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The Discursive Contours of Linguistic (In)Equality in Catalonia From the Perspective of Civil Society Representatives

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine the meanings of 'linguistic inequality' and 'linguistic equality' for representatives of 21 civil society bodies in Catalonia. More specifically, we want to investigate whether these two concepts activate distinct imaginaries regarding the politics of 'redistribution' and 'recognition' and a dissimilar focus on 'speakers' as social actors or on the relationship between 'languages' as abstract entities. We argue that bringing (in)equality to the fore during interviews allowed participants to move away from established language policy discourses in Catalonia and to discuss in a more explicit way the connections between language and access to material resources, alongside the traditional focus on identity or linguistic rights. The discussion of the data aims to engage with recent attempts to rethink the contribution of 'conflict sociolinguistics' to general sociolinguistic theory (Pujolar, 2021; Costa, 2023) and to develop materialist frames of analysis for our discipline.

RESUM

Aquest article analitza els significats dels conceptes de 'desigualtat lingüística' i 'igualtat lingüística' per als representants de 21 entitats de la societat civil de Catalunya. Més en concret, volem investigar si aquests dos conceptes activen imaginaris distints amb relació a la política de la redistribució i el reconeixement, i si situen el focus, de manera diferent, sobre els parlants com a actors socials o sobre la relació entre llengües com a entitats abstractes. Defensem que situar el concepte de (des)igualtat al centre de les entrevistes va permetre que els participants anessin més enllà dels discursos establerts sobre la política lingüística a Catalunya, i que discutissin de manera més explícita les connexions entre la llengua i l'accés a recursos materials, en paral·lel al focus tradicional en qüestions d'identitat o de drets lingüístics. La discussió de les dades vol entrar en diàleg amb els intents recents de repensar la contribució de la sociolingüística del conflicte a la teoria sociolingüística general (Pujolar, 2021; Costa, 2023) i de desenvolupar marcs d'anàlisi materialistes per a la disciplina.

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1 | Introduction

'Can you explain the concept to me?' This was the response we received when we asked a representative from one of the major civil society organisations devoted to the promotion of the Catalan language and culture whether the concept of *linguistic inequality* was important for their association. We replied that our aim was to understand whether the concept meant anything for *them*, that is, whether it was part of their conceptual apparatus. He hesitated, argued that they had not discussed it to then admit that, maybe, someone had sometime written or talked about it. Finally, he attempted two distinct definitions, one that referred to class-based linguistic variation among Catalan speakers and another one focused on the inequality between Catalan and Spanish. He concluded by saying that he did not know what linguistic inequality was. His bewilderment, if not downright discomfort, forced us to try to ease the conversational tension. We explained to him that it was, in fact, a concept that was central for Canadian language policymaking[1] but that, we believed, had not circulated widely in Catalonia. Reassured, he replied 'ok'. Yet, the concept had clearly stayed with him because, just a moment later, he stated, 'I don't know what we should promote, linguistic inequality or equality'.

This vignette illustrates the types of difficulties the participants in our research, all representatives from civil society bodies in Catalonia, experienced when requested to relate to the concepts of linguistic inequality and equality. As sociolinguists, we had anticipated that this would be the case, for different reasons in each case. Language-based inequalities do not normally find their way into intersectional analyses of inequalities and social justice in Catalonia (with a few exceptions, such as Rodó-Zárate 2020, or Block and Corona 2022). This is similar to what happens in Wales (see Barakos and Llewellyn in this theme series). As for equality, it has usually been viewed as a problematic term in the linguistic realm in Catalonia. The Catalan sociolinguistic commonsense (Pujolar 2021, 143) relates equality to an increased institutional presence of Spanish, and eventually, to the decline of the vitality of the language (Woolard 2020). As we will argue in the next section, the epistemological history of the concept is anchored in the postulates of the sociolinguistics of conflict (Aracil 1965; Ninyoles 1969) that informed Catalan revitalisation policies during the 1980s.

Despite the fact that we were aware of the oddity of bringing these concepts to our semi-structured interviews, we were interested in their potential to destabilise established discourses in Catalonia. We were intrigued by how each association would try to make sense of each concept and relate them to their own understanding of sociolinguistic dynamics in Catalonia. We hoped to be able to relate the dissimilar focuses of their discourses (e.g., languages vs. individuals, or material vs. symbolic dimensions) to their specific trajectory and social mission. Above all, we wanted to investigate what discourses were prevalent among civil society bodies forty years after the passing of the first language policy law in 1983. We assumed that by forcing participants to walk unfamiliar paths, we would de-automatise responses, bring more explicitness to the conversation and generate reflection on the current validity and affordances of established concepts. This is exactly what happened.

This article, therefore, aims to examine the meanings (if any) of linguistic (in)equality for representatives of 21 civil society associations in Catalonia. More specifically, we want to investigate whether the two concepts (inequality and equality) activate distinct imaginaries, and what kinds of links we can identify in relation to the politics of recognition and redistribution (Fraser 2005), which language policymaking in Catalonia has not successfully articulated yet. Following Merkel and Lauth (1998, 7, cited in Merkel 1999, 68), we adopt a broad definition of civil society as:

> a non-state sphere of activity [which] consists of numerous pluralist and voluntarily established organisations and associations. They articulate specific material and normative interests and are autonomously organised. Civil society occupies the space between the private sphere and state. [. . .] Actors in civil society are involved in politics, yet without assuming state posts.

