

# Multilingualism in Catalan Secondary Schools: An Exploration of Language Practices and Challenges

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## Abstract

This article summarizes some of the results of an ethnographic research project investigating the language practices, attitudes and ideologies of secondary school students of immigrant origin in Catalonia. It identifies some of the educational and linguistic challenges that the migration experience as well as societal and individual bilingualism pose for such students. In sum, the study points at the development of flexible translanguaging practices, pragmatic ideological standpoints and the need to foster educational practices that value the students' multilingual abilities.

## 1. Introduction

Language policy in Catalonia aims at a multilingual, cosmopolitan society with the Catalan language in a socially integrating role (see *Pla per la Llengua i la Cohesió Social*, Generalitat de Catalunya, 2009). In fact, the latest research describes present-day Catalonia as a linguistically and culturally complex society that has become the perfect site for investigating globally-relevant sociolinguistic phenomena. In Catalonia researchers seek to understand, among other issues, the interface of societal and individual bilingualism and multilingualism, as well as the adaptation processes of speakers from different backgrounds to this society and its language practices. In particular, educational sociolinguists have taken a special interest in recently-arrived youth and in how the Catalan school system provides them with opportunities for social, academic and linguistic integration.

From this perspective, the GREILI-UPF<sup>1</sup> research group has explored the language practices, attitudes and ideologies of secondary school students of immigrant origin in Catalonia, with a focus on students of Latin American and Chinese origin. With this study, researchers have intended to answer the following research questions, among others:

- What are these students' language practices in interactions inside and outside of the school?
- What are these students' language attitudes and ideologies?
- What challenges do they experience as regards the migration experience, societal local bilingualism and the school's Reception process?

These questions are pertinent in a society that in the last two decades has received high numbers of international migrants and where two co-official languages — one with an international projection and one historically identified with the territory — are used daily by the local population. In fact, if younger than sixteen, the children of this immigrant population enter schools which have

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<sup>1</sup>The author and her research colleagues belong to GREILI-UPF (i.e. *Grup de Recerca en Espais Interculturals, Llengües i Identitats* from Universitat Pompeu Fabra) and conducted this research with the financial support of Recercaixa Project 2010ACUP-00344 and AGAUR-Generalitat de Catalunya Projects 2009ARAFI-00049 and 2010ARAFI-000017. For more information see <http://www.upf.edu/greili-upf>.

Catalan as the medium of instruction and follow an educational model that rebalances the unequal presence outside the school (in favour of Spanish) of this language and Spanish. Besides, schools also facilitate the learning of at least one other language: most frequently English, but also French, German or Italian.

Since the 1990s, Catalonia has seen how the two local languages increasingly share space with more than 250 languages spoken by people who have come from around 160 countries. Significantly, meaningful percentages of those who do not have Catalan as their mother tongue view it as their language of identification and as their most habitual language when older than fourteen (see IDESCAT 2014 for more information). These statistics point at the existence of what Pujolar and González (2013) have called *mudes lingüístiques*, namely, linguistic changes in one's life history.<sup>2</sup>

To explore such issues, several types of data have been collected by GREILI-UPF in seven secondary schools from Barcelona and its metropolitan area: (a) interviews with 4<sup>th</sup> ESO students, (b) interviews with language teachers and with those in charge of the Reception classes,<sup>3</sup> (c) interviews with students' parents, and (d) researchers' observational data in the schools both in and outside the classroom. The group has already analyzed these data in depth in previous publications<sup>4</sup> but they will be synthesized here, with a special focus on language practices, opportunities and challenges as explained by the students themselves.

### 1. Adoption of local bilingual language practices

Upon arrival in Catalonia, students of either Latin American or Chinese origin very often do not notice that the local population speaks two different languages until they start classes in school. They arrive from their countries of origin unaware of the existence of Catalan; thus, Catalan signs on the street may appear as Spanish to Chinese students and as Peninsular Spanish to the Latin American youth. For example, when a researcher asked Enrique<sup>5</sup> “y ¿no te parecían los rótulos los letreros que había dos idiomas [*on the street*]?”, he answered “no no me fijé”. Nevertheless, for those for whom bilingualism is a new experience, bilingual practices may be considered — as Colombian Juan Manuel put it — “una experiencia muy bonita a mí me gusta mucho porque, [...] es para mí muy muy impresionante ver un profesor que habla castellano y con sus profesores (*sic*), con sus compañeros habla en catalán a veces castellano.”<sup>6</sup>

Even if they very often socialize with students from their own or similar cultural background (i.e. Chinese students with other from China and Latin Americans with students from their same or other Latin American countries), they interact with local students and do so both in Catalan and

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<sup>2</sup> Pujolar and González (2013) further define this concept as “changes in language use that are important for people's self-presentations in everyday-life, but whose implications for ethnic ascription are open to negotiation and contestation.”

