

The Quality of the Catalan Language Used on TV

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Faced with problems that arise with regard to the use of the Catalan language on television programmes of a colloquial nature, particularly on Televisió de Catalunya (TVC), the Catalonia Broadcasting Council (CAC) commissioned the Llengua i Mèdia Group to prepare a report that analysed the quality of the language in the programming of TVC, BTV and Televisió Española in Catalonia and, in particular, in the programmes that generate the most viewer complaints.

The Llengua i Mèdia Group aims to study linguistic variations in the media. The research team, made up of professors from the departments of Catalan Philology and Translation at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) has been working for 15 years on different research initiatives, including three projects funded by the Ministry for Education, i.e., “Language Models and the Audiovisual Media, Radio and Television, in Catalan”, “The Relationships between Oral and Written Discourses in the Broadcast Media” and “Variation and Creativity in Subtitles”, which is currently being developed.

The report entitled *The Quality of the Catalan Language Used on TV* was prepared by Margarida Bassols, Josep-Anton Castellanos and Anna Maria Torrent (coordinator) with the assistance of Neus Faura, David Paloma, Albert Rico and Elvira Teruel.

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The Report on the Quality of the Catalan Language Used on TV

The report began with a brief historical overview of the use of the Catalan language on television, both with regard to supply and reception. It went on to include a short introduction to varieties and registers according to receiver and programme and a review of the evolution of the TVC language model.

The aim of the report was to diagnose the linguistic quality of television in Catalonia with regard to Catalan and to make a string of proposals (recommendations) to ensure the full linguistic ‘normalisation’ of Catalan on the television shown in Catalonia.

The body of the analysis is defined below. The sample used was based on criteria of time and diversity. It established the time period to study, which covered the months of December 2002 and January-March 2003, and the selection of the stations, i.e., TV3, K3/33, TVE and BTV. It also included a list of all the programmes analysed in line with the following classifications:

- Daily and non-daily news programmes and current-affairs reports and documentaries
- Sports programmes: live (broadcasts or panel discussions), relayed or prepared
 - Inhouse works of fiction: sitcoms and miniseries
 - External works of fiction: dubbed movies, miniseries, youth-oriented sitcoms, children’s and teenagers’ cartoons
 - Specialised comedy, entertainment or current-affairs talk shows involving discussions or interviews
- Game shows
- Special programmes

To explain the analysis procedure the authors then established categories for the following linguistic phenomena:

Phenomena A: rude and/or offensive expressions.

This section included words and expressions basically related to sex and scatology, such as *vés a cagar!*, *merda!*, *collons!*, *conyi!*, *fotre*, *la mare que et va parir!* (but not the euphemisms *fúmer*, *me càsum l'olla*, *coi* or *cordons*), and words and expressions that could be offensive to the public, the Church, women, homosexuals, etc., such as *sudaca*, *negre de merda*, *marieta*, *neneta*, *hòstia* and *redéu*.

Phenomena B: linguistic interferences, basically words taken from Spanish.

This section included the use of words, expressions or constructions that pertain to Spanish, which mainly arose from a lack of knowledge rather than for any stylistic effect, even though systematic carelessness was not ruled out in this aspect for stylistic reasons. For example, the lexical borrowing of expressions such as *reflexar* or *flux de diners*, or syntactic ones such as the omission of the pronouns *en*, *hi* or *ho*, *ens hem d'anar*, *has d'oblidar [això]*, the incorrect use of pronouns (*donar-li voltes* instead of *donar-hi*) or mistakes of periphrasis, such as *tenir que* or *anar a fer*. The free use of foreign words, such as *coffee*, was analysed separately.

Phenomena C: colloquial or non-standard or inappropriate use of words or expressions.

Firstly, the authors included all the words, expressions or constructions of a colloquial register not recognised under the standards of the language, even in a colloquial register. They also included words and expressions that are tolerated and even defended by some linguists, such as colloquial constructions of the relative verb (*l'obra que se n'ha parlat tant*), pronouns (*els hi portaré el llibre per els portaré el llibre* or *els hi portaré* instead of *els el portaré*; *afanyem-se* instead of *afanyem-nos*), the use of prepositions (such as *des de que*, *les coses de les que et volia parlar*, *consistia en fer*, *s'atribueix a que*), the absence of the double negative (*ningú ho va veure*), agreement with the verb *haver-hi* (*hi han molts cotxes*), intensifiers or generalisers (*lo bo del cas*, *lo bé que m'ho passo*), and the words *bueno*, *carinyós*, *mimat*, *tio* and *nòvio*.

