

THE “ANOMALY” OF THE CATALAN LANGUAGE

TRIBUNE
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The key device with which we communicate, albeit (luckily) not the only one, is language. Linguistic communities are also a proxy for nations, or peoples, with a few spreading throughout the globe. Fundamentally, thanks to colonisation and imperial expansions of the past, English, French, Arab, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish have all attained a prevalent use far beyond their “natural hinterlands”. Because of its plasticity and relative simplicity, English is the world’s unofficial lingua franca today, claiming more than 1.3 billion able speakers.

Catalan and Castellano, along with Portuguese, are Western romance languages, derived from the “lingua vulgaris”, the local practice of Latin brought by the Roman Empire. In fact, the three had similar expansions, from north to south of the Iberian Peninsula, following its reconquest from the Muslims. Then, the conquest of the Americas changed things, and today knowledge of Castellano, or Spa-

nish, is a huge advantage in almost all of Latin-America: twenty countries have it as their primary language, which amounts to more than 460 million native speakers, or ten times the population of Spain itself.

Most people unfamiliar with local events find it hard to understand the relevance of the language question. Catalans wanting to use their own language even bothers many people, who think it enough to be able to speak Castellano, which may be deemed more “useful” considering its vast community of speakers. The institutions also play their role, for Spain presents itself, at home and abroad, and with few

exceptions, through the voices of a deeply nationalistic Castilian elite.

For at least 300 years, Madrid has thus put all means necessary into unifying the State in and around the Castellano language, in a pattern that reflects how the largest countries in Europe have been unified via a majority language. One of the mottos of the fascist coup in 1936, “Si eres Español, habla Español” (“if you are Spanish, speak Spanish”), still has a strong resonance today, even among self-anointed Spanish liberals.

Yet, against all odds, Catalan is alive and kicking, being regularly used in eastern Spain, Valencia, the Balearic Islands, Catalonia, a stretch of Eastern Aragon, and in one spot of Sardinia, the Alghero, and south-east France. Catalan is also the official language of Andorra. All in all, with roughly 10 million, a few less than Dutch and Polish, Catalan is probably the regional language with most speakers in the EU.

By way of example: its version of Wikipedia has almost 700,000 articles, ranking it 20th in the world, and one of the top four languages in active editors per capita (only some Nordic languages are more active). It helps to have a strong and dynamic civil society, together with high levels of literacy, which explain, for instance, why school results on the use Spanish tend to be higher in

Catalonia than in the rest of the State.

Given all of the above, the Catalan case is an anomaly, at least in the EU, for minority languages have either a rather folkloric role, such as Breton, Galician, Friulian or Welsh, or are inherently “protected” by the borders of monolingual nation-states. In this sense, although twenty of the EU’s twenty-four official languages have fewer speakers, Catalan is not one, after unremitting opposition from Madrid. All in all, the ultimate fiasco of Madrid fully imposing Castellano may be telling of the intrinsic different values of both societies; for instance, democratic standards clearly differ there, as recently witnessed with incarcerations and mass beatings under the disguise of law and order.



The app Apparella't, a fun way to learn and practise Catalan. GEMMA BUSQUETS