

ALPHA



White Paper


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## Catalan - Not really a minority language

"A language is a dialect with an army and a navy." This somewhat shocking statement, attributed to Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich, powerfully illustrates the status of most of the languages that are not the main official language of any nation state. Often expelled from state institutions, education, culture, and considered provincial and frowned upon by certain elites, their use becomes more and more restricted to the private sphere, the number of speakers slowly wanes and, finally, they become a rarity, if not completely extinct. We can frequently see in the media documentaries or newspaper articles about the loss of countless animal and plant species and the environmental catastrophe they entail, but we rarely hear anyone's lament for this hidden mass extinction. One study estimates that 90% of current existing languages will disappear by 2050.

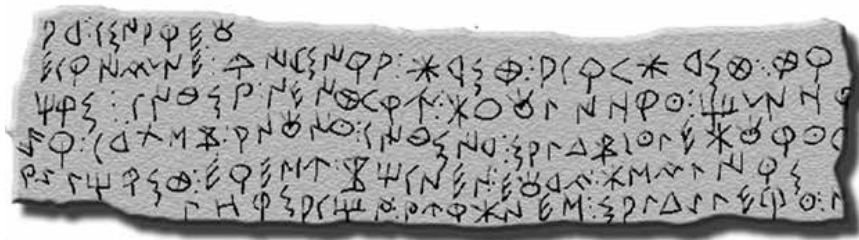
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Relatively few people are concerned for those extinct languages; for some, a foreign language is just a set of difficult grammar rules and long lists of strange words - slow and painful to learn. Some would even cherish a new world order where language diversity would finally disappear altogether, where no time and money would be “wasted” on foreign language learning or translations. There doesn't seem to be much awareness of what is lost with the death of a language. Everything that was created in it disappears, too: songs, jokes, literature, philosophical or medical treatises, legends, historical documents, popular wisdom. Imagine how much was lost when the last Etruscan, Iberian, Olmec or Numidian speaker died and their languages became a bunch of largely undecipherable engravings on stone. What would those symbols unveil about ancient civilisations if we could just understand them properly? How many people can now read the poems of the Occitan troubadours, the first who ever dared to write in a Romance language and the pioneers of modern European literature, unless in translation?



*Iberian Script. Source: Wikipedia*

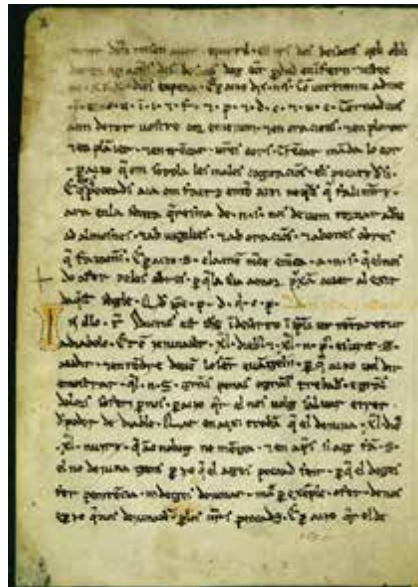
Some minority languages, though, refuse to die. This is the case for Galician, Basque, and Catalan in the Spanish state. Why is it that, in contrast with other minority languages in the Iberian Peninsula, these languages are still alive and regularly used by a large number of people after centuries of attempted elimination? The main factor for their survival seems to be a strong sense of cultural and political identity, a powerful literary tradition, and a very active social tissue that fosters creative initiatives to promote the use of the language. Catalan, for example, still has several million active speakers, a very high percentage of the population in most Catalan-speaking lands.

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## A little bit of history

The origins of Catalan as a spoken language, like that of other Romance languages, are lost in time. It evolved gradually from Vulgar Latin, under the influence of previously existing languages like Iberian and other languages such as Gothic, Arabic and the different Romance varieties spoken in the surrounding regions. The first complete texts ever found, though, date back to the 11th or 12th century and were mostly church sermons.

