
Catalan: From minoritised to global language

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ABSTRACT

Catalan has managed to jump on the bandwagon of globalisation and carve an important niche for itself. Despite the internal problems it has to grapple with and deficits in certain areas, it has achieved global visibility and recognition, which translates into the language's presence in numerous international services and companies, even ahead of other languages with a state. Catalan's position as a global language seems to be indisputable. However, this is worth very little unless there is also social awareness of it, and this is precisely one of the most exciting challenges Catalan culture is facing.

KEYWORDS

Catalan, globalisation, global language, linguistic ecology.

A language was traditionally defined as global – implicitly giving it a higher status – if it was spoken by millions of people around the world, especially if many countries had made it their official language.

That concept of what a global language was clearly reflected a colonialist system. For example, for a long time all the inhabitants of the British Empire's colonies were counted as English speakers, whether or not they actually spoke it. And the same happened with French, Spanish and Portuguese. When referring to the 300 million speakers of Spanish, the trick was to include speakers of Catalan, Basque, Galician, Mayan, Purépecha, Arawak, Aymara, Quechua, Ticuna, Yuracaré, Fang and Bube, just to cite a few, even if they were not bilingual.

This way of understanding global languages has clearly been cast aside today by the advent of anti-colonial consciousness, including linguistic consciousness, but especially by the fact that demographic changes are increasingly making the most widely spoken languages – not necessarily European ones – continent-wide in scope. For example, today the five languages with the most speakers in the world are Mandarin Chinese, English, Spanish, Hindi-Urdu and Bengali, and if the demographic trends continue, Swahili, Hausa, Yoruba and Malay will soon join this list.

For this reason, when defining a language as global it seems more useful and reasonable to refer not so much to its demographic scope but more to the language's ability to use the tools of globalisation. But for this, we first have to understand what globalisation is.

Catalan in globalisation

Globalisation has traditionally been defined as a movement coming from outside which is superimposed onto the very existence of human communities, that is, a movement that interferes with them. Given the state of things, we cannot deny that this is partly true. The globalising impetus, driven first by transport and later by the economy, mass culture and communication, did not appear spontaneously or simultaneously in all countries, and therefore it is a many-years-long project targeted by some – primarily what we call the First World – towards. But since the spread of the Internet, globalisation has ceased being just an intrusion and has taken on an internal dimension – in each society – which is increasingly important and relevant.

Globalisation is no longer a debate about something “foreign” that is impacting society from the outside. To put it graphically, we are now carrying globalisation in our pockets, which is prompting a new categorisation of languages. Global languages are those that do not ask their speakers to change language in order to use the instruments of globalisation, rendering the demographic factor secondary.

Each individual's private and everyday use of the instruments of globalisation, such as mobile phones, mean that globalisation urgently needs to be studied and understood not as an

exogenous phenomenon but as a first-order internal factor, thereby questioning the traditional meaning of the expression “global language”.

From this standpoint, Catalan is actually a role model and an acknowledged success story within this adaptation. From the very beginning, Catalan has managed to jump on the bandwagon of globalisation and carve an important niche for itself. This obviously does not change its internal problems, but it does enhance its usefulness within the community while also making it visible and recognised on a global scale. It is not a perfect situation, given that there are still many major challenges for Catalan to overcome, yet it is extraordinarily valuable, and it is simply irrational that our society does not understand and appreciate it.

Upon the advent of the Internet, Catalan culture was one of the most active in the world and played an extremely prominent role in all sorts of initiatives. For example, we should recall that Viquipèdia (Wikipedia in Catalan) was the second in the world, and that the .cat domain opened the door to the cultural and linguistic domains, prompting a veritable online revolution. That far-reaching, energetic activism was rewarded with the attention that large companies paid to that group of netizens who were known for their stubborn determination to make it known that they were Catalan and wanted to browse – and do everything else – in their own language.

Strengths and weaknesses

To analyse how this global impact of languages takes shape, some time ago I proposed what I call the 20/50/100 paradigm, starting from the premise that global companies never actually decide to offer a version in Catalan or Icelandic or Lingala. That is, they do not think about specific languages or specific markets. Instead, these companies are driven by business interests and simply ask what degree of multilingualism they need to prosper around the globe. And depending on their capacity or needs, they usually choose to do so in the 20, or 50 or 100 main languages.

