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Language, Culture and Identity in the Global Age

Joan Pujolar, Josep-Anton Fernández, Jaume Subirana

Language, Culture and Identity in the Global Age (identi.cat) research group (UOC)

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Abstract

Research into language, culture and identity in the global age requires an interdisciplinary approach in order to understand the phenomena of identification in the contemporary world. This article provides critical analysis of the discourses on language and identity in modernity, based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and explores the new theoretical frameworks that question the sociological and anthropological traditions that assume that the phenomena of identity is intrinsically linked to territory. In a globalised context characterised by mobility, we need new paradigms in social sciences that are not based on the static geographic nature of human formations. Among other aspects, attention needs to be paid to the timeframe for social phenomena. For this reason, we set out the need to develop understanding of this temporality in our disciplines in order to learn to *historicise* or place in time the social and cultural processes involved in today’s construction of identities.

Keywords

language, culture, literature, globalisation, Catalan

Llengua, cultura i identitat en l’era global

Resum

La recerca sobre llengua, cultura i identitat en l’era global ha d’assumir un caràcter interdisciplinari per a comprendre els fenòmens d’identificació en el món contemporani. En aquest escrit plantejarem una anàlisi crítica dels discursos sobre llengua i identitat de la modernitat, a partir dels plantejaments de Pierre Bourdieu, alhora que explorem els nous marcs teòrics que qüestionen les tradicions sociològiques i antropològiques que han pressuposat que els fenòmens identitaris estan intrínsecament lligats als territoris. En un context globalitzat caracteritzat per la mobilitat, calen nous paradigmes en les ciències socials que no es fonamentin en el caràcter geogràficament estàtic de les formacions humanes. Entre altres elements, cal fer atenció a la dimensió temporal dels fenòmens socials. És per això que plantejarem la necessitat de desenvolupar la comprensió d’aquesta temporalitat en les nostres disciplines a l’afecte d’aprendre a historicitzar o situar en el temps els processos socials i culturals implicats en la construcció de les identitats d’avui dia.

Paraules clau

llengua, cultura, literatura, globalització, català



Language, Culture and Identity in the Global Age (identi.cat) research group, UOC, is composed of Josep-Anton Fernández, Isidor Mari, Maite Puigdevall, Jaume Subirana, Miquel Strubell and Anna Titus and is headed by Joan Pujolar. Natàlia Cantó and Joan Fuster from the Arts and Humanities Department also work with the group. Identi.cat was recognised as an emerging research group in 2009. Since its inception, the group has focused on research into linguistic and cultural issues in contemporary Catalonia from an interdisciplinary perspective and, with the assistance of international partners, from a comparative perspective.

In this article we describe two ways in which we foster interdisciplinarity. First we genealogically review discourses regarding language and identity, emphasising the role played by linguistics in distracting the attention of the social sciences from the power relations that condition access to linguistic resources and cultural capital. Secondly, we propose the need to develop an understanding of the *time* dimension in our disciplines, so as to situate or *historicise* the social and cultural processes involved in the construction of identities in an historic context.

This focus of the group, in a contemporary world characterised by globalisation, determines to a large degree its thematic and theoretical directions. As observed by Castells (1997), the reshaping of identities is one of the great processes underway at present, especially affecting collectives such as the Catalans. Globalisation not only makes research into language, culture and identity more complex and interesting; it also forces us to review many of the basic theoretical assumptions on which linguistics, philology and other social sciences in the modern era are based.

Linguistics, modernity and the nation-state

We should be aware from the outset that our disciplines emerged simultaneously with modern nation-states and with a mission to serve them and provide them with ideologies and knowledge that enable people and the public interest to be managed. We are familiar with the etymology of *statistics*, the traditionally hegemonic procedures in sociology and the roles of anthropology in early colonialism and of psychology in discipline and punishment (Foucault, 1975). Historiography and literary studies have long assumed the criticism of their original role in the ideological founding of national identities. Linguistics, however, is probably the discipline which has most resisted any questioning of its object and genealogy. For this reason we pay particular attention to linguistics in this article. We will see that, in a global era, the association of language with the nation-state is an issue that needs to be questioned, as it is happening, *mutatis mutandis*, in other social science disciplines.