Our focus on civil society is relevant because of the key role of civil society in the revitalisation and promotion of Catalan (Mollà 2002), and it is novel because, despite its sociopolitical relevance, it is a social field that has been underexplored (though see Bou 2016; Byrne 2020, for recent studies). We aim to engage with the current revisiting of the contributions of Catalan and Occitan conflict sociolinguistics to general sociolinguistic theory (see Pujolar 2021; Costa 2023, in this journal) and, more specifically, to seek connections between political-economic perspectives on language and society (Del Percio et al. 2016) and conflict sociolinguistics (Vila 2016) in research on minoritised language communities. Through the situated examination of how assumed positive concepts such as 'equality' are problematised in certain linguistic communities (see also Rosa, this theme series), we also aim to provincialise sociolinguistic thinking and advocate for the need to historicise logics and policies, as well as their epistemological underpinnings.

Our article starts with a brief discussion of the language policy context of Catalonia before presenting the theoretical framing of our analysis. After reviewing our methods for data generation and analysis, we discuss the meanings of linguistic inequality and equality for our participants. Our article closes with a reflection on the contribution of our research, both in relation to sociolinguistic conceptualisations of key policy terms and to the shifting discursive contours of language revitalisation agendas, which we analyse taking Catalonia as a case study.

2 | The Language Policy Context

The policies for the revitalisation of Catalan that were implemented during the 1980s in Catalonia were inspired by academics working on the sociolinguistics of conflict (Marí 2016). The very use of the concept *linguistic normalisation* in the title of the first language policy law (1983) makes this connection explicit, as it was originally coined by Valencian sociolinguist Lluís V. Aracil (1965). Because of the situation of minoritisation of Catalan and dominance of Spanish, both legally at the State level and demographically within Catalonia (this as a result of the arrival of large groups of Castilian-speaking migrants from other parts

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of Spain between 1950 and 1970), its proponents argued that any form of symmetrical treatment of Spanish and Catalan in the newly established autonomous institutions would reinforce the trends towards language shift. For a long time, concepts like (institutional) bilingualism were actively opposed by Catalan language policy makers, sociolinguists, activists and civil society at large (see Woolard 2020).

Accordingly, the linguistic regime of post-Franco Catalonia has been characterised by a 'compensatory approach', which prioritises the use of Catalan in domains under sub-state control (mainly education, public administration and public media) with the aim to secure a minimum number of relevant societal functions to increase Catalan's social value. Grounded on non-ethnic and cultural views of Catalan identity, policy makers also aimed to extend knowledge and use of Catalan among the Spanish-speaking population to facilitate social access, while consciously avoiding the creation of separate institutions and public services for each linguistic group (Vila et al. 2005), as has been the case in other contexts like Canada or Belgium (McAndrew 2013). This language policy frame, and especially the implementation of a single model of schooling in Catalan for the whole school population, has been instrumental in generalising access to Catalan. This has enabled the overcoming of the ethnolinguistic and social class barriers that had previously discouraged it (Woolard 2003), and for some authors, it has indeed facilitated a certain 'de-ethnicisation' of the use of Catalan (Pujolar and Gonzàlez 2013). The desire expressed in the motto of the first language policy campaign of the newly established Generalitat de Catalunya, *El català, cosa de tots* (which means both that Catalan belongs to everyone and that Catalan is everyone's responsibility, see Block and Corona 2022, 10), had been partially fulfilled (for a fuller account, see Woolard 2016; Pujolar 2020).

At the turn of the 21st century, two elements worked to reshape the social debate on languages in Catalonia. First, Catalonia became a top destination within Spain for international migrants, and this newly arrived cultural and linguistic diversity destabilised the long-standing dynamics of Catalan and Spanish bilingualism. Efforts were then made to renew the language policy lexis (Codó and Nussbaum 2007) bringing new arguments and concepts to the public debate, such as intercultural frames inspired by Quebecois policy making (Riera-Gil 2022). Second, the emergence of a new political party (Ciutadans),[2] created in 2006 to do away with the Catalan language policy consensus, and fuelled by a general process of renewal and reinforcement of Spanish (linguistic) nationalism in the early 2000s (Moreno Cabrera 2008), reclaimed and resignified concepts like bilingualism and language equality from a (neo)liberal perspective (Cetrà 2019, 92–99). In particular, their reframing of 'bilingualism' as 'symmetrical presence' of Catalan and Castilian in all the institutional settings under sub-state control, and specifically in those where Catalan has gained wider currency such as schools, has probably reinforced the trend among pro-Catalan sectors to identify symmetrical treatment of languages in institutions as a threat to the 'sustainability' of Catalan.

More recently, after the political tensions generated by the 2017 referendum, which led the pro-independence parties to background the language debate (Pujolar 2020), the public discourse has centred around how to effectively promote the use of Catalan. This stems from a generalised perception of threat due to the diminishing social use of Catalan (Pradilla and Marí 2022, 29–31), in particular in fields like education (CSASE 2021), while at the same time being an attempt on the part of Catalanist parties to legitimise themselves after the failed attempt to achieve independence. In this context, it is interesting to note both the push for a *Pacte Nacional per la Llengua* (National Agreement for Catalan),[3] which, interestingly, has the notion of equality in the title of its framing document (*Un marc sociolinguistic igualitari per a la llengua catalana* 'An egalitarian sociolinguistic framework for the Catalan language'; Pradilla and Marí 2022), and the recent upgrading (in 2024) of the language policy body of the Government of Catalonia to the status of *Conselleria* (Ministry). It is in this context of increased social debate on language that our interviews took place.

