

Mama `poma`, dad `apple`: Raising a Child with Catalan in Australia

Victòria Gras

To the family of my own: Ewan, Amàlia and whoever is yet to come

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The decision to speak Catalan to my daughter came naturally to me. How else would I tell a story, sing a lullaby or make her laugh but in the language I was told stories, sung lullabies to and made to laugh since I was a new-born! However, whereas the choice to speak one's mother tongue to your children is not questioned anymore in Spain, making this same choice when you live elsewhere seems to raise a lot of eyebrows. In this article I will reflect, from my own experience, on speaking a language of Spain other than Spanish in Australia. Catalan is one of 300 community languages in Australia, and it's spoken by a small and ageing population. Keywords: Catalan, bilingualism, Australian community languages, first language, minority language, language policy.

Language decides the fate of many people around the world. It certainly decided mine. There was no way my Australian monolingual 35 year-old boyfriend would move to Catalonia, where not only Spanish is spoken, but also Catalan. The option of continuing a two year long-distance relationship from side to side of the world did not seem appealing either so I, like many other courageous women, said "yes" to becoming a migrant in Australia. I left a full-time permanent job in Barcelona, an apartment near the Mediterranean and all my relatives and friends, to build a family of my own with an Aussie.

To be honest, I didn't fall in love with the country, in fact, I still think it's too far, too big and too ahistorical, but after nearly four years, I've learnt to "call Australia home". There are a few things I loved about it, which helped make up my mind about moving, though. One was the different shapes, sizes and colours of the people who live here, and consequently, the number of languages you are likely to hear on a simple trip to the city by train. There is something fascinating about stepping into a local food market and being addressed in

Greek because of one's appearance, or being the only non-Chinese person at a neighbouring restaurant. Around half the population currently living in the state of Victoria were born overseas, meaning there is a huge amount of first-generation Australians, and a lot of people who have gone through something similar to what I'm going through now. Needless to say, it would be unfair and naïve to compare my motives to those of someone who has been forced to flee their country due to political or economic reasons. In the end, I'm a privileged lady who became Australian for love. So, with the prospect of becoming a parent, at least my child wouldn't be one poor bullied kid with a foreign mum. If I chose to speak my mother tongue to my children, they would just be part of the 26% of Melbournians who speak a language other than English at home.

Another reason was the fascination Australians have for authentic food. It was a revelation to me to walk down a supermarket aisle and be presented with a range of olive oils, Carbonell amongst them. Ok, I can live here, I thought. If there is a country where you can revive your favourite dishes, it is Australia: even *jamón de Jabugo* has recently been given the green light for importation (if you are ready to pay for it, of course).

So far, we have access to a lot of other languages and to food. Can these get you far to become a bilingual family? One thing that is certain is that households with two languages need what some call "a language contract", i.e. some agreement on what language, when and for what functions is going to be used. The decision to speak Catalan to my daughter came naturally to me: how else would I sing a lullaby, play with her or tell her stories but in the language I was sung to, played with and told stories? I have always been a staunch defender of the one-parent one-language option, especially when one of the parents does not speak much of the other parent's language. So here we go, starting our own personal experiment: mama speaks Catalan, dad speaks English.

But there is more to our language contract than this. Where I come from, Barcelona, it is just logical, protected by law even, to choose to speak Catalan at home. It is just logical, protected by law as well, to learn Spanish. As we regard Catalan as a language spoken in Spain, it has official status and has slowly become a language of reputation, of economic and political power, of the *status quo*. Catalan is a minority language because it has no official State, but it is a major language of the Catalan economy, culture and society in general. However, since I started answering the question of what language I was going to speak to my daughter, I found myself in an argument that led too much, to my taste, to a justification of why I had chosen Catalan, even among Catalan speakers. All of a sudden, Spanish becomes just so much of a better choice: after all, it has so many more speakers, and what is she going to use Catalan for, and you are making your husband learn it, too? As if I were not aware of the numerical difference myself. In Australia, around 93,000 people speak Spanish at home, as opposed to some appalling figures of 46 in Melbourne and 20 odd people in Sydney who speak Catalan, according to the last published census. These numbers, and the fact that such a small minority of people speak it at home, is also reflected on the amount of resources you can find to support the learning process at home: books and videos, but also media coverage and presence in schools as a second language or in the form of bilingual programs, not to mention the possibility to create a net of relations who speak it. There is a lot of that in Spanish, there is nothing of that in Catalan.

