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Aidan Collins

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Catalan: The Renaissance of Europe's "Stateless" Language: A Paradigm for the Irish Language Revival?

Aidan Collins

Barcelona,

Abstract

This paper looks at the history of the struggle to keep Catalan – the “stateless” language - alive. Throughout the period of Franco, Catalan suffered almost devastating oppression. It came close to extinction and was kept alive by language enthusiasts determined to preserve an integral part of the Catalan culture. As a result, Catalan today not only survives but flourishes, reaping the benefit of benevolent and progressive government programs. Have we, in Ireland, a lesson to learn from the success of Catalan?

The Language of Llull

Straddling the border of France and Spain, snuggled in to the foothills of the Pyrenees, lies the Principality of Andorra. Its population of 64,000 people inhabit an area of no more than 468 square kilometres of rugged land. During the winter months it is a Mecca to European skiing enthusiasts. For the rest of the year its tax haven status draws visitors in search of cheap alcohol, perfumes, cigarettes and electronic goods. Were it situated in the mid-West of America this population would feature as an insignificant dot on a standard O/S map.

Yet Andorra is a unique entity. Its population is the only group of people in the world to have Catalan as their official language. While Andorra is the only place where Catalan is the sole official language, Catalan is spoken by approximately 10.5 million people in areas covering Spain, France and a small city on the Italian island of Sardinia. The combined total area of Catalan speaking territory is 68,000 square kilometres.

That Catalan-speaking area is bigger than Holland, Belgium Denmark or Switzerland. As a language it is more widely spoken than Danish, Finnish and Norwegian, and is equivalent in number to speakers of Swedish and Portuguese. Although only Andorra has it as a unique official language, Catalan - along with Castilian (Spanish) - has official status in three Spanish autonomous regions: Catalonia, Balearic Islands and the Community of Valencia. Today some 27.5% of Spanish citizens live in territories where Catalan is the official language (albeit jointly with Castilian).

Catalan is not a dialect of Castilian – a common misunderstanding by people who first encounter it. Nor is Castilian a dialect of Catalan. Indeed, both could be said to be dialects of low Latin having been forged from that source many centuries past. The first Catalan words were found in documents dating as far back as the 9th century. The first known literary texts written in Catalan date from the 12th century. The language is thought to have evolved about two centuries previously. The oldest extant book - titled *Les Homilies d'Organyà* - can today be found in the National Library of Catalonia.

In the 13th century Catalan had its first literary giant: Ramon Llull (1235-1316). Llull, writer and philosopher, was the first writer to use Catalan - the language of the people. At the time it was the norm for scholars to write in Latin. In his 80 years Llull produced some 256 texts, using Catalan for a large majority of them.

But it was during the 19th century that Catalan became the medium of a literary revival which raised its status from the language of dusty antiquity and the vernacular of the peasant to the accepted and respected language of the middle and upper classes and officialdom. The period became known as the Catalan *Renaixença* (Renaissance). During this time several outstanding writers emerged including Jacint Verdaguer, Àngel Guimerà, Narcís and Joan Mangill.

At the start of the 20th century there was a drive to have Catalan accepted as the language of government. The architects of this campaign believed rightly that the language's long-term survival could best be achieved by embedding it as the language of government and commerce. Such a strategy assured the language of funding. It also provided a central driving force and blessed it with the imprimatur of officialdom. It was a tactic that was to bear fruit. Interestingly, Israel adopted a similar strategy in its drive to restore Hebrew to the pantheon of living languages and, too, succeeded.

In the early 20th century the foundations of Catalan's long-term well-being were systematically put in place. In 1907 the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (www.iec.es) – The Institute of Catalan Studies - was founded to assist in the standardization of the language. The Institut set about preparing a report on how the spelling and grammar of Catalan might be standardized. The effort culminated in a report, published in 1913, titled “Normes Ortogràfiques” (Spelling Rules). In 1917, the *Diccionari Ortogràfic* (Spelling Dictionary) was published. The following year the *Gramàtica Catalana* (Catalan Grammar) was completed. Soon after, a full scale effort was launched to create the first, comprehensive Catalan

dictionary. The work culminated in the publishing of the definitive Catalan dictionary in 1932.

