

Language policy as social policy

The role of languages in an open society

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In recent years, a parallel has been established between biodiversity and cultural and linguistic diversity, and just as we know that there are as many different species of ant living in a single tree in the Amazon rain forest as there are in the whole of the British Isles, it will come as no surprise to find that on the island of New Guinea – a Pacific territory a bit smaller than France and Germany put together, inhabited by 7,000,000 people – 1,000 different languages are spoken. While it is estimated that about 7,000 are spoken in the whole world, it is no less true that the numbers of their speakers differ enormously and can go from the 65,000,000 French speakers to the 19 speakers of Arutami that are left (or that *were* left), a language spoken on the borders of Brazil and Venezuela. So unequal is this distribution that only 5% of these languages – a small minority, headed by Mandarin Chinese and English – group together 94 % of the speakers, while the remaining 6% of the speakers in the world correspond to the languages making up the other 95 %. Currently, almost 56% of the languages of the world have 10,000 speakers or fewer, and there is another 28% of languages that do not even reach 5,000, which means that in the coming decades we shall most surely be witnessing the extinction of hundreds of different language systems, with the subsequent reduction of the wealth of our world view.

Though it may seem strange, Europe – where 230 languages are spoken – is a continent of low linguistic diversity that only concentrates 3% of the languages in the world. If we ask ourselves what place the Catalan language occupies in the linguistic landscape of the continent, we can answer that it is a case unique in Europe or, plainly and simply, that it is the greatest linguistic anomaly in Europe. Why is this? Quite simply, because, leaving to one side the exception of Andorra, Catalan is the most important and consolidated non-official language, within a State, on the continent: for its number of speakers, for its legal status, for its linguistic features, for its vitality and for its cultural and literary tradition, among other facts. Historically, we Catalans

have loved our language so much that we have never stopped speaking it to our children, as other peoples have done in circumstances not as desperate as ours, and we have experienced this loyalty in such a way that we have been able to successfully withstand the onslaught of centralized authority, shop-window cosmopolitanism and the defection of a substantial part of our governing classes.

Catalan is spoken in a territory measuring 68,000 square kilometres, inhabited by 13,529,127 people, and according to the estimates in the most recent surveys, carried out between 2002 and 2004, 9,118,882 European citizens speak Catalan and about 11,011,168 understand it. If classifications interest you, let's add that Catalan is in the group of the 347 most-spoken languages (5% of the total), and that it occupies eighty-eighth position in the list of languages with most speakers in the world; a table in which to be precise it would appear between Zulu – the Bantu language spoken in South Africa – and Bulgarian.

Finally, with regard to the situation of the Catalan language in the European and world context, I would like to express my conviction that it would be a mistake to fall into the temptation – as generous as it may be and as big as it may make us feel – of making the Catalan language's leading role among the minority languages of Europe our priority strategic commitment, rather than stressing the identification, the cooperation and the technological exchanges with non-independent political entities that have their own robust official language (Quebec or Flanders) and with states that share with us the difficulties of making languages with an average number of speakers viable, in a modern society with an advanced economy, and combining them with the use of one or more other languages of international scope, as Luxembourg, Denmark, the Netherlands or the Baltic republics do.

When asking ourselves what the current situation of Catalan is – although I shall refer especially to the situation of Catalan and the other languages in

the Principality of Catalonia – we cannot ignore the weakness of the cohesion between the group of territories and people that make up the Catalan-speaking linguistic community, which is the European linguistic area most fragmented and also the most threatened by the danger of linguistic disintegration, and not just due to the age-old problem of the language's name. Indeed, we ought to be asking ourselves if our linguistic community still conserves any or all of the attributes characteristic of a *normal* linguistic community; that is, the social group that shares a language and the corresponding rules of usage; which stays together through the existence of a network of frequent interactions (which maintains personal and professional connections, which watches certain television channels, which shares affinities, cultural industries, markets and a space for communication), and which has in common similar linguistic attitudes and the same scale of values, with regard to the use of the language and its meanings. Historically, once the territories of the old Crown of Aragon had lost their political independence, at the beginning of the 18th century, administrative frontiers were drawn between the speakers of Catalan, and as a result of the language's loss of its official status and the reduction of its use in public life, the generation of a common standard, equipped with a symbolic function, identifying and agglutinating, essential for the maintenance of internal cohesion and external differentiation, has been interrupted for long periods of time. In a situation of fragmentation like ours, sanctioned by the existence of frontiers between states and between autonomous communities, the exercise of the right to maintain the links between its members, across these frontiers, is still today seriously restricted, unlike the situation with the national groups that coexist in the framework of truly federal states like Switzerland or Canada, but who do not, for this reason, cease to effectively belong to the community of French or German speakers.