Probably the clearest, most direct and probably best known criticism of the basic principles of linguistics in regard to established

power relations is that of Pierre Bourdieu in his famous essay *Ce que parler veut dire*:

The linguistic model was transposed with such ease into the domain of anthropology and sociology because one accepted the core intention of linguistics, namely, the *intellectualist philosophy* which treats language as an object of contemplation rather than as an instrument of action and power. To accept the Saussurian model and its presuppositions is to treat the social world as a universe of symbolic exchanges and to reduce action to an act of communication which, like Saussure's *parole*, is destined to be deciphered by means of a cipher or code, language or culture.

In order to break with this social philosophy one must show that, although it is legitimate to treat social relations—even relations of domination—as symbolic interactions, that is, as relations of communication implying cognition and recognition, one must not forget that the relations of communication *par excellence*—linguistic exchanges—are also relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized. In short, one must move beyond the usual opposition between economism and culturalism, in order to develop an economy of symbolic exchanges. (Bourdieu *et al.* 1991, p. 37)

Having denounced the 'original sin' of language, Bourdieu goes on to theorise about the existence of a *linguistic market*, the operation of which would be directly implicated in the legitimisation of power relations between different social groups. As in the arts, academia, media or cultural products fields, those who wielded the most symbolic power (usually political) or economic power (usually also political) would be in a position to determine the most valuable forms of capital and the conditions in which this would be recognised. In this way, the ruling classes could exert a hegemony based not only on control of the state and of money, but also of the mechanisms that bestow symbolic capital or social legitimacy, including language.

Bourdieu questions those most enduring myths of modernity, language and culture—the backbone of the legitimising discourse of the nation-state. His questions, however, do not so much represent a destructive denial of these concepts as an exercise in subscribing to the logic of socioeconomic and power relations between different social groups. Language and culture (even in the former communist bloc) were presented as objects or structures untarnished by the dirty game of work and power struggles; Bourdieu, however, situates them as simultaneously controlling and controlled instruments that achieve their impact precisely because the mechanisms are concealed.

The linguistic and cultural hegemony maintained in the framework of the nation-state has points of dissonance that



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are familiar, for instance, to Catalans: the existence of mostly territorial-based groups which have been pushed to the sidelines or which have openly rejected the language and culture of the state as the basis for their identity. The so-called *linguistic minorities* themselves have not questioned the linguistic and cultural paradigm of modernity. Rather, they have struggled to construct their own symbolic legitimacy and present themselves, whenever possible, as even more modern than anyone else. For this reason, minorities have similar trajectories at similar moments of history. The most obvious examples are the literary revivals of Europe (and Canada) in the nineteenth century, which had the aim of consolidating and standardising languages and marking off separate fields of cultural production and consumption (Subirana, 2006) —in a word, as modern cultures.

Linguascapes of globalisation

It is this context that contemporary globalisation unfolds, changing the rules and moving the goalposts. States nowadays no longer guarantee the functioning of monolingual public spaces, now that capital flows, major political decisions and communications facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICT) adhere to a global or transnational logic. Moreover, economic growth itself is concentrated in services, cultural production and the management of information flows, which implies that the economy itself is increasingly linguistic. These two processes feed each other and are fostering a genuine paradigmatic change, in the aftermath of which nothing will be the same. Social actors are increasingly organising their life (work, communications) with individuals and in contexts that transcend the public sphere, which, until recently was predominantly local-national in nature. The internationalisation of economies is one of these processes, as companies organise production (and therefore workers), design marketing strategies (target customers) and seek out alliances that transcend state borders (and, therefore, their own culture and language). The emergence of an international political sphere is another issue that calls into question the principle that the state is the sole source of law and the only framework for political participation. And, in this international political sphere, linguistic and cultural unification projects lose their meaning. Migrations and other forms of mobility are also creating increasingly diverse communities at the local level. The ICTs intensify all these processes by providing the technological infrastructure necessary to create and manage transnational networks (whether of individuals, organisations or institutions) and even communication contexts (global); they also underpin the functioning of new types of economic production and exchange where language is essential. Finally, neoliberalism has emerged as a political paradigm —both product and producer— that redefines the relationship between, on the

one hand, public institutions and the economic sector and, on the other hand, public institutions and citizens.

Bolton *et al.* (2006) proposed the term *linguascape* to describe some of the language localisation and globalisation processes occurring in the contemporary world. They were referring to the global expansion of English and the different ways in which English is appropriated in different contexts. A portmanteau word coined by blending the words 'lingua' and 'landscape', it was, in fact, inspired by global cultural flows described by Appadurai (1996): 'ethnoscape', 'mediascape', 'technoscape', 'financescape' and 'ideoscape'. These concepts endeavour to reflect the notion that globalisation has a de-territorialisation effect on cultural practices. With increasing mobility and interconnectivity at the global level, languages and cultures can free themselves from the territorial ties of yore.