Even when you look at the language's maintenance -survival through generations- Spanish scores very well, with a remarkable number of third generation Australians who still speak it. Catalan, on the other hand, has a less optimistic diagnosis: in general, the main flow of Catalans arriving in Australia in the 1940s and 1950s did not speak it to their children, so transmission has been cut fairly quickly. At present, there is only one Catalan club in Australia, the *Casal català de Victoria*, which celebrated its 20th anniversary in October 2006.

Unfortunately, young members are scarce and there appears to be a great generational gap which will be hard to replace.

Having said all this, I am not here to whinge about how little support Catalan speakers have in Australia. After all, nobody expects to count on much support when you speak a minority stateless language. In fact, I can only feel lucky and grateful to have found a university where Catalan is taught, a club, and, yes, some books in Catalan at foreign-language book shops.

In the end, the supremacy of Spanish as an international language made the decision even easier, as I thought, well, we can find ways for her to learn Spanish anywhere in the world, but if I don't speak it to her she'll never learn Catalan.

Also, I strongly feel that my language is Catalan and, hence, part of my vision of the world and that of my family and friends. Catalan is nothing here, but is everything back in Barcelona. So, I guess the clue lies here: the relationship between a person and his/her country of origin. In our case, a trip to Barcelona a year was nearly an implied prenuptial agreement. We live in a small house, but we do get to travel every year, and I hope we can do it for as long as we have the energy.

For the first couple of years in Australia, my flight tickets were still processed in Barcelona, so every time I left for that city, I was actually "returning". At first, there is a sense of provisionality, as if being here is just a step to go somewhere else. I had a strong sense of displacement, just like the jigsaw puzzle pieces my 21 month-old daughter Amàlia stubbornly tries to fit in the wrong place. Then, I needed to go back for sanity, to feel adjusted again. After Amàlia was born, going back to Barcelona was more about sharing my world with her, the bonds I have with my nation, my friends and my family, ordinary things that other people take for granted. My ultimate aim is that my children feel adjusted both in Barcelona and Melbourne, they are able to speak to their grandparents, uncles and cousins with little interference, and that they

understand, respect and participate in Australian and Catalan cultures as bilingual and bicultural adults.

However, other issues make this situation a bit more complex than choosing one or the other language. Officially, Catalonia enjoys a social bilingualism, where both languages are expected to be known by all members of society. In reality, there are different degrees of that in different areas of the Principality. Among them, its capital, Barcelona, is an example of a highly bilingual society. Opposite interpretations of the language situation in the city range from considering Spanish speakers a discriminated minority, to considering the advance of Spanish a threat to the survival of Catalan. In my experience, the two languages were always heard and spoken in the streets of the city, more Spanish in some areas, more Catalan in others. As a young teenager, I recall having friends who spoke Spanish, and friends who spoke Catalan, maintaining conversations in one and the other language interchangeably, and even maintaining conversations in both languages. At home, we speak Spanish to dad and Catalan to mum, so language shift, code-mixing and all other language contact phenomena were part of our daily lives. So, Spanish has been part of my life and development as well.

In Catalonia, young children who are not exposed to Spanish at home are exposed to the language from other environmental sources anyway: through television, speakers in the street, school, etc. In our case, there is no such environmental exposure. And the fact is that if I really want my children to feel adjusted when we travel to Barcelona, they will probably need to at least understand Spanish as well. In Catalonia, there are no remaining Catalan monolinguals, so there is no reason why one shouldn't survive only with Spanish, because everyone speaks and understands it. So, a person who speaks Catalan but not Spanish is by itself, an extremely rare case. My children would be in this situation in case I didn't expose them to Spanish.