3 | Theoretical Framework

Our article—and our research in broader terms—aims to bring together political-economic perspectives on language and society and conflict sociolinguistics, to which we respectively (and mostly) affiliate. These two paradigms have, of course, distinct epistemological trajectories and research focuses. Coming from the Catalan sociolinguistic tradition, Vila (2016) argues that while conflict sociolinguistics has tended to think of 'languages' as their object of study, political-economic perspectives have focused mostly on the 'speaker' as their unit of analysis. According to this author, the first tradition has focused on the processes of language maintenance and shift, from a historical/diachronic perspective and using macrosocial methods and data. In dialogue with the Fishmanian sociology of language, this tradition has enriched the analysis of the relationship between languages with their critique of 'diglossia' (Ninyoles 1969; Gardy and Lafont 1981) and 'bilingualist discourses' (Woolard 2020; Pujolar 2021, 137–138) and their theorization of 'linguistic normalization' as an alternative to language shift (Aracil 1965). According to Vila, the second tradition has centred around individuals' access to material and symbolic resources linked to their (lack of) mastery of linguistic resources, from a synchronic perspective and using microsocial and qualitative methods and data.

Thus, whereas in the first case, the issue at stake for speakers (and linguistic communities) is the survival of their languages and connected identities, and in the second case, what is at stake is the construction of, reproduction of and/or resistance to social inequality through linguistic means and its impact on social actors' opportunities and living conditions. To put it in Fraser's (2005) terms, where the first addresses mostly issues of cultural 'recognition'—as a way for minority language speakers to be treated with 'parity of esteem' or 'equal dignity' vis-à-vis speakers of dominant languages, by protecting their ability to use the language in a variety of settings (van Parijs 2011)[4]—the second one is basically concerned by socioeconomic 'redistribution' issues. However, as noted by Fraser, it is important to avoid dichotomising these two kinds of justice claims, as a social justice agenda should be able to address simultaneously both redistribution and recognition issues.

In the remainder of the article, we argue that asking representatives of different civil society bodies for linguistic issues

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using the unfamiliar concept of linguistic (in)equality was indeed productive to bring to the fore issues of 'redistribution' to discussions of language, which in Catalonia tends to be routinely conceptualised under the 'linguistic rights' (May 2005) lexis and mainly as a matter of 'recognition'. This is hardly surprising, as the concepts developed by conflict sociolinguists permeated the social imaginary in Catalonia through their adaptation to institutional policies (Marí 2016), their diffusion through educational versions of the theory (such as Solé i Camardons 1988) and, importantly for our research, in civil society and political activism directly or indirectly inspired by Aracil (Porquet 2013). As we will show, juxtaposing '(in)equality'—the cornerstone of redistribution debates and struggles—to 'language' had certainly the potential to complexify the discussion of these organisations' language ideologies (Rosa and Burdick 2016), going beyond the discussion of the relationship between languages and recognition issues, and re-centring the material implications of language policy agendas.

The analysis of our informants' attempts to make sense of the concepts of linguistic inequality and linguistic equality offers an opportunity to discuss in more explicit terms the socioeconomic implications of language revitalisation. This is not strictly novel, as Costa (2023) has lately reclaimed the materialist genealogy of conflict sociolinguistics, which Martin-Jones (1988) had already noted in the late 1980s. We should not lose sight of the fact that early accounts of linguistic conflict by Valencians Lluís V. Aracil and Rafael L. Ninyoles (Flors-Mas 2020; Pujolar 2021) or Occitan Robèrt Lafont (Costa 2023) viewed it indeed as a specific manifestation of 'social conflict' in which class struggle played a central role. This article wants thus to contribute to recent attempts to rethink the contribution of conflict sociolinguistics to general sociolinguistic and social theory (cf., Pujolar 2021; Costa 2023), and tries to build bridges between researchers in both traditions.

4 | Data and Method

The discursive corpus analysed in this article consists of 21 semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2021 and February 2024, which generated over 22 h of recorded material.[5] The interviews were conducted in Catalan, as this is the habitual language of both authors and an unmarked language of communication in the non-governmental sector (Bou 2016). If we were uncertain whether our interlocutors would have any difficulties understanding Catalan, we asked them whether it was okay for them if we employed Catalan and reassured them that they could use Spanish or English (the two languages that we both command) if they preferred. This can be seen in Excerpt 1 below, for example, where the respondent answers in Spanish the questions we formulate in Catalan.

Our sampling strategy aimed to include a variety of organisations within Catalan civil society. The corpus includes 3 university student associations, 2 associations devoted to leisure-time education (*educació en el lleure*), 3 trade unions, 1 employer association, 1 teacher association, 3 Catalan language promotion bodies, 1 popular culture association (*colla de cultura popular*), 6 migrant-run associations (4 for international migration and 2 for internal migrants from areas with official bilingualism in Spain), and 1 association focused on the rights of Spanish speakers in Catalonia. Without claiming to be representative of Catalan civil society, our corpus includes a wide range of organisations of different size and degree of institutionalisation, historical trajectory and social mission.

In the majority of cases, organisations were contacted through the email address publicly available, and they freely chose the person to represent them. They were in general willing to collaborate, although we faced significant difficulties with migrant associations due to their precarious staffing (often run by only one person who has to juggle multiple work responsibilities). Finally, we could only interview one pro-Spanish body. Two other organisations refused to participate or simply did not answer our many messages (Leblanc and Léger, this theme series, report similar difficulties with Anglophone associations in New Brunswick).