<sup>3</sup> See Trenchs-Parera and Patiño-Santos (2013) for more information on Reception classes in Catalonia.

<sup>4</sup> This article synthesizes the main results published in the following articles and book chapters: Newman, Patiño-Santos and Trenchs-Parera (2013), Trenchs Parera (2013), Trenchs-Parera and Patiño-Santos (2013), Trenchs Parera, Patiño, Canós and Newman (2013), Trenchs Parera and Tristán Jiménez (2014), Trenchs Parera, Larrea Mendizabal and Newman (2015), and Newman and Trenchs-Parera (June 2015, in press).

<sup>5</sup> Pseudonyms are used in all cases to ensure students' anonymity.

<sup>6</sup> For the sake of legibility, transcriptions, although literal, have been shortened and simplified as regards the transcription of phonemes and intonation patterns; shortenings are indicated by the sign [...].

Spanish. And, as occurs with the local population, the language used in first encounters frequently determines the language used in future interactions:

Zhang: sí sí tenim un grupet sí

Researcher: que són de, totes totes les nenes, les noies són d'aquí?

Zhang: mh

Researcher: i amb amb les altres també parles castellà

Zhang: sí amb els de l'altre cole parlo castellà i amb els d'aquest cole parlo català [...] sí que vam començar a parlar en castellà i llavors jo també contesto en castellà.

In fact, what most interviewees share is the normality with which they approach two common phenomena in Catalonia: (1) speaker's accommodation to the language of the interlocutor, and (2) what several of our interviewees describe literally as 'speaking *barrejat*':

Researcher: tú hablas catalán aquí y con tus amigos pero ¿y cuando vas por la calle y tienes que hacer cosas? ¿lo hablas?

Xiaobai: hum depende de los amigos

Researcher: ah sí ¿por qué?

Xiaobai: si es de china hablo xinès y catalán si es catalán

Researcher: y en el bar también hablas a veces catalán ¿cierto?

Xiaobai: sí barrejat.

## 2. Echoes of local language ideologies and attitudes

Students of immigrant origin adopt local language practices as well as local language ideologies and attitudes. Thus, although they view the public presence of the two local languages as normal, they think that “a l'escola el català és més important però al carrer és més important l'espanyol [...] quan li pregunto a algun espanyol en català, alguna persona diu que no ha sentit bé però en espanyol pot respondre més,” as Longhui explains. The academic language is then seen as different from the social language, be it Spanish, Mandarin or a vernacular such as Wu or Tianjinhua:

Longhui: [*talking about classroom notes*] sempre els escric en català [...] em sembla que els xinesos que surten de la Xina i van a l'escola a aprendre amb els seus companys parlen espanyol però amb els professors no ho sé

Researcher: no ho saps, i tu creus que de petits els haurien d'ensenyar l'espanyol o els haurien d'ensenyar el català?

Longhui: català perquè quan és més gran i va a l'escola, els companys parlen espanyol ja però de petits han d'estudiar català.

Researcher: perquè així és més fàcil després, no?

Longhui: perquè a l'escola els llibres tots són en català i si estudien l'espanyol no els poden entendre en català.

Nevertheless, Latin American students may have diverging feelings towards Catalan and Peninsular Spanish. Some of them verbalize an ideology that invests the least international language with less importance. For example, Ecuadorian Johan says regarding Catalan: “para mí es un idioma secundario.” Cuban Dionisio — who arrived when he was three years old — explains that Catalan “no molesta tampoco” but admits that “a mi tampoco m'agrada parlar, a part de que no és la meva llengua doncs, no m'agrada parlar, em sento raro.” In contrast, for others, such

as Ecuadorian Kevin — who arrived in Catalonia very young —, there is a clear hierarchy of languages led by Catalan:

Cuando escuchas hablar a un catalán dices hostia este este tío tiene cultura digamos que no siempre es así pero dices este tío es listo este tío es no-se-qué, o escuchas a un tío hablar en castellano o a un un sudamericano hablando ahí con su forma que no estoy despreciándolo porque yo soy de Sudamérica y a veces de broma digo esas palabras tipo de no-se-qué la verga digo cosas de estas así de broma, yo lo digo pues lo ves que dices este chico no es digamos no sé listo culto no es culto.

### 3. Everyday opportunities for authentic language use

According to our participants, life outside school brings a wealth of opportunities for authentic language use. First of all, these students frequently take on roles that force them to interact with local adults in either of the two co-official languages. For instance, we have found both Chinese and Latin American students who act as language brokers for the family. Moreover, they may take on work responsibilities that call for authentic language use:

Researcher: a més a més d'aquestes classes, has après català o castellà d'alguna altra manera fora de l'escola?

