

# Young people's language in Barcelona and its representation in the mass media

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## Abstract

*[...], the above-mentioned mass media (press, comics, radio, etc.) in its dual method of spoken and written communication, has a special language in common in which colloquial twists and substandard voices predominate [...]. Young people's everyday speech also shares these characteristics. [...] To talk about the characteristics of their languages [those of young people] we basically need to reflect on the cultural consumption of young people and their leisure-time practices. (Rodríguez González 2002b:23)*

Cultural phenomena and, above all, the culture of the mass media are reflected in linguistic behaviour. This is particularly valid with regards to the linguistic behaviour of young people as the mass media is an excellent "multiplier" of the dissemination of expressions that are typical of young people's language. However, it cannot be claimed that the mass media adopts, by norm, general expressions of young people's language and that, in this way, it essentially contributes to its dissemination among young people and also its adoption into standard language. It is interesting to see in which contexts young people's expressions appear in the mass media and whether these expressions can be really considered to be typical of young people's language. The study "Jugendsprache in Barcelona" ("Young people's language in Barcelona", Wieland 2008), presented summarised here in English, is based on these aspects. The study looks at the way in which different adolescents in Barcelona speak and contrasts it with the language used in young people's favourite Catalan television programmes and journalistic texts aimed at youths.

## Summary

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## 1. Introduction

Thanks to the success of "linguistic standardisation", most Catalan adolescents have Catalan language skills that range from basic to very good. This means that at least part of these adolescents choose Catalan as their intragroup and intergroup language. Obviously, there are often divergences and a slightly different composition of the group of adolescents can be decisive when choosing the language. Therefore, the question this study looks into is not about when and if the young people of Barcelona use Catalan as their intragroup communication language, but about how these young people speak, whether they do so in Catalan, and what the relationship is that they have with the young people's language as disseminated by the mass media.<sup>1</sup>

However, in the first place we should make some observations about the linguistic skills of young people analysed and the use they make of language.

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<sup>1</sup> With regard to the communication of adolescents, this happens much more frequently in small cities and rural areas of Catalunya than in Barcelona and its environs. Nevertheless, as Brake (1980) states, for example, the styles of young people's speech are normally created in the urban setting. In Catalonia, this means a concentration in the Barcelona area.

To do the study, informants were sought in Catalonia in schools in neighbourhoods with a high percentage of Catalan speakers. Therefore, two of the three schools are in the Sarrià-Sant Gervasi and Eixample districts. The third school is in the Horta-Guinardò district, which has a high percentage of students with Spanish as their mother tongue. On average, the most strongly represented social class was middle-class.

## 2. The use adolescents make of language

There is no doubt that the area in which the linguistic policy applied to date in Catalonia has obtained best results is in the group that includes infants and adolescents, as this youngest section of the population comes into daily contact with Catalan at school and in the mass media and is the sector that moves with greater or fewer skills in the use of the language. The analysis of the statistical data corresponding to the informants of this study also shows a very positive situation of the Catalan language, although it should be taken into account that young people were chosen precisely because of their high use of Catalan. 58.3% of 144 adolescents questioned, aged between 13 and 19, stated that they speak Catalan with their parents and 18.7% speak Catalan with one of their parents and Spanish with the other or mix both languages. With regards to communication with siblings, the data obtained is similar. When they were asked about the use of language when speaking with their friends, 66.7% of adolescents declared that they preferred to use or almost exclusively used Catalan. As far as the linguistic confidence of young people is concerned, Catalan, at 49.3%, comes out a lot worse than one would imagine taking into account the use of the language with family and friends. Nevertheless, 33.3% of young people state that they can express themselves just as well in both languages. As far as the choice of language and the use of both languages in everyday life is concerned, the adolescent informants of the corpus adopted a relatively pragmatic and non-dogmatic attitude. Most of them consider themselves to be bilingual and feel at ease with both languages.