Against this background, proposals have begun to appear in the human and social sciences to reformulate the theoretical bases for a number of disciplines. Sheller *et al.* (2006) propose the 'new mobilities paradigm', which posits that traditional sociology needs to question the assumption that social processes occur in societies characterised by geographical location and continuity. This same paradigm embraces studies on immigration and transnationalism (Vertovec, 2001) and also proposals for an anthropology of globalisation, in which the traditional anthropological 'terrain' is transformed into an ethnographic terrain with many interconnected spaces (Friedman, 2002; Marcus, 1995).

The implications of all these transformations for language and identity discourses and practices are also very important. Until a few decades ago, we could study Catalan language dynamics and the grievances of Catalan culture as a clearly internal matter, affected at most by the public policies of Spain. Nowadays, however, this is impossible without taking into account complex links with other globalisation processes. The early 1980s saw a struggle for public media in the Catalan language as an alternative to Spanish-language public media. Nowadays, Corporació Catalana de Radio i Televisió (CCRTV) media compete mainly with private Spanish channels and with the globalised audiovisual world (Castells *et al.*, 2007). Before, people used telephone, electricity, water, gas and public transport services controlled by public companies. Now these services are controlled by multinationals that evade regional language policy legislation. Before, debates on language and immigration in Catalonia focused on the newly arrived immigrants from other parts of Spain (Pujolar, 1995). Now immigrants come from all corners of the globe, with very different languages, religions and education levels. Before, Catalan companies moved comfortably in the Spanish market. Now everyone wants to learn English to sell abroad, forge alliances and work for transnational companies or abroad. Before, few academics went abroad for stays. Nowadays, academic evaluation agencies ask academics to 'list' their 'international' research stays. Today we are as dependent on the policies of Brussels as of Madrid. In the last twenty years,



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Spain, our state, through its participation in international military coalitions, has been involved in five wars.

If we add in the aforementioned effects of the consolidation of the services and knowledge sector as a major industry, we can understand why there is a sensation of 'panic' regarding identity and culture, whether it is the future of books, the quality standards of language, the future of high culture or the very 'survival' of linguistic and cultural diversity in a global era. This concern regarding the future connects with another dimension of interest to *identi.cat*: time.

Space and time

For the first five years of its existence, *identi.cat* has chosen to study the time dimension of culture, departing from the affirmation that, because the human and social sciences have been predominantly synchronic, they have emphasised the space dimension. It is very likely that, as Harvey argues (1989), concerns regarding space are a consequence of changes in the use, management and significance of land, which led to the development of capitalism. The imbalance in the treatment of time and space has also prevented studies of the historicity of the phenomena described, while probably going some way to explaining the isolation of these disciplines from history, with which they logically should be closely linked.

According to Harvey (1989), among other authors, capitalism itself arises from ongoing improvements to transport technologies (first maritime and then land), as industrial production found new ways of managing time that were directly applicable to work processes and that, in turn, had an impact on all other areas of life. Fordism and the popularisation of the car in the 20th century brought about yet another contraction in space-time, which further accelerated towards the century's end when consumerism stimulated the investment-production-marketing-profits cycle and the ICTs eroded time and distance.

Going beyond the long sociolinguistic tradition of analysis of the relationship between language and identity and the historical tradition that delineated myths and tales of national construction, more recent studies of culture and identity have tended to focus on issues of space and place, the city, the landscape, the role of memory, etc (eg, Castellanos, 1997; Epps, 2004; Johnson, 2006; Resina, 2008). Nevertheless, time has hardly been treated as an object of systematic research in itself, despite being an important focus of debate between the agents and actors in Catalan culture, in regard to symbolic struggles regarding the past (Giner, 1996), the different rhythms of construction of a cultural tradition in each Catalan-speaking territory and, most especially, in regard to the future of Catalan language and identity (Fernández, 2008; Pujolar, 2007).

