



Catalan: the Historical and Social Background of a Romance Language

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Descended from Latin, Catalan at present counts some ten million speakers, making it comparable numerically to both Dutch and the Scandinavian languages. In Spain, it is used in the Principality of Catalonia (capital Barcelona), the Valencia region or *País Valencià* (named after its capital) and the Balearic Islands (capital Palma de Mallorca); in France, in the Roussillon region (capital Perpignan); and throughout the Principality of Andorra, an independent state where it is the only official language.

During the Middle Ages, the backbone of the Kingdom of Aragon, a major Mediterranean power, was formed by territories which were Catalan in both language and culture. As a natural consequence of this economic ascendancy, the language reached a high degree of formal development, both in literary expression and as the unified idiom of the royal chancellery. Thanks to the work of Ramon Llull in the thirteenth century, it was the first European vernacular, other than Latin, to be used for philosophical and scientific treatises. The outstandingly beautiful literature of the same period reached its peak, towards the close of the fifteenth century, in the poetry of Ausiàs March and in *Tirant lo Blanc*, rightly considered the first modern novel. Spoken dialects differed from one another, as is the case with other European languages today, yet the unifying example of the Court made written Catalan, during the Middle Ages, one of the most consistent and (if the use of an anachronistic concept can be pardoned) 'standardised' languages of Western Europe.

With the dawn of the modern age at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Kingdom of Aragon underwent a profound crisis which had varied causes: demographic (the arrival of the plague in the second half of the fourteenth century), political (the civil war which ravaged the Principality of Catalonia in the middle of the fifteenth century) and economic (the discovery of America by the monarchs of Castile led to the Atlantic replacing the Mediterranean as the main avenue for trade). The prolonged period of decadence which resulted dragged on till the start of the industrial revolution in the 19th century, when very different circumstances obtained.

In the meantime, two wars had been waged, and lost, against the expansionist policies of the Castilian throne. In that of the *segadors* or "reapers", half way through the seventeenth century, Catalonia, unlike Portugal during those same years, was defeated and deprived of its northern counties (Roussillon passed to France). In the War of Spanish Succession, in the first two decades of the eighteenth century, the supporters of the Austrian claim to the Spanish crown were defeated by those who backed the Bourbons. At this point, the separate institutions retained hitherto by the former Kingdom of Aragon were absorbed into Castile, whose absolutist monarchy immediately set about persecuting the Catalan language in political terms.

The industrialisation of Catalonia in the course of the 19th century set a gulf between this region and the Spanish hinterland. A striking contradiction emerged by the end of the century, since the

class with the greatest economic power inside the Spanish state, the Catalan bourgeoisie, was denied even minimal influence in politics. This remained in the hands of a decadent and feudal Castilian oligarchy, incapable of shoring up a collapsing overseas empire. Catalonia had always felt itself to be different from the rest of Spain. Combined with tensions of an economic nature, this led the Catalan middle classes to set their face against the power of an obsolete and anachronistic state.

The movement known as the *Renaixença* or "Rebirth", during the middle years of the nineteenth century, was one manifestation of the growing interest in 'popular' cultures, and the idealisation of the languages associated with them, provoked by Romanticism throughout Europe. But by the end of the century, this phenomenon was becoming increasingly politicised. What set Catalonia apart was that the leaders in the battle for linguistic, cultural and, in the last analysis, national self-affirmation were not scholars, even less those at the bottom of the social pyramid, but the middle and lower middle classes, dissatisfied with the state they found themselves a part of and determined to modernise it politically and socially, as well as forcing it to recognise the diversity of languages and cultures in the territories it embraced.

It was against the background briefly outlined above that the reform of the Catalan language took place, and culminated in Pompeu Fabra's proposals for 'standardisation'. The court had gone over to Castilian in the sixteenth century. In the eighteenth century Catalan was banned from education and state administration. Yet in the nineteenth century it was still the only language spoken by the vast majority of the population. Because Castilian had absorbed all official functions, and had been adopted by the upper echelons of society, Catalan had fragmented into dialects and lacked the expressive means needed if it was to be used by an industrialised society.

Pompeu Fabra (1868 - 1948) was a chemical engineer as well as a linguist, formed within the school of the new grammarians. Thoroughly familiar with the work of Saussure, he assumed the task of proposing a codified form of Catalan, which would reject both archaic and populist solutions. While the former meant restoring the medieval language and ignoring the historical and the resulting linguistic changes that had occurred in the meantime, the latter proposed adopting the impoverished spoken language of the period, strongly influenced by Castilian, as a standard. Consistent with his approach, Fabra put together a model of referential language with the following main characteristics.