## 3. Young people's language – Young people's culture

Overall, young people's culture and the "subcultures" associated to it are considered to be the main features responsible for young people's language:

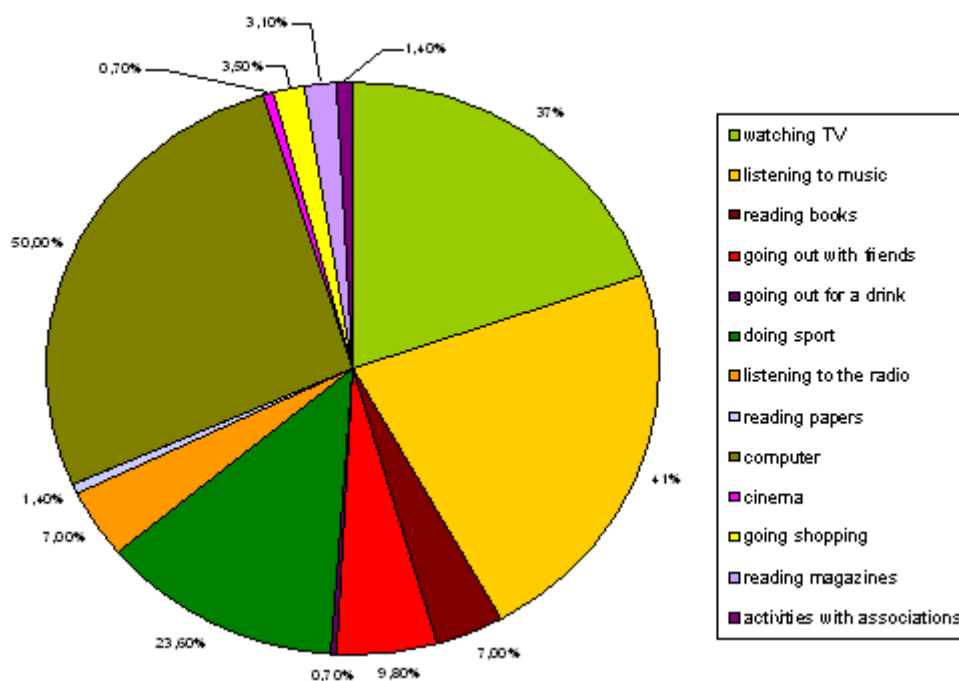
*"In a far-reaching sense, young people's cultures refer to the way in which the social experiences of young people are expressed collectively by means of the construction of different lifestyles, mainly found in free time or in gaps in their institutional life. In a more restricted sense, they define the appearance of young people's micro-societies, with significant degrees of autonomy with regard to adult institutions, which have specific spaces and times and which are historically shaped on the Western countries after the Second World War, coinciding with significant processes of social change in the economic, educational, employment and ideological terrain." (Feixa 1998:84)*

The concept of young people's culture may seem too broad to define some aspects of the way in which adolescents live. In this sense, we should therefore talk about more or less visible lifestyles or ways of living which adolescents adopt. We refer, for example, to the preference for certain television programmes, certain ways of dressing and certain linguistic expressions that could be characteristics of one or several groups of youths, but that should not necessarily be compared to a "subculture".

