

MULTILINGUALISM AND UNIVERSITIES: AN OPPORTUNITY OR A THREAT?

by Isidor Mari*

1. Have we not always been multilingual?

Universities around the world have always been multilingual to some degree since their object of study, universal knowledge, is multilingual by its very nature. Logically, special attention has been paid to those languages most used internationally in the production and diffusion of specialised knowledge (according to the area of knowledge involved) and the languages in the immediate surroundings, especially the first languages of the society in which they are found, and also the languages most used by the society in its economic and cultural relations of an international nature.

In the case of Catalonia, it is worth noting that multilingualism in the universities (as in the rest of society) has been profoundly affected over long historical periods by the uniforming policies of the Spanish state. The use of Catalan was severely restricted during the 1960–1970 period, precisely when large parts of the population were starting to gain access to tertiary education.

It is therefore understandable that the democratisation of the universities during the political transition that took place following the death of Franco brought with it a strong desire to recover a normal usage of Catalan, in teaching and research as well as every area of the universities' communications and operations. Throughout the 1980s, virtually all the universities in the Catalan-speaking region introduced statutes that named Catalan as the official language of the institution. They also established services charged with promoting a knowledge of Catalan, its use in academic and administrative activities and the drawing up of documents and linguistic criteria relating to specialised vocabulary in Catalan.

In a few short years the linguistic plans of the universities and the technical services charged with their execution soon developed a high level of skill. They in turn gained in prestige, making them models to be followed by linguistic services involved in recovering the knowledge and use of Catalan in other sectors of society. The coordination between these linguistic services was rein-

1 <http://www.vives.org/>. To consult statistics as to the use of languages in Catalan universities: <http://www.llengua.info/continguts.php?seccio=3.6>. For the use of languages in doctoral theses, statistics can be found at: <http://www.tesisenxarxa.net/index.html> (all URLs in this article were current as of October 2009).

forced with the creation of *Xarxa Vives*¹, in 1994. It sought to group together universities in the Catalan-speaking region and facilitate a concerted effort in many fields of university activity.

At the end of the twentieth century, the multilingual strategies of the universities in the Catalan-speaking region were centred on the restoration of Catalan as a university language, without any special changes in the academic use of foreign languages².

2. A turning point

A new emphasis in university multilingualism emerged from the growing mobility of university students brought about after 1987 under the ERASMUS programme and particularly as a result of the development of the objectives of the Bologna Declaration (1999), in which all the countries of the EU committed themselves to constructing a Higher Education Space towards 2010.

At present, the EU's university policies are mainly focused on European competitiveness in the global knowledge economy, in teaching as well as research and development³. By the same token, European multilingual policies emphasise the desire to overcome the problems of linguistic diversity, opting for integration in the single European market, with the aim of promoting European competitiveness in the global context. The contribution of universities to the EU's other strategies of multilingualism is wide and varied⁴. Nonetheless, in the current context of priorities, university policies tend to see multilingualism as more than anything a factor that contributes to strategic objectives of the universities, the university system and

the country in general. The role of the universities in the construction of an equitable, sustainable multilingualism, one that is in society's general interests, is clearly relegated to second place.

3. Multilingualism in teaching

In terms of teaching, the great importance that is currently placed on indicators of the international mobility of university students⁵ has a decisive influence on the selection of the languages of instruction. The design of new study plans (especially degree courses) represented a good opportunity for clearly setting the linguistic entry and exit standards of future professionals, both in order to guarantee their abilities in the most usual languages in their immediate surroundings (Catalan and Spanish) and to provide them with a varied multilingual ability that aids their access to the international job market and universal knowledge itself⁶. The new push for multilingualism at the university level was seen as a suitable occasion for reactivating and systematising the learning of all languages, in the hope of achieving this.