In the contemporary philosophy and social science fields there is an important body of thinking about time, which, *inter alia*, includes: reflection on the role of tradition in political communities (Arendt,

1993); the relationship between time and the concept of progress (Benjamin, 1992); the questioning of the notion of continuity in historical accounts (Foucault, 1971); the notion of the future as an alternative to identity (Deleuze *et al.*, 1980); the effects of traces of the past in the present (Derrida, 1994; Gordon, 1997); and the importance of change in the concept of time in the modern idea of nation (Anderson, 1991). The general argument that emerges is that modernity brings into play a vision of time based on the concepts of progress and evolution, with change understood to be a series of ruptures. Nonetheless, in a context of advanced modernity like ours, transformations resulting from the commercialisation of culture, globalisation and digital technologies affect the construction of identity (Abbinnet, 2003; Frow, 1997) and complicate the very idea of the future (Bono, *et al.*, 2008). On the other hand, as population flows intensify, certain cultural forms (eg, those of some immigrant communities) begin to appear anachronistic; postcolonial studies read this as the coexistence of asynchronous time and as the departure point for the vindication of subaltern pasts (Chakrabarty, 2008).

Time is, therefore, one of the links between culture and identity and also between the social and the psychic or subjective. From a sociological point of view, identity is the outcome of a relational process based, among other things, on the control of time; as Bourdieu argues, the *habitus* of individuals is a product of a history that keeps past experiences present to ensure the predictable social practices (Bourdieu, 1980, Bourdieu *et al.*, 2001). From an historic point of view, the nation-state is determined by the construction of collective identities, the elaboration of pasts in the form of invented traditions (Hobsbawm *et al.*, 1983) and memory sites (Nora, 1997)—so that individuals can relate to these identities—and the formulation of projects for the future. Past and future, nevertheless, are also the object of symbolic struggles. There is a highly productive tension between the sociological and historical perspectives which is centred, as in psychoanalysis, on the inevitable conflict resulting from the simultaneously psychological and cultural nature of subjectivity. Indeed, unconscious mental processes are timeless, but the ego organises itself in time in a dual movement of anticipation and retrospection that puts a brake on the anxieties of the present, thereby ensuring constant tension between the unconscious and the ego (Freud, 2005; Lacan, 1966; Laplanche, 1997, 2006). Time is, therefore, a source of simultaneous cultural and psychic conflict. A significant point of contact between the two views is provided in Althusser's analysis of interpellation as producing the subject, suggesting that ideology—like the unconscious—is timeless (Althusser, 1971).

Conclusion: immediate objectives

On the basis of the above reflections and perspectives, *identi.cat* is developing a number of projects associated with objects of study that can be analysed from various perspectives.



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The new speakers. In this project, we investigate new paradigms for constructing the relationship between language and identity among *new speakers*, that is, non-native speakers of a language in different contexts: Catalonia, Galicia, Ireland, Madrid and Quebec. Our hypothesis is that new speakers develop new discourses on language, belongingness and anchorage in both the territory and the past that frame new perspectives on multilingualism, linguistic hybridisation, multiple belongingness and the commercialisation of cultural capital.

Identity tourism. In the context of studies of linguistic minorities, numerous projects for developing tourist products have been identified since the 1990s, which have given rise to reflections on the commercialisation of languages and the construction of authenticity as a reaction to the commercialisation of culture.

Functions of the past in contemporary Catalan culture. The aim is to study use of the past in the discourses and representations of the two major paradigms in contemporary Catalan culture in the second half of the 20th century: 'resistance' and normalisation. The project, which focuses on cultural production and activities in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s and on specific forms of cultural production in subsequent decades, analyses the meaning acquired by the past (eg, Modernisme, Noucentisme, the Republican period and the Civil War) in discourses and representations of resistance and how this meaning is significantly transformed, or is centred in other historic periods, as it configures the constellation of cultural and political discourses contained in the normalisation paradigm.

Identity and multilingualism are two main themes in international academic and social debate. Economic globalisation, the emergence of the knowledge society, the new ICTs, the intensification of flows of people worldwide and the cultural and social consequences of all these developments pose questions and challenges for European societies, not only in terms of concrete policies to manage the impact of these processes, but also regarding the ways these societies represent themselves in space and time. We are in transition, from a 'modernity' paradigm characterised by nation-states that define and defend homogenous linguistic and cultural spaces, to a new paradigm where homogeneity is no longer sustainable and cannot be simulated and where identities must be projected in global settings. From the confluence of different disciplinary fields, *identi.cat* aspires to describe and deepen understanding of this emerging new paradigm.

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Joan Pujolar, Josep-Anton Fernández, Jaume Subirana

Language, Culture and Identity in the Global Age (identi.cat) research group, UOC
<http://www.mapadelconeixement.com/fitxa.php?id=19>

Main researcher

Joan Pujolar Cos
 jpujolar@uoc.edu
 Arts and Humanities Department
 Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
 Av. Tibidabo, 39-43
 08035 Barcelona