So, I will try and find strategies for them to also learn Spanish as they grow up. So far, we have been attending a Spanish playgroup where we meet with other Spanish-speaking families and sing, play games and interact in Spanish for two hours a week. I say, at least her brain is opening up a new drawer where it says "Spanish". Classes to toddlers aged more than 2 are offered around Melbourne and we might join one sometime soon. Spanish is my second language, and is also part of myself.

Now, as for Amàlia's language development, these are some of the things we have enjoyed at home.

When I was pregnant with her, I chose a song that I would repeatedly sing to her in the shower, or in bed before falling asleep. I used this song, *Deu pometes*, for many months to soothe her to go to sleep. She pronounced her first word when she was 12-13 months old, "no", don't they all? The second word was "dad", which she pronounced with an elongated "a" of sheer pleasure. It wasn't until she was 14 months old that she said "*mama*", and since then she hasn't stopped saying it some 2,000 times a day. Around the same time she started nodding with the head and the words haven't stopped appearing since then. At about 17 months old she was adding a new word to her vocabulary every day. At first, she would take the word in Catalan or English, usually the easiest to pronounce, and would stick to it. So, if she said "*aigua*" she wouldn't use "water", or she said "door" but not "*porta*". At about 18 and a half months, she started saying certain words in the two languages: *poma*-apple, *gràcies*-thank you, *més*-more. I was never very fond of using baby words, especially when she is not exposed to Catalan but through one adult person. In Catalonia you often hear people calling the dog "*bup-bup*", which is really the sound the animal makes. However, the use of onomatopoeic sounds to describe animals and transports appeared spontaneously, and she used them until she could pronounce the words: train was "tu-tu", cow was "muu", etc. Interestingly enough, these sounds were used by her as fully meaningful words, since she

distinguished between a Catalan sheep, “*beeeee*”, and an English one “*baaaaaa*”, same as between a Catalan bird, “*piu-piu*” and an English one “*chirp-chirp*”.

At 19 months and a week, she started identifying herself by her name, and a few weeks later the first two-word sentences appeared, “*Amàlia hat*”. At around 20 months she picked up on English possessives such as “*dad’s*” or, this one she absolutely loves, “*Amàlia’s*”. She mixed this structure with Catalan vocabulary for a while, so to say “*the girl’s hat*”, she would say “*nena’s hat*”. All in all, a normal language development in two languages, I would say.

Around the same time, she became aware of *mama’s* words, and *dad’s* words, as we call them. Today, at 21 months, if you ask her “*what does mama call ‘eye’?*”, she will say “*ull*”, and she will say “*thank you*” to dad and “*gràcies*” to mama.

She has also become very aware of her grandparents back in Barcelona. The last time we were there she was 13 months old. One of the first words she started saying there was “*avi*”, the Catalan word for granddad. Since then, we have been connecting via web cam every week. At first she wouldn’t know much of what was going on, and she would only wave because she was told to. Now, she recognizes her grandparents and gets very excited before every connection. Photographs are a good resource to keep a toddler’s memories alive: through a personal small photo album, she has learnt to recognize and name all her cousins, uncles and grandparents. Books and videos in Catalan are part of our daily routine. We have managed to build a nice collection in our recent trips, despite the 20 kilo luggage limit, and have divided two areas on her bookshelf, with *mama’s* books and *dad’s* books. At home, the *Teletubbies* speak Catalan, and so do *Teo* and *Les tres bessones*; *Elmo*, *Maisy* and *Miffy* speak English.

Catalan is obviously the language she identifies with me and *àvia* (grandma), so every time I speak this language on the phone she assumes I’m speaking to my mother. There are certainly very few young Catalan speaking

people in Melbourne, and most of them are just here for a short period of time, so it gets difficult to find a time to speak the language. Even when you find a Catalan family, they might speak Spanish, because this is their mother-tongue, or because they have chosen to do so for the reasons I didn't choose to.

In a few years, I will be able to tell whether or not the effort to speak a minority language from Spain to my children was a good choice for their development. For my part, I will continue to play with them in Catalan, and try to expose them to this language and Spanish as much as I can, so that, one day, when they want to travel to mama's country, they don't feel like foreigners.