Nonetheless, at present it is not clear whether university multilingualism is evolving in this way. Rather than opting for a systematic design of the acquisition and accreditation of diverse linguistic competencies, some universities have chosen to mainly focus on the learning of English and in its use as the language of instruction⁷, to the detriment of other neighbouring languages of undeniable economic and cultural interest, such as French or Italian. There is no doubt that a knowledge of English is useful for university students, but a restriction on other languages is a contradiction, especially now that

2 Bulletin no. 4 of Cercle XXI (2006), entitled *El català a la universitat* (Catalan in the Universities) offers a thorough overview of the topic under discussion: <http://www.cercle21.cat/butlleti/04/index.html>.

3 Council of Europe resolution of 23rd of November 2007 on the modernisation of universities (http://www.highereducationmanagement.eu/attachments/155_st16096-re01.en07.pdf) is very explicit in this regard.

4 See, for example, the numerous references to universities in the Commission's first communiqué (2005), *Una nova estratègia marc per al multilingüisme* (A New Strategy Framework for Multilingualism) (http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/doc/com596_en.pdf).

5 See, for example the recent report *Higher Education in Europe 2009: Developments in the Bologna Process* (EACEA-Eurydice, 2009): http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/doc/com596_en.pdf.

6 Some research supports this, such as the article by Marta Estella, M. Jesús Ferrés and Mireia Calm, *Espai europeu d'educació superior: llengua catalana i multilingüisme* (European Higher Education Space: Catalan Language and Multilingualism). In *Llengua i ús*, (Language and Use) no. 33 (p. 12-20). Barcelona: *Generalitat de Catalunya*, 2005. V. http://www6.genocat.cat/llengcat/liu/33_525.pdf.

7 In this case, often without paying much attention to the principles that guarantee the success of the experiences of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), or *Aprenentatge Integrat de Contingut i Llengua Estrangera* / AICLE, in Catalan).

both the United Kingdom and the rest of the European Union insist in their multilingual policies that 'English is not enough'!

Not all the effects of university mobility are positive: the presence of ERASMUS students in the lecture theatres of our universities appears to favour the replacement of Catalan as the language of instruction with Spanish and English. In order to counter the withdrawal of Catalan, the universities in the Catalan-speaking region have expended significant effort in providing information and initial, intensive training for their new, mobile students⁸. A particularly effective measure for stabilising the use of Catalan and promoting receptive multilingualism has been the specification of the main language of instruction of the courses on offer and of the languages allowed receptively by the teaching staff. Such a transparent approach provides linguistic security to both students and lecturers and avoids embarrassing linguistic debates such as shown in the film *L'auberge espagnole* [English title: Euro Pudding]

Another tendency that has been noted is the propensity of postgraduate programmes to exclusively adopt Spanish or English as more widely-spoken languages of instruction, to the detriment of Catalan, which is seen solely as added value, rather than a social commitment.

4. The need for systematic multilingual strategies

All these factors highlight the need for a more global, systematic and well thought out multilingual strategy for each university and the university system of the Catalan language area in general. What is more, multilingualism, which should be a stimulating element

that provides new reasons for the acquisition and use of all languages, including Catalan, could end up being a threat to the position our language has gained with difficulty in recent decades⁹.

The systematic consideration of university strategies of multilingualism would not only allow us to overcome these doubts as to multilingual competencies and the language of instruction, they would also allow us to make a new and improved design of the professional profiles directly related to languages, as is the case of all teachers, especially language teachers¹⁰, translators, cultural mediators, sociolinguists and specialists in linguistic engineering.

5. Research and multilingualism

If we focus on research, the universities' other major field of activity, we can highlight the fact that Catalan has achieved a significant presence¹¹. Nevertheless, English is gaining ground as an international lingua franca. We can also observe how a more systematic, diversified and considered examination of the multilingual strategies is lacking. Instead, they appear to adopt a rather stereotypical view that is not adapted to universities in the Catalan-speaking region.

The totally justified and legitimate objective of giving research carried out in our universities the widest international exposure is not incompatible with the contribution university research ought to make to the priorities and necessities of the society in its immediate surroundings. Ultimately, the host society makes such research possible and finances a large part of the university's activities. This double commitment with the progress of universal knowledge and the development of the

⁸ See Intercat, where these measures are discussed: <http://www.intercat.cat/>.