First, he adopted a double system (*diasistematicitat*), obviously based on the central dialect of Barcelona (given the preponderance of the capital in both population and prestige), but such that all other varieties of Catalan could recognise themselves in it, especially where crucial areas such as spelling and vocabulary were concerned.

Second, he made it as distinctive as possible (*especificitat*), in other words, he chose for the norm those elements of pronunciation, morphology, vocabulary and syntax, which differed strongly from the traditionally dominant language, Castilian, and which gave the best chance of emphasising the individual nature of Catalan.

Third, he provided an intellectual register, either by borrowing from the languages of Europe's major cultures, or by exploiting the native resources of his own language, so that Catalan would formally be suitable for use in all areas of social activity, including the highest levels of culture and scientific investigation.

At the same time, Fabra was careful to keep this work of codification within strict limits. From this point of view at least, he wanted there to be no obstacles to its spread. He also ensured that only those solutions which could be adopted in practice found a place within the norm.

Two movements provided the historical context Fabra's reform needed for its adoption. *Modernisme* struggled to transform Catalonia from a regional society rooted in tradition into a modern nation, while *Noucentisme* (literally "(championing) the 1900s") gave institutional expression to the political commitment of the Catalan middle classes. The publication of the spelling rules or *Normes Ortogràfiques* in 1913, of the *Catalan Grammar* in 1918 and of the *General Dictionary of the Catalan Language* in 1932 were milestones in this process.

The diffusion of the norm met with the support of the vast majority of intellectuals sympathetic to *Noucentisme*. However, there were no parallel innovations aimed at encouraging society at large to adopt it in place of Spanish, which continued to be the official language of the state. The establishment of a dictatorship by General Primo de Rivera, which lasted from 1923 to 1930, was a major setback in this sense, much as it satisfied the Catalan middle classes. Shaken by the social upheavals resulting from the crisis which followed the First World War, they abandoned their commitment to reform and to the Catalan nation, in favour of an apparatus of repression offered by the central power. There was a renewed campaign against the use of Catalan in crucial areas such as education, public administration and the courts, a foreshadowing of the openly genocidal policy adopted by Franco's government after the Civil War.

In 1931 the Second Republic was proclaimed in Spain. Catalan nationalists, by now largely drawn from the lower middle classes and from among skilled workers, obtained a Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia. For the first time in the modern period, Catalan gained official recognition alongside Spanish, and had access to the world of education and of public administration. The achievements of the *Generalitat* (the name of the autonomous Catalan government) under the republic were, however, totally dismantled after the victory of the rebel armed forces during the war of 1936 to 1939, which set Franco's right-wingers against the left-wingers who supported the republic.

The defeat of the latter led, in Catalonia as throughout Spain, to the establishment of a nationalist and fascist dictatorship totally opposed to civil liberties with, in Catalonia, the added aim of destroying all traces of a separate identity. There was no let up in the persecution by Franco's dictatorship, from its beginning to its end, of everything that marked Catalonia out as a nation: language, culture, literature and symbols. It was only when the Axis powers lost the Second World War and, during the postwar period, Spain was gradually drawn into international organisations, that little by little the regime permitted certain cultural activities to start up again in Catalonia, naturally within the limits of the censorship to which the whole country was subjected.

Rather than in the openly repressive policies adopted towards Catalonia by Franco's regime, the real threat to the survival of Catalonia as a nation came from some of the most crucial social changes to have affected Western society, which took place while the dictator was in power (from 1939 to 1975). There was a massive immigration of Spanish speakers, victims of long-standing economic backwardness attracted by the possibilities of employment Catalonia offered. While Catalonia had always been able to absorb immigrants, however harsh the conditions which obtained, the arrival of television in the late 1950s, naturally restricted to the Spanish language, was a major blow. It now became more or less impossible to assimilate the new arrivals linguistically and Catalan society, hitherto homogeneous in ethnic terms, split into two groups: the Catalans, speaking mainly Catalan but increasingly bilingual, and the Spanish immigrants, totally monolingual. Furthermore, beginning with the 1960s, the phenomenon of mass tourism brought with it a new wave of outsiders, totally ignorant of Catalan national life and only concerned with the emptiest clichés of Spanish folklore, clichés which Franco's regime skilfully exploited.