Chunzhen: sí al bar del meu oncle que té les clients sempre parla castellà la meva cosina també ella que també fa dos anys però sembla tres, ella treballa al bar i sempre parla més millor que a mi el castellà

Yingmei: jo també i treballa al bar i toda espanyol alguna vegada habla català i alguna vegada parla castellà i todo junto.

Sometimes, the role these students adopt is that of a language teacher, as Esther and Nieves explain:

Esther: [...] mi papá también en ocasiones me habla [*in Catalan*] para que a él no se le haga difícil como a mí entonces le vamos hablando y le ponemos libros para que los lea en catalán

Nieves: mi madre cuando estaba haciendo el curso nos pedía que le hiciéramos de pareja y lo hablábamos pero ella no respondía.

These students, however, also practice translanguaging for their own personal purposes. Thus, when asked on what occasions he uses Catalan or Spanish, Sanping answers:

no sé porque por ejemplo tenemos una tienda y queremos comentar algo del cliente que necesita no sé qué cosa y lo hacemos en chino para que él no sepa que estamos agobiados y que no sabemos qué hacer en chino cuando estamos en la familia con los parientes un comentario sobre ellos sobre los platos en catalán cuando tampoco hace falta que nos entiendan

Or, as Nixiang explains, Catalan and Spanish may be used with relatives when knowledge of the L1 fails: “con mi hermano también hablamos en dialecto pero a veces no nos entendemos mucho usamos palabras del mandarín y ya nos acostumbramos a hablar en catalán o en castellano.” The mother tongue — Mandarin or the Chinese vernacular in the case of Chinese students, and Spanish, in the case of Latin American youth — remains the language of the time spent watching

TV. However, Longhui explains that he often chooses to watch soccer on the Catalan television channel because “si miro televisión es para estudiar y aprender el catalán.”

#### 4. Presence and role of the first language

Nixiang’s quote above hints at the presence at home of two different languages from her country of origin. In Catalonia, Chinese families may speak both Mandarin and a vernacular at home. In some cases, Mandarin is used as a sort of lingua franca, as in Sanping’s home: when the researcher assumes that “en tu casa hablan el dialecto de Tianjin”, Sanping corrects her by saying “no porque mi padre habla dialecto de Fujian y ellos [*father and mother, who speaks Tianjinhua*] no pueden comunicarse así y tienen que comunicarse en mandarín”. In other interviews, students hide the family use of the vernacular because they believe that Mandarin is more prestigious than any other Chinese language: “jo parlo xinès com de poble perquè hi ha el mandarí i el de poble”, explains Samuel, a student who had come from the region of Sheng in China and who used a Biblical name.

Students of Chinese origin may do translanguaging at home between two or even three languages whereas Latin American students may feel torn between two “Spanishes.” The differences between Peninsular Spanish and the Latin American variety the family speaks pose several challenges for them. In the following extract, South American Nieves and Dominican Juan illustrate some of these conflicts:

- Nieves: sí a ver habitualmente cuando estamos con los compañeros lo disimulamos el *sho sha*<sup>7</sup> cosas así más que nada porque en teoría dicen [*the local peers*] que se acostumbrarían pero mentira porque se burlarían. Lo he intentado, personalmente, y se ríen hasta el cansancio [...]
- Researcher: ¿y seguís usando el vos o has cambiado al tú?
- Nieves: habitualmente sigo usando el vos sobre todo fuera de clase pero dentro uso el tú [...]
- Researcher: ¿qué tal con el vosotros?
- Nieves: al principio fue horroroso porque no sabía utilizarlo pero ya me he ido acostumbrando
- Juan: y más en Santo Domingo mi padre desde que ha estado aquí en este tema me la ha cogido con con las palabras de tío y esas cosas [...] cuando fui pa’llá me relajaron mucho con estas palabras.

#### 5. Presence and role of other languages

The mosaic of the languages present in the daily lives of these students would not be complete if we did not acknowledge the presence of, at least, two more languages: Korean and English. With regard to the Korean language, we detect a strong impact of the Korean culture in the leisure time of our young Chinese participants. Moling explains the normality with which she accepts the presence of the Korean language, a presence that has triggered in her the desire to learn yet another language:

Researcher: Super Junior, què és? un actor?

<sup>7</sup> In phonetic transcription, [ʃo:] and [ʃa:].

