minutes from the February 21, 1833 meeting recorded that “the importance and urgency of reforming the Academy’s
Grammar was ultimately discussed.” The second instance of the need to issue a new grammar occurred right after the publication of Bello’s *Compendium of the Castilian grammar written for the use of the schools* [*Compendio de la gramática castellana escrito para el uso de las escuelas*] (1884 [1851]). The minutes from the meeting held on September 4, 1851, recorded that Antonio Gil de Zárate, a prominent figure, as we have seen, in the process of affirmation of the RAE’s linguistic authority, urged the corporation to actively devote itself to the elaboration of the Grammar. Since Bello’s *Compendio* was a reduced grammatical text specifically targeting schools, it seems highly significant that the reminder of the importance of working on the grammar came this time from Antonio Gil de Zárate himself, an academician well connected with the government’s educational institutions.

The pedagogical nature of the 1854 edition is in fact one of its distinctive qualities. In addition, the RAE’s grammar shows a marked normative character and an acute awareness of the political importance of language. Because of these three salient characteristics, it can be considered, following Narvaja de Arnoux’s typology (2008b), a state grammar. Rather than as a set of rules for language, grammar, due to its normalizing and unifying power, can be understood as a practice that disciplines individuals into citizenship. Accordingly, grammar becomes a foundational discourse of modern states (Ramos 1993: 18), which upholds both the practical and the symbolic realization of the nation.

This political nature of grammar and the challenge posed by other texts can explain the RAE’s interest in the imposition of its *Gramática*. Parallel to the process of official recognition of its orthography, the corporation relied, once again, on its connections with the government and took advantage of the context of rapid and intense centralization of education. And, once more, they obtained the queen’s support: on September 28, 1854, Isabella II signed a Royal Decree asserting that “having listened to the Royal Council for Public Instruction, and in accordance with its opinion, [the queen] has declared the new edition of the Grammar of the Castilian language made by the Royal Spanish Academy the textbook for public education, and stated that it is recommended to all schools and high-schools of the Kingdom” (qtd. in Villalain Benito 1997: 156). Although this legal document did not yet entail a full imposition of the RAE’s grammatical norm as mandatory and exclusive in education, its *Gramática* would enjoy, after this decree, not only official approval, but also the royal recommendation, a privilege not granted to other authorized textbooks at that time.

The concession of exclusivity to the RAE’s grammatical norm would come three years later, hand in hand with Spain’s first comprehensive educational law, the *ley Moyano*. Signed on September 9, 1857, the law stated that both the RAE’s grammar and its orthography would be the mandatory and only
norms to be taught in public education. The academicians’ privileged political position – which, we argue, facilitated this imposition – is made evident once more by the fact that they knew about the officialization even before the ratification of the law: the minutes from the RAE’s meeting held six days before the ley Moyano was made public recorded the “need” to work on grammatical textbooks specifically targeting elementary and secondary education and entrusted the composition of an Epítome and a Compendio to Manuel Bretón de los Herreros (1796–1873) and Eugenio Hartzenbusch (1806–80), respectively.

The context of emergence of the RAE’s 1854 Gramática and its 1857 Epítome and Compendio – and the understanding of grammar “as a cultural artifact intensely engaged in a dialogue with its times” (Del Valle 2009: 885) – lead us to perceive the steps taken by the institution to gain official recognition of its grammatical norm as a strategy to recover their hegemonic status in the field. According to contemporary testimonies, the officialization of the grammar in 1857 did indeed entail the RAE’s monopoly in education: only ten years later, Spanish printer and humanist Pascual Polo stated that “the language Academy has almost banned the introduction of any book other than its own on this subject [grammar] for elementary and secondary schools” (qtd. in Gómez Asencio 2004: 1322); and, by the end of the century, Simón Aguilar y Claramunt – a well-known Spanish pedagogue – asserted that “this Grammar, declared a mandatory and exclusive text by article 88 of the September 9, 1857 Law, has reigned supreme in official education, leaving other treatises on the matter only some hidden spots where they can, every now and then, raise deeply felt complaints” (qtd. in Calero Vaquera 1986: 269).

The RAE’s control of the educational market became not only a permanent source of the corporation’s authority but also a continuous source of income from the sale of grammar textbooks (Gómez Asencio 2004: 1316–21). According to the Marquis of Molins, director of the Academy between 1857 and 1868, more than one hundred thousand copies of the Compendio and seven hundred thousand copies of the Epítome had been printed by 1870 (Fries 1989: 86). The economic stimulus they brought took place during one of the worst crises suffered by the institution, ending “the, until then, chronic financial misery in the Academy” (86) and, thus, considerably boosting “the flourish of its activities during the second half of the nineteenth century” (87).