So, only five years after the defining dictionary of English was completed – the Oxford English Dictionary – Catalan had its definitive dictionary and all the standardized rules and regulations of a modern, living language. For a brief, glorious spell during the 1930's Catalan enjoyed the status of official language of Catalonia. It was actively promoted and taught throughout the education system. At the outbreak of the Civil War in Spain Catalan had the cornerstones of its language in place – widespread acceptability and use, a literary tradition and standardization. It was the fact that Catalan was so robust in health at this historical juncture that allowed it to survive through the next four decades of turmoil and suppression.

The Language's Nadir

Catalan's lowest ebb came during the reign of Franco who ruled Spain as a right-wing dictator from 1939 until his death in 1975. During that reign Franco pursued a relentless campaign of repressing all things Catalan, especially the language. He saw the existence of other languages within the greater Spain as a threat to his centralized control. Publishing houses, book shops and libraries were emptied of Catalan literature. Priceless collections of Catalan works were burned in the streets. A campaign of "Castilianisation" was enforced with street names and village names changed from the Catalan to a Castilian equivalent or approximation. Catalan was wiped from the airways of TV and radio and banned from use in the education system. The publishing of books, newspapers and magazines in Catalan was banned. The language of government, commerce and law was Castilian. Any legal documents written in Catalan were not considered to have any legal status.

In short, Catalan was subjected to a literary garrotting. The slogan of the Franco era was "Si eres español, habla español" ("If you are Spanish, speak Spanish"). Yet, remarkably, the language did not die but survived as an underground language, spoken in the homes of Catalan speakers. Catalan philologists continued to update the vocabulary – the life-blood of every living language. Exiled and non-exiled writers continued to produce literary works. In essence, an underground literary resistance was practised throughout the reign of Franco. It kept the language alive and healthy. As a result, when Franco died, Catalan was ready to be restored to its former glory.

The Modern Era

With the death of Franco in 1975, and the gradual reassertion of democracy across Spain, tolerance for cultural diversity grew. This tolerance was manifested in the 1978 Constitution of Spain which give official recognition to minority languages and paved the way for languages like Catalan to be restored to joint official status with Castilian. Article 3 declares: *“The other Spanish languages shall be official in their respective autonomous communities in accordance with their statutes”* and, furthermore, *“The wealth of the different languages variations of Spain is a cultural heritage which shall be the object of special respect and protection”*. Between 1979 and 1982 Catalan was restored as an official language across the different autonomous areas of Spain where it had survived Franco’s suppression.

Under these statutes, the autonomous parliaments of Catalonia, the Balearic Islands and the Community of Valencia passed laws favouring the Catalan language. During the 1980’s the use of Catalan was introduced in to the education system, government and media. The Catalan Statute of Autonomy of 1979 established that while both Catalan and Castilian were joint official languages, only Catalan was “native” to the region. It was a subtle assertion of Catalan’s primacy in the minds of the Catalonian people. The Linguistic Normalization Act of 1983 provided for Catalan to be used in all official contexts and actively encouraged the use of Catalan in all business or commercial transactions. In 1997 the Catalan Language Act made it obligatory for all radio and TV stations in Catalonia to broadcast at least 50% of their programmes in Catalan. In the schools Catalan became the language of education with non-Catalan speakers undergoing “immersion” programs to bring them up to the accepted standard. The government of Catalonia – The Generalitat - saw the use of Catalan in daily, commercial life as the way to ensure that it survived and grew as a living language amongst the wider population.

During the 1980s and early 1990s there was a growth in mass media outlets for the Catalan language in the autonomous regions of Spain. Television and radio channels flourished and the presence of Catalan in the written media increased to the point where today there are approximately – according the official site of the Catalan government - 10 daily Catalan language newspapers, a hundred magazines and over 200 local Catalan papers (www.gencat.net). According to the same sources in the Catalan-speaking regions of Andorra, Catalonia and the Balearic Islands 95% of the citizens understand it. In the Community of Valencia that number is an estimated 80%.

The Catalan publishing industry – which is subsidized - is also flourishing. In 1999, for example, 7,492 titles were published in Catalan with a total print run of 20 million copies. These same publishing houses publish around 6,000 new titles every year. At the beginning of 2000, the number of titles available in Catalan, according to the ISBN, was in excess of 75,000. According to the Institució de Les Lletres Catalanes (www.cultura.gencat/ilc) there are more than 1,200 living Catalan authors. Today, there are more books published in Catalan than there is in either Hebrew or Norwegian.