⁹ This is also the question dealt with in the article by M. Jesús Ferrés *El procés de Bolonya, una oportunitat o un obstacle per a la llengua catalana?* (The Bologna Process, an Opportunity or an Obstacle to the Catalan Language?) In *Llengua i Ús* (Language and Use), no. 42 (p. 2-12). Barcelona: *Generalitat de Catalunya*, 2008. We can observe the evolution of this point of view some years after that mentioned in note 5, in which the author of this article also participated.

¹⁰ The appropriate training of language teachers is essential if we wish to progress in the achievement of general multilingualism suggested by the Barcelona objectives: that all residents speak two languages apart from their personal language. It is also worth noting that the indicator of linguistic competence (see Document COM(2005) p356 to end) has until now not taken into account competence in Catalan when measuring the achievement of this objective (a contradiction in the Barcelona objectives, where Catalan is its official language). It remains to be seen whether the indicators that are being drawn up by the SurveyLang consortium (<http://www.surveylang.org/>) will resolve this issue.

¹¹ Doctoral theses presented in Catalan remains around 25%, while many academic journals are published in Catalan (for example the RACO website: <http://www.raco.cat/>).

host society not only affects priorities for the selection of what to investigate, it also has linguistic implications. The international publication of the research results in the lingua franca common to each field of research should not restrict local publication and the social exposure of said research in Catalan. The marginalisation of a language from specialised knowledge is a factor in its loss of prestige and the risk of being replaced by another language.

Lately, academic voices have been heard that question the tendency of those that evaluate research to mechanically generalise evaluative systems typical of experimental sciences to all fields of research. This tendency has negative effects, both for the recognition of the value of much research carried out in the human and social sciences as well as for the continued use of languages other than English. There have been cases in which very valuable research on a particular cultural area, published in the language relating to this particular cultural tradition by recognised publishers and excellent peer-reviewed journals, have failed to be taken into consideration by the mere fact that they are not in English and therefore do not appear in Anglo-Saxon bibliometric indices. This prejudice goes against the scientific rigour of university research and is at odds with the intrinsically multilingual nature of universal knowledge. It does not exclusively affect Catalan, although it is a decisive factor. It could have devastating effects in terms of the

consolidation of an equitable, sustainable multilingualism on a global scale: there are studies¹² that demonstrate that the use of a variety of languages in the process of research contributes to richer, more precise results.

Finally I should like to point out the considerable importance of research into sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic questions associated with multilingualism in the Catalan-speaking region¹³. We should hope that the project announced by the Catalan government¹⁴ to group these investigations into a centre of reference will help to strengthen and systematise the existing initiatives.

THE PUBLICATION OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS IN THE LINGUA FRANCA COMMON TO EACH FIELD OF RESEARCH SHOULD NOT RESTRICT THE LOCAL PUBLICATION AND SOCIAL EXPOSURE OF SAID RESEARCH IN CATALAN

I hope more than anything that multilingualism at the university level remains an opportunity for students and for society as a whole, and not a threat to Catalan and sustainable linguistic diversity. We need to make advances in the elaboration of systematic multilingual strategies such as those proposed by some European university networks and those carried out by some leading universities¹⁵.

12 Those by Professor Lorenza Mondada, for example (<http://icar.univ-lyon2.fr/membres/lorenza/english/publications.htm>).

13 This can be confirmed by reference to the periodic reports on research published by the Institute of Catalan Studies: <http://www.iec.cat/gc/ViewPage.action?siteNodeId=323&languageId=1&contentId=-1>

14 <http://www.gencat.cat/diue/noticies/31257.html>.

15 The research conducted by Ian Tudor, *Benchmarks for a Higher Education Language Policy* (http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~enlu/downloads/TF1_report_final.rtf) and the linguistic policy of the Copenhagen Business School (http://uk.cbs.dk/about_cbs/menu/language_policy) are key works in this field.

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