Over the years, Catalan has been losing ground in this ranking, partly because the incorporation of new languages that are not so pioneering is reshaping reality and bringing it closer to overall demographic patterns. But nonetheless, today Catalan is indisputably between the top 20 and 50 languages. This means that when a company decides to globalise and use at least 50 languages, Catalan is always one of them, and sometimes it even makes it into the top 20.

For example, in early 2024 the Apple operating system iOS was offered in 34 different languages, one of them Catalan. And it is interesting to note that there are European languages with a state in which iOS is not available, such as Estonian, Slovenian, Icelandic, Latvian and Lithuanian. Obviously, there are also numerous languages with many more speakers than Catalan that are not on the list. The classification of world languages by number of speakers is always

highly debatable, but according to 2020 data from Ethnologue, Catalan ranks 127th. Joining the group of the 34 most important languages when it ranks 127th in number of speakers is obviously remarkable.

Indeed, iOS is not an isolated case. The leading social media platforms – for example, Facebook, X (former Twitter), Flickr, YouTube and Tinder – all have versions in Catalan. For messaging, Messenger, Telegram, WhatsApp, Skype and Hangouts are all available in Catalan as well. You can organise your travels in Catalan on Booking.com, Airbnb and obviously Google Maps. There is a considerable number of online media in Catalan, and local supermarkets like Caprabo, Condis and Bonpreu sell in Catalan, meaning that we Catalans can shop without changing our language. The landscape is fairly wide-ranging, even though there are certain gaps that are extremely worrisome, such as games and films. Yet with all of this, today we can assert that Catalan constitutes an Internet success story because its objective capacities fit the rules of globalisation, although this is also due to social activism.

A new awareness of the language in the linguistic ecology

At this point, I wish to emphasise the need to rethink Catalan from this perspective because I am afraid that if we are unable to do so, all the victories we have won so far may dissipate over time. What are we referring to when we claim that the definition of a global language no longer depends on the number of speakers or its geographical extension, but rather its capacity to adapt to globalisation?

Basically, we are talking about the fact that the market, which is ultimately the essential interest of the biggest multinational corporations (often more powerful than most states), is no longer defined only by population or state borders but is instead framed within a combination of language, state capacity, technological resources, economy, scientific capacity, global presence and other factors. And to complicate matters even further, this combination is an all-versus-all competition, where nation-states can no longer claim the hegemony of formal international representation, even though they still can in the political sphere.

Obviously, a language with very few speakers always faces added difficulties, and this explains why the languages of independent countries that are technologically advanced and even cutting-edge, like Estonia or Iceland, are less available than Catalan within major globalisation services. Having fewer than one million speakers is a problem even today, while the eleven million theoretical Catalan speakers – both locally and around the world – are a totally different thing in scope.

However, figures are not the only thing that matters. Modernity, that is, the ability to adapt to technology and use it, and individuals' ability to purchase or acquire it, are extraordinarily

important for these companies and are, for example, what is holding back African languages today. On the aforementioned list of languages in which Apple's iOS system operates, there are 22 European languages out of a total of 34 and no African language, not one, unless we also count Arabic as an African language.

This is why the existence of a technological and scientific environment that facilitates the adoption of new technologies and their rapid integration into everyday life – that is, their social penetration – is so important in this new vision of linguistic ecology. This was the key factor, the single most important one, in Catalan's initial impact on the Internet, because trained people were able to equip the language with basic instruments to be recognised by machines.

Furthermore, in the specific case of Catalan, we should also bear in mind the Barcelona factor. In a globalised world there is a series of cities that stand out from the rest because they are fully immersed in globalisation. They are attractive, well-connected cities with an urban ecosystem that is interesting for multilingual digital nomads and offers a pleasant lifestyle alongside a powerful technological and university base. And having these things changes any linguistic community's opportunities. The fact is that fortunately for Catalan culture, Barcelona is one of these cities. When Oriol Amat explains that Catalonia – the Principality – accounts for one-thousandth of the global population but generates 1% of its scholarly output, he is opening our eyes to a reality whose importance we underestimate, although as Amat admits, a less positive aspect is that the impact of this scholarly output on society is not what it should be.

Therefore, I believe that the status of Catalan as a global language is indisputable. Nonetheless, it is not worth much if society is not aware of it. This is why I believe creating this awareness is one of the most exciting challenges we face as a culture.

Now is the time for Catalan speakers to set aside their traditional view of their own language – which is so heavily marked by political, social and cultural repression, as well as diglossia and minoritisation – and to realise that they do not have a second-class language; instead, they possess a language that is perfectly adapted, and adaptable, to the most crucial reality of today's world: globalisation.