

The importance of speaking Catalan

Pere Vilanova reflects on his personal experience of learning his ‘native’ tongue – as a third language.



Although these lines reflect a strictly personal viewpoint, I will start with a quote by an old friend, the writer Jorge Semprún, who died in 2011. Semprún used to say “the homeland of the writer is language”, adding “not one language, not his or her language: speech”. It is the essential instrument, the tool that will allow this issue of freedom of expression to become a reality. That is to say, it would evolve from being an abstract idea into a lasting social reality. Jorge knew what he was talking about, since he was a world-class writer and he was trilingual, genuinely trilingual. Not only could he speak more than one language more or less well, but he was able to use three of them – Spanish, French, German – as literary working languages. It is not to be believed, but it is true. Therefore, he was able to make the exercise of freedom of expression an individual, cultural, social and literary practice, a way of life in three languages. And Jorge belonged to a generation for

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whom freedom of expression was not free. Far from it.

In my own case, my native language is, supposedly, Catalan. But that is a big assumption. Yes, I used it with my family and friends when I was little and as a young man, but I was not able to write it! I had to learn it when I was pursuing... my doctoral courses. As the son and grandson of refugees from the Spanish Civil War (a civil war that included Catalonia, but not in the iconic manner that is represented nowadays), I grew up in exile, under the welcoming protection of a small country, Andorra, that always took care of the refugees that the dark 20th century threw at its small territory. In this exile, my first school, the primary one, from six to nine years of age, was a French school that the French Government supported in Andorra. It was the “Ecole Publique, Laique, Républicaine et gratuite” that marked me for life. Even today, very often, I have to stop and think if I am thinking in French, Catalan or Castilian. Only afterwards, I attended a (strict) Catholic boarding school in Spain. Because my parents wanted that besides the recently acquired French culture, we would not completely lose our roots with Spain. And it so happens that Andorra is just between France and Spain, high in the mountains.

In that Catholic boarding school in Franco’s Spain the “clash of civilizations” was sharp, you can believe me. I had to learn a language that I did not know, Castilian, without forgetting my “educational learning language”, French, and my forbidden Catalan that navigated through my subconscious. It was mandatory to write to your parents every week in an open letter (censorship was not concealed, it was “concentrated”) that did not say anything bad about the school, and, of course, in Castilian. Have you ever tried to write to your parents in another language if both have a common native language? Do not do it. It is embarrassing even fifty years later...

Afterwards I moved on to the University of Barcelona, a Bachelor in Philosophy and a lot of political activity (clandestine, leftist), but all classes, examinations, administrative reports in Castilian. And later on, to close the vital linguistic loop, the doctoral courses in Paris (in the excellent, Ecole de Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales), to return to Spain after the death of Franco. And then, and only then, to begin to learn to write without spelling mistakes my alleged native language. It was not an easy matter, because in Paris in those years, I met K, the daughter and granddaughter of Spanish Civil War refugees, who had been born in Moscow (initial language: Russian), and raised in Paris (educational learning language: French), and whose Castilian (theoretical “original” language of the family) was much worse than mine. To make it short: we met in Paris, speaking in French and still –several decades later–we still keep speaking in French and/or Castilian. But K, to our children (36 and 32 years of age) has only spoken in French from the first day until today, because Russian was no longer hers. She did not know Catalan in 1976, but she learned it in less than a year, her fifth language.

Why have I brought you up to here, you would ask yourselves? Because only with the death of Franco in 1975, the first democratic elections in Spain in 1977, the approval of the Constitution in 1978, and above all –regarding linguistic effects- the approval of the Statute of the Autonomy of Catalonia in 1980, there began what we may call a process of normalisation of the Catalan

language, in a constitutional framework consistent with the principles of the rule of law. But of course, this does not mean that in January 1981, the Catalan language was already “normalised”, its social use expanded and consolidated, the process has been unfolding over more than three decades and still continues to do so. The legal framework of a public educational policy –it is the case of the linguistic policy– could be created with relative speed. It is a matter of political will and social consensus. And both things occurred, in those years. But the material implementation of such a public policy, with effects that are visible and have an impact, that is something that takes at least one generation. That is to say, that my children, more or less, are the first “cohort” of citizens who have reached adult life with a “normal” use of Catalan as their original social language. I cannot say “mother tongue” (an absurd expression), because their mother is Russian-speaking and French-speaking although an exiled Spaniard; and I cannot say “father tongue” because my partner and I speak French and/or Castilian. Well then, one of my sons always speaks to his mother in Castilian, but speaks Catalan to me, while the other son speaks in Catalan with both his mother and me. We do not know why, but it does not matter to us. They have learned English so they are going through life with four languages, and as a matter of fact the older son also speaks Italian and Portuguese fairly well.

