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Language dynamics in the Iberian Peninsula in the 14th century

In the 14th century, the Iberian Peninsula was divided into five independent Kingdoms: Portugal, Castile-Leon, Navarra, Aragon-Catalonia and Granada. Linguistic diversity was great, even within each of the kingdoms. In the north, the pre-Roman (and pre-Indo-European) Basque language was spoken in Bizkaia and the other Basque provinces that were incorporated into the Kingdom of Castile, and it was also the majority language in the Kingdom of Navarre. It also appears to have been still spoken in the Pyrenees valleys of Aragon, from indications such as a city ordinance of 1349 forbidding its use (as well as that of Arabic and Hebrew) in the market of Huesca.

The Arabic language, which some centuries earlier had been spoken over most of the Peninsula, following the Muslim victory over Visigoth Spain in 711, was now confined to the Muslim Kingdom of Granada and its use by Muslim populations remaining in Christian territory. The Christian reconquest of previously Muslim Spain had brought about the southward expansion of the continuum of Romance varieties that had developed along the northern fringe of the Peninsula, displacing Arabic, as the Christian kingdoms conquered more and more territory. As a result of this expansion, the local Romance varieties that had been spoken under Muslim rule, collectively known as Mozarabic, were also replaced. Thus, the Galician-Portuguese language originally formed as the local evolution of Latin in Galicia and Northern Portugal reached the southwest of the Peninsula; Castilian, which was also born in the north, around the city of Burgos, had expanded all the way to Seville and Cádiz; and Catalan, which, had its cradle on both sides of the western Pyrenees, had spread to southern Valencia and the Balearic Islands. Other northern Ibero-Romance varieties, such as Leonese and Navarro-Aragonese experienced a more restricted southward expansion. Less well-known is the presence of pockets of Gallo-Romance (Occitan) speakers, most notably in the Kingdom of Navarre, where they arrived as settlers and kept their language in active use for several centuries.

As written languages, Portuguese, Castilian and Catalan reached preeminence among the Ibero-Romance languages. But the situation of the use of written languages was complex. Even within the Kingdom of Castile-Leon, where, following the work of Alfonso X the Learned and the School of Translators of Toledo, Castilian had reached a high status as a written language, competing with Latin, other languages also played an important role in literature. For instance, Galician was preferred as a lyric language and Sem Tob from Carrion (1290- c. 1369), one of most distinguished poets in Castilian, wrote some of his work in Hebrew. In the Catalan-speaking area, the language was seen as part of the Occitan linguistic complex by many authors, who favored the Occitanization of the written language.

In this presentation, I will focus on the dynamics of language in the Iberian Peninsula in the 14th century, after briefly reviewing the linguistic history of this territory from pre-Roman times, in order to explain the state of affairs regarding language that we find around the year 1365.