Interestingly enough, the officialization of the RAE’s grammatical norm did not trigger a public debate or meet the opposition that the official recognition of orthography had confronted. Spelling is certainly a more suitable matter for linguistic ideological discussions, but there is a more powerful reason to explain this lack of reaction from the educational community. The ALCIP – the

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3 The contents of this legal document can be found in http://personal.us.es/alporu/historia/ley_moyano_texto.htm.
organization that had actively rejected the imposition of the RAE’s orthography – had been censured: “by Royal Decree on January 5, 1853, the suspension of the said Academy, as well as of the ones established in other provinces, was determined” (Academia de Maestros 1870: 5). The legal document that abolished those institutions justified the suspension of the teachers’ associations on the grounds of “the untimeliness and harm caused by the matters and conflicts that some of them have promoted, bringing discredit on themselves” (qtd. in Molero Pintado 1994: 55). Antonio Gil de Zárate reappeared in this language-ideological debate to represent, in his salient _De la Instrucción pública en España_ [Public instruction in Spain] (1855), the ALCIP and its members as sources of instability and decadence:

Madrid teachers, for their part, organized in an Academy labeled _scientific and literary_ that promoted frequent scandals in their public meetings, declared themselves enemies of the general reform of elementary education, of the normal schools and of the teachers trained by them, and formed a coalition so that neither these teachers nor their methods penetrated in those establishments; hence everything remained in the same backward and decadent state. (239)

By suppressing the teachers’ associations, the government had erased dissident voices and, therefore, won the battle over control of Spain’s educational market. However, while this erasure was certainly an effective method to succeed in the process of becoming Spain’s linguistic authority, we have argued that there was still another issue that decisively worked in favor of the RAE: its deep connections with the government (Fries 1989: 64–5). The excellent relations between the RAE and the administration have already been pointed out: on the one hand, it was once again the Council for Public Instruction – which included many members of the RAE – that was responsible for asking Queen Isabella II to give the 1854 grammatical text a special status; on the other, the academicians started to compose the 1857 _Epítome_ and _Compendio_ in order to satisfy the needs brought about by the _ley Moyano_ even before the legal document was ratified. It seems reasonable to suggest that this coalition between state and RAE was embedded in the sociopolitical context of the nineteenth century: the linguistic institution relied on its relations with the government and, in turn, gave the state apparatus a state grammar that would reinforce the nation-building project by emphasizing normativity and offering a standard language for the nation (Narvaja de Arnoux 2008b: 210).

**Contextualization and conclusions**

The nineteenth century stands out for the large number of measures designed and implemented in order to promote state power and Spain’s nation-building project. The liberal, progressive and moderate political parties that governed
Spain in the 1840s and 1850s took decisive steps in favor of economic development, the expansion of infrastructures, territorial reorganization, the administration’s rebirth and the increase of power in the state’s hands. During the central decades of Isabella II’s reign, coinciding with the period covered by this chapter, the Spanish police force – Guardia Civil – was set up (1844), the Treasury was reformed with a new tax system (1845), a centralizing model was imposed over local and provincial administrations, the uniformity of the legal system began to be feasible thanks to the 1848 Penal Code, trade and communications were improved with the Railroad General Plan (1852) and the Railroad General Law (1855), the stock market was reorganized, the 1856 Banking Law was signed and the Bank of Spain was created (Arias Castañón 1998: 33–7).

As part of this nation-building project and the subsequent centralization of state institutions, public education was also promoted as a strategic site to spread national practices and representations. In consequence, the nineteenth century witnessed the central government’s recurrent efforts to consolidate a national school system by enacting education laws and establishing mechanisms to supervise public instruction. For instance, Madrid’s Normal School [Escuela Normal de Madrid] and the Council for Public Instruction, in charge, respectively, of controlling teacher training and instructors’ practices, were instituted in 1839 and 1843. Regarding the legal underpinnings of education, several legislative initiatives – such as the ley Someruelos for elementary schools (1838) and the plan Pidal for secondary and university instruction (1845) – undertook a regulation of the public school system in the first half of the century that culminated in 1857 with the signing of the already mentioned ley Moyano (Puelles Benítez 1999, 2004).