Previous to the interviews, we translated both the informed consent form that had obtained ethical clearance by the University of Ottawa, as well as the interview script that had been devised (and already used) by our colleagues in Canada and Wales. We adapted the phrasing and organisation of questions and added some questions regarding key concepts in Catalan policymaking at different historical moments. Examples include *normalització lingüística* (language normalisation), *llengua pròpia* (own language), *cohesió social* (social cohesion) and *emergència lingüística* (linguistic emergency). The analysis of the current validity of these concepts for the organisations surveyed is beyond the scope of this article.

Interviews were fully transcribed and thematically coded (Saldaña 2009). Afterwards, the two authors performed theme-oriented discourse analysis (Roberts and Sarangi 2005) on the extracts in which the participants engaged directly with the two focal concepts under examination. We framed and interpreted their responses in the light of their previous description of the association's goals and its stance towards linguistic issues.

The nature of our research design had a significant impact on the process of data generation. In the opening vignette and afterwards, we have discussed how dauting it was for some of the representatives to engage with the concepts of linguistic equality and inequality. This was even more complex for the representatives of the non-language-focused bodies. Aware of this, we first asked whether the concepts had 'any ressonances' for them, by which we meant whether 'they used them to explicate their mission and function', as we phrase it in one of the interviews, and only secondarily did we enquire about 'what they thought about when they heard them [the concepts]'. We engaged in a great deal of pre-empting and face-saving strategies, like 'I know we are asking you to engage in a very difficult exercise', justifying the concepts as being 'part of the scientific objectives of the project' and reassuring participants when they opted out of defining the concepts. Being self-reflective about the arduousness (and oddity) of the questions, and sharing this with our interlocutors, was essential to enable participants to make sense of what we were jointly constructing, and also, for our own professional credibility. We came across as both epistemologically informed sociolinguists and methodologically caring interviewers, which, given the nature of the event, were essential traits. This prompted

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our informants to be equally reflexive. Many voiced their concern about not accurately reflecting their organisation's perspective but their own. We understand these hesitations as being part of the data we were producing. They surfaced precisely because we were asking 'unusual' questions, and because an 'official' institutional position on what linguistic (in)equality meant did not exist. Our participants' responses were, in fact, the closest we could get to these bodies meaning-making processes. On a practical level, we tried to help by bringing the discussion to the concrete terrain of the associations' discursive productions and debates ('do you actually employ any of these terms?'), which became a productive way to move the conversation forward. In what follows, we will present and discuss the findings of our analysis.

5 | Results

Following the project interview script, our participants were asked to discuss first the concept of linguistic inequality and then the notion of linguistic equality. In what follows, we present their uptake of these two terms in that same order.

5.1 | Discourses on Linguistic Inequality

As we expected, most organisational representatives were puzzled by our question on what linguistic inequality meant for them. This is because, as discussed in the introduction, the concept has been and continues to be alien to Catalan policy-making. Their responses inevitably included pausing, asking us back, hesitating, confessing ignorance, requesting time to think, checking understanding, requesting answer validation and/or metapragmatically framing answers as tentative responses. In some cases, respondents cancelled the concept and provided, instead, a definition of another term that sounded close enough but was more meaningful to them, such as when the representative of one of the student associations answered 'rather than inequality we would talk about asymmetrical proportionality, right?, I mean the moment you have two languages living on the same territory they would hardly be fifty fifty'.[6] In a non-negligible number of cases, our researcher expertise was made relevant, as, for example, when one of the interviewees asked us 'to teach me [him] a short lesson'.

In general, there were not any observable regularities in the type of response uptake linked to the type of organisation participants belonged to, except for those associations working in the fields of leisure time education (*esplais)* and popular culture, and for migrant-oriented, migrant-run associations. All representatives from the former group opted out of engaging with the concept on the grounds that it was not part of their daily work or institutional discussions. In fact, Catalan was perceived as so hegemonic in those two social spaces that language issues were rarely tackled. This was rationalised by one of our participants in the following way: it is 'a movement that is so Catalan, I mean, just the simple fact that the movement of *esplais* was born out of the Catalanist movement of the late Francoism'. By contrast, the concept did have clear and strong resonances for the migrant-run associations, which quickly related to it, mostly to describe their members' life and professional experiences in Catalonia, as we shall see later.

In relation to what specific languages were imagined by participants as being subject to relations of linguistic inequality, we explicitly avoided choosing any in our formulation of the question, which referred, in general, to 'linguistic inequality in relation to language dynamics in Catalonia'. The majority of respondents, however, took the question to be about Catalan and Spanish. Yet, for one student association, linguistic inequality distinctly referred to students' unequal access to English or other foreign languages based on socioeconomic factors: 'when we talk about linguistic inequality we normally refer to English' or to 'foreign languages in general that can entail difficulties for students'. Along similar lines, after an initial focus on Catalan and Spanish, the two main worker unions in Catalonia brought to the fore the growing importance of multilingual skills for work opportunities and, thus, their potential for linguistic inequality. One of their representatives stated that, for her, linguistic inequality referred to the inequality of 'a person who is monolingual in relation to a person that commands more than one language'.

Overall, in participants' definitions of linguistic inequality, we distinguish two types of discourses: those focused on the social actors and those focused on the relationship between languages (conceptualised as entities separate from individuals). Interestingly, this parallels the distinct emphases of political-economic and conflict sociolinguistics outlined in the theoretical section of this article. In what follows, we will present both strands and the different focuses within.