Catalan in an Expanded Europe

In 2004 the European Union will grow with the addition of 11 new states. Of these new “Accession States” only one has a greater population than the aggregate area where Catalan is spoken; Poland with its 38 million people. Nevertheless, Catalan is still categorised as a minority European language. Catalan advocates argue that this is an anomaly arguing that while Catalan is not the language of a monolingual people (apart from Andorra); it has the characteristics of a majority language.

Minority languages are defined as those which have no monolingual population, the speaking populations are part of a bigger state where there is a majority language, and the language is not completely assimilated in to some aspect of social life. However, advocates of Catalan argue that there are good reasons to argue that Catalan is not a minority language:

1. Catalan has a legal status and governmental recognition;
2. Catalan has a demographic force of numbers. It is the 7th most spoken language in the European Union as that entity is presently constituted;
3. Catalan speakers represent more than one third – 33.5% - of EU minority language speakers. The nearest next minority language is Galician at 13%.
4. Catalan has a robustness and historical pedigree that has allowed it to survive and grow;
5. Catalan has a vibrant and growing literary pedigree;
6. It has a recognised linguistic authority and all the linguistic resources of a majority language.
7. Catalan has all the attributes of a majority language: it is codified, standardized and controlled, has an organic philology and is accepted by both citizens and academics in their daily lives.
8. Unlike English, Catalan has an agreed spelling across all of its dialects!

(Source: <http://cultura.gencat.es/llengcat/publicacions/>)

Compared with other minority languages Catalan jumps out as a class of its own. This fact received some recognition when Catalan, following a proposal from the Intergroup for Minority Languages, was granted limited recognition within the European Parliament. Unlike many of the other minority languages it appears to be progressing rather than regressing. Admittedly, in urban centres such as Barcelona the predominance of Catalan is challenged by the constant influx of non-Catalan speaking people. These new residents, mostly from other parts of Spain, tend to dilute the preponderance of Catalan speakers.

The impact of non-Catalan speakers settling in the Barcelona area is probably the biggest challenge to the growth of the language in that area. In a survey commissioned by the Spanish national paper *El Pais* earlier this year one out of every two adults living in Barcelona said that they considered Spanish and not Catalan to be their main language. However, the same survey noted a six fold growth since 1985 in the number of people who classified themselves as bi-lingual (*El Pais*, April 26, 2003).

Yet even in Barcelona Catalan still retains a strong presence and new migrants find they need to learn to understand the language even if they do not reach fluency. The fact that Catalan is used so widely in business, appears in road signs and is prevalent in the media behoves them to at least develop a degree of bi-lingualism. What one commentator dubbed “passive bi-lingualism” has resulted in the strange situation where it is quiet common to hear conversations in Barcelona shops with one party speaking the native Catalan and the other person speaking in Castilian. Even in Andorra locals easily switch between their native Catalan and speaking Spanish when required.

The children of these migrants are educated solely through Catalan and so develop a fluency for the language. This has resulted in the children having Catalan as their first language while their parents have Spanish. Both the parents and the children consequently find a need for bi-lingualism. Figures from the recent *El Pais* survey show that the younger population of Catalonia – 18-25 year olds – consider Catalan their native language and use it in every aspect of their daily lives. It is a factor that seems to augur well for the survival of the language.

In early June the Conselleria d’Ensenyament de la Generalitat de Catalunya (the Education Department of the Catalan Government) announced it would promote the social use of Catalan language in the schools with out-of-school activities. It plans to start up these language activities in the course 2003-2004. In addition, under the slogan ‘En català, tu hi

guanyes' (in Catalan you win), the Direcció General de Política Lingüística (Generalitat's Linguistic Policy department) also announced a programme addressed to business leaders and workers emphasising the importance of learning Catalan and using it in all kinds of social gatherings.

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Language

Some cynics might be tempted to argue that the language of Lull reached some form of mundane acceptance when, in 2001, the makers of the Harry Potter films agreed to dub their films in to Catalan. Speakers of Catalan had threatened to boycott the first Potter film – and all Time Warner films - because it was not available in Catalan. The boycott was avoided after an agreement was reached between Time Warner AOL and the government of Catalonia that all future Potter films would be dubbed. As an interim solution Time Warner circulated copies of the original film with Catalan subtitles.

