

Overcoming assimilation: plurilingual practices, linguistic capital and social rights of students with a migrant background in Catalonia ¹

Migration has transformed the linguistic practices and the landscape of many cities all over the world in recent decades, but it has not been exceptional in our history (Pavlenko, 2018; Piller, 2016). However, in the current international arena where the growth of "anti-migration" parties is pushing political debates away from social justice for all and focusing on old and renewed notions of otherness, migrants' communicative practices are often interpreted as threats to national identities and linguistic diversity is seen as an anomaly.

To present linguistic diversity as an anomaly is to build an ideal type of speaker that, like other social constructions based on variables such as gender or race, can lead to discrimination. Nevertheless, linguistic discrimination is especially invisible because language as a concept has become reified and increasingly seen as objective, as if it were something independent and abstract (Bourdieu, 1985). In addition, languages are associated with nation-states in a way that the correspondence of 'one territory, one language' appears to be natural, which means that it can be demanded as a *sine qua non* condition for belonging in any particular place. But this understanding of such correspondence as a natural phenomenon has not been always so, and it is only after the birth of the modern state that it became a commonplace (Martín Rojo and Mijares, 2007; Woolard, 2008). It is directly related to the nation-building processes in which some social behaviours are legitimized over others, in this case linguistic behaviours. Since the turn of the century, mobility and migration resulting from globalization are challenging even more this correspondence between one territory and one language.

Even so, the benefits of linguistic diversity have received great attention both in academic research and supranational institutions, acknowledging not only multilingual combinations of prestigious European languages but also those including both regional languages and the languages that immigrants bring into the receiving societies. But in the education system this celebration at the theoretical level coexists with a treatment in practice based on concern; concern due firstly to this monolingual approach of nation-states pervasive in schools and, secondly, to the wrong assumption that multilingualism, when it combines non-European languages, constitutes an obstacle to the ordinary functioning of the curriculum and to the progression of learning (Hélot, 2012, Martín Rojo and Mijares, 2007). Thus, although linguistic changes are presented in society sometimes as an opportunity for mutual enrichment, they are often also presented and treated in practice in social spaces such as the school, as problematic and in a simplistic way, as if new citizens move from just one language of origin to one language of reception. Global worlds of today -from regions to cities- require a review of the processes of language acquisition by immigrants from different perspectives, moving away from one purely focused on the unidirectional process of acquiring the language regarded as 'the only one' of the receiving society. In fact, part of the migration capital includes multilingualism (Narciso and Carrasco, 2017; Erel and Ryan, 2019). Reality is always much more complex and interesting than that represented by the media and public opinion.

During 2014 to 2018 I conducted research focused on the linguistic learning and capital of Catalan students of immigrant origin at a secondary school in Barcelona where almost all the student body had an immigrant background. This school ethnography gave me the opportunity to analyse some of the issues that arise from the current communicative practices in the globalised cities and around the assumptions behind the concept of linguistic assimilation. Through an ethnographic anthropological and sociolinguistic research, I analysed

¹ This article gathers some of the most relevant ideas of the doctoral thesis of the author, *Communicative repertoires of students of immigrant background in Catalonia. Beyond the boundaries of the school*, which was presented at UAB in October 2018.

the students' communicative practices developed in the school and in their other social worlds, such as leisure spaces, places of worship and their own homes.

One of the most notable findings that emerges from this ethnographic experience questions precisely those assumptions linked to nation-building processes. When listening to what the new citizens had to say about their communicative practices, the assumption that the normality is that speakers of one territory speak one language and consequently new speakers experience or have to experience a unidirectional process from their language of origin to the language of reception loses its grounding. Catalan students of immigrant origin are usually described by the media and public opinion above all, but often also by academia, as speakers in a process of more or less successful linguistic assimilation, between a language of origin and one or two languages of reception (more Castilian than Catalan). However, when examining their practices, it is evident that they include linguistic features of many more languages.

It also has to be acknowledged that the concerns of educational practitioners about certain kinds of multilingualism is supported by objective data—the low school performance of students of non-EU immigrant origin is a general concern in the whole of Europe and it is especially worrying in Spain (Eurostat, 2017; Carrasco, Pàmies & Narciso, 2018). However, to connect this indicator of higher risk of academic and social exclusion with the fact that the family or community languages of these students do not coincide with the language of instruction in the school is to validate folk theories that circulate in public opinion and to ignore what research on multilingualism has revealed. The incorporation of students with a specific linguistic background is not an explanatory factor *per se* for their low performance; when schooling is done by providing the necessary tools, multilingualism is not a barrier, but positive at a cognitive level (Bialystok, 2016).

In the Catalan context, the shift towards the revaluation of multilingualism by supranational institutions pointed out above is gradually penetrating some schools and linguistic policies. An example of this change of paradigm is the latest proposal for the linguistic model of the education system of Catalonia (Departament d'Educació, 2018) which adopts a clearly plurilingual approach². There are still insufficient indications of how to give community languages a more prominent role, but the document contains a deep reflection on their importance in the learning processes of their speakers.

Nevertheless, in a context problematized by a historically minoritized language and an international majority language and the fact that around 60% of the population in Catalonia does not have Catalan as their first language, the authorities' concern on the health of the minority language can lead to focusing once again on the language over the speakers. Although this is an understandable position when one of the languages is endangered, it can silence speakers of immigrant background institutionally -Catalan is the only language of tuition in compulsory schooling in Catalonia- as much as they are silenced in territories where the language of reception is a socially hegemonic one (Reyes & Carrasco, 2018). Focusing on the endangered language can make the school function as a monolingual school even when the concern is for the speakers of immigrant background having access to the Catalan language and the instrumental asset it may become for them due to its protected and prestigious status. When the learning experiences of students of immigrant background are observed closely, other problems emerge: for example, access to academic registers and not so much to one or other language in abstract; or the lack of linguistic support beyond the months spent in the reception classroom. Approaching the communicative practices of these students by emphasizing above all the relationship they establish with a single language causes a dichotomous interpretation of their

² Plurilingualism has been defined by the Council of Europe as “*the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures. This is not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw.*” (Council of Europe, 2001:168).

practices, analysed, again, as communicative practices between a language of origin and a language of reception. It also leads to ignoring many of their multiple learning processes and capacities.