If we consider the influence of the strictly political interests on the exercise of this cooperation, which in the Valencian Country reaches disturbing limits

and which goes as far as expressions of symbolic or real violence, and the lack of regulation of the official status of Catalan in the case of the Franja de Ponent (where we are still awaiting the passing of a law to regulate the situation of Aragonese and Catalan), North Catalonia (where the only officially recognised language is French) and Alghero (where the existence of a Sardinian regional law of 1997 and a state law of 1999 has made no substantial changes to the status of Catalan), we will have to come to the conclusion that the Catalan linguistic community faces very serious difficulties, when it comes to normally exercising the functions that could guarantee the survival or the reconstruction of a common linguistic framework. Finally, Andorra, where the Constitution in force establishes the exclusive official status of Catalan as the language of the State, is for various reasons a special case.

The example of the Treaty of Union of the Dutch Language, signed by Belgium and the Netherlands, with the aim of safeguarding the establishment of rules and the promotion of the language common to Dutch and Flemings, or of the agreement between France and Quebec has not been followed by the authorities competent in the sphere of the Catalan linguistic community, more than anything because neither the government of the Spanish State nor the successive governments of the Valencian Country nor the majority of those that have followed one another in the Balearic Islands or in Aragon have shown much interest – when they have not been openly opposed – in the creation of scenarios of mutual cooperation, in the linguistic and cultural sphere. I believe, sincerely, that it would not be true either to claim that Catalonia and its institutions have always acted with the responsibility, the flexibility and the perspicacity that would be desirable, when promoting cohesive dynamics, from the respect for the political, sociological and cultural differences of the rest of the territories in the linguistic area.

Now, three official languages coexist in Catalonia: Catalan, Castilian and the Aranese variant of the Occitan language. What's more, Catalan is the

native language of Catalonia and Occitan is that of the Vall d'Aran. Knowledge of Catalan and Castilian is, at the same time, a duty and a right of all the citizens of Catalonia, which the Government of the Generalitat and the authorities in Catalonia have to guarantee. Moreover, according to Professor Carme Junyent, currently in Catalonia there are speakers of more than two hundred different languages, among them Romanian, Urdu, Arabic, Tamazight . . . , used by and between foreigners, and the Catalan authorities will have to temporarily award instrumental rights to some of these languages, in order to guarantee these people's access to vital public services, for a period of transition that should be long enough for the newly arrived population to reach basic competence in the two official languages.

It is logical that in a situation of inequality such as that still existing between Catalan (and Occitan in the Vall d'Aran) and Castilian, the public authorities should act, applying principles of affirmative action and giving special attention to the Catalan language, the one that has historically been subordinated. This is a basic principle of fair coexistence; it cannot be seen as a sign of bias or politicization of the language, and neither should it be used for the manipulation or for the stirring up of non-existent conflict. These principles of affirmative action are a compensatory demand that goes beyond the thinking of any political party – with some exceptions hardly representative and by no means innocent – and which has traditionally been assumed by the great majority of the citizens of this country. Both the ethics of the public policies and the opinions of the progressive wing of political theory – represented singularly by the work of the political philosopher Will Kymlicka, a lecturer at Queen's University in Ontario, which has been translated into over 30 languages, including Catalan – justify and call for the protection of the use of the languages historically linked to each territory. I feel that we can state that the social and political majority in Catalonia is in agreement with working to make two aims that cannot be waived compatible: for Catalan

to become a common language of social cohesion, shared by all the citizens, at least functionally, and for all citizens, regardless of what their habitual language is, to be able to take part in public life, exercise their rights on an equal footing and maintain satisfactory intercultural relations.

