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# The Sociolinguistics of Higher Education

Language Policy  
and Internationalisation  
in Catalonia

Josep Soler  
Lidia Gallego-Balsà

palgrave  
macmillan

# The Sociolinguistics of Higher Education

“This timely book offers a compelling account of the tensions between internationalisation and national priorities in higher education – as seen through Catalan language policies. Written by renowned experts in the field, it is a must read for researchers, policy makers and anyone even remotely interested in the profound sociolinguistic changes higher education systems across the world are grappling with.”

—Anna Kristina Hultgren, *Senior Lecturer in English Language and Applied Linguistics, The Open University, UK*

“Essential and stimulating reading for anyone studying the language impacts of internationalisation in higher education institutions in non-anglophone and minority language contexts. Through their critical, constructive and insightful analyses of original data from a university in Catalonia, the authors show us the tensions arising from the competition between Catalan, Spanish and English amidst national and global goals, and weigh up the position of the Catalan language and its prospects.”

—Peter Garrett, *Emeritus Professor, School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Cardiff University, UK*

Josep Soler · Lúdia Gallego-Balsà

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# Introduction: Language Policy and the Internationalisation of Higher Education in Catalonia

**Abstract** In recent years, universities have increasingly attracted the attention of applied linguists, allowing them to investigate important sociolinguistic phenomena. From the point of view of language policy in particular, universities are attractive research sites because of their double-sided nature: on the one hand, they continue to be seen as flagship national institutions, expected to be (and sometimes legally required to be) locally relevant and nationally important research organisations; on the other hand, they are increasingly asked to engage globally in the field of education, making them players in an international market. These two different aims produce a set of tensions, ambiguities, and anxieties that universities and their primary stakeholders experience in terms that are intensely sociolinguistic in nature, particularly where the universities are located in non-anglophone contexts. Our book explores these tensions and ambiguities, using empirical material from the Catalan higher education system. This first introductory chapter succinctly presents the main goals of the book and its general outline, together with an overview of the central arguments to be developed in it.

**Keywords** Language policy · Internationalisation · Higher education · Catalonia

<b>Professor</b>	<b>Molt bé, bon dia a tothom. Avui parlarem del futur del sistema capitalista global</b>	Well, good morning everyone. Today we will talk about the future of the global capitalist system
Int. St. A	<i>(she raises her hand)</i> Por favor, señor	<i>(she raises her hand)</i> Excuse me, sir
Professor	¿Sí?	Yes?
Int St A	<i>(she stands up)</i> ¿Perdone pero podría dar la clase en castellano?	<i>(she stands up)</i> Excuse me, but could you give the class in Spanish?
Int. St. B	Sí ...	Yeah ...
Professor	Lo siento señorita pero no podrá ser. La mayoría de estudiantes son catalanes, o sea, que no creo que tenga que cambiar de idioma	I'm sorry, miss, but it's impossible. The majority of students are Catalan and, I mean, I don't think I need to switch to another language
Int. St. A	Hay más de quince estudiantes Erasmus que no hablamos catalán y para usted no es un problema hablar español	There are over fifteen Erasmus students here who don't speak Catalan and for you speaking Spanish is not a problem
Professor	Mire, yo la entiendo perfectamente, señorita, de verdad, perfectamente, pero usted me tendría que entender a mí también. Estamos en Cataluña y aquí el catalán es idioma oficial. Si usted quiere hablar español, ¡se va a Madrid o se va a Sur América!	Look, miss, I understand your point perfectly, I really do, but you should understand mine too. We are in Catalonia and here Catalan is an official language. If you'd like to speak Spanish, go to Madrid or South America!
Int. St. B	O ...	Oh ...
All:	<i>(noise)</i>	<i>(noise)</i>

*L'Auberge espagnole* (Klapisch 2002)

Bold type: Catalan; Roman type: Spanish; Italic type: inserted comments; Int. St. = international student

The extract above, from the film *L'Auberge espagnole* by the filmmaker Cédric Klapisch, captures a moment of linguistic tension in the context of a university classroom in Catalonia. The movie is about Xavier, an undergraduate economics student from Paris, who decides to embark on a year-abroad study programme as an Erasmus student, and goes to Barcelona. Beyond capturing the then growing youth phenomenon of the study-abroad experience, this scene in particular is of relevance to the topic that we want to address in this book, namely the sociolinguistics of higher education. Prior to the dialogue that we read in the extract between one of Xavier's friends (also an exchange student) and their professor, we see the same student together with Xavier and their group of friends talking (in French) before class and wondering if there is anyone who will ask the professor to switch to Spanish when delivering the subject.