- Moling: és un grup de trenta persones  
 Researcher: i per què t'agraden? què fan ells?  
 Moling: perquè és molt bonic i canten molt bé  
 Researcher: canten també? i en quina llengua canten els Súper Junior?  
 Moling: coreà i xinès  
 Researcher: i per què t'agradaria aprendre coreà?  
 Moling: perquè jo sempre miro pel·lícules de coreà [...]  
 Researcher: i en quin llengua parlen ells els coreans? parlen en coreà? però tu com ho fas per entendre'ls?  
 Moling: parlen coreà i aquí tenen xinès  
 Researcher: ah en subtítols en xinès.

Also among Latin Americans societal bilingualism sparks an interest in language learning. For example, when asked which *Batxillerat* he was going to study, Ecuadorian Jorge says:

[...] humanístic per anar a turisme a la universitat perquè des de que vaig aprendre el català ràpidament en tres mesos doncs m'he interessat en les llengües en tot perquè crec que dono bueno i això que vaig a turisme a aprendre moltes llengües [...] el francès l'italià el portuguès l'anglès.

As regards English — the foreign language that all our interviewees study at school — both Latin American and Chinese youth share the belief that the English language may prove useful for international mobility and this belief becomes a motivating force, as Álvaro explains: “Me gustaría aprenderme el English [...] porque si voy a un sitio que no hablan catalán y hablo yo pues a lo mejor no me entienden y entonces vale más aprender un idioma que se hable más.”

English is also seen as useful in Catalonia when one of the interlocutors in the conversation may have faulty knowledge of the local languages. Longhui explains this case as follows:

- Longhui: sí si hi ha alguna paraula de vocabulari no entenc en algun hospital o algun lloc puc parlar en anglès o xinès si ells parlen en anglès  
 Researcher: aquí vols dir? aquí?  
 Longhui: sí algun metge no parlen bé el català parlen anglès  
 Researcher: però tu parles bé el català pots parlar en català  
 Longhui: no alguns que no que no sé com parlar algunes paraules.

Nevertheless, such multilingualism in everyday life may entail some cognitive challenges beyond the fact that Catalan — and also Spanish for Chinese students — is a major academic obstacle for many of these students. As an illustrative example, we will provide a final quote from the interview with Xiaobai, a speaker of Wu and Mandarin who had studied English in China for four years; his reaction when asked about the English language speaks for itself:

- Xiaobai: anglès? no m'agrada anglès  
 Researcher: per què no t'agrada l'anglès?  
 Xiaobai: perquè és difícil tens que aprendre castellà català i anglès la tercera no puc.

## Conclusions

As we have seen, the students interviewed tell us that the migration experience results in flexible multilingual practices and in rich functional repertoires that they consciously use in different contexts, with different interlocutors and for different purposes. They have also given us insights into a pragmatic language ideology that values several languages for different reasons:

- Catalan holds prestige and utility for everyday life in Catalonia;
- Spanish is seen as a useful language for everyday life in Catalonia and for state-wide and international mobility;
- the language (such as Mandarin, Tianjinhua or Wu) or variety of origin (such as Colombian Spanish or Argentinian Spanish) is valued for communication within the family and for maintaining links with the culture of origin;
- English is valued as an international language that facilitates international mobility and as a third/fourth linguistic resource in Catalonia when command of other languages fails;
- finally, other languages — such as Korean in the case of Chinese students — may be present and are normally accepted by students in leisure time.

These ideologies often reflect preconceived ideas that are held in the family and in the country of origin. Nevertheless, the students' spontaneous multilingual practices and the new experience of the local active bilingualism challenge and modify those preconceptions. Such changes and practices are not exempt from conflict. However, rather than ethnic, students experience the emerging challenges as predominantly cognitive. Therefore, the difficulties they go through should be addressed directly by those in charge of their education by giving multilingualism the academic — and social — value it deserves: in Liu et al's words (cited in Kamwangamalu 2010, p. 129), "in an increasingly globalized world, code changes may need to be added as a curriculum objective, a required skill for life".

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Obra Social 'la Caixa' and AGAUR-Generalitat de Catalunya for their financial support, as well as my GREILI-UPF research colleagues and collaborators who have participated in various stages of the project: Chun-Chun Chin-Ko, Michael Newman, Àngels Oliva Girbau, Imanol Larrea Mendizabal, Manel Ollé, Adriana Patiño Santos, Elena Suárez and Larissa Tristán Jiménez.

We owe special thanks to the secondary school teachers Montserrat Abella, Dolors Baqué, Laura Canós, Gemma Castro, Gemma Montoya and Ortrud Siemsen, without whom this project would not have made it to its final port. Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge the participation of all anonymous students, parents, teachers and school administrators who have allowed us, for some time, to peek into their lives.

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## Biodata

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“... those that understood him smiled at one another and shook their heads, but, for mine own part, it was Greek to me.”

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