This drastic intervention of the state in education brought about a deep reorganization of the market which entailed the rearrangement of structures of power and control over decision-making. In this context, the RAE began to position itself as Spain’s linguistic authority and, along the way, accomplished a worthy goal: the officialization of its orthographic and grammatical norms in Spain’s schools. The first two sections of this chapter have shown the coexistence of these two processes – namely, the rise of the RAE and the restructuring of education – by analyzing the public debate over orthography that involved the government, the RAE and the ALCIP. Following Blommaert (1999), I have characterized it as a language-ideological debate and placed the focus of analysis on “human agency, political intervention, power and authority” (5). While language is undoubtedly a central topic in this orthographic episode, the debate itself is also “part of more general sociolinguistic processes, . . . sociopolitical developments, conflicts and struggles” (2). As we have shown, it reproduces a wider controversy among different approaches to Spain’s nation-building project as well as the struggle between the state’s centralization initiatives
and the non-governmental organizations’ resistance to its rapidly increasing accumulation of power.

Literacy, as this orthographic episode clearly shows, should be understood as a political matter rather than as a merely technical activity (Woolard 1998: 23). Discussion of specific linguistic features was, indeed, almost completely absent in our corpus. Instead, the participants in this debate put forward a great many arguments to defend the legitimacy of their dictation of the norms of linguistic correction in education. It seems evident, then, that this debate goes beyond the limits of the linguistic terrain: the control over educational spaces is what is really at stake (Villa 2011). The main goal of this study has been, precisely, to bring to the forefront the sociopolitical environment surrounding the emergence of the standard spelling system that, with minor changes, is still accepted and widely used today in the Spanish-speaking world. Placing the political context at the heart of the analysis has led us to emphasize the agency of all parties involved in the debate, and, thus, to consider both the teachers’ simplification initiative and the RAE’s officialization as disputed and ideologically laden projects.

The competition to control language and education inclined to the RAE and the central government. The third section of this chapter has studied the officialization of grammar in close connection with the sociopolitical context of mid-nineteenth-century Spain. The revitalization of grammatical activity within the corporation and the steps taken by its members to give their norms an officially recognized special status have been understood not as part of a neutral standardization process but rather as purposeful movements to occupy a hegemonic position in the linguistic market. The analysis concluded that the exceptional relations of the RAE with the government and other state institutions, particularly educational ones, were determinant for achieving the officialization of its grammar (and its orthography), for erasing the resistance to its project and, thus, for confirming its authority in language. In fact, those links were so strong in the central decades of the nineteenth century that we barely find academicians that did not hold, at some point in their lives, positions of responsibility in Spain’s administration: members of parliament, ministers, directors of the National Library, of the General Direction of Public Instruction, and presidents of the Ministers’ Council swelled the ranks of the RAE between 1843 and 1857.

Placing the focus on the political history of standard Spanish, this chapter has unveiled a historical struggle behind the emergence of linguistic authorities and official norms in the central years of the nineteenth century that has often been neglected in traditional representations of the historiography of Spanish. Dominant discourses on the history of standard Spanish have actually contributed to a neutralization of its context of emergence and to a naturalization of the linguistic norms and authorities themselves by erasing the RAE’s agency
in the historical process. This chapter, in contrast, has paid attention to the crucial role that the institution as a whole and some particular academicians, such as Antonio Gil de Zárate, played in achieving the officialization of its orthographic and grammatical norms, as well as to their active participation in the struggle over the monopolization of the linguistic and educational markets in mid-nineteenth-century Spain. Discussion over the institutionalization of the Spanish language is, of course, not a process exclusive to the period covered by this study; quite the opposite, contestation from different sources – powerful groups within Spain, Spain’s periphery movements and Latin American intellectuals – would actually increase in the following decades (Del Valle and Gabriel-Stheeman 2004; many contributions to this volume). However, the 1840s and 1850s deserve more scholarly attention because they witnessed the development of a strong alliance between the state and the RAE. The former granted the cultural institution a special status and a national character that made it possible for the corporation to become Spain’s linguistic authority, for its norms to be made mandatory and for its activities to be invigorated thanks to an economic growth. The RAE, in turn, provided Spain’s political authorities with a standard language that made it possible to develop the nation (both in its material and symbolic dimensions) and to form the national citizens through the public school system – as Antonio Gil de Zárate’s passionate statement on the ideological potential of education suggests.