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## Language question in the discourse of modern Catalan nationalists

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**Abstract.** The article analyzes statements about the Spanish-Catalan language contact given by the intellectual and political leaders of the Catalan independence movement. First, this paper investigates how the leaders of Catalan nationalists refer to the history of Catalonia and its language. Their statements concerning the sociolinguistic situation around Catalan during F. Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975) are also briefly discussed. The main focus of this article is on analyzing the possible implementation of the proposed state language policies in the event of Catalonia becoming independent from Spain. This analysis is based on the speeches given by Catalan nationalists in the five years between September 2012 (the unprecedented protests in Barcelona) and October 2017 (Catalan independence referendum and the following crisis). Two possible scenarios for the implementation of language policies are highlighted: the radical and the moderate. Those in favor of the moderate scenario would preserve the official status of Spanish in an independent Catalonia, in which case the new state would have two official languages. This view is supported by all leaders of the prominent secessionist parties. Advocates of the radical scenario consider it necessary to deprive Spanish of its official status in the public sphere. In this case Catalan would become the official language of the government, all educational institutions and the state media. Finally, the paper assesses the likelihood of each scenario being realized. Based on this analysis, the newly formed sovereign state will have two official languages (Catalan and Spanish). Still, some members of the political and intellectual elite favor the radical scenario and might try to depose Spanish, which could in turn lead to conflict between the Spanish-speaking and the Catalan-speaking communities.

**Keywords:** language policy, Catalan language, language contact, political linguistics, Catalan separatism.

### Introduction

The rise of Catalan nationalism and the struggle of local regionalist parties for the creation of an independent Catalan state is one of the most relevant issues in the political life of modern Europe. The Catalan independence referendum held in October 2017 and the political crisis in Catalonia in the autumn of 2017 and the winter of 2018 are perfect examples of the secessionist process in the region. The results of regional election in December 2017 showed the influence and power of separatist parties: 3 political formations opting for the secession obtained 47.5% of votes: *Junts per Catalunya* ('Together for Catalonia')—21.66%,

*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya–Catalunya Sí* ('Republican Left of Catalonia — Catalonia Yes') — 21.38%, *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular–Crida Constituent* ('Popular Unity Candidacy — Constituent Call')—4.46% (Eleccions al Parlament de Catalunya 2017). Numerous street demonstrations in Catalonia during 2018 culminated in violent clashes between the police and the pro-independence protesters on 21 December 2018. The recent investigations show that the Catalan nationalism will be a problem for Spanish authorities in the future (Serra *et al.* 2018).

Analyzing the rhetoric of Catalan separatists concerning the necessity of secession, it could be observed that the "language question" plays

an important role in their argumentation. The preservation of the Catalan language under the “pressure” of Spanish is exposed as one of the most important arguments in favor of independence from Spain. Prominent Catalan politicians often appeal to the history of Catalonia trying to show that the regional language has always been “suppressed” by Spanish authorities. After the fall of F. Franco’s dictatorship in 1975, and the Transition to democracy (*La Transición*), local politicians came up with the idea that in the XX century the Spanish government tried to exterminate the Catalan language (Tereshchuk 2018).

A number of Catalan independentist politicians issued statements accusing the Francoist authorities of an attempt of cultural and linguistic genocide. E.g., the “father” of modern Catalan nationalism J. Pujol in his pamphlet against the general Franco wrote that the repressions against the Catalan culture were taking the form of a real vandalism (Pujol 1960). J. Benet, an important politician in the period of the Transition, published the book *Catalunya sota el règim franquista* (‘Catalonia under the Francoist regime’). The author declared the Spanish government guilty of an endeavour of a “cultural genocide” (Benet 1978, 11), and blamed the authorities of a prohibition of media in Catalan language (Benet 1978, 256). Arguing about “repressions” against Catalan, J. Benet did not allege any documentary records of the repressive policy by the Spanish state. According to the politician, all proofs could be found in “secret Francoist archives” (Benet 1978, 258). A. Mas, President of the *Generalitat* in 2010–2016, remembered about the “repressions” against the Catalan language, declaring that Catalonia and its people were victims of F. Franco’s regime (Artur Mas, a Vic: “Els botxins del català es presenten ara com a víctimes”)<sup>1</sup>.

It could be observed that in such contexts the language begins to play the role not only of depositary of national culture and memory, but also that of a sphere of political, economic, juridical and educational interests (Breuille 2002, 209).