It was not a revolt that put an end to the dictatorship but the physical decease of Franco in his bed. The regime was gently liquidated, without major disruption, but through compromise and transition instead. Although Catalan democrats had played an important role in the resistance to Franco's

regime, their representatives had to be content, in the Spanish constitution of 1978 and the statute for Catalan autonomy of 1979, with legal documents which, as far as language was concerned, formalised the disadvantages suffered by Catalan compared to Spanish. Knowledge of the latter is a duty, while knowledge of the former is merely a right which, consequentially, anyone who wishes to can cheerfully renounce. The law of 1983, promulgating linguistic 'normalisation' for Catalunya, could hardly do more than spell out the implications of both the constitution and the statute. Sanctions were excluded. The only course open was to ensure that the public use of Catalan was not penalised (no-one was to be prosecuted for using the language either in private or in public), while reaffirming the undeniable presence in Catalonia (now given 'democratic' legitimacy) of a language, Spanish, which has been introduced by brute force, that is, with blood and flames.

And so, under conditions of formal democracy, Catalan society continues to be overwhelmingly Spanish-speaking in such crucial areas as the law, business and the mass media -omnipotent and omnipresent. In this last field, with the early 1980s, the autonomous Catalan government or *Generalitat* set up Catalan language media, which can do little more than palliate the serious deficit of radio and television broadcasting in Catalan.

In the area of compulsory education, not directly subject to the inflexible laws of the capitalist market (always tending to favour the silent majority as against smaller groups) the *Generalitat* resisted the initial temptation to set up a parallel network of separate teaching in two languages and instead introduced a policy of 'language immersion' within a single system, which aims to render all children fluent in Catalan, the language of their country. These energetic measures on the part of the autonomous government have, however, proved totally incapable of bringing about the 'linguistic normalisation' mentioned above, were this only in the sense of giving Catalan a status equal to that of Spanish, where everyday use in Catalan life is concerned.

Moreover, the policy of 'language immersion' has provoked the anger of Spanish colonialists, totally opposed to abandoning the dominant role their language has enjoyed for centuries, in schools and elsewhere. For some years now they have been pursuing, through certain political parties and various media, and through particularly active groups of Spanish-speaking immigrants cast in the role of a Trojan horse, a campaign which denigrates the language policies of the *Generalitat*. Their objective is, yet again, to reduce Catalan to the position of a tribal idiom, used only in emotional and family contexts by a remnant of speakers. Were they to succeed, then Spanish rather than Catalan would be the unifying factor, fusing together in one single melting-pot the diverse strands of contemporary Catalan society.

Spanish colonialism is intrinsically hostile to Catalan and it is hardly surprising that it should also attack the unity of the language. Since the beginning of the last century, for the historical reasons outlined above, the Principality (Catalonia in the strictest sense) has formed the core of a group of territories, never completely integrated and known as the Catalan lands or *Països Catalans*, which have in common only a language and a culture. Each of the lands has a different history and this has weakened awareness of their original shared identity. As a result, both the Valencia region and the Balearic Islands are being increasingly assimilated to Spain, while Northern Catalonia is assimilated to France -the victim of an institutionalised Jacobinism which continues today implacably to proscribe any public manifestation of the area's indigenous language.

In this context, and with the help of statutes of autonomy which are deliberately ambiguous where language is concerned, Spanish colonialists have turned to the old strategy of 'divide and rule', fostering separatist local sentiment, opposed to both Catalonia and Spain, and claiming that a distinctive language exists for Valencia (or for Mallorca, or Minorca, or Ibiza), totally different from the shared language which is known internationally under the generic name of Catalan. At the time of writing, the autonomous government of the Valencia region is in the hands of parties representing

the Spanish right wing and folkloristic provincialism, who have gone so far as to concoct a spurious, aberrant grammar in order to fan the flames of linguistic separatism, ignoring any of the scientific criteria revelation to the codification of a natural language.

Manoeuvres of this kind cannot, however, alter the effective unity of Catalan, or the validity of Fabra's proposals for standardisation, supported both by writers and, in the last analysis, by all educated speakers of the language in the Valencia region (where, indeed, the only weekly news magazine embracing all the Catalan lands to appear so far, *El Temps*, is published) and in the Balearic Islands. At the same time they undeniably confuse the mass of the Catalan speakers in these areas, whose sense of national identity has already been weakened, and by doing so foment their progressive assimilation to Spain, from the grass roots upwards.

The phenomenon of Spanish replacing Catalan is currently more widespread among the lower classes than among the others, just as the informal registers of Catalan are those most strongly affected by interference from Spanish. We are therefore witnesses to the reversal of a tendency, dating as far back as the 16th century, to relegate Catalan to domestic and colloquial use. It is now, in contrast, a language of culture perfectly suited to meet all the expressive requirements of the contemporary world with its complex and dynamic historical realities. It can boast normally functioning written and audiovisual media, notwithstanding the powerful competition caused by massive immigration from the rest of Spain. Its output, in terms of literature and publishing, can measure up to the challenges of the parallel output in Spanish, and has created a public which can at least ensure its survival. Catalonia has several universities, where teaching is to all effects equally split between the two languages.