Therefore, regulating the use of the languages in the public arena is a condition necessary for the citizens – who are also customers and users – to be able to exercise their linguistic option in a really free way. Otherwise, the freedom of organizations, civil servants and professionals might cancel out, paradoxically, the freedom of the citizens whom they serve. The language policy of Catalonia has to help to preserve the legacy of the country's own language, and this demands that Catalan reach, in its own territory, levels of habitual use and dignity similar to those that any other normalized language has in its territorial ambit. As at the moment it is not possible to live completely normally in Catalan in all areas – while doing so in Castilian *is* – policies of positive discrimination are needed with regard to Catalan, until it reaches total equivalence with the other official language of our linguistic territory – and nobody should be shocked by this, just as no-one is shocked by the political measures adopted to protect the weakest from the most powerful.

Meanwhile, it is useful to remember that in Catalonia Catalan does not present the definitive symptom of languages in decline, consisting of the halting of the transmission of the language from parents to children. On the contrary, in a significant number of Catalan families whose first language is not Catalan, this is the language now being transmitted to the children. Reviewing the latest figures that we have, we shall see that although Catalan has only been the first language learnt in the home by 2,213,000 Catalans (40.6% of the total), next to the 2,424,700 (53.5% of the total) that learnt Castilian first, due to the high level of migration that took place throughout the 20th century, on the other hand 2,670,100 (48.8%) consider it their own

or identifying language and for 2,742,600 (50.1%) it is their habitual language. This differential of almost 10 points, favourable to the use of Catalan – or put another way, the fact that the Catalans of the Principality use Catalan more with their children than with their parents – confirms the existence of a potential of attraction that is not exactly typical of the languages on their way out and which makes it possible to claim that, albeit with only moderate intensity, the factor of the linguistic integration of the immigrant population has been active in Catalonia, in recent decades.

It is true, however, that the Catalan language presents deficits in many areas and faces the challenges posed by an intense world situation of linguistic contact, stimulated by the establishment of a new global space and by the impact of large movements of population. The changes associated with globalization place new demands on people, societies and authorities, who will have to give priority attention to the role of the languages in education and who, as Unesco and the European Union recommend, will do well to make sure that the citizenry gradually achieves, in our case, satisfactory functional competence in Catalan, in Castilian – and in Occitan, in Aran – and in English and one other foreign language, to allow them to maintain personal, professional and cultural relations in the local, state and international ambit. This is an objective in which our capabilities are still not what they ought to be, if we bear in mind that only 20% of Catalans can express themselves satisfactorily in English, putting us below the European average, 46%, and a long way behind the 88% of Sweden or the 72% of the Netherlands and Germany. Moreover (and for the first time in Catalonia) there is a percentage difficult to estimate of newly arrived adults that know neither Catalan nor Castilian. Despite everything – and unlike what happens with societies made up mainly of monolingual individuals, an exception in the predominant world scenario of multi-lingual societies – it cannot exactly be said that we Catalans look at the world through a hole, or that we do not

enjoy a more qualified and tolerant view of the diversity than that which characterises the majority of monolingual individuals.

As a result, both the action of the government of the Generalitat and the action of the other authorities in Catalonia have to serve to promote a regime of linguistic coexistence in the public sphere to make effective the respect for linguistic rights included in the legislative framework and to guarantee the acceptance of the new arrivals. Through this policy two objectives that cannot be waived have to be made compatible: for Catalan to become – and in no lesser measure than Castilian – the common language of social cohesion, shared by the whole citizenry, and that all citizens, regardless of what their habitual language is, may take part in public life, exercise their rights on an equal footing and maintain satisfactory intercultural relations. These aims have to be achieved by guaranteeing linguistic non-discrimination and with the conviction that progress in the knowledge and the use of Catalan must not be seen or thought of as an aim that systematically implies the retreat of Castilian, nor should Castilian be considered as an obstacle for the consolidation of Catalan.