<sup>1</sup> The language practices of the inhabitants of Catalonia, i.e., “word and grammatical choices that an individual speaker makes” (Spolski 2005, 9), during the Francoist dictatorship were thoroughly studied by A. Badia i Margarit. He analyzed the sociolinguistic situation in Catalonia and language preferences of the inhabitants of the city of Barcelona in the late 1960s (Badia i Margarit 1969). The investigation results obtained by the researcher from the University of Barcelona proved that in the last period of Franco’s dictatorship the Catalan language was widely used in the capital of Catalonia (Badia i Margarit 1969). The latest research showed that Catalan was never legally prohibited in Catalonia since 1939 (Tereshchuk 2019). In the present investigation the attitudes of the Catalan secessionist politicians towards the history of Spanish-Catalan language contact will not be described.

J. Fishman wrote that “the essence of a nationality is its spirit, its individuality, its soul. This soul is not only reflected and protected by the mother tongue, but in a sense, *the mother tongue is itself an aspect of the soul*” (Fishman 1973, 46). Consequently, “nationalist leaders and masses frequently viewed the vernacular not only as the most undeniable indicator of uniqueness [...] also as an indubitable nationality contrastive or continuative device” (Fishman 1973, 53). The Catalan nation building is impossible without elaboration of basic principles of new language policy, different from that of the modern Spanish state.

B. Spolsky indicated three components of language policy: language practices, language beliefs or ideology and language management (Spolsky 2005, 5). The purpose of this article is to study language beliefs of modern Catalan pro-independence leading figures. Language beliefs (or language ideology) could be determined as “a speech community’s consensus on what value to apply to each of the language variables or named language varieties” (Spolsky 2005, 14). The present paper concerns itself not with the whole speech community’s consensus, but rather that of the Catalan separatist political elite.

Different aspects of language ideology in the Catalan society after the beginning of the period of Transition has been studied in numerous scientific works, e.g., by Argente *et al.* (1979), Süselbeck (2008), Boix i Fuster (2008), Boix i Fuster, Vila i Moreno (1998), etc. At the same time, the language question in the political discourse of leaders of modern Catalan secessionist movement has not been analyzed yet.

The study of language question in the discourse of modern Catalan separatists is relevant for forecasting possible changes of the sociolinguistic situation in the region in case of formation of an independent Catalan state. Besides that, the present research could be important for the estimation of perspectives of Catalan and other regional languages of Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Methodology

The purpose of the present paper is to study the ideas of Catalan separatists concerning the language policy in a hypothetical independent Catalonia and the attitude towards the language contact of Spanish and Catalan. The term “Catalan separatists” will be used to describe the inhabitants of the autonomous community of Catalonia that favor the secession of the region and the creation of an independent Catalan State. In this context the term *separatism* will be used as a synonym

to the term *nationalism*, i.e., “the elaborated beliefs, values, and behaviors which nationalities develop on behalf of their avowed ethnocultural self-interest” (Fishman 1973, 4).

There are studied opinions towards the language question by prominent figures of the Catalan nationalism — representatives of the political and intellectual elite of the region. A number of speeches, newspaper articles and books dedicated to the future of the Spanish-Catalan language contact in Catalonia have been analyzed. The temporal limits of the investigation are September, 2012 (unprecedented independence demonstration in Barcelona) and October, 2017 (the independence referendum and political crisis in Catalonia).

### Results of the investigation

Among the representatives of the Catalan political and intellectual elite two general points of view on the “language question” have been highlighted. One of them will be called “moderate”; the other, “radical”. It should be taken into consideration that the delimitation of the both attitudes towards the sociolinguistic situation in Catalonia is based only on theoretic reflections of prominent secessionist leaders; the practical realization of language policy in an independent *Estat Català* could considerably differ.

The “moderate” point of view is dominant in the discourse of modern Catalan separatists. The partisans of that idea consider necessary the conservation of the official status of Spanish language in an independent Catalonia. According to them, all inhabitants of the region could be described as Catalans irrespectively of their mother tongue or language preferences. All leaders of parliamentary political separatist parties and the most prominent independentist movements express the “moderate” point of view in their public activity.

J. Cuixart, the president of the organization *Omnium Cultural*, in an interview to the online media *Crític*, said that all people living in Catalonia belong to the Catalan nation without any relation to the language they use in communication. The politician remembered some details from his own biography: J. Cuixart’s mother originated from Murcia and spoke Spanish as her mother tongue, but considered herself a Catalan: “La meva mare, la murciana, em deia: ‘Jordi, tranquil perquè catalans ho som tots’” (“My mother, a Murcian, told me: ‘Jordi, be patient, because we all are Catalans’”) (Discurs de Jordi Cuixart sobre el català i el castellà).