Although the first Catalan poets chose Occitan, a strikingly similar language, as a vehicle for their creations, literature and all sorts of writing in Catalan flourished some time between the 13th and 15th century, when the Catalan speaking lands federated under the Crown of Aragon had become the centre of a powerful Mediterranean empire (...yes, at the time, it was a language with an army and a navy). Catalan thus became the language of a considerable territory including Catalonia, Valencia, the Balearic Islands, and parts of Aragon and Sardinia.



*Homilies d'Organyà, one of the oldest documents written in Catalan*



*"The Book of Deeds" an autobiography in Catalan by King James the Conqueror*

The 15th century marked the beginning of the decline, as king Ferdinand married Isabella of Castile and started the unification process of the Hispanic kingdoms. Although the dynastic union treaty defined Hispanic kingdoms as equal, maintaining the independence of their institutions and laws, in practice, the Spanish kings chose Castile as their centre of operations, and their Prime Ministers often started policies tending to suppress the legal independence of the Aragonese and Catalan lands. Many Catalan nobles intermarried with Castilians and adopted Castilian Spanish as their main language, and the upper classes became bilingual. The royal court - at the time the main cultural and literary sponsor - was established in Castile so, for the next two centuries, literary production in Catalan dropped dramatically. However, the activity of the Catalan parliament continued and the language was still used in many areas. At the same time, Castile started its expansion, creating an empire that would effectively impose the Castilian language (nowadays called Spanish) in most of South and Central America, as well as some areas in Africa and Asia.

More difficulties were to come in the way of the Catalans. In the 18th century, the Spanish king Charles II died without offspring, and a civil war started in Spain between supporters of Philip of Bourbon and Charles of Habsburg. Together with England and Austria, the Catalan speaking lands sided with the Habsburg, as the Bourbons had already made it clear, in France, that they were not exactly supporters of territorial diversity; Louis XIV had actually forbidden the use of the language in North Catalonia, the part of the country that Spain had relinquished to France after the Treaty of the Pyrenees, and had also suppressed all Catalan political institutions and laws. The Habsburg side won some important victories, but owing to geostrategic reasons, Britain and Austria retired from the war and signed treaties with the Bourbons. Thus, the Catalans were left alone, and after a series of dramatic battles, they surrendered on 11th September 1714. A new centralised, absolute monarchy was imposed by the "Nueva Planta" decree, suppressing the centuries-old Catalan, Majorcan and Valencian Parliaments, institutions and laws, and the public use of Catalan. Universities were closed down, while a new one was opened in Cervera, safely far from Barcelona. Heavy taxes were created without the parliamentary control that had been customary in Catalan speaking lands. Many people had to go into exile or were imprisoned, executed or sent to the galleys. Almost one third of Barcelona (its most densely populated area), was demolished to build a fortress, known as the Ciutadella, with the scope of suppressing any future uprisings.

Thus, Catalan completely disappeared from the public and cultural sphere; however, people still used the language in their day-to-day lives: in the family, with friends, in the streets. At work, office clerks spoke in Catalan while they wrote contracts, invoices or accounting books in Spanish. There is even some surviving literature, sometimes published abroad.

Things would take a turn towards the third decade of the 19th century. At this time, Catalonia and the Basque country took the business lead in Spain with their industrial revolution - new factories started exporting their products to the rest of Spain and abroad; in the absence of state investment, private initiative created railways, electric power stations, and also theatres, opera houses and literary festivals where works in Catalan gained momentum thanks to the new publishing houses appearing with the economic prosperity. The process continued with an increasing political desire for home rule, claimed by both the left and right of the political spectrum.

A small concession arrived in 1914 with the Mancomunitat de Catalunya - an institution that, despite its insignificant political power, started projects like the translation of classical literary works into Catalan, a network of libraries, and the creation of technical and industrial schools. An Institute of Catalan Studies was born, presided by linguist Pompeu Fabra, who compiled Catalan grammar and spelling rules and an official dictionary. This institution existed up until the military coup of Primo de Rivera in Spain put an end to its efforts. The short-lived Spanish Republic (1931-1939) also gave restricted home rule to the Catalans and the use of Catalan was promoted, but again - this was suppressed by General Franco's dictatorship, after he won the civil war with the help of Hitler and Mussolini.