There are three basic conditions for a language like Catalan to develop fully: firstly, the people who speak it should use it in their habitual surroundings, transmit it to their children and create spaces for oral use so that whoever comes to Catalonia or those who still have not adopted it can learn it and speak it; secondly, that this language should be the one to collectively identify the people who speak it, beyond individual identities; thirdly, that political will should be exercised in all spheres to work efficiently to guarantee its vitality. Thus, it is necessary for everyone living in Catalonia to know Catalan and whoever wants to use it may do so in any circumstance anywhere, and that the offer of products, goods and services in this language for mass consumption should be spread.

In the struggle against social exclusion and for the acceptance of the new citizens, as essential for those accepted as it is for the accepters, as essential for the public authorities as for civil society, it is very positive that they should quickly be able to understand Catalan and that they perceive it as useful for them to learn, not just from the point of view of social, employment and educational insertion, but also because the Catalan language is an element of social cohesion and a force that opens doors and erases labels, in the framework of a plural society that has in this language a strong element of non-exclusive identity – one can quite easily speak Catalan and feel oneself to be Georgian or Extremeño – and which reacts generously to the solidarity of those who feely decide to do their bit for the continuity of this historical project called Catalonia and for the survival of its language. On the contrary, to perpetuate the condition of immigrant, to promote the setting up of mediating bodies that monopolize the representation of the *immigrant for life* and to promote or tolerate the establishment of economic, planning and cultural ghettos – a strategy widely exploited by Francoism – may be tempting for the passing interests of some political parties, but it is a terrible strategy with regard to the future of the group as a whole, it compromises social cohesion and only benefits those for whom, according to the sociologist Miguel Fernández, “The figure of the perpetual immigrant is necessary to justify the current status quo”.

The aims, plans, actions and steps of the Generalitat’s language policy for the eighth parliamentary session revolve around two main objectives: first, to promote the social use of Catalan; second, to make language policy a public policy transverse in nature and, as a result, a social policy. They are two ambitious objectives that define the framework of the fundamental actions of this session, beginning with the introduction of the policies necessary to carry out the reform introduced, in matters of linguistic ordinance, by the Catalan Charter of Autonomy of 2006, and more precisely by the approval of a basic law that recognises the official status of the Occitan

language and another to effectively recognise Catalan sign language, in accordance with what is laid down in article 50.6 of the Charter, and which guarantees the conditions that should allow the people with hearing difficulties who choose this language to achieve equality. Before the year is out, the Government will place two bills before Parliament referring to these questions.

Promoting the social use of Catalan involves also taking steps necessary to achieve an objective increase in its uses and its offer, especially in the following areas: in the organizations, public and private, with regard to external and internal communications, signs, advertising and, in general, in the field of work; in spontaneous and informal oral communication, especially in the spheres of relationships and the activity of young people and in those corresponding to newcomers; in communications in everyday spaces and working environments, above all between the people who already speak Catalan, those learning it or who do not feel confident enough to use it, and in the products and services already available on the market and all those that have to be boosted in the world of leisure, audiovisuals and the new technologies.

Secondly, making language policy a transverse public policy means assuming efficiently that this constitutes an important part of the Government of the Generalitat's public policies. This means that, going beyond symbolic acts, language policy has to be approached and interpreted as a social policy whose aims are fairness and justice, which expresses the commitment to reduce imbalances in the exercise of rights, and which has to be aimed at guaranteeing all citizens an effective equality of opportunities and an increase of their welfare. Therefore, to claim that language policy has to be transverse and social means that it has to constitute an important part of the public policies of the departments and that it is necessary for these to take it into account in their plans of action, especially in three strategic sectors: the world of work, the judiciary and with regard to the immigrant population.

I am of the opinion that during the Transition and even afterwards, part of Catalan society and some of its politicians were convinced that Catalan's handicaps in relation to Castilian were temporary and that, once the Dictatorship was over, the integration of the children of the Spanish-speaking immigrants would take place quickly, that the positive effects of linguistic immersion would be spectacular and that, before too long, the situation of inferiority of the Catalan language would be a thing of the past. In reality, due both to errors in the diagnosis and for other reasons too numerous to list, this almost idyllic view – even today some Catalans are convinced that Catalan was used a lot more *before*, without being able to say where or when this ideal *before* took place, against which Joan Fuster warned us: “Displeasure with the current reality was invariably accompanied by a certain yearning for the past, perhaps for any past” – and confidence in a spectacular rise in the use of the Catalan language have been contradicted by the force of events; events that have shown up the inadequacies of the promotional policies and of a more favourable legal framework, when it came to bringing about changes in the linguistic behaviour of the citizens and increasing the use of Catalan in all spheres.