The government of Catalonia - the Generalitat - continues to pursue a rigorous campaign promoting the language in all aspects of life. They have identified the web as a vital area for the promotion of the language. In 2002 they launched an ambitious e-government project. The objective of the campaign is to open up access to all departments of the government through the internet. One resulting symbolic move was to change the web site of the regional government from the .es suffix of Spanish web sites to the more international suffix .net. Also as part of the campaign they invited Yahoo to develop a Catalan version of its search engine directory. This resulted in a launch of the Catalan version of Yahoo in 2002. According to the Italian newspaper "La Repubblica" Catalan has 440,000 web pages and is the 19th language in terms of volume on the web.

But perhaps the biggest disappointment to speakers of Catalan is the slowness of Microsoft to make a full version of its Microsoft Office product available in their language. Nevertheless, several Microsoft products and operating systems are available in Catalan for example, Windows 98, Windows XP Professional, MS Messenger and Word 6.0. Meanwhile, the government of Catalonia continues to encourage Microsoft and other software providers to localize more of their products in to the Catalan language. (For a full list of all available software and operating systems available in Catalan see the Generalitat's web site at: <http://cultura.gencat.net/llengcat/informat/index.htm#progr>).

The Future

Through the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune Catalan has survived. And its survival does seem assured. Its longevity and resistance would seem to bear witness to that. In addition, it has the backing of a government which is striving daily to ensure that it not only survives but prospers as a living, vibrant language. Certainly its existence has been weakened in areas where immigration from outside the region is highest. That is probably the greatest source of concern for the Generalitat. Ironically, the biggest threat to the language is the attractiveness to immigrants of an area like Barcelona, with its strong economy, beautiful location and temperate climate. The challenge for the Generalitat is to ease the absorption of these new residents in to the area and to make the use of Catalan attractive to them. Campaigns such as the recently announced 'En català, tu hi guanyes' (in Catalan you win) are aimed at precisely this.

The Generalitat must also encourage more communications providers, the mass media, film makers and software providers to supply their products in Catalan. If they can build this momentum the erosive effect of non-Catalan communications will be greatly weakened. Finally, the aficionados of Catalan should feel encouraged: the fact that Catalan has these challenges to overcome and not the more daunting, life-threatening challenges facing the other minority languages of the European Union is in itself a wonderful achievement and a testament to the Catalan speakers of Europe. It should also give encouragement – and act as a blue-print? - to Irish language enthusiasts as they strive to continue the revitalisation of An Gaeilge.

Note: A version of this paper was first published in *Multilingual Computing and Technology*, in November 2003

Appendices

Regions where Catalan is spoken in Spain

- o The old principality of Catalonia, which, since 1977, has had its own autonomous government, the Generalitat de Catalunya. This corresponds to the Spanish provinces of Barcelona, Girona, Lleida and Tarragona.
- o The old kingdom of Valencia (consisting of the Spanish provinces of València, Castelló and Alacant)
- o A strip of eastern Aragón.
- o The Balearic islands (Mallorca, Menorca, and Eivissa)
- o Within the Spanish territories mentioned above, Catalan has joint official status with Spanish.

Regions where Catalan is spoken outside of Spain

- o The Co-Principality of Andorra, where Catalan is the only official language. However, Spanish and French are also spoken and widely understood.
- o The French province of Rosselló, the Department des Pyrénées Orientales (also known as Catalunya Nord)
- o The city of Alguer (Alghero) in Sardinia, Italy

Source: <http://www.bham.ac.uk/CatalanStudies/language.htm>

The population of Catalan-speaking areas compared to the 10 New Accession States

Polish	38.7m
Catalan	10.8m
Hungarian	10.5m
Czech	10.3m
Slovak	5.4m
Lithuanian	3.7m
Latvian	2,4m
Slovene	2.0m
Estonian	1.4m
Cyprus	0.76m
Maltese	0.4m

Data Source: IDESCAT INE PANORAMA OF THE EU 2000

Examples of Spanish and Catalan Words

ENGLISH	CATALAN	SPANISH
chair	cadira	silla
table	taula	mesa
window	finestra	ventana
(drinking) glass	got	vaso
ground	terra	pisos
ceiling	sostre	techo
boy	noi	muchacho
woman	dona	mujer
uncle	oncle	tío
cousin	cosí	primo
nephew	nebot	sobrino
clean	net	limpio
dirty	brut	sucio

Source: <http://www.geocities.com/aeccsa/faqs.html>