

Slow translation and the revival of the Catalan language

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Today in Catalonia young people grow up bilingual. It also occurs in other parts of Europe. But here a small miracle has taken place; a tradition and a culture that were in danger of being lost have been recovered.



People browsing books in Barcelona. Demotix/Matthias Oesterle. Some rights reserved.

The oldest profession in the world is....translation. That's what Catalan-language writer and poet Francesc Parcerisas tells us in a delightful book entitled *Sense mans. Metàfores i papers sobre la traducció* (*No hands! Metaphors and papers on translation*).

In the past, state ambassadors used to heavily rely on translation. Today, in a world perpetually connected, everybody uses it; often resorting to quick, error-prone methods. That is, Google Translator's way: really fast and since translations are truly indispensable, the automatic translator has finally managed to combine necessity and practicality. Hence its success. The traditional version, i.e. the good old editorial one – created almost by hand and with the aid of dictionaries (often still paper ones) – is a rather slow, delicate, painstaking activity that feeds on shades of grey; one that doesn't allow for syntax errors.

Take for instance a region of Europe which has sparked much debate in recent years, Catalonia, of which [Parcerisas](#) is a native. The region is the historic cradle of Catalan, a language spoken by roughly one out of four citizens in the Kingdom of Spain (it is [also used](#) in the region of Valencia and the Balearic Islands). A language that has been able to resist [intimidation and repression](#). They say it's in excellent health, according to the official language academy Institut d'Estudis Catalans: the small publishers popping up everywhere testify to this, along with its widespread use on social media. It's never been in better shape, really, at least since the fall of the Franco regime.

One could almost argue that instead of losing a language, Europe has celebrated the comeback of Catalan. A grandee of the Continent's age-old cultural heritage – Catalan was indeed born in the early Middle Ages. Not a dialect of Spanish, as many believe, but one of the evolutions of late-empire Vulgar Latin. An astonishing linguistic recovery. Those who care about diversity in general of any kind can't fail to be happy about it. Diversity is good. Mankind embodies diversity. Fellini, who knew a thing or two about visions and wide angles, said that each language offered a [unique point of view](#) on the world. Surely, the renowned Barcelona-based London journalist and author [Matthew Tree](#) would also agree with that. Trilingual, he's been writing professionally and successfully, mostly in Catalan, for over thirty years now.

Catalan is therefore a happy contrast to a global trend: languages and linguistic diversity disappear slowly and inexorably. Europe can boast very few exceptions. Often, these are sadly predestined to be short-lived. In the Alps,

for instance, Romansh (overshadowed by German and artificially kept alive to the sound of [Swiss government francs](#)) or [Ladin](#) spoken in the northeast of Italy (also economically undermined and eroded by German as well as syntactically and phonetically by Italian). Both Romansh and Ladin are off-shoots of Vulgar Latin, languages in their own right that is, not mere dialects.

A language dies every two weeks, as the British historian and linguist [Andrew Dalby](#) wrote in *Language in Danger* back in 2002. Who's responsible for language revival if governments don't want or simply can't afford to be magnanimous? Who or what can help maintain diversity, that is, the different angles from which we see the world, in order to avoid mainstream ideological conformism, a close relative of a dystopian thought police, that no-one really wants?

Let's go back to Catalan, to see how the role of translation – slow, precise and thoughtful, and where you might still need pencil and paper, but where algorithms, however ingenious they may be, don't and can't fit in. It's not about a sense of intellectual superiority. It's that algorithms are simply unnecessary. Perhaps it makes little sense to say so in 2014; everything is an algorithm, after all. And yet there's probably more than an element of truth in this. Catalan was reborn by becoming the native language of more and more people, who do, however, speak Spanish as well. They are bilingual. But within their intimate perception, on a very personal level, Catalan comes before Spanish in their heads; and here the change has been slow, yet inexorable. There's no reversing it, thanks to the strength of quality, slow-paced, proper translation; the precise, editorial kind. You could call it pedantic and unfriendly when comparing it to Google Translate, which chews, swallows up, digests, and regurgitates anything, rapidly and effectively, delivering guaranteed commercial added value.

Editorial translation has painstakingly performed the precious job of translating school books, for example. All charts, diagrams, pages of science, biology, mathematics – all translated into the once archaic language of the philosopher Ramon Llull and then gradually moving towards the modernity of the literary critic Joan Fuster and the contemporary poet Pere Gimferrer. The Catalans were and still are the printers of Spain, as well as being great translators – there are hundreds of them specialising in solely literary work.

Professional printing, translating and writing – that's what's saved Catalan from oblivion; plus the pride and entrepreneurial money behind it all, of course. Fast, clever trade has a place; literature and thoughtful translation have a place. Sometimes the three meet for a good cause. International literature available in Catalan means more people read a broader range of topics, yet still in their own language. That makes Catalan itself more important and stronger against those who try to [undermine](#) it, like the Spanish education minister, José Ignacio Wert. All thanks to slow and accurate translation, on a level unmatched by Google Translator (yes, okay, you can find Catalan on there).

It's not an easy task keeping a language alive. The fruit of this labour is harvested today by the Catalan autonomous government, the *Generalitat*, in a very dignified way – Madrid should admit it. And if the Catalans print and sell books in Spanish, they do just the same with works written in the language that comes to their mind first. They have two. One comes before the other; and they would never dream of giving up either of them. Why would you want to do that? They have made money with both and still are. Culture, yes, but also trade is essential – don't we know it! – and if you do well in business by using two languages instead of one, even better, right?

Today in Catalonia young people grow up [bilingual](#). It's the reality of many people. It also occurs in other parts of Europe. But here a small miracle has taken place; a tradition and a culture that were in danger of being lost have been recovered. Scholars discussed philosophy in Catalan centuries ago. When Don Quixote came to Barcelona, Cervantes began to insert dialogues in Catalan – a tribute and an acknowledgment. Spain is not only about Castile, a region that stops at some point. Spain continues from there and becomes Catalonia.

Spain is not a synonym for Castile; that's a misunderstanding that has hurt Europe, which was in danger of losing an historic piece of itself; a piece of its true identity. Europe without an awareness of its history is not Europe. This is a case of a language enjoying a thorough resurgence: Dave Eggers' novels are translated; science is written in Catalan. American films are [dubbed](#). That's all thanks to proper, professional, meticulous translation work and the phenomena (of cultural enjoyment which form identity) arising from it. Earlier we talked about the translation of school books; it's the same – the slow, brooding, smelling-like-paper one, that's not averse to online dictionaries (the good ones).

Catalonia is a land of books, booksellers, printers, translators, poets, novelists and essayists: it is now back to its hybrid status; its proper role in the world. Hybrid and avant-garde, in tune with the post-modern ways of creating on

different levels, mixing everything up, recycling, disguising, reinventing, with impunity, effectively: not ashamed of stratification; it actually turns it to its own advantage. But there's a significant part of monolingual Spain that doesn't understand any of this. Part of its population believes in the archaic and [exclusive role](#) of Spanish, the language of Castilian people, in a varied and complex country that is not just made up of Castilians. If only.