Another remarkable partisan of the “moderate” opinion is O. Junqueras, the leader of the *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*. In 2014 he published the article “La lengua de mis amigos, de mi gente”

(‘The language of my friends, of my people’) in the *El Periódico*. The Catalan politician expressed an opinion that there were no language problems in Catalonia and that the idea about the existence of the language conflict in the region was artificially supported by the media loyal to the Spanish government: “Hoy en Catalunya no hay ningún problema lingüístico a pesar de los enormes esfuerzos de algunos medios de comunicación, del Gobierno del PP y de parte del aparato judicial, empeñados en dividir a los catalanes por razón de lengua” (‘There is no linguistic problem in Catalonia today despite enormous efforts of some mass media, of the Government, of the People’s Party and of a part of judicial corps that try to divide the Catalans on the ground of language’) (Junqueras 2014). O. Junqueras declares that the two official languages in the future independent Catalonia would be Catalan and Spanish (the former language number one): “En cuestión de lengua, el catalán debe seguir siendo la vehicular, la común, la preferente en la Administración, y debe tener el estatus oficial que ahora no tiene” (‘As for the language question, Catalan should continue being vehicular, common and preferent in the Administration, and should have an official status that at the moment it does not have’) (Junqueras 2014). According to the politician, the Spanish state impedes the recognition of Catalan as one of the official languages of Spain by other countries: “Al contrario, lo que ahora tenemos es un Estado que veta sistemáticamente el reconocimiento oficial del catalán en la escena internacional” (‘On the contrary, what we have now is a State that forbids systematically the official recognition of Catalan on the international stage’) (Junqueras 2014).

Two years before that, in the article “El castellano y la República catalana”, the leader of the *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* announced that the question of independence involved all people living in Catalonia. O. Junqueras, who at the moment of publication was the mayor of Sant Vicenç dels Horts, a municipality with 80% of Spanish-speaking population, ensured the linguistic rights of all inhabitants of Catalonia:

“Pero a propósito de lenguas, dejémoslo claro de entrada, en la Catalunya independiente el catalán será la lengua propia y oficial del país, la lengua común de todos. Pero el castellano también será oficial en la República catalana”.

(‘Referring to the languages, we should make it clear from the very beginning that in an independent Catalonia Catalan will be proper and official language of the country, the common language of everybody. But Castilian will also be official in the Catalan Republic’) (Junqueras 2012).

It is not only the partisans of the “moderate” point of view that influence Catalan society, but also the followers of the “radical” one. The advocates of the “radical” scenario express an opinion that after the possible secession the Spanish language should be deprived of the official status. The language of the administration, education, mass media, etc., should be only Catalan.

Some statements of the supporters of the “radical” point of view provoke a public scandal. The famous case of C. Baronet, mayor of Folgueroles, who described Spanish in an official meeting with a visitor in 2013 as a “damned language” (‘puta lengua’), is a striking example of a disaster of that type (Serra 2013). Other “radicals” make serious offers of prohibiting Spanish in Catalonia. E. g., the philologist, interpreter and writer P. Vidal in 2015 published the book *El bilingüisme mata* (*Bilingualism kills*). The author expressed concerns about the coexistence of Spanish and Catalan in the autonomous community. According to his opinion, there is only one way of saving the Catalan language from disappearing — the elimination of Spanish from the public life. From Vidal’s perspective, the bilingualism is a positive phenomenon from the point of view of an individual, but a negative one as a coexistence of two languages in one society (the author does not clearly distinguish the phenomena of *diglossia* and *bilingualism*) (Vidal 2015).

A. Argemí i Roca, the founder of the *Centre Internacional Escarré per a les Minories Ètniques i les Nacions* (*International Escarré Center for the Ethnic Minorities and Nations*) also described the bilingualism existing in Catalonia as a problem: “Tenim un altre problema que és el del bilingüisme.

El bilingüisme no és una solució, crea un problema” (‘We have another problem that is that of bilingualism. The bilingualism is not a solution, it creates a problem’) (Entrevista a Aureli Argemí. Ja podem anar predicant, que el referèndum no el farem). He also made a proposition about the implementation of language policy in a hypothetical independent Catalan state: “En la república hi ha una llengua, i en aquest cas nostre seria la llengua catalana. Perquè és la llengua del país. El castellà és la llengua d’un grup molt important, i que hem de respectar. Però no és la llengua de la república” (‘There is one language in the republic, in our case it would be Catalan. Because it is the language of the country. Castilian is a language of a very important group that we have to respect. But it is not the language of the republic’) (Entrevista a Aureli Argemí. Ja podem anar predicant, que el referèndum no el farem).

## Conclusions

Supporters of both points of view share the idea of retaining the official status of Catalan in a hypothetical independent Catalonia. It should be no doubt that in case of secession Catalan will be widely used in all spheres of public life. Considering that the dominant point of view among the separatists is the “moderate” one, it could be forecasted that Spanish would preserve its official status. At the same time, the existence of personalities that follow the “radical” point of view could lead to the anti-Spanish propaganda in an independent Catalonia. This propaganda will provoke tensions among the inhabitants of Catalonia and undermine the political situation in the region.

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