The example of Clarissa (the pseudonym she chose), one of the case-study students in my research, may help understand how far this dichotomic way of analysing the communicative practices of students of immigrant background is from their real learning processes and capacities. Let's observe more closely her linguistic repertoire.

Clarissa is a young girl who arrived in Barcelona from Pakistan when she was 9 years old. She speaks Urdu, Spanish, Punjabi and Catalan in the school. Above all she speaks Spanish with close friends, but she also uses Catalan with some students and teachers. She can understand some Bangla and she has learnt Punjabi through her classmates (above all boys) and she also says that she has learnt more Urdu through her friends (girl friends), because she used to speak more Potwari in Pakistan. But she also uses English to communicate with relatives who live in the UK, and likes to use English with tourists, although, as many of her friends also express, she has lost English competence since she arrived in Barcelona. She also combines different languages in other spaces, as for example at home, where she explains how, beyond Potwari, she also uses Catalan and Spanish with her siblings or to help her parents with bureaucratic processes, or how she teaches her mother Spanish and Urdu. She has also learnt Hindi through television. We can observe how her linguistic practices are complex and situated, different languages used in different contexts and adopting different values, like Spanish and Catalan used back in Pakistan to share secrets with her sibling. It is especially relevant how she plans in the future even more linguistic practices, like learning Russian, which she loves through using Instagram, and Catalan, which, although she recognizes she is not using a lot at the moment, she thinks she will when she moves to a social context with a real social demand for the language, like at university and work. Ensuring that students like Clarissa can access such spaces would be the greatest protective policy measure that the minority language of the place of reception could implement; as well as being a fair contribution by the reception society to avoiding the linguistic discrimination that citizens of migrant background so often experience (Piller, 2016).

Clarissa is just one example, with her own particularities, but not exceptional at all. All the participants in my research reported using linguistic features from more than 5 languages at some level. Their linguistic practices reveal a complexity in accord with the global world where they live and move, and which is beyond the school boundaries, beyond physical and mental boundaries. However, in most of the schools of receiving countries, languages are still taught within a specific space and time frame, as a closed linguistic body of knowledge with clear boundaries, such as those that state or regional authorities impose and justify. This approach makes it difficult to build upon the plurilingual potential of students of immigrant origin. It also ignores or hides other factors that affect the school trajectories of these students and limit their social integration -that is, the access to their rights and resources in society (Carrasco and Poblet, 2019).

References

- Bialystok, B., (2016) Bilingual education for young children: review of the effects and consequences, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, DOI: .1080/13670050.2016.1203859
- Bourdieu, P. (1985). *¿Qué significa hablar? Economía de los intercambios lingüísticos*. Madrid: Akal.
- Carrasco, S.; Poblet, G. (2019). *Overview of the social integration of Roma in Spain and some transferable lessons for the EU*. NESET Ad hoc report no. 4/2019 for the EU-EAC.
- Carrasco, S.; Pàmies, J.; Narciso, L. (2018). Abandono Escolar Prematuro y alumnado de origen extranjero: ¿un problema invisible? en: Arango, J., Mahía, R., Moya, D. y Sánchez Montijano, E. (dir.) *Anuario CIDOB de la inmigración 2018*. Barcelona: CIDOB (en prensa).

Council of Europe. (2001). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment.

Departament d'Ensenyament (2018) *El Model lingüístic del sistema educatiu de Catalunya : l'aprenentatge i l'ús de les llengües en un context educatiu multilingüe i multicultural*.
<http://ensenyament.gencat.cat/ca/departament/publicacions/monografies/model-linguistic/de-les-llengües-en-un-context-educatiu-multilingüe-i-multicultural>.

Erel, U.; Ryan, L. (2019). Migrant Capitals: Proposing a Multi-Level Spatio-Temporal Analytical Framework, *Sociology*, 53(2) 246 –263.

Eurostat (2017). Early leavers from education and training by sex and country of birth [en línia: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_02&lang=en]

Hélot, C. (2012). Linguistic diversity and education. In M. Martin-Jones, A. Blackledge & A. Creese (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Multilingualism* (214-231). Nueva York / Londres: Taylor and Francis.

Martín-Rojo, L. & Mijares, L. (2007). «Sólo en español»: una reflexión sobre la norma monolingüe y la realidad multilingüe en los centros escolares. *Revista de Educación*, 343, 93-112.

Narciso, L.; Carrasco, S. (2017). Mariama on the move. Capital migratorio y segundas generaciones en la emigración juvenil española. *Migraciones*, 43, 147-174.

Pavlenko, A. (2018). Superdiversity and why it isn't. In S. Breidbach, L. Kuster & S. Schmenk (Eds.), *Sloganzations in Language Education Discourse*. Multilingual Matters, Bristol, forthcoming.

Piller, I. (2016). *Linguistic diversity and social justice: An introduction to applied sociolinguistics*. Oxford University Press.

Reyes, Ch.; Carrasco, S. (2018). Unintended effects of the language policy on the transitions of immigrant youth to upper secondary education in Catalonia, *European Journal of Education* 5 (4). December 2018 online first. doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12304

Woolard, K. A. (2008). Les ideologies lingüístiques: una visió general d'un camp des de l'antropologia lingüística. *Revista de llengua i dret*, 49, 179-199.