Therefore, and leaving to one side the description of the objectives and steps that make up the Language policy Plan for the 8th Parliamentary Session, which may be consulted on the Secretaria de Política Lingüística's website, I would like to devote this last part of my speech to sketching – along the lines that the Vice-president of the Generalitat has already placed before the Parliament of Catalonia and in other political spheres – the basic elements that we feel should constitute a good point of departure for initiating a process that ought to end in the signing, by the interested parties (unions and management organizations, bodies, groups, social agents, organizations, etc.), of a grand national agreement for linguistic skills in Catalonia, with the aim of promoting social dialogue and reaching a new basic consensus with regard

to the suitability of guaranteeing all Catalans a good knowledge of Catalan, Castilian – and Occitan in Aran – English and a second foreign language, plus the means to achieve it.

Therefore – and in accordance with what I have tried to explain throughout my speech – I would like to end by synthesizing the twelve points of departure that we suggest at the beginning of this process, on the basis of which we may seek this new consensus over language policy that has to be developed in Catalonia, in the next few years, with the conviction that ours is a multi-lingual society, modern, open and plural, where Catalan should play the part of common language:

1.- Catalan and Castilian are official languages in Catalonia and the knowledge of both is a duty and a right of all citizens. Catalan is the native language of Catalonia, the one that identifies us collectively, and constitutes a patrimony to be preserved for the coming generations.

2.- Castilian has become a structural element of Catalan society and is closely linked to the roots of a substantial part of the citizenry.

3.- Catalan has been historically the subordinate language and it is a fair aspiration to continue working actively to reverse this situation.

4.- The Catalan language is the most important and consolidated non-official language, in a state, in the continent of Europe, but it is still at a disadvantage in relation to Castilian, so it is legitimate to continue implementing a policy of affirmative action and compensatory measures.

5.- In Catalonia, as in many other countries in the world, the existence of more than one language does not constitute a problem or a limitation, but

it increases the cultural and human singularity of Catalan society and means that the multi-lingual Catalans have a more qualified and tolerant view of the world and its diversity.

6.- The school system of linguistic combination, besides guaranteeing the teaching of the Catalan and Castilian languages, offers an early opportunity for the socialization of infants in Catalan, facilitates the integration of the pupils coming from outside Catalonia and is no obstacle for pupils whose family's language is Castilian. Quite the contrary, the model presents, according to the results of scientific research, all kinds of advantages of a psychological, sociological and linguistic nature.

7.- The new immigration is an opportunity and a consubstantial factor in the development of Catalan society. To take steps so that the new citizens can gain enough competence in the two official languages of Catalonia is a factor essential in the struggle against exclusion, but the acquisition of the Catalan language still requires special promotion, due to its socio-linguistic situation.

8.- The progress in the knowledge and use of Catalan is an objective that does not automatically imply a retreat in the use of Castilian. Nevertheless, it is obvious that it will be necessary to boost the rebalancing of linguistic usage in those spheres in which the presence of Catalan is clearly insufficient (in the cinemas, in the administration of justice, in customer attention in the hotel and catering sector and in socioeconomic activity in general, among others).

9.- It is necessary to definitively drop the outdated distinction between *Catalan-speakers* and *Castilian-speakers*, categories that have no real sociological value and which do not even exist in our legal code, and replace them, when

necessary, with more objective and scientific terms (first language acquired, language of daily use, language of identification...), and not just because that idyllic image of the mother as the only definitive element of transmission of the language has been more than overtaken by the reality of the influence and the weight of the language or the languages of the father, grandparents, brothers, group of friends, etc., but for the objective and very frequent fact that every individual is perfectly capable, throughout their life, of constructing their own linguistic history, of adhering to second and third languages and of altering the terms of their linguistic loyalty, without limitations of origin that would make our project for a plural society demographically unviable. If in today's Catalonia the children, the grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren of the Andalusians or the Aragonese that arrived in the middle of the last century or of the Ecuadorians who are arriving now had never been able to become new Catalan speakers, probably not even I would be here today defending these arguments, or I would not be doing it in Catalan.