5.1.1 | Linguistic Inequality: A Focus on Social Actors

This understanding of linguistic inequality is the most frequent in the corpus. 12 organisations out of the 19 that engaged with the concept centre on issues of inequality affecting individuals, while 7 conceptualise linguistic inequality as referring to the relationship between languages. The social actors that are imagined to be impacted by linguistic inequality were: individuals who cannot speak Catalan (in 5 cases), individuals who cannot speak either Catalan or Spanish (1 case), habitual Catalan speakers (4 cases), habitual Spanish speakers (1 case) and people who are not proficient in English (1 case).

With regard to the meanings of linguistic inequality, respondents delineate it as: (a) actors' unequal access to important material resources (work, education, healthcare, legal assistance, etc.) motivated by the lack of knowledge of Catalan in the case of work and education (the majority) or of both Catalan and Spanish in the case of healthcare and legal assistance (one case); (b) actors' unequal chances of learning Catalan, with the material consequences mentioned in (a); (c) the symbolic distance that some actors' lack of competence and use of Catalan creates with local community members; and (d) Catalan speakers' impossibility of using Catalan in all social spheres, which creates a situation of comparative inequality with respect to Spanish speakers. We situate definitions (a) and (b) along Fraser's redistribution axis, whereas (c) and (d) would align better with the recognition axis—or with language justice as 'equal dignity' in van Parijs' (2011) terms.

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The following excerpts illustrate each of the conceptualisations of linguistic inequality mentioned. In Excerpt 1, the participant (Resp), the representative of a migrant-run association, discusses the impact of not knowing Catalan in relation to work opportunities, mostly for jobs in the public sector. A2 (Author 2, Avel·lí) is posing the question.

Excerpt 1 (Migrants 5)

A2: si nosaltres te preguntem pel concepte de de desigualtat lingüística/ e:hm com t'imagines tu aquesta: eh desigualtat lingüística\ o què penses que vol dir desigualtat lingüística\

Resp: ya\ la desigualdad lingüística pues yo lo entiendo de que pues bueno\ no: no no: no no todo el mundo e:h te habla lo- que se lo:- o sea no tienen implementado aquí o sea\ está implementado el catalán/ pero más que nada para las las las entidades para cuando vas a buscar trabajo/ e:n en e:n entidades de: públicas\ es hacienda seguridad social/ estas cosas por ejemplo las oposiciones/ todas estas cosas te piden el catalán y se lo exigen aquí\ no/ entonces sí ahí hay una: una una: una: una:: impedimento lingüístico muy grande\ no/ porque ahí pues ahí sí ya no podemos entrar la mayoría de las personas que hemos vinido\ hemos venido pues ya en esos años\ no/ pero:

A2: if we ask you about the concept of linguistic inequality/e:rm how do you imagine this linguistic inequality\or what do you think linguistic inequality might mean

Resp: right\ linguistic inequality I understand as okay\ no:t not no:t not not everyone e:rm speaks to you- like you don't- I mean like you don't have it implemented here I mean\ Catalan is implemented/ but especially for the the the institutions like when you look for a job/ in in in public institutions\ like the tax office or the social security office/ these things for example the public examinations/ in all these places they ask for Catalan and it's a requirement here\ right/ so there there is a: a: a: a: a: very big linguistic barrier\ right/ because there so there we can't access the majority of people that have come\ that have come recently\ right/ bu:t

We see how the respondent highlights the lack of practical use ('implementation') of Catalan, which prevents the development of linguistic competence. She equates linguistic inequality with some sort of double linguistic gatekeeping, which is, on the one hand, social, and on the other hand, institutional. Beyond the actual response content, it is worth noting how much the interviewee hesitates before she dares say that people do not speak Catalan to them (with 5 repetitions of the adverbial 'not') and that this, combined with the legal requirement to know Catalan for accessing jobs in the public sector, constitutes a huge linguistic barrier '*impedimento*' (note also here the 5 repetitions of the indefinite article 'a'). The hesitant way in which the message is delivered seems in fact to convey a third lamination of linguistic inequality, which would be the difficulties for openly discussing the issue.

Excerpt 2 contains an imagination of linguistic inequality linked to the (im)possibility of accessing the language. For the participant in Excerpt 2, a representative of a student association, school immersion in Catalan is fundamental to prevent the types of language-based exclusions mentioned in Excerpt 1. She also challenges Catalan speakers' systematic use of Spanish to address certain kinds of (racialised) interlocutors for being a sort of discriminatory practice that thwarts rather than enhances integration into the host society (see Pujolar 2010, for an analysis of this trend).

Excerpt 2 (Students 3)

Resp: noltros sí que l'utilitzam quan xerram en aquest cas d'immersió lingüística\ és a di:r defensam òbviament es model d'immersió lingüística i::

A2: hm hm

Resp: creim que es fet de què no hi sigui sí que pot generar aquesta desigualtat entre estudiants i creim que hi ha dos grans peri::lls una que seria sa segregació escolar per motius lingüístics i s'altra que seria es fet de què famílies o:n sa llengua sigui es castellà o qualsevol altra no tendria espais on practicar i desenvolupar es seu català i això sí que és en es moment que se generen aquestes desigualtats lingüístiques però ho tractam des d'aquest àmbit i si no és també amb es tema des prejudicis lingüístics es fet de què tu canviïs de llengua també és una desigualtat al cap i a la fi

A2: una desigualtat respecte què/

Resp: o sigui també ho entene:m/ a part de què seria: una [actitud

A2: [hm hm

Resp: bastant racista/ per dir-ho de qualque manera [considerar

A2: [hm hm

Resp: que una persona sigui pes motiu que sigui no t'entén eh també li estàs llevant s'oportunitat de què s'expressi en aquesta llengua/ de poder-la practicar/ de poder-se integrar-se/ etcètera etcètera

