

# Language as a Catalyst: The Catalan Language, Nationalism, and the Impact of the Language Immersion Model on Education

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## Abstract

*This article explores the role of language in consolidating identity and promoting a sense of belonging. Taking the Catalan model as a case study, the article intends to analyze how language and education are used as means of integrating or excluding linguistic groups. Moreover, aspects related to language policies are addressed, highlighting the positive and negative aspects, and supporting the need for a balanced approach to avoid exclusivist tendencies.*

**Keywords:** *identity, language, nationalism, language immersion model, Catalonia.*

## *Introduction*

In the context of separating linguistics from semiotics and problematizing the concepts of text and discourse, the twentieth century manifested a strong concern for ways of objectifying philosophical practices, as elements of legitimation and starting points for their analysis.

In an era of transformation, states must learn to manage the cultural diversity they face within their borders and develop policies that emphasize mutual respect, acceptance of differences, and socio-cultural integration. They must find the most appropriate option and a balance between the equality of all citizens, as a fundamental human right, and the recognition of the distinct character of each culture and the right to have access to and enjoy one's own culture, through special rights. But in many cases, cultural diversity became problematic when majority rights and minority rights overlapped.

A community's identity is deeply rooted in attachment, devotion, participation, and a shared interest in preserving its linguistic, cultural, or historical distinctiveness. Moreover, the injustices suffered in the past leave a mark on their

collective identity and make the sense of belonging even deeper. Mother tongue is perhaps the most distinctive and enduring element of identity. Be it majorities, national or ethnic minorities, the fundamental goal of any group is linguistic continuity as a means of group survival. Language is not only a communication tool, but also the expression of a culture and a collective consciousness. How people adapt their language to different contexts and how societal norms, history, and political decisions influence language are debated topics in both sociolinguistics and international relations.

In the case of Catalonia, the spirit of identity and attachment stem from two sources. The first is the economic momentum taken long before the rest of Spain, complemented by the cultural, literary, and linguistic richness, which gave them their distinct character. The second source is the suppression of language and culture during the Francoist period and the need to compensate for the injustices suffered.

In the context of Catalonia's distinctive character, balancing linguistic preservation with social inclusion proved to be a challenging task. This article raises the question of how language policies in Catalonia impact the collective identity of the Catalan minority. Specifically, it examines the legal framework and the immersion program and investigates how language policies in Catalan education shape the cultural integration of linguistic groups, exploring both the positive and negative implications of using language as a tool.

### *Theoretical perspective*

The concepts of minority, identity, and nationalism are closely intertwined. As professor Andre-Louis Sanguin pointed out, a

*stateless ethnic group defines a small community in isolated form, that has to defend a language which is not spoken anywhere else. Without having a sovereign state, the community cannot be based either on a homeland neighboring country or a linguistic hinterland, often evolving in a difficult context (see the cases of the Sami, Frisian, Welsh, Corsicans, Occitan, Bretons, Catalans, Basques, Sardinians etc.). (Ivan, 2011, p. 109)*

In this context, stateless ethnic groups do not have a state of their own to rely on. For example, languages like Catalan, Basque or Sami are spoken in limited areas, with no neighboring nation to actively promote the languages. These groups are in a vulnerable position and susceptible to disappearance. Even though Catalans have regional autonomy, they still face pressures from the dominant language, the struggle for linguistic preservation being a continuous challenge.

Some scholars, such as Gellner and Hobsbawm, argue that nationalism is a modern phenomenon, the result of industrialization, mass literacy, and the postmodern state, while others, like Smith, emphasize the role of religion, cultural traditions and attachment to land. In the case of Catalonia, both historical and modern elements shape its national identity (Miller, 1996, p. 114). The promotion of Catalan as the main language of instruction in education reflects the dynamic character of their identity, evolving while maintaining cultural traditions and a strong connection to place.