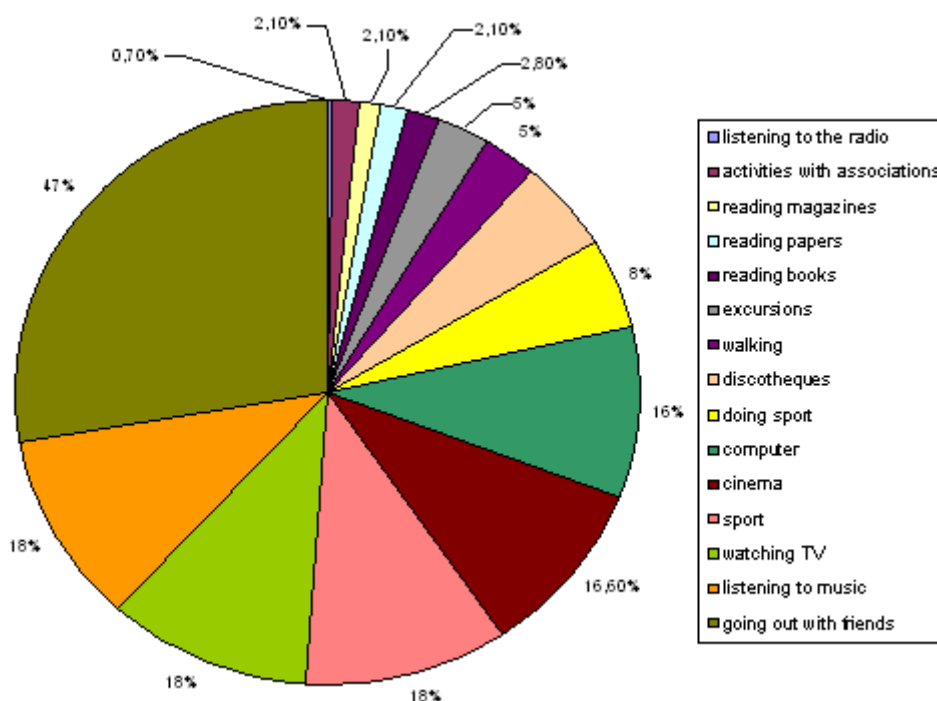
Therefore, before talking to the informants of this piece of work (144 adolescents) and recording conversations, note was taken of their lifestyles, especially the way in which they use audiovisual and digital mass media (cf. Wieland 2006 a and b), by means of a questionnaire. In addition to asking statistical questions regarding age, place of residence, mother tongue and bilingualism, above all we tried to discover the young people's behaviour in their free time. The results were mainly used to choose later themes of conversation, but also to select the characteristic, favourite electronic and audiovisual mass media of the adolescents, in particular television programmes and to thus be able to contrast the "young people's language" used in these programmes with the authentic material from the conversations.

Based on the results of the questionnaire, the behaviour of these adolescents in their free time can be represented for the corpus as follows:

**Graph 1: free-time activities of adolescents (2003) on workdays**  
(according to our own data)



**Graph 2: free-time activities of adolescents (2003) at the weekends**  
(according to our own data)



Graphs 1 and 2 show how adolescents aged between 12 and 18 prefer to spend their free time (they named the two most important occupations and the ones they practised most frequently). If we compare the workdays with the weekend, we can identify logical differences. At the weekend, young people have more free time and therefore more time and opportunities to meet their friends, to go shopping, to the discotheque or to the cinema than on workdays.<sup>2</sup>

If we compare both graphs, we can see that the free-time activities that adolescents prefer are using the computer (workdays 50%, weekends 16%), watching the television (workdays 37%, weekends 18%), listening to music (workdays 41%, weekends 18.1%), doing sport (workdays 23.6%, weekends 18%) and going out with their friends (workdays 9.8%, weekends 47.2%).

On the whole, we can establish two axes of adolescents' free-time behaviour: on the one hand, relationships with each other and, on the other hand, the consumption of music and information at home. These two main lines -the intergrupal behaviour of adolescents and their attitude towards the mass media- are essential factors in young people's way of living and characterise the use they make of language. This is why they make up the bulk of this study.

When adolescents speak to each other they use young people's language, in other words what in the linguistic research into the German language (cf. Neuland 2003?, Augenstein 1998) is called the way in which young people speak. With this concept, the aim is to indicate that young people's language is not so much a new variety, but rather aspects of the specific language that vary from one group of young people to another. Nevertheless, it is surprising that many features are often used in the same way in all the groups, especially because of the wide dissemination made of them on the radio and on television (cf. Baumann 2001:35). Therefore, and without wishing to generalise, what Augenstein states could be absolutely valid: "[...] [some] subcultural stylistic features are commercialised and disseminated through the mass media in such a way that we can perfectly well speak about a common young people's language (1998:34).

