

# THE ‘NORMALISATION’ OF CATALAN: A QUALIFIED SUCCESS

by Vicenç Villatoro\*

*Viewed from a historical standpoint, the policy known as ‘linguistic normalisation’ carried out by Catalan institutions over the last thirty years can be considered a success. It has achieved many of the goals that were established and has partially resolved some of the more pressing problems that threatened the survival and the vitality of the Catalan language. On balance, however, the last thirty years of linguistic policies in favour of Catalan have left a bittersweet taste. While some problems that were correctly identified were solved, other new ones emerged. These problems did not form part of the original diagnosis or else they weakened aspects that were hitherto considered solid and healthy. The Catalan experience, while being a successful one, helps to highlight the difficulties of carrying out linguistic policies. Partly this is because they occur in an ambiguous political framework, where different institutions conduct contradictory linguistic policies. While Catalan institutions design policies that promote Catalan, the constitutional Spanish framework clearly prioritises the languages present in the state, to the benefit of Spanish. According to the constitution, a knowledge of Spanish is an obligation for all citizens. The other official state languages can be protected and promoted, but they are relegated to a complimentary or subsidiary role.*

From the outset, the Catalan case presents us with a relatively exceptional diagnosis, indicating the priorities of its linguistic policies. Many European languages threatened by official languages present a common problem: they are understood by a significant proportion of the population, but they lack social prestige. They are considered to be domestic languages by their speakers and

therefore of less value than the official state language. This is the case in Italy with its so-called dialects, or France with the other languages that have come to be thought of as patois in the minds of the speakers themselves. These are languages to use at home, rural and antiquated, only to be used for unimportant activities. This diagnosis held true for Catalan some thirty years ago in the majority of



the territory, in Northern Catalonia in particular, the majority of the Balearic Islands and in the Valencian Country. However, in the Principality of Catalonia the situation was the reverse, leading to different linguistic policies being applied and the varying degrees of success and failure. In the Principality of Catalonia, Catalan had considerable cultural prestige some thirty years ago, having survived the repression of the Franco era with a unique capacity to resist. Catalan was a language that was very common in middle-class urban circles and not simply a rural patois.

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Catalan's problem in the Principality of Catalonia was the opposite of Galician, for example, or the so-called Italian dialects and Catalan itself in the Balearics or in Roussillon. In all these cases the language was sufficiently well known but failed to find social recognition. In the case of Catalan in Catalonia,

while it had prestige, there were wide sectors of society that had no knowledge of it. In the 50s and 60s the country underwent an enormous demographic transformation, with the arrival of a vast number of migrants from Spanish-speaking parts of Spain. When the first

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### LINGUISTIC NORMALISATION MEANT SELF-RESPECT FOR THOSE THAT SPOKE THE LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL PRESTIGE FOR THE LANGUAGE ITSELF

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linguistic normalisation policies were designed, there was no urgency in giving prestige to the language, but rather to ensure a large part, or an immense majority of the population knew how to speak it, promoting it in order that it reached the large sections of the population that had no contact with Catalan. Linguistic normalisation ensured that everyone understood Catalan. This was not the case in Galicia and the Balearics where everyone already knew the local language. Linguistic normalisation there meant self-respect for those that spoke the language and social prestige for the language itself.

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### CATALAN LINGUISTIC NORMALISATION CURRENTLY DEMANDS NEW INSTRUMENTS TO FACE NEW PROBLEMS

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From this diagnosis of the situation, which was basically correct in its analysis, the resulting treatment can also be considered correct. What were to be the major instruments of the language's diffusion, the levers with which to increase people's knowledge of it? On one hand, there was the school system, which had to ensure (and has achieved) that all school-leavers in Catalonia completed

their compulsory schooling knowing Catalan alongside Spanish. In the short and long term, the existence of large sectors of the population with no knowledge of the language, unable to understand and use it, has been eliminated by such means. On the other hand, the media has played a part, in particular radio and television, with popular, competitive programming which is able to enter virtually every household. With an enormous economic and professional effort, the Catalan institutions promoted public radio and television in Catalan ensuring it managed to win the ratings war in Catalonia, thereby achieving a dual objective: sectors that were impermeable to other public uses of Catalan had some contact with the language and the Catalan audience themselves realised that their language was suitable for all social contexts. It is worth keeping in mind that the new developments that occurred in the world while Franco kept Catalan restricted to the domestic ambit meant that many new cultural phenomenon did not have a Catalan tradition, while others had lost it. Imagine the audience's surprise at hearing the first Western dubbed into Catalan, when both the cowboys and the Indians spoke Catalan. Something previously unheard of. Another instance is how the old formulas needed to be rethought in order to provide radio commentaries of football matches.

Thanks to these two powerful instruments, the objective of the diffusion and the widening of a knowledge of Catalan was achieved with notable success. At present the levels of understanding of the language are high, above ninety percent in terms of comprehension. Nevertheless, this statistic highlights an insufficiency in the initial diagnosis of Catalan's problems. Once the most pressing problem was solved,

that of understanding, the Catalan institutions realised almost by surprise that an increase in the understanding of Catalan did not automatically lead to a proportional increase in its social use. Knowing how to speak Catalan did not bring with it a desire or the necessity to speak it. What is more, it led to a demobilisation of Catalan speakers, who felt they were absolved of any need for linguistic militancy thanks to the institutional commitment to the language. The arrival of a new wave of immigrants in this context once again produced sectors of adults who had no knowledge of Catalan and who were not directly conscious of the advantages of speaking it or indeed saw any need to do so.

As for the language's prestige, almost taken for granted in the initial analysis, recent years have seen a transformation and fragmentation. At the time of the ending of the Franco era and the implementation of linguistic normalisation policies, someone defined Catalan culture as a large head on a small body. A high culture of prestige, especially in a literary sense, but one without populist, mass culture. This situation was to change over the years. A medium-sized market of cultural productions in Catalan was created and diffused to a broad audience. However, it did so by relying on the prestige of high culture, revealing the weakness of the very industrial fabric of culture and how Catalan did not quite manage to be associated with an idea of modernity or innovation in some areas. There is no single source of

prestige even from the cultural perspective. Catalan advances in some areas, while retreating in others. A similar thing happens with social prestige: it increases in some areas (it is clear to all that a knowledge of Catalan can help one to find work or promotion), while other areas appear to be almost impervious to its influence.

Does this mean to say the initial diagnosis was incorrect and that the therapies and instruments that were chosen were the wrong ones? Absolutely not. If these policies had not been carried out the problem of a widespread lack of knowledge of Catalan (on the increase with new immigration) would have produced devastating effects for the future of the language as the tool of a living culture. Without the aid of the school system and the media, Catalan would have been relegated to being the language of half the country, if that. However, with the passage of time the diagnosis, while being confirmed, has shown itself to be insufficient. New problems have emerged along with questions that were thought to have been answered but have been found to still need a reply. Without giving up the tools that have been so useful, Catalan linguistic normalisation currently demands new instruments for new problems. As a general rule there is no one, magic formula for ensuring the survival of languages. What is needed is a range of flexible, changing, instruments in order to confront problems that can be equally diverse and contradictory.

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