Besides being a tool of identity preservation, language plays a very important role in self-determination, legitimizing political aspirations. Thus, language functions as a linking symbol of collective identity, connecting a group and differentiating it from the rest. Kedourie argues that: “language is the external and visible badge of those differences which distinguish one nation from another; it is the most important criterion by which a nation is recognized to exist and to have the right to form a state on its own.” (Miller, 1996, p. 114) This perspective is relevant in the case of Catalonia, where the promotion of the Catalan language justifies their political goals of self-determination and autonomy. Thus, language preservation is a goal in itself and a means to achieve further political goals and establish power relations.

Discussing the issue of individual versus collective rights, there are two distinct perspectives regarding Spain and Catalonia. The monolingual liberal Spain-centered view promotes the idea that Spanish is the main official language of the state known by all Spaniards and bilingualism is an issue to be debated only at local level. Therefore, the use of local languages should be territorially limited, and policies should be implemented only at this level. The social-democratic peripheral perspective suggests that there is no peaceful coexistence between the dominant Spanish language and the rest of the local languages, but a relation of subordination. In this situation, the logical step should be to normalize the status of the subordinate languages and make them equal with the dominant one (Clua i Fainé, 2017, p. 55). Hence the never-ending dichotomy between the individual rights of Spanish speakers and the collective rights of Catalans and between the Spanish nation-state and the stateless Catalonia. We can observe two contrasting types of nationalism manifested here. Firstly, Spanish nationalism considering Spanish as the official language of the state and, consequently, the right of every citizen, regardless of the region in which they live, to speak and study it freely. Secondly, Catalan nationalism, shaped by a history of oppression that severely limited linguistic rights, emphasizes the need to preserve and promote the Catalan language. From their perspective, Spanish, as the official and dominant language,

is known and spoken by all, not needing more support and promotion, unlike Catalan, which is restricted in number of speakers and geographical location, thus the need to put more emphasis on its preservation.

Minority, identity, and nationalism are linked through the struggle for linguistic and cultural preservation. A stateless ethnic group, as a minority, must protect their language and culture against all the elements threatening their survival. The increased vulnerability of these groups is exploited for political reasons, using language as a main tool. In this way, nationalism for stateless groups becomes not just a cultural expression but also a way to face subordination.

### *The roots of Catalan nationalism*

From a theoretical standpoint, Ernest Gellner promotes the idea that “industrialization rearranges the social fabric, making it more susceptible to different social phenomena than agrarian societies”. (Kark, 2007) Thus, with this shift in focus and activities, people need to change their habits too. Mobilities from the rural area to the urban one and contacts with people beyond your local community require education and knowing a common language, pushing individuals towards a wider cultural space, and creating a new collective identity than the previous one, as a significant sign of advancement (Kark, 2007).

Starting from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Catalonia established itself as a distinct region, standing out especially in terms of economy and culture. In contrast to the highly agrarian Spain, Catalonia started to industrialize and urbanize, leaving them behind in terms of economic growth and profitability. The uneven development of the country, with Catalonia being the primary provider and yet having no support from the state, fueled their discontent.

The German Romanticism arrived in Catalonia in the 1830s, taking the form of the cultural movement known as *Renaixença* (Renaissance). The core concept during this period was Herder’s concept of *Volk*. According to him, individuals can define themselves based on religion, language, or a common feeling. The *Volk*, this collective entity, has a joint soul manifested through culture, and a strong common consciousness, making mixing with others merely impossible. The concept of *Volk* influenced the Catalan intellectuals, who started to question the differences between the Spaniards and the Catalans in terms of success, seriousness, and common sense (Kark, 2007).

Following the Spanish Civil War in 1936 and Francisco Franco’s nationalist ideology promoting the dominance of Spanish, the Catalan language and culture were marginalized for a long period of time. Only later, with Spain’s orientation

towards the European democratic values, was Catalonia acknowledged as a distinct nation within Spanish borders.