Secondly, they included expressions or words inappropriate to the register, such as *esclarir* instead of *aclarir*, *complert* instead of *complet*, *caire* instead of

caràcter, *finalment dir* instead of *finalment cal dir* or *direm*. This section also included the incorrect use of idioms or set phrases, such as *ho faré tal com raja*.

This classification made it possible to gather the information in an organised and systematic fashion, which facilitated quantification.

The main body of the report was devoted to developing the analysis. The results were thus quantified through the frequency with which each of the three-abovementioned phenomena appeared in each programme viewed and in the overall number of programmes of the same format (daily news bulletins, reports, live sports programmes, inhouse miniseries, films, etc.). The authors added assessments and comments of comparison about the linguistic quality of the different stations with regard to programmes of a same format.

To conclude the detailed analysis carried out, below is a chapter on general assessments referring to each of the groups of linguistic phenomena described.

With regard to the group of rude and/or offensive expressions (phenomena A), the report found there was a control in the selection of words and restraint when it came to mangling the language. Rude and/or offensive expressions and words were used when necessary and a particular and defined range were chosen, which had been assessed and decided upon over time by the people who work at the stations.

With regard to the group of linguistic interferences, particularly from Spanish (phenomena B), the report distinguished between:

- Programmes that featured practically no syntactic borrowing, i.e., did not use linguistic structures influenced by other languages (e.g., the construction *porto anys fent el mateix* instead of *fa anys que faig el mateix*) but which did feature some lexical borrowings, i.e., linguistic interferences of vocabulary (e.g., the use of the word *bueno* instead of *bé*). In this case, the authors of the report attributed it generally to a will on the part of the people responsible for the script or translation to widen the range of non-standard colloquial words or expressions (phenomena C) to a point beyond what is accepted under linguistic standards.
- Programmes in which there was a certain margin of improvisation and which presented lexical and syntactic

borrowings. In this case, the authors of the report found that both lexical and syntactic borrowings were due to a lack of linguistic ability on the part of the presenters and/or regular collaborators.

At the same time, and within this section, they established four groups of programme formats according to the degree to which they were influenced by Spanish (i.e., density of Spanish words and expressions).

- The first group was made up of foreign productions, news programmes and other programmes. The report found there was almost no Spanish influence in programmes with no margin for improvisation, and a residual amount in programmes with a certain margin for improvisation.

- The second group included game shows and prepared sports programmes. The report found a higher frequency of Spanish influences (lexical borrowings, Spanish vocabulary and morphosyntactic borrowings of a linguistic structure) in these programmes.

Although the density of Spanish influences were overall low and of little significance in these programmes, the authors of the report assessed the systematic use of this type of borrowings in prepared programmes as being negative and suggested they could be reviewed and corrected in subsequent broadcasts.

- The third group was made up of inhouse productions, sports programmes with discussions and special programmes (e.g., the TV3 Marathon), in which the frequency of linguistic interference was higher, particularly with regards the use of Spanish structures and words, as well as problems of phonetics (pronunciation) on the part of some actors and discussion panellists.

- Finally, the fourth group covered sports broadcasts, inhouse sitcoms (*Jet Lag* and *Plats Bruts*) and other humorous talk shows, which had the highest number of linguistic interferences in the programming analysed. The report distinguished between interferences detected in sports broadcasts, mainly due to a lack of linguistic ability on the part of some of the presenters, and the exorbitant entry of Spanish slang for comic purposes in humorous talk shows and inhouse sitcoms. Furthermore, the report detected that the humorous talk shows analysed often used borrowings without a comic purpose, with abundant morphosyntactic structures that had been interfered with and Spanish phonetics.

With regard to non-standard or inappropriate colloquial words or expressions (colloquialisms) (phenomena C), the results of the report showed a direct relationship between the degree of spontaneity of the different programmes and the appearance of colloquialisms. In general, colloquial words or expressions were absent or scarce in programmes that used a prepared language, while in programmes where linguistic control fell they appeared more frequently. However, the report found there were programmes with planned language that featured a high level of colloquialisms, such as sitcoms and inhouse miniseries, something it attributed to the interest of the person responsible for the script in symbolising the characters.