We can draw several conclusions from all this. Some, as you can see, are from my personal sphere, but others have a larger social dimension. Catalan, as a language, has been spoken for many centuries, it is a Romance language derived from vulgar Latin, a variant of the Occitan one and its literary tradition dates back to the middle ages. A factor that must be taken in consideration is that Catalan has shown a great social vitality. Despite living historically for three centuries in a state not only of a very conservative tradition in the political sense, but also very centralistic regarding the language (as the proverb says: “Spain was built in Castilian”), it has survived throughout time cutting through all social strata both in a rural milieu and an urban setting. Even when forbidden, and believe me, the Franco regime, like a good military dictatorship of fascist origin, was also extremely repressive in relation to the non-Castilian languages of Spain. It failed, at least in that respect, the Franco dictatorship definitely failed. People keep speaking Catalan. Nowadays 11 and a half million people from Andorra (where it is the only official language), Spain (in Catalonia, Valencia, the Balearic Islands), France (the Rossello) and Italy (the region of Algher, in Sardinia) have a relation with the Catalan language. Therefore, it does not seem an exaggeration to emphasise the importance of its progressive normalisation – especially, leaving aside the case of Andorra, which as a sovereign state it has it as its official language— in places where it socially coexists and cohabits with one or other languages.

Progressive normalisation means exactly the following: to reconcile its ample social use, that has allowed it to survive throughout time, with an adequate updating of its educational and grammatical learning, in order to ensure the fulfillment of functions that every historical language has assigned. All this should be handled with caution, common sense, a sense of history, and thinking about future generations: that is to say, my grandchildren and great-grandchildren, in case I have them. For it is not so, at least at the present time in the case of Catalonia and its complicated relationship with Spain, because it is here where politics in its worst sense breaks in and, above all, the

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politicians in a wide range of representation. Actually, the current political problems are a symptom of that deep evil: to consider languages not as instruments of knowledge and vehicles of social integration, etc. but rather as “weapons of war”. Here are several examples. Some (or many) persons tend to think that the culmination of all this reasoning is that, for strange reasons, if several territories are Catalan-speaking (to a greater or lesser degree, the distinction is important) due to a strange “natural law” they are intended to form a sovereign, independent nation-state. I tend to tell these people (with little success): “do you know anybody who speaks “Swiss” or “Belgian” or “Canadian”, and then “are you sure that the Swiss or the Belgian francophones want to be French from France?” Anyway, it is no use.

At the other extreme, for example, in Spain, at the present time, the conviction that Castilian is “threatened” in Catalonia has grown at an alarming rate, when in reality, the newspapers, radio, television available in Catalonia are Castilian-speaking in a ratio of 10 to 1 in relation to the use of Catalan. Other citizens believe, some in good faith, others not so, that in a territory in which several languages socially cohabit in truly significant proportions, there would exist a fundamental right for the citizen not to ever be in contact with the other language. Including the educational cycle from primary to doctorate, in the workplace, in private life, etc. It is, as a matter of fact, the worst of all models (for example the Belgian one), because it entails using the state and its institutions to build and maintain stagnant linguistic ghettos, separated from each other using as a pretext “the protection of differentiated cultural rights”. In Catalonia, for the last 35 years, a functionally bilingual linguistic model has been successfully achieved, and according to the most recent polls, 95% of the population understands Catalan (the knowledge of Castilian is 100%) and two thirds of the population declares it as the priority language.

To all this, and to conclude, I return to the beginning: languages are human expressions of what we call “speech”, our main instrument to make social life a collective project, to be built by all of us. From personal experience, I emphasise some conclusions: the more languages you know, the better; the more you travel, the better; the more books you read, and in more languages, the better. When a language is at a disadvantage in relation to others with which it shares both territory and population, and in the case of Catalan this is due to very concrete historical and political reasons, it has the right to a full normalisation. It has the right that institutions, public authorities, political elites get involved in an effort so that that delay be fulfilled prudently, but swiftly. This type of principles allow the average citizen – if he or she resolves to do so – to be uncompromising when the Catalan language is unjustly attacked, although his or her attitude will only be morally valid if he or she reacts with equal firmness to attacks against the Castilian language. All I am saying, as a matter of fact, is not exactly a majority viewpoint in any social segment, either in Catalonia or in Spain, at the present time.

Languages are meant to be understood, and freedom of expression depends exactly on that, that it can be defended in any language. And as in Jorge Semprun’s case, the more languages you know, the better you will be able to do it.

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