*The legal framework*

The roots of Catalan nationalism and their attachment to language go back to the Franco era, when their linguistic rights were practically annulled. The Catalan was banned from all fields of activity, economic, social, political or cultural. In schools, public administration, and media, the official language was Castilian. Additionally, all the names were translated into Spanish. The only source of language preservation remained their own home. After Franco's death and the change in regime, the Catalan nationalism focused on the recognition of the Catalan's language status.

In 1979, the Spanish Autonomous Communities were established, making Catalonia one of the main autonomous regions of Spain, with a high degree of self-government. Generalitat de Catalunya (the Catalan Government) placed education and culture at the core of their activity, as a means of identity preservation. This includes the promotion of the Catalan language in all spheres of activity and a language immersion model to normalize the use of Catalan (Clua i Fainé, 2017, pp. 46-47).

The legal framework for the Language Immersion Model relies on the Spanish Constitution of 1978, the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia (1979) and the new version of 2006, Law 7/1983 on Linguistic Normalization, replaced by the Language Policy Law (1998) and Law 12/2009 on Education. To understand the role of this initiative we shall analyze the main provisions.

Article 143 of the Spanish Constitution of 1978 mentions the right to form Autonomous Communities and self-government for provinces with common historic, cultural, and economic characteristics (Spanish Constitution, 1978). References about culture, research and teaching in the local language can be found in Article 148.

Article 3 of the same Constitution states that:

*Castilian is the official Spanish language of the State. All Spaniards have the duty to know it and the right to use it. The other Spanish languages shall also be official in the respective Autonomous Communities in accordance with their statutes.*  
(Spanish Constitution, 1978)

The first Statute of Autonomy (1979) provides the legal framework for language policy. Catalan was recognized as the official language of the region, alongside Castilian, the official language of the state. The Generalitat ensured

access to and use of both languages, with the legal provisions to guarantee equal rights and responsibilities (Language Policy Law, 1998).

In 2006, an updated version of the Statute promoted Catalan as the primary language within Catalonia. While still recognizing both Catalan and Castilian as official, the revised statute placed Catalan's normal and preferential use in administration, media, and education. This evolution was a clear attempt to strengthen the Catalan presence in all domains and to balance bilingualism with language preservation. In terms of education, Catalan shall normally be used as the teaching and learning language. Students should also have the right and obligation to have a sufficient knowledge of Catalan and Castilian when completing compulsory education, with both languages being represented in the curricula. Students will not be segregated based on their language of use (Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia, 2006).

Law 7/1983 on linguistic normalization in Catalonia had the purpose of standardizing the use of Catalan in all areas of activity. According to the law, the Catalan language is the main language of Catalonia, and the language normally used in education, political, social, or economic affairs or in relation to the authorities. However, Castilian is an official language also and may be used if the speaker requires it to be used. Education should be ensured in both languages at non-university level and all students have the obligation to know both languages when graduating from their compulsory studies (Law on Linguistic Normalization, 1983).

The Language Policy Law adopted in 1998 replaced the 1983 law. As it is stipulated in Articles 2 and 3, Catalan is the language used in administration, institutions, companies, public services, media, and education. At the same time, Castilian is also the official language that can be used in all public or private activities. In the case of administrative procedures, public and judicial documents, both Catalan and Castilian might be used at request. Moreover, personal and place names should be written only in Catalan. Chapter III offers an insight into the educational system. Article 20 specifies that: "Catalan, as Catalonia's own language, is also that of education, at all levels and types of schooling." (Language Policy Law, 1998) In pre-university education, the teaching of both Catalan and Castilian is guaranteed. In colleges and universities, the language of study is of students' choice. Regarding the written media, radio, television, as well as all types of entertainment and cultural events, the main language is generally Catalan.