But this means that, more than ever before, Catalan runs the risk of turning into a species of Latin, used liturgically for elevated purposes. Within Catalan society today, it is above all Spanish which distinguishes people from one another and therefore, inevitably, offers the possibility of integration, a function assumed first and foremost by language in modern societies. The mechanisms regulating promotion or blockage in terms of class operate primarily in Spanish. Catalan is of secondary importance where access to the job market is concerned, and there are even activities where it is more crucial to know English than to know Catalan.

There again, increasing interference from Spanish language mass media and from the Spanish speaking population settled in Catalonia effectively undermines the achievements of compulsory schooling, literature and publishing in fostering the Catalan language and disseminating Catalan culture among those who speak it. The latter are losing their linguistic competence, more and more ignorant of basic and genuine elements, which are discarded in favour of unnecessary loans from Spanish. It hardly needs pointing out that this tendency is clearest in the city of Barcelona. This is all the most worrying, since the major innovations (including the replacement of one language by another), to which no language is immune, usually spread outwards from the capital, which has unquestionable superiority in terms of population, social influence and power.

It is not easy to predict what the future of Catalan will be. All one can say is that the years immediately ahead of us, with the end of this century and the arrival of the millennium, will be crucial in deciding whether the language is consolidated in full and normal use within Catalan society, or is replaced by Spanish in a fashion that could be very rapid indeed.

At present there can be no denying that all the measures undertaken by the institutions of both the autonomous and the local administrations and within civil society, with the intention of normalising the status of the language, have proved frankly insufficient. It is true that minimal progress has been made in spreading the active use of Catalan among the Spanish-speaking population, and that there have been significant advances in introducing Catalan into areas which proved resolutely refractory

until now, such as the judiciary and the business world. But there has proved to be no way of inducing Catalans to carry on speaking their own tongue when faced with a Spanish speaker who presumably understands it, and thereby practising what is known as passive bilingualism. Nor has it been possible to convince them that they have every legal right, within the territory of Catalonia, to insist on using the language of that territory in any circumstances whatsoever, be they public or private.

Currently applicable legal procedures give Spanish an unfair advantage over Catalan, and the Catalan *Generalitat* (like the autonomous governments of the other Catalan lands, the Balearic Islands and the Valencia region, it goes without saying) pursues a language policy based merely on compromise. A considerable sector of Catalan society shows less and less interest in the language of the country they were either born in or emigrated to. According to the pithy conclusions of Albert Branchadell, in a recent analysis of the process of linguistic normalisation, these are the principal stumbling blocks facing any attempt to ensure for Catalan a comparable status in its own society to that of any other language of culture with a similar number of speakers, inside its own historical territory.

There can be no question at present of major changes to either the Spanish Constitution or the Statue of Autonomy. The way to correct the reigning imbalance would be to reform the current legal provisions for Linguistic Normalisation (the *Llei de Normalització Lingüística*) so as to bring about genuine changes in the world of business and in the judiciary. Catalan would then achieve genuine prestige within the mechanisms of legal and economic power and, as a result, become increasingly essential to the functioning of such crucial areas of any society.

What is more, such a legal reform would have to be indissolubly linked to a social programme which saw Catalan as a valid means of self-promotion, rather than as a species to be saved from extinction, bringing the appropriate pressure to bear on all political parties, be they left or right, in favour of independence, nationalist-inspired or led from Madrid. That way they would fight, at the very least, for Catalan to reach genuine and effective equality with Spanish in that lands that historically constituted Catalonia.

Leaving aside the indubitable difficulties inherent in such policies, scholars and people active in culture, as well as those citizens most sensitised to the issue, are unanimous in declaring that the fate of Catalan will be freely decided by those who speak it. In the developed world at any rate, society seems to have left behind the ghost of any kind of totalitarianism and to have made a definite commitment to regimes which protect the formal liberties of every citizen. Even a strongly centralised state, determined to protect a foster language, could not do so if its citizens, for whatever reason, chose to abandon it and adopt a different one.

And yet, given that throughout history the people of Catalonia have shown a constant determination to affirm their own existence, one may hope that, yet again, a majority of people in the stateless nation which has the most lively and powerful language of all Europe's stateless nations will once more choose to remain faithful to their age-old tongue, rendering it worthy to take its justified place within the ample and varied assembly of nations of the world.

"Window on Catalonia". *Chapman*. [Edimburg], 88 (1997), 19 - 26.

Translated by Christopher Whyte