Resp: we do employ it when we talk in this case about language immersion\ that is to say we obviously defend the model of language immersion a::nd

A2: hm hm

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> *Resp: we believe that if it doesn't exist it can generate this inequality among students\ we believe there are two main pe::rils\ one would be school segregation on language grounds and the other one would be the fact that families whose language is Spanish or any other one they would not have spaces where to practice and develop their Catalan and so that would generate linguistic inequalities\ we make sense of it in that sphere and also in relation to language prejudices\ that is the fact that you code-switch is also a type of inequality at the end of the day*

> *A2 a type of inequality in relation to what/*

> *Resp: I mean we also understa::nd it/beyond the fact that it would be:: a racist [attitude*

> *A2: [hm hm*

> *Resp: fairly racist/ to call it some way [to think*

> *A2: [hm hm*

> *Resp: that a person for whatever reason will not understand you erm you are taking away their opportunity to use that language/ to practice it/ to become integrated and so on.*

The third and fourth types of participant definition of linguistic inequality are situated on Fraser's recognition axis. The third type was specifically voiced by the representative of another migrant-run association, who argued that linguistic inequality emerged due to a lack of competence in Catalan because, in their words, 'speaking Catalan brings you closer to your interlocutor'. Although this social 'proximity' could also be understood in material terms, the respondent made a point of emphasising its symbolic dimension as if command of Catalan indexed something about the speaker's sensitivity to the local linguistic context, which was positively valued by their interlocutors.

The fourth sense of linguistic inequality refers to social actors' uneven possibilities of using one of the two languages, in particular Catalan, because, as the respondent mentions in Excerpt 3 below, there are certain social fields where it is absent (or 'gaps', as the interviewee calls them). In other interviews, this is referred to as the 'unequal rights of Catalan speakers', echoing the scholarly paradigm of linguistic rights (May 2005). A common trope is that of (not) being able to live one's life in Catalan, which also appears in the excerpt. This type of discourse, although sometimes phrased in individual terms (as in the extract below), tends to foreground the linguistic group dimension (*catalanoparlants* vs. *castellanoparlants*) of situations of linguistic inequality.

> Excerpt 3 (Unions 1)

> A2: […] tu creus que és desigualtat lingüística és un concepte: rellevant per a parlar sobre la situació de les llengües a: a Catalunya/ i si és el cas com com enteneu aquesta desigualtat

> Resp: crec que ho és\ i:: i fem servir el concepte sempre no/ a::mb a:::mb sempre ens ens preocupa la impossibilitat de una persona catalanoparlant de fer servir la seva llengua en tots els aspectes de la seva vida perquè hi ha forats no/

> *A2: […] do you think that linguistic inequality is a conce::pt that is relevant to speak about the linguistic situation in Catalonia/ and if this is the case how do you understand this concept*

> *Resp: I think it is\ a::nd we always use the concept right/ wi::th wi::th it always worried us that a Catalan-speaking person cannot use their language in all spheres of their life because there are gaps right/*

We argue that this perspective on linguistic inequality is not technically redistribution-oriented because it does not prevent Catalan speakers from accessing key material resources but forces them to switch into Spanish, which most can do rather unproblematically.[7] This definition of linguistic inequality would, therefore, be aligned with Fraser's recognition or van Parijs' (2011) argument that speakers of a minority language that is a key element of their collective identity should be able to go about their everyday lives in that language. Failure to do so is an affront to their dignity, and this is a source of linguistic injustice.

A similar standpoint is held by the representative of an association that fights for the rights of habitual Spanish speakers in Catalonia, mainly in the field of education. The main issue for them is, again, symbolic: In the interview, their representative stated that 'the inputs that this child receives at school is that their language is not a language of culture, because it's not a language in which they can study or can use to express themselves'. We see how the critique of current language-in-education policies plays on the recognition axis and not on children's ability to access education.

5.1.2 | Linguistic Inequality: A Focus on Languages

A significantly less frequent type of discourse (occurring only in 7 out of the 19 participant definitions provided) views linguistic inequality as inequality between languages. The discourses in this strand are more closely aligned with the conceptualisation of language conflict in early Catalan sociolinguistic theory. Some of them focus on the imbalance of size between Catalan and Spanish, others on the legal asymmetry between the two languages enshrined in the Spanish Constitution, and still a third strand draws on the discourse of linguistic minoritisation to foreground the elements that work to devalue and discourage the use of the non-state language. In all these discussions of linguistic inequality, social actors are erased. As we see in the extract that follows, even though the interviewee mentions 'rights' and 'obligations', which are usually associated with speakers of certain languages, they are discursively discussed as properties of the languages. We attribute this semantic transposition to the location of the association in the field of Catalan language activism, where the focus away from the actual speakers is not

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an uncommon discursive strategy. In the excerpt, we further observe how the interviewee hesitates, emphasises the need to 'understand' the concept correctly and mentions three times that the concept of linguistic inequality is not part of their conceptual toolbox as discussed earlier.