Pompeu Fabra, the linguist behind the standardization of modern Catalan language

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## Situation in recent decades

After Franco's death, Spain was initially reluctant to grant home rule devolution, but this changed after a huge demonstration that filled the streets of Barcelona in 1977. Soon afterwards, other Catalan speaking territories like Valencia and the Balearic islands were also granted home rule. Thanks to this, the situation has certainly improved for Catalan, although to different degrees depending on the territory. In Catalonia, after centuries of marginalisation, Catalan became the main language of the autonomous government and of town councils, and a good working knowledge of the language is a prerequisite for local government employees.

It holds a status of co-official and is the main vehicle of learning in primary and secondary schools. According to recent statistics 100% of regular residents in Catalonia can understand the language and about 80% can speak it. At least half the sales of books published in Catalonia are in Catalan. Moreover, Catalan writers like Quim Monzó or Jaume Cabré are translated into dozens of languages.



*Demonstration for autonomy in 1977*

However, the battle for the full use of the language is far from being won. Certainly, Catalan has an important presence in the media. Yet, the majority of TV channels, radio and newspapers are still in Spanish. It is almost impossible for Catalan speakers to use their language regularly in all situations. For example, lawyers sometimes advise to use Spanish in court hearings, as most judges are monolingual in Spanish and they fear that the use of Catalan might introduce bias against their clients. It is often the case that a whole group of Catalan speakers have to switch to Spanish because there is one person present that does not understand Catalan. The native language seems to have lost the battle as the default language in business communications, supermarkets, and other contexts. It is almost impossible to watch films in Catalan in a regular cinema (although they are normally translated for the Catalan TV channels, and some internet platforms like Filmin offer dubbed or translated films and series).

It is true that some big corporations like Google, Microsoft or Facebook offer products in Catalan, but many others have not yet understood the importance of winning the Catalan speaking market. But Catalonia has a very organised community of speakers and there are many initiatives in favour of the language. For example, besides learning programs sponsored by the Catalan government or cultural societies, there is a program of "linguistic partnership", where newcomers can benefit from free conversation sessions with natives. There are societies that organise all sorts of different activities to promote its use, such as the [Plataforma per la Llengua](#), sometimes stimulating the population to prefer localised products or lobbying for the language. In some cases, some big brands have even been boycotted for refusing to use the Catalan language or for discontinuing it. Some organisations like [softcatala.org](#) have done an outstanding job in the promotion of software in Catalan.

Whereas many proprietary software programs and videogames are not yet localised into Catalan, most open source products are translated by the community, and some companies use crowdsourcing to translate their products. However, without proper quality assessment by experienced linguists, and without professional localisation support, those translations are sometimes partial and low quality; linguistic inaccuracies, lack of consistent terminology, untranslated or cut strings, or even broken functionality are often the unwelcome side of those products. There are, though, some success cases, achieved by a combination of community efforts with professional supervision and coordination by localisation experts.

Behind every small victory in the use of a minority language, there is a long-fought battle by speakers. It should never be the case that a language is effectively treated as a dialect for not having an army and a navy, but it often happens that a product gets translated into a language of 2 million speakers because it is spoken in an independent state, while other languages with many more speakers are neglected because it is taken for granted that speakers can understand the dominant language of a state. In the absence of armed forces, though, there is a large army of consumers that are growing increasingly aware of their power. As much as they can change the world by demanding social and environmental responsibility to companies, they are changing the situation of minoritized languages by taking into account their linguistic preference in choosing a product. Therefore, being the first to offer a product in those languages can make a difference in the future of a brand. It is a fact that a translated product is more easily adopted by a community of users, and users belonging to a linguistic minority are not an exception; on the contrary, they are even more aware of the importance of having products in their language and they will lobby for it.

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