Within this section, the authors of the report considered lexical colloquialisms (slang words and expressions) to be appropriate when they appeared in scripted programmes or live shows, as they can be necessary to correctly reproduce particular environments, situations or characters. With regard to phonetic colloquialisms (i.e., pronunciation), they found that most pertained to the way people speak in a low or medium register of formality¹. With regard to syntactic colloquialisms (i.e., grammatical structure), they did not believe it was counterproductive for them to appear in programmes in which the accepted or colloquial register dominates, but they did say that all types of imprecision and inappropriateness of register should be avoided.

Recommendations

In keeping with the initial goal of preparing a number of proposals that could be used as recommendation for television stations to adopt, the final chapter of the report developed a section on recommendations for each of the linguistic phenomena analysed throughout the research work.

In relation to the inclusion (or not) of rude and/or offensive words and expressions, they put forward the following criteria:

a) Criterion of Broadcasting their Use

The report concluded that programmes that broadcast rude words or expressions usually do so to be funny and, in that case, could have a major role in influencing linguistic use.

b) Criterion of Necessity

The report found that a diversity of solutions was required

to build the different registers that a 'normal' language should have and that swear words were present in the colloquial reality, a primary source of the language of fictional scripts. The colloquial register is therefore essential to linguistic regeneration, to the entry of speakers and generations of speakers, and the planned pseudo-colloquialism of television programmes represents an inevitable opportunity to make a recognisable language for many speakers who move fundamentally in this level of formality, to favour identification with the medium.

c) Criterion of Verisimilitude

The authors of the report recognised that in a fictional text, naturalness and verisimilitude are able to impact viewers' feelings and rationale and make them 'believe' in the character proposed, even though this sometimes requires making concessions to vulgarity.

d) Criterion of Discrimination

The report concluded that television uses a significant amount of rude and offensive words only in comedy programmes and some dubbed films, and that the selection was made nearly for stylistic reasons or for purposes of narrative consistency.

e) Criterion of Quantity

Although the results of the report found that the number of swear words heard in programmes was not high and were usually found in very particular programmes and at particular times, some dubbed films far exceeded a reasonable limit. In this case, television stations should warn viewers before a programme begins so they can understand that they cannot clean up the original language of the script.

f) Criterion of Broadcasting

The report defended the television specialists who have spent more than 20 years planning the progressive entry of swear words to achieve a model that can be assimilated by the audience.

g) Criterion of Acceptability

In line with the data in this report, the words used in the section on rude and/or offensive expressions were fairly authentic in the case of planned languages, although the occasional non-acceptable word got past them, for example in sports discussions (spontaneous), sitcoms (recorded live) and humorous talk shows.

h) Criterion of Adaptability

The authors of the report found that rude linguistic choices

were always motivated by situation, script or character rather than being gratuitous.

Based on the above, the authors of the report made the following recommendations:

- **Warn the audience:** to continue to indicate in the most significant cases that a film could offend some viewers because of the rude language or facts it contains.
- **Apply the Diversification of Registers:** to continue with the process of diversifying registers. Screenwriters and linguistic services have carried out a lot of very interesting work in this area.
- **Take Children into Account:** to continue to think about products addressed at young adults because the other age groups can generally be attracted by the arguments and jokes they generate. Candidness, inexperience, impulsiveness, a sense of criticism and humour are real mental regenerators.
- **Apply Discrimination in Use:** to try as far as possible to use rude words that truly belong to Catalan and to always seek a solution that upholds a sense of verisimilitude.
- **Use a Monolingual Code:** to try to avoid a bilingual code as far as possible, even in the use of swear words. It does not seem inconsistent that a character should use Spanish for script reasons or for parody, but it does seem inconsistent if he changes continually from one language to another.

With regards the use of linguistic interferences in the Catalan language used on TV, the report had two basic recommendations:

- To take greater care in preventing the appearance of interferences in programmes with a certain degree of spontaneity.
- To limit the deliberate appearance of interferences in programmes that aim to recreate the colloquial reality.

In this section, and with regard to programmes with a certain degree of spontaneity (some general or specialised news reports, programmes, interviews, discussions, game shows, etc.) the authors also recommended that presenters and regular collaborators know about authentically Catalan phonetics and have a good knowledge about the terminology that belongs to the issues raised in the programme.

To that end, the authors of the report believed it was necessary to contract professionals with an appropriate linguistic ability.