As groups of foreign students began to populate university classrooms in Catalonia in larger numbers from the turn of the century onwards, this type of scene became more and more familiar to both university teachers and local students alike. It is something that preoccupied university stakeholders then, and that continues to be an issue of concern now, as we shall see in the pages of this book. While it is dramatized and therefore exaggerates the debate, the scene succinctly captures a moment in the sociolinguistic life of Catalan universities, encapsulating many of the issues that we wish to investigate in our volume. These issues are as follows:

1. In a context of increasing internationalisation, how do key stakeholders ‘on the ground’ at universities (teachers, students, and administrative staff) respond to their changing sociolinguistic environments and to the language policy documents of their universities?
2. What major themes emerge from officially formulated policy documents; that is, what stance do universities present in their regulating documents?
3. What is the fate of languages like Catalan, which has a relatively solid presence at universities in Catalonia, in a context of increased coexistence with other major languages such as English, but also Spanish?

In the modern world, higher education has become a key site for exploring compelling issues of a sociolinguistic or applied linguistic nature. One of the main reasons for investigating universities from a sociolinguistic angle is that, while they are key state (i.e. national) institutions, universities are also increasingly portrayed as internationally relevant players in a global educational market (Hultgren et al. 2014). As a result, many higher education institutions today are pervaded by a range of different discourses, which range between the nationalising and the globalising poles (Soler and Vihman 2018). This interplay of diverse, sometimes opposed, discourses frequently results in important sociolinguistic tensions, ambiguities, dilemmas, and expectations, and these can crystallise in the formulation of specific language policy documents authored by university councils or other relevant authorities (Källkvist and Hult 2016) that are intended to have an impact on the actual language practices of speakers within the context in which they operate.

This book explores in some detail how Catalan universities respond to the challenge of becoming more international and global in nature, while remaining very much locally grounded and nationally relevant—something that is, of course, not exclusive to universities in Catalonia (Vila and Bretxa 2015). What makes Catalan universities a particular case, compared to many other universities in non-anglophone countries, is that universities in Catalonia already present a bilingual setting, with both Catalan and Spanish as prominent working languages (that is, languages of teaching and learning, of research, and of administration), and with English gaining increasingly in importance (Pons 2015). This is a situation that Catalan universities share with other higher education institutions in officially bilingual territories, for example those in the Basque Country (Doiz et al. 2013) or some universities in Finland (Lindström and Sylvén 2014).

The general perspective that we offer in the first half of the book, which is based on a document analysis of university language policies, is combined in the second half with a more situated, qualitative, and ethnographic account of the specific situation at one public university in Catalonia, with data collected through participant observation of classroom practices and institutional events, focus-group discussion sessions, and in-depth interviews, while also taking into account the university's web page and other university materials. This more situated perspective allows us to present the different positions taken by a number of relevant stakeholders at the university (teachers, administration staff, and international students); in our analysis, we aim to show how the positions that these stakeholders take are discursively shaped, and how their positions are associated with particular vested interests. Before summarising the key points of our analysis and providing an outline of the volume, in this first chapter we situate the book with respect to current scholarly discussions around language issues in the context of higher education and trends in internationalisation, where language, and particularly matters of language policy, are seen as key sites of struggle, anxiety, and ambiguity.

#### THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION FROM A LANGUAGE POLICY PERSPECTIVE: METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

As mentioned above, universities today are under more and more pressure from seemingly opposed discursive poles, the 'nationalising' and the 'globalising' (Soler and Vihman 2018). In the last few years, it has