



Beyond language: Class, social categorisation and academic achievement in a Catalan high school



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the sociolinguistic situation of a multilingual secondary school in the Barcelona metropolitan area and examines the language practices of both students and educators. Following a critical sociolinguistic ethnography perspective, it understands practices as constructing the socio-institutional order of the school, and language as constitutive of social processes. The analysis of the data shows that the students, the majority of which are of migrant background, systematically fail to employ Catalan, the language of schooling, and that the teachers refuse to enforce official linguistic norms. Rather than considering it exclusively a language issue, we claim that language is an index of a process of constructing the school as “different” and the school body as non-academic. In the analysis of discourses and practices, social class emerges as one of the grounding motivations for such “difference”, which leads to low academic demands, a life skills educational perspective, and lack of competence in Catalan, with serious consequences for students’ social access.

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1. Introduction

In officially bilingual communities, the issue of the relationship between language proficiency, language use and school performance is a rather complex matter. Such is the case in Catalonia, in the north-east of Spain, where both Catalan and Spanish are legally recognised as official languages, but have different values. Spanish is not only the state language, but also one of the international *linguae francae* of today’s world. Catalan, meanwhile, is a regional language, which nevertheless has high social prestige within the local marketplace. As Pujolar (2007, p. 123) argues, “Catalan embodies not only national identity, but also the type of cultural capital that ensures access to powerful networks and prestigious employment”. This means that the relationship between the two languages is more multifarious than the minority–majority dichotomy may suggest.

In schools, Catalan is the preferred language of use. The declared mission of the education system is to ensure that all school-leavers are equally proficient in the two official languages (Article 10 of the Education Law of Catalonia [LEC]).² To achieve that goal and given the unequal weight that both languages have socially (Spanish is predominant in the public sphere, especially in the fields of business, law and the media, and also in the private sphere in the Barcelona metropolitan area), Catalan plays a more prominent role than Spanish in children’s schooling. Studying Catalan and in Catalan is, thus,

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² Downloadable from: <http://www.gencat.cat/diari/5422/09190005.htm>. Retrieved 18.07.13.

one of the central requirements of any pupil in the Catalan educational system.³ The goal is to ensure “social cohesion”. It is believed that guaranteeing the learning of Catalan at school by those students who do not have access to it socially is a means to ensure equal opportunities, no matter what their the linguistic/family background might be.

In such a situation, a set of challenges and dilemmas arises for the educational community, especially in schools that are located in areas where Catalan is, socially, practically absent. This happens mostly, though not exclusively, in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. A number of peripheral cities, and especially their most outlying districts, were populated by Spanish-speaking internal migrants from other parts of Spain who arrived in the 50s, 60s and 70s. These were later joined by the foreign migrants who, in the late 90s, helped materialise the Spanish economic boom of the early 21st century. Since the populations living there were mostly Spanish-speaking, Spanish has become the *lingua franca* of these neighbourhoods.

Recently arrived migrant students who do not speak either of the two official languages find themselves in the awkward situation of having to learn and use Catalan at school but needing Spanish to socialise outside of it. Those who already speak one of the two languages, i.e. Spanish, find that it has little value for a successful academic trajectory in the Catalan education system, often contrary to their expectations. This generates a number of tensions in schools that educators have to deal with and position themselves with regard to, both practically and ideologically.

The main purpose of this paper is to explore and try to explain the communicative practices in Spanish and Catalan, the two official languages in Catalonia, of students and teachers at a multilingual secondary school, *Els Quatre Gats*,⁴ which faces the linguistic discontinuities outlined above. Adopting an ethnographic perspective, we understand language as embedded in broader educational and social categorisation processes. We claim that language cannot be examined independently of the roles and the identities it creates. For this reason, we take language practices not as our main (and only) analytical focus, but as the means to comprehend what schooling means at EQG.

This paper is organised as follows. Section 2 introduces the theoretical tools of the critical sociolinguistic ethnography framework. Section 3 presents the particularities of the Catalan case in order to enable a contextual understanding of the data. Section 4 is devoted to the method and the description of the school, our focus students and the data on which our analysis is based. In Section 5, we analyse schooling practices at EQG, which revolve around the construction and enacting of EQG as being a “different” school. Finally, in Section 6, we discuss the broader implications of the analysis in terms of social access and social reproduction.

2. Theoretical considerations

Our concern with the ways in which the *Els Quatre Gats* (henceforth EQG) secondary school was socialising its students and with the socio-educational consequences of such practices, in terms of students' local integration and social access, led us to embark on a six-month sociolinguistic ethnography (Heller & Martin-Jones, 2001; Martín Rojo, 2010; Rampton, 1995) in the first semester of 2008 with a special focus on a group of students aged between 15 and 16.⁵

Sociolinguistic ethnography (SE) seeks to account for the ways in which people shape, communicate, negotiate, reproduce – but also contest and transform – the social order in their everyday practices (Giddens, 1984; Heller, 2001). For that reason, it draws on a number of theoretical concepts and methodological orientations to the study of the social and institutional order as produced in situated interactions (e.g. the local construction and negotiation of identities, the role of ideologies in shaping speakers' practices, and the (re)production of power relations through categorisation processes, amongst others). It also involves a set of analytical tools taken from ethnomethodology/conversation analysis (e.g. turn allocation) and interactional sociolinguistics (e.g. communicative patterns, contextualisation cues, language alternation and language choice), as well as an ethnographic perspective on data collection, which informs the analysis of situated practices in the communities studied.

Schools have been considered to be one of the most suitable sites for doing SE (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Blommaert & Makoe, 2012; Goldstein, 2003; Heller, 1999/2006; Martín Rojo, 2010; Patiño-Santos, 2011; Pérez-Milans, 2013, and the chapters included in Heller & Martin-Jones, 2001, amongst others) for various reasons: (i) School is one of the key spaces for the production, reproduction and legitimation of the social order. As the first state institution citizens are compulsorily enrolled into, students come to encounter what counts as the suitable (linguistic and behavioural) norms, rules and knowledge of a society. (ii) It is through language use that school agents (whether students, teachers, school staff or parents) construct their daily practice (i.e. teachers do being teachers and students do being students) while, in so doing, indexing particular meanings, identities, beliefs and understandings of their roles. The study of all these processes reveals complexities and tensions at different levels. As described by Heller and Martin-Jones:

³ According to the Education Law (Article 11), Catalan is the language “normally” employed as the medium of instruction and learning in the Catalan education system.

⁴ This study has been undertaken with two research projects: “La competencia multilingüe de los jóvenes: continuidades y discontinuidades entre las prácticas escolares y las prácticas de entorno” (DECOMASAI, SEJ2007-62147-EDUC, 2007–2010) and “La competencia plurilingüe, audiovisual y digital como vehículo para la construcción de saberes en comunidades de práctica multilingües y multiculturales” (PADS, EDU2010-17859, 2010–2013), both funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science.

⁵ In the Spanish education system, secondary education is compulsory between ages 12 and 16. The non-compulsory baccalaureate between 17 and 18 prepares young people for higher education. Secondary schools offer both compulsory and non-compulsory strands. We chose to focus on a group of 15–16-year-olds because they were in their last year of compulsory education.

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