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Letter from members of the scientific community to remind some principles that guarantee the protection, the continuity and the investigation of the practices of whistled language in Canary Islands

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Letter from members of the scientific community to remind some principles that guarantee the protection, the continuity and the investigation of the practices of whistled language in Canary Islands

The person who appear in the list at the end of the text¹, members of the scientific community, based on our experience in the fields of History, Ethnography, Sociolinguistics and Applied Linguistics (in the latter case, with observational and analytic studies of whistled words and sentences produced by traditional whistlers from the Canary Islands), also with the firm purpose to guarantee the protection, continuity and investigation of the Canarian heritage in all its expressions; and in order to facilitate, in the responsible exercise of our profession, the greatest and most precise knowledge on the topic of whistled forms of languages to the Canarian society,

we subscribe to the following principles:

1. That in linguistics the term *articulation* is used for two different levels of human language (*double articulation*):
 - First, to characterize how nonsense elements such as vowels and consonants are pronounced (i.e., a limited inventory of *phonemes*).
 - But also to explain that the speakers combine these *phonemes* — that are then articulated in a second level — to compose significant elements (called *morphemes* or *lexemes*), thus producing a virtually unlimited inventory of words.
2. That a whistled language based on a non-tonal language (such as Spanish, Turkish, Tamazight or Greek, for example) is based on the articulation of words of this language and the approximation of the *phonemes* of the spoken dialectal variant, with sounds called *phonetic* productions that the individual is capable of whistling while articulating.
3. That we attest the existence of whistled languages in different places and languages of the world with very similar physiological and combinatory processes, where the fundamental principle used is to transpose local speech to whistles.
4. That we know at least three geographical areas in which the use of the whistled mode of Spanish has been evidenced: Tlaxcala (Mexico), Almería (Spain, with the particularity, in this case, of the use of an element external to the human body made of mud or cork, called *pito* or *boca*) and the Canary Islands (Spain).
5. That, despite the decline experienced on the island of La Gomera from the 1970s, its survival and the conservation strategies applied around the turn of the century allowed for a recovery in its knowledge and dissemination.

6. That the studies carried out in the past on the whistled language in La Gomera and El Hierro prompted a new stage of exploration of the existing historical documentation and recent ethnographic research that attest to the use of this type of communication, at least in La Gomera, in El Hierro, in Tenerife and Gran Canaria.
7. That this exploration of existing materials and new fieldwork among speakers of the Canary Islands confirm the survival to the present day of people who used the whistle as an articulated language and who learned it in their lives through traditional transmission on these four Canary Islands (without learning it thanks to a revitalization initiative through an association or a modern school).
8. Knowing that the principles for articulating whistles are the same regardless of the extent of the vocabulary used, the fact that the whistled vocabulary develops more or less in one place than in another responds both to historical needs and orographic and economic conditions, as well as to the state of vitality in which these conditions are found when the ethnographic or linguistic analysis is carried out.
9. That the whistled forms of Spanish spoken locally and practiced by the traditional whistlers from the islands of La Gomera, El Hierro, Tenerife and Gran Canaria, are all well characterized by the denomination *articulated whistled languages*, although they can be distinguished according to the variant of Canarian Spanish that is spoken by the whistlers, but also according to the techniques used to emit whistles, or to the state of vitality in which they are at the moment of the study.
10. That all of the above does not undermine the historical relevance of La Gomera in the development of Silbo, but rather gives to this island a pioneering role in revitalization through modern education and a role of major prestige in promoting a dynamic of protection of Silbo in La Gomera.
11. That, with the evidence of the use of Silbo in different corners of the Canary Islands, in our opinion there is no argument that justifies the disregard of the whistled language practice used in any of the islands as an authentic articulated whistled language.
12. That denying the existence of proven evidence of the use of articulated whistled language on different islands entails, together with the advanced age of many of the speakers, the irreparable loss of the sources carrying this heritage.

Consequently, for all of the above, we urge the institutions and associations linked to the research and dissemination of the whistled language in the Canary Islands to put

all their efforts into supporting all the research carried out and to be carried out, and to carry out all the actions of possible protection, in order to prioritize respect for the last traditional whistlers and the survival of this heritage.

The 27th of July 2023

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ⁱ The list appears at the end of this document in alphabetic order