Excerpt 4 (Defense of Catalan 3)

> Resp: no\ com a [entitat] no ho fem servir\ com a [entitat] no ho fem servir\ jo entenc mmh a vera primer que ho entengui bé eh/ si desigualtat lingüística s'entén doncs e::l precisament això que el català és una llengua minoritzada i que per tant no no està equiparada pel que fa::: ni a evidentment ni a:: ni a drets ni a::h ni a deures diem-ne amb el que és el castellà\ això no no:: com a [entitat] diem-ne no ho fem servir\

> *Resp: no\ we don't use it in our association\ in our association we don't use it\ I understand mmmh let's see first let's make sure I understand it correctly right/ if linguistic inequality is understood as right the::: precisely this that Catalan is a minoritised language and therefore it is obviously not on an equal footing with Spanish with regard to:: rights and obligations so to speak\ but we don't use this concept in our association*

To summarise our findings in this section, over 60% of the definitions provided homed in on how inequality plays out for individuals. Among these, the most frequent ones related inequality, on the one hand, to the inability of those actors without sufficient command of Catalan to access key material resources, in particular employment and education, and on the other, to the impossibility for *catalanoparlants* of employing Catalan in all spheres of life.

5.2 | Discourses on Equality

In her discussion of linguistic justice, Piller (2016, 204) quotes Fraser (2012) to suggest that linguistic justice should be interpreted as 'the overcoming of (linguistic) injustice'. Similarly, when we undertook this project, we expected that our participants' attempts to define linguistic equality would somehow rely on the idea of 'reversing' the kinds of linguistic inequalities they would identify. Following a similar logic to that of Piller's, we also expected definitions of inequality to be mostly focused on the description (and critique) of specific situations/processes in the areas of work of each association and definitions of equality to be oriented to more abstract ideals and principles (thus, more difficult for participants to relate to).

When analysing the data, we realised that in fact the organisation of the interview reflected these expectations. Significantly, the 'easier' question on linguistic inequality was always asked first. In addition, the phrasing of our questions and of some of the prompts we provided to help the participants experiencing trouble formulate their responses was also telling in that respect. For instance, after participants answered what 'linguistic inequality' meant for them, Avel·lí (in charge of this part of the interview) usually framed the question about 'linguistic equality' asking what would be, according to them, 'the contrary' or 'the flip side of the coin'. We also consistently asked if it made sense to 'apply' the concept of linguistic inequality in relation to the association's actions or perceptions of language dynamics in Catalonia; by contrast, we prompted participants to reflect on how they would 'imagine' a situation of linguistic equality.

However, despite these assumptions and the fact that we were somehow pushing responses towards our expected paths, in many interviews the issues raised during discussions of inequality were absent from the discussion of equality, which was clearly not understood as the 'reverse' or the 'overcoming' of processes of inequality. Also, no consistent pattern was found linking discussions of 'inequality' to 'concrete' facts and processes, and discussions of equality to more 'abstract' ideals or scenarios. Likewise, the two concepts could not easily be mapped onto a differential focus on the (un)equal standing of social actors versus the (un)equal relationship between languages. Discussions of linguistic equality followed, thus, their own logic, and, to our surprise, were sometimes easier to tackle for some of the participants than linguistic inequality. Despite these exceptions, however, what emerges from our data analysis is that more participants opted out of providing a definition of linguistic equality than of inequality (6 vs. 2). Two others cancelled the concept on the grounds that 'it does not exist' or that 'it is impossible' (see also Rosa, this volume, for a discussion of social actors' contestation of linguistic (in)equality based on their lived experiences). In the latter cases, participants did not engage in specific discussions about why they thought linguistic equality was not possible in Catalonia but drew on general considerations such as 'we are not equal' or 'I don't think there is anywhere in the world where language equality is possible in any sector'. What matters for our discussion is that 8 of our participants (almost 40%) did not engage with the concept at all.

In what follows, we will organise our findings following the structure of the section on linguistic inequality. We will discuss first discourses that link the idea of equality to speakers' access to linguistic capital or their linguistic rights and then discourses that thematise the idea of equality between languages.

5.2.1 | Linguistic Equality: A Focus on Social Actors

Unlike what we observed in relation to discourses of linguistic inequality, where the balance was clearly tilted in favour of a focus on actors, in the case of equality, responses are more balanced, with 6 definitions taking an individuals' perspective and 7 adopting a language-centred approach. Another difference is that the meanings of linguistic equality as it impacts actors are a lot more heterogeneous than in the case of linguistic inequality. In 3 cases, participants refer to having equal possibilities of language choice (for habitual Catalan-speakers in two instances and for habitual Spanish-speakers in one instance); in one case, equality is linked to accessing material resources (employment), where knowing Catalan is viewed as reflecting 'equality'; in one other case, equality is discussed as respect for the languages of migrants on the part of the local population, and vice-versa,

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as 'sensitiveness' towards Catalan on the part of international migrants; and finally, one definition of linguistic equality relates it to migrants' wanting to belong in the host society, which translates into their learning of the local languages (both Catalan and Spanish).

5.2.2 | Linguistic Equality: A Focus on Languages

As we mentioned, over half of the definitions of linguistic equality provided (7 in total) take a language-centred perspective that erases actors. Although the number for linguistic inequality was the same, in 3 of the cases, the associations involved are different. This further confirms that the two concepts were not treated as the 'flip side of the same coin' by participants in our research.

One of the most salient elements in relation to our participants' understandings of equality is that it is largely rejected as 'adequate' for Catalonia. For the majority, the notion of equality activates a symmetrical (50–50) framing of the relationship between Catalan and Spanish that contributes to further minoritise Catalan even in the few social fields where it enjoys wider currency (e.g., in education). This is hardly surprising, considering the lasting influence of conflict sociolinguistics' framing of language dynamics and suspicion against bilingualism, as can clearly be seen in the following extract, in which we interview two representatives of one of the major trade unions.