Augenstein's statement refers to the new central role of the mass media in creating and disseminating young people's language.

#### 4. The mass media and young people's language

Television can be considered to be the multiplier and also the creator par excellence of young people's language. If nothing else, in many television programmes, not just the ones aimed at young people, special attention is paid to ways of expressing that are typical of young people's culture and with their ostentatious expressive codes (Barruti 1990, Rodriguez Gonzalez 2002b). However, in reality, what amount of young people's language is contained in Catalan television programmes aimed at adolescents and young adults such as *Una altra cosa* or *Plats bruts*?

This question leads us to another aspect, often the object of controversy and sometimes polemical, on the relationship between the Catalan language used in the mass media and that of the linguistic standardisation. For receivers, the language of the mass media is always spoken language, whether it appears in a relatively spontaneous way (television chats, programmes with the intervention of the public) or in a non-spontaneous way (series, films, cartoons, the news, etc.). Whether the public has the feeling that the language is a full reality depends, among other factors, on the standardised measure used to gauge linguistic reality. All too often, receivers of mass media communication have a negative reaction and one of rejection towards the linguistic standard used because it seems ridiculous, inadequate and artificial to them (cf. Sinner/Wieland and Reinke and Reinke/Ostiguy). In these cases, a conflict is often detected between the standard (written) and the oral performance, as can be

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<sup>2</sup> According to the definition of the United Nations (see <http://www.un.org>), this study also set an age limit of 19. This age represents a moment of change in the life of many young Catalan people as, on finishing sixth form college, there are a series of deep transformations (the beginning of their university life or their entrance into the labour market, the resulting move and making new friends, etc.) that could also have an affect on their linguistic customs.

seen in the following fragment taken from a conversation held with those responsible for the Linguistic Service of Televisió Catalunya: <sup>3</sup>

AA: we try to use living/  
colloquial/  
(..0.7) correct/  
language/we avoid the intrusion of Spanish words with the  
súper tres guide-  
(..0.6) and we make it as youthful as we can\  
(...)

Nevertheless, in recent years a slightly different trend has been noted in television productions for adolescents and young people. Series such as *Plats bruts* -and earlier the series *Poble Nou* (cf. Paloma i Sanllehí 1999:84), although to a notably lesser degree- use a Catalan that was less backed by the standards and more by colloquial language when representing some of the characters, which managed to obtain higher audiences and good commercial results. However, so far there is no general study on the credibility and linguistic authenticity of series or moderators.

The lack of a linguistic "base" for the use of more authentic oral registers in the form of descriptive oral standards for Catalan continues to be problematic.

## 5. The corpus

40 conversations held by adolescents in small groups were recorded and analysed according to the principle of participative observation. The groups were, on average, made up of three young people who had met on a voluntary basis, who have known each other for some time and who, on the whole, spend part of their free time together. For these young people, the conversation constituted a communicative situation without commitment, in which they could act freely, without having to think about whether they were being subjected to assessment.

The material for the corpus of oral communication in the mass media comes mainly from television programmes on the channels TV3 (*Una altra cosa*, *Jetlag*, *El cor de la ciutat*), Canal33 (manga and cartoon series, *Super 3*) and Flaix TV, recorded between 20th of March and 10th of April 2003. In addition, the corpus of 10 chapters of the series *Plats bruts* from 2001 was included as when collecting data in the questionnaires, many adolescents mentioned this series.