With regard to fictional or real programmes that reproduce colloquial situations, it is important to distinguish between:

- Inhouse sitcoms, for which the report recommended approximating script language to the plausible solutions of externally produced series (i.e., to seek a genuine Catalan that alternates with Spanish solutions to turn the current trend around), preventing 'inadvertent' syntactic interference and correcting the inauthentic phonetics of some characters.
- Comedy programmes, for which the report recommended that the presence of the Catalan language should be dominant and that the use of Spanish should be used as a humoristic device limited to comic exceptions within genuine formulas.

In relation to the inclusion (or not) of colloquial words and expressions, they put forward the following criteria:

a) Criterion of Broadcasting their Use

The authors of the report recognised that some words or expressions commonly used in colloquial lexicon (*bueno*, *despedir-se*, *nòvio*, *tonteria*, etc.) are used very often in the real language, as well as some morphological forms (*masses*, *prous*) and syntactic structures (*el/zi* –or *els hi*–, the neutral *lo*, colloquial relatives, etc.), i.e., they are very common living structures in informal language. They were aware that neither linguists nor grammarians will ever be able to eradicate them.

b) Criterion of Necessity

The authors of the report found that colloquial words and expressions were often necessary because they filled a gap: although Catalan has semantically equivalent terms and expressions, they do not belong to the colloquial register. Furthermore, the most commonly used colloquial morphological forms and syntactic structures are appropriate to this register and their replacement by the recommended standard equivalents does not form part of spontaneous speech or scripts that simulate spontaneous speech.

c) Criterion of Verisimilitude

The authors of the report found that some words and structures, such as slang expressions, are essential for

achieving verisimilitude with characters whose portrayal pertains to social groups that regularly use this language.

d) Criterion of Discrimination

In accordance with the results of the research work, Catalan television stations have not made free and indiscriminate use of slang expressions. Their presence is thus limited to inhouse dramas and, to a lesser extent, comedy programmes that use a fairly spontaneous language and within these programmes are only used by some of the characters that appear, according to their social and generational portrayal.

e) Criterion of Quantity

As slang expressions only appeared in miniseries and humorous talk shows, according to the authors of the report, the average transmission time of these programmes is very short compared with the other programmes in which the register used is more often than not the standard one.

f) Criterion of Broadcast Time

Given that the majority of the programmes that contained lexical or syntactic colloquialisms were broadcast at night, the authors imagined there would be no children watching (children being more likely to assimilate linguistic innovations).

g) Criterion of Acceptability

The report found that many of the non-standard linguistic structures used on some television programmes were defended by linguists and grammarians as belonging to daily and colloquial language and that some specialists were even calling for their acceptance and a review of the standards so they could be recognised as valid in informal registers.

h) Criterion of Adaptation

The authors were aware that in informal situations it is hard to replace colloquialisms (even phonetic ones or ones of pronunciation) with corresponding standard ones without damaging the register.

Based on the above, the authors of the report made the following recommendations:

- **Discriminate the Use of Slang Words:** to use slang lexicon only in miniseries and humorous talk shows in which the portrayal of the characters or presenters demands it and eliminate it from other types of programmes.
- **Increase amount of Youth Programming:** to increase and diversify the range of programmes aimed at youths, so

that, apart from humorous shows and sitcoms with colloquial or vulgar language, there were other programmes in which language would not be a problem.

- **Warn Audiences:** to warn audiences, using a symbol or logo, that a programme uses colloquial language with problematic, unaccepted or dubious expressions.

- **Promote Applied Research:** to encourage research in universities and in collaboration with linguistic advisory departments at the television stations on colloquial language applied to the media and make proposals for using lexicon that belongs to this register, so that stations can make the appropriate recommendations for using it. They also recommended in-depth research into the grammatical structure of languages which, although not accepted, does not arise from interference and which has a long and homegrown tradition in the colloquial register.

All in all, a large part of the interest of this report lay in the proposed recommendations, as “the colloquial register has an increasing presence on TV”², in line with the conclusions from the Congress on Colloquial Catalan On Television that the Llengua i Mèdia Group organised in the Faculty of Communication Sciences at the UAB on 22 January 2004, and that it is important to develop linguistic guidelines in this regard.

Notes

1. That is why they justify their proposal to review the harsh criticism of the Institute of Catalan Studies (IEC) when it comes to tolerating the use of some colloquial words and expressions.
2. Llengua i Mèdia Group (2004) *Conclusions de la Jornada sobre el català col·loquial a la televisió*, at: <http://kane.uab.es/llenguaimedia/Conclusions-Jornada.pdf> [consulted on 12 May 2004].