As for our linguistic rights, it is clear that they are or ought to be identical for all citizens and to take the terms *Catalan speakers* or *Castilian speakers* – what about the citizens who speak Chinese, English or Romanian? – in a strict sense would lead us to defend the existence of a dual model of society that does not actually exist; which is denied every day by the evidence of our ordinary interactions, by the existence of a very high number of mixed couples and groups, and by a growing percentage of people who identify themselves with more than one language.

10.- The language for personal identification, the feeling of belonging to a country (regardless of the language spoken by each person) and the condition of Catalan as the community's own language are in no way contradictory. Becoming Catalan does not imply any renunciation of one's name, one's language, one's religion, one's customs...'85and the traditional terms of

admission to our national community are open to people from increasingly diverse ethnic groups and cultures.

11.- We have to define a realistic and sustainable framework of respect, knowledge and dissemination of the main languages and cultures brought by the new immigrants, in the framework of the traditional commitment of Catalan society to linguistic and cultural diversity.

12.- Knowledge of foreign languages is still not good enough. Therefore, for Catalonia one objective of the education of its citizens and their preparation for a full life should be that they acquire sufficient competence in Catalan, Castilian, English and a fourth foreign language (which in many cases, could be French), apart from those that are the native language of each individual or family of foreign origin, and of those others that, like Occitan or Catalan sign language, also form part of our cultural and linguistic patrimony.

I sincerely believe that it is good to keep the authorities in check and not to allow them to become too complacent. However, we cannot deny that the supreme test of political satisfaction is, in democratic societies, imperfect though they may be, the electoral process, and that on this basis governments are established. It is they who agree on the programmes and introduce the policies. Finally – and in conclusion – I would like to end by making a plea to renounce this obsession of ours of endlessly debating whether Catalan is dying or has stopped dying, as I am convinced that it is a pointless, frustrating and demobilizing exercise. Just like all the languages in the world, Catalan could disappear, but the truth is that in Catalonia – but also in Andorra and the Balearic Isles, and to a lesser extent in the Catalan-speaking part of the Valencian Country – not only has the family transmission of Catalan from one generation to another not been broken, but what can be seen is an increase in the number of people speaking Catalan to their children. To be

sure, this is not the predominant tendency in the Franja de Ponent, or in Algherese or North Catalan society, where Catalan is only the everyday language of 13.9% and 3.5% of the population, respectively.

I am firmly convinced, as I said at the start, that if one considers objectively its legal recognition, its linguistic features, its vitality, the fact of being the eighty-eighth most-spoken language in the world... it requires a great stretch of the imagination to show Catalan as a language in its death throes. This must by no means lead us to deny the evidence that our language still has not achieved a good number of objectives essential for its normality; that it does not possess many of the elements that guarantee the sustainability of a language; that it is not even consolidated yet as the common language of all the Catalans; that the situation in some areas of its linguistic territory is frankly delicate and that the politico-administrative fragmentation of the linguistic area is a serious limitation for the prosperity of the whole.

However, from that to stating that Catalan is about to die out, this is a desire to come out with paralyzing prophecies that seem deliberately spread about in order to make the good people of our linguistic area give up the ghost. Would it not be more sensible and useful to exorcise these ghosts and think seriously – as we have done, even at times much more difficult than the present, against adversaries much more powerful, and finding ourselves lacking in resources and freedoms – the challenge of trusting a little more in the country and in its citizens? That is, to see ourselves wanting to win; to get over the culture of defeat; to increase our self-knowledge and our self-esteem, and to turn our normality, the sustainable continuity of our language and our culture, into a contribution to the world cause of peace, dialogue and respect among peoples and cultures. According to Alfred Bosch and Noemí Ibáñez, we Catalans are perfectly capable of succeeding in this project because “Their history [...] is that of a patient, integrating, persevering and

peaceful march. [...] They feel the joy of thinking that their adventure has left no corpses in its wake – on the contrary: it has contributed life and genius to humankind”.