## 6. Summary of the results

Adolescents' way of speaking represented in the corpus is found in a field of tension. The poles of this field are, on the one hand the Catalan language and culture and, on the other hand, the forms of urban expression of young people's culture and an urban setting with a more Hispanic influence than any other region in the country. Therefore, it is not surprising that despite the fact that the present corpus is relatively small, a tendency can be defined: adolescents use more phenomena of Spanish greetings in the daily use of the language than programmes of the mass media aimed at them. <sup>4</sup>

In the television programmes recorded, one finds an attempt to approximate to the phenomena of the youth culture. However the absence of some usual phenomena in young people's language, such as the use of the discourse markers "vale" (ok) or "bueno" (right) is noticeable. These markers appear very rarely in mass media language or are used expressively as style resources; on the other hand, the use of markers is one of the most characteristic features in the way in which the young informants speak. The mass media have a conflict with regard to the use of pragmatic markers. As many authors, as well as standardised grammar books, consider lexemes such as "bueno" to be not just Spanish

<sup>3</sup> Interview with the head of the Linguistic Service of Televisió Catalunya, A. Agulló, on the 25th of October 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Unlike what one fears in many languages, once the corpus was analysed, one cannot talk of an unnatural presence of Anglicism in Catalan young people's language. There is an imbalance between the two parts of the corpus: the mass media, as the innovative linguistic force, uses a lot of Anglicisms, but on the other hand, the adolescents appear to be a lot more reserved towards the use of the new terms derived from English.

interference, but also -with negative connotations- errors that should be avoided, the linguistic services of the television channels are obliged not to use them if they wish to maintain their status of "language guarantors" (cf. Bassols et al. 1997).

The use of Spanish interference shows that the mass media unconsciously distances itself from young people's language. It avoids certain features, not because they are typical of young people's language, as in the programmes chosen for this work the proximity to young people's language represents a positive factor and one that contributes to the success of the programme, but because they do not adhere to the linguistic standard. However, the valuation that the linguists of the channels consulted make of their own programmes for young people with regards to their proximity to young people's language is, in some areas, far removed from reality. This occurs above all when the features of young people's language coincide with "authentic" or alleged Spanish interference. They are avoided by appealing to linguistic purity (cf. Salvanyà 2003:28). Even in programmes that are based on spontaneous, unplanned language, such as *Una altra cosa*, relatively few phenomena of young people's language appear and also fewer language greeting phenomena than is often assumed.

The careless use that adolescents make of language is often considered to be a "decadence of the language" and, when compared to the standard, it is valued in a negative way. If we refer in particular to the standards for written language, it is clear that divergences will appear. And inversely, adolescents also unconsciously move away from the young people's language of the mass media.

In the examples given, the conflict between the standards and the individual creation of a language and between Spanish and Catalan is evident. For young people, when they communicate with each other, this conflict is relatively unimportant. They use the features that diverged from the standard in a natural way and do not pay much attention to Spanish borrowing. The way in which the young Catalan informants speak is found in a field of tension between the ongoing desire to break the rules and the need to use these rules to make communication more fluent. Nevertheless bilingualism is an interesting component. The fact that young people break the linguistic standards by borrowing Spanish features does not prevent communication, even though the presence of these features in the Catalan may be very heavy. Intelligibility by all the bilingual participants of the conversation -the informants of the corpus- is guaranteed at all times. Therefore, adolescents have a communicative freedom that means that, in the purely linguistic area -and not in the political or cultural area-the above-mentioned field of tension is for them a source for extending their linguistic possibilities.

However, because of this, the mass media aimed at young people faces real and, in part, problematic tensions: as we have explained, they feel committed both to the public and to taking care of the language. Now, more than ever, they are facing the task of finding a linguistic form of expression that satisfies various demands: on the one hand, it must obey the principles of linguistic policy but, on the other hand, it must reflect the use that adolescent speakers make of the language. Essential aspects for a "normal" survival of Catalan are not just the influence and the unarguably important effects that the mass media has on young people with regards to taking care of the language in the areas marked by the forms of informal speech. Guiding the mass media to the linguistic transformations that occur specifically in these areas is just as important. We need to try and find a standard for young people's language, particularly spoken and -as a next step-for general language, that respects the linguistic reality of the young people -and therefore of the adults they will later be-and that is accepted as a source of linguistic innovation and creativity.

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