The 2009 Law on Education emphasizes Catalan as the primary language of instruction, with the specification that almost all subjects, except Spanish language and literature and foreign languages, be taught in Catalan. At the same time,

segregation based on language is prohibited and by the end of their compulsory education students should acquire a strong command of both languages. Article 15 of this law describes the immersion model as a factor of social cohesion. The program includes strategies for linguistic adaptability based on the local linguistic landscape, tailoring language instruction to community needs and allowing schools to modify their schedules to effectively implement these measures. (Law on Education, 2009)

The main goal of the immersion was to create a unified system, integrating all children and giving them the opportunity to learn both languages. However, complaints started to appear, coming from Spanish parents dissatisfied with the fact that their children are forced to study in Catalan and don't have enough opportunities to study Castilian.

*The European Parliament's report on the efficiency of the language immersion model*

The European Parliament sent a mission to Catalonia in December 2023, to analyze the language immersion model and its impact on Spanish-speaking pupils. The goal was to investigate the complaints coming from several Spanish-speaking parents about the refusal of the authorities to ensure more classes in Spanish. After meetings with the petitioners, the representatives of the teachers, members of the judiciary, regional authorities and several visits to schools, the committee concluded that the petitioners accuse the Catalan authorities of not complying with the law and ensure a minimum of 25% teaching in Spanish. Besides the refusal of the schools, they also faced discrimination, harassment, bullying and hate speech coming from Catalan society.

On the other hand, the Catalan authorities insisted that the language immersion model is highly efficient, offering competence in both languages by the end of the educational cycle. Moreover, they intend to continue with full immersion due to the need to preserve the Catalan language, which would otherwise be lost.

After visiting several schools, the delegates observed that even if school representatives support the idea of bilingual education, in practice, the announcements and official sites offer information only in Catalan or English. Besides, not too many school subjects in Spanish are added to the curriculum. The justification was that Spanish is known and spoken by everybody, therefore, the focus is placed on Catalan.

The delegation's primary recommendation urges Catalonia to ensure equal treatment for Spanish and Catalan as languages of instruction and particularly to

accommodate students with special needs who have Spanish as their first language. They emphasized that Catalonia's language policy significantly affects social and economic factors, impeding families from other Spanish regions to relocate due to language barriers, thus infringing with the European Union's principle of free movement.

To address these concerns, the regional authorities should improve communication and provide information on official school websites in both languages. Furthermore, both regional and national authorities should establish a defense protocol for families to protect them from harassment, bullying, and social exclusion.

The delegation also calls for close monitoring by the Commission regarding the implementation of EU Article 165 in Catalonia, especially regarding the regional authorities' commitment to respecting cultural and linguistic diversity. Additionally, the delegation notes that the High Court of Justice of Catalonia's ruling on December 16, 2020, mandating a 25% provision of teaching in Spanish within the Catalan education system, is currently not being enforced by the Regional Administration. It emphasizes the importance of upholding the rule of law, a fundamental principle of the EU outlined in Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union and asserts that the failure of both Spanish and Catalan public administrations to comply with judicial decisions constitutes a breach of this principle (Mission Report, 2024).

### *Conclusion*

The purpose of this article was to analyze the legal framework regarding Catalan language rights, the educational system, and the effectiveness of the language immersion model, addressing the complex dynamics between Catalan and Spanish linguistic rights. As can be seen, although the legal framework has been in place for some time, grievances have not stopped arising.

On the one hand, the Catalan authorities believe the approach is effective and inclusive, with all students being bilingual and competent in both languages upon completion of compulsory education. On the other hand, Spanish speakers in Catalonia accuse the authorities of lack of communication and refusal to allocate more hours in Spanish for their children. Following the visit of the European Parliament's delegation, the conclusions are not exactly favorable to Catalonia. They found deficiencies in communication between the Spanish petitioners and the authorities, as well as the reluctance of Catalan society regarding their rights, raising concerns over the efficiency of the program.



As for the European Union, since the respect for linguistic and cultural diversity is one of the main principles guiding the organization, and any discrimination based on language is prohibited, they will continue to monitor the situation in Catalonia and the changes brought with the language immersion model. The article ultimately suggests that Catalonia's case exemplifies the complexities of linguistic integration. Adopting a legal framework is just the first step of an ongoing process of consultation and adaptability.

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