



UNESCO CENTRE OF CATALONIA
UNESCOCAT

LINGUAPAX AWARD 2010

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Text written by Miquel Siguan for the Linguapax Prize ceremony.

You can imagine how emotional this is for me, not just because of the honour this Prize represents, but also due to the personal meaning it has. Twenty-five years ago, in an international meeting about teaching foreign languages organised by UNESCO at the University of Kiev, during the last session I proposed the LINGUAPAX programme. After being approved by the participants, the programme was adopted by UNESCO itself. It was initiated and worked for some years. Over time it lost its strength for many reasons, but mainly because linguistic issues have always been uncomfortable at UNESCO. It would not be spoken of today were it not for Fèlix Martí, who was head of the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia at that time. He decided to give his support to the programme and those who have followed him in the position have maintained the decision.

I will try to say some words about how I imagine this future, but first let me make some comments, not only about the original project, but also about how I have seen the role of languages in the education system evolve throughout my life and, more generally, throughout European history.

In Europe, teaching began during the Middle Ages and was bilingual. Europe's inhabitants spoke many different languages, some of which were Romance languages, others were from different branches of Indo-European languages, but everybody who received formal teaching, received it in Latin. This situation changed from the Renaissance onwards, and as nation states were formed and the use of teaching became generalised, schools used the national language, or, to be more precise, the State language exclusively.

Obviously the aim was to ensure national unity, but it was not only for this reason. It was also believed that introducing a second language early damaged children's personal development. Only in the context of secondary education, when pupils are adolescents, did it make sense to introduce a second language, and it was made clear that this was to be a foreign language. I will use an example that I find especially significant. In the late nineteenth century, Professor Altamira was an important figure at the Institución Libre de la Enseñanza (Free Institute of Learning), which was trying to renew Spanish public life in a liberal sense and aimed at modernising Spain by renewing education. One of the Institute's most important innovations was the opportunity for young intellectuals to study abroad, and Altamira had an important role in this practice. In contrast, Altamira himself protests in one of his books about some Spanish families' initiative to send their teenagers to France for a year to study French. He considered it an educational mistake that would produce an ambiguous and confused personality. His thinking was a replay of what French education experts used to say at that time. In a more bizarre way, a German warned others going to live abroad that they should send their children to German

schools, because, he said, “the mixture of languages is as dangerous as the mixture of blood”.

The Catalans also believed that teaching had to be in Catalan in Catalonia. In 1923, General Primo de Ribera quashed incipient Catalan autonomy. Shortly afterwards, Pere Rosselló, secretary of the International Education Bureau in Geneva organised a meeting in Luxembourg with people from Catalonia, Wales, Flanders and Luxembourg to talk about language in education. A good part of the discussion was dedicated to talking about the work of the professor who believed it could be demonstrated that Welsh speaking children learnt Welsh texts better than English texts. Francesc Galí, head of the Catalan delegation, demonstrated that Catalan children learnt Catalan texts better and explained the horror of having to teach children who spoke Catalan to their parents to pray to God in Spanish. I will not continue, but anyone interested in the subject can refer to...

Although those who defend minority languages protected the speakers' right to use their own language, for example, Catalan, Flemish, Welsh, in an area where there was another official language such as Spanish, English, linguistic revindication was not limited to these cases, but spread increasingly to more languages, and also, and above all, it did not only refer to the first language learned. Plurilingualism started earlier and the World War from 1945-49 was an important catalyst in this respect.

After the Second World War, there was a complete change in the attitude towards languages in the most developed countries, from considering that knowing more languages than your own was a privilege reserved for some and which could only be enjoyed from a certain age, to believing that more than one language was open to everyone and should be taken advantage of as soon as possible.

This is as far as my father got in the text he had written. He had written enough for us to be able to sense how his speech would develop and his vision of the future of language. Among other things, he would probably insist on the importance of the presence of languages on the Internet. In this respect, one of the last texts in which he discussed this topic was the course he wrote this winter for the Colegio Libre de Eméritos on “The future of language and the future of languages” which can be found on the School’s website. His reflection on the present always focussed on actions for the future, and his proposed actions were always based on the analysis and understanding of present society. In this way, he left us with work to do and proposed actions. He was delighted to receive this Prize because it represents recognition for the work he began with enthusiasm and which is being carried on. Thank you very much.