Excerpt 5 (Unions 2)

Resp1: és que jo no ho sé si la igualtat pot existir

Resp2: és lo que anava dir si: igualtat és bilingüisme no ho sé eh/

Resp1: = sí\

A2: = mh\

Resp2: que hi ha molta: hi han molts dubtes que el bilingüisme pugui sobreviure en una societat\

[…]

A2: és a dir que: aquesta idea d'igualtat/ la vincularíeu d'alguna manera amb bilingüisme\

Resp1: és que [no ho sé

Resp2: [home

Resp1: d'entrada potser més que de igualtat hauríem de parlar d'equitat no/ de:

Resp2: = entre llengües

Resp1: = entre llengües sí\

A2: mh mh

Resp1: per tant que aquella que més ho necessite estigui més protegida/

Resp1: the thing is I'm not sure equality can exist

Resp2: this is what I was going to say if equality is bilingualism I'm not sure

Resp1: = yes

A2: = mhm

Resp2: there are many doubts that bilingualism can survive in a society

[…]

A2: so this idea of equality/ you would somehow relate to bilingualism

Resp1: the thing is [I'm not sure

Resp2: [well

Resp1: in fact maybe we should speak of equity rather equality

Resp2: = between languages

Resp1: = yes between languages

A2: mh mh

Resp1: so that the one that needs it the most be more protected/

The excerpt begins with one of the union representatives casting doubts over the idea that equality might at all be possible, in line with responses that simply cancelled the validity of the concept. The second participant aligns with her colleagues' hesitant stance and brings the concept of bilingualism to bear. We mentioned in the introduction that this concept has traditionally been problematised in Catalan policymaking because, following the postulates of the sociolinguistics of conflict, it is believed to be the first step towards language shift. These echoes are clearly seen in our participants' claim that they are unsure whether bilingualism can 'survive'. Finally, as a way out of their discomfort with equality, they resort to the idea of *equity* (see also Bonnin in this theme series), which provides the theoretical grounds to argue that the two languages must be treated asymmetrically (at least, in some fields) so that the minority language enjoys greater protection. What this means in practice we can see in the following excerpt, which explicitly addresses the field of education.

Excerpt 6 (Students 2)

Resp1: és el que anava a dir que igualtat no crec que fos la paraula és a dir si parlem del context més català castellà e::hm una immersió lingüística plenament en català això seria l'equitat que necessitem […] el pla de::

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> immersió lingüística de la de:: l'educació obligatòria pública e:::h demostra que la immersió lingüística és eficient per formar part de la societat en la que vivim llavors realment el pla de immersió lingüística on el català es vetlli pel català es vetlli per la llengua la que en aquest cas seria la minoritària e::h això seria una equitat real i no hi ha necessitat d'una igualtat perquè en el context de que:: féssim català i castellà per igual com sembla que volen encaminar-nos realment el que significaria seria la destrucció de la llengua minoritària

> *Resp1: this is what I was going to say I don't think equality should be the word\ if we think of the Catalan Spanish context e:rm a language immersion fully in Catalan this is the equity we need […] compulsory public education proves that language immersion is an efficient way to belong to the society where we live so a plan of language immersion where Catalan is protected because in this case it's the minority language e:rm that would be true equity and there is no need for equality because in a context whe::re we did equal number of hours of Catalan and Spanish as some would like us to this would amount to the destruction of the minority language.*

In this fragment, we see similar stances as previously, that is, the wholesale questioning of equality in an unequal playing field. Equality would entail, for this participant, the 'destruction' of Catalan. Instead, the concept of equity is believed to be a more suitable alternative, as it justifies the prioritisation of Catalan in certain fields, such as education, where immersion policies guarantee, according to her, 'true equity'.

The preference for equity over equality is a common stance in our data. This comes as no surprise, as the concept is well aligned with the 'compensatory approach' adopted in current language policymaking in Catalonia. In fact, 4 (out of the 7) associations that adopt a language-focused rather than a social actors-focused approach to equality explicitly challenge this concept in favor of equity. A fifth association defends the same postulates, that is, implementing measures of positive discrimination in favour of Catalan (see also Barakos and Llewellyn, this theme series), without actually using the concept of equity itself. Of the remaining 2, one of the informants also questions the concept of equality and switches over to a discussion of the legal concept of symmetry in his response. He argues that Spanish and Catalan are asymmetrically treated by the Spanish Constitution and that this, therefore, cancels the relevance of the concept of linguistic equality.

6 | Discussion and Conclusion

This study has shown that the concepts of linguistic equality and inequality do not work as a binary for participants and that one is not the reverse of the other. This is important for policymaking but also for refining and complexifying both normative and sociolinguistic theorisations of these and related concepts, such as that of (social/linguistic/sociolinguistic) justice. We have demonstrated that participants' definitions either centred social actors or languages but that this worked differently in each case. Whereas linguistic inequality mostly (though not exclusively) activated definitions that constructed social actors as centrally impacted by it, in the case of linguistic equality, discursive stances were more balanced. Respondents viewed linguistic equality as referring to social actors' chances of freely choosing what language to use, and more frequently, to describe the social presence/relevance of each language. What is most important is that a significant number of respondents decided not to engage with the concept at all because it did not resonate with them or simply found it unrealistic. A great deal of those who chose to discuss it did so to reject the idea of equality in favour of equity and to defend that the protection of Catalan needs a positive discrimination approach that prioritises the minority language. The activation of the concept of equity in the discourse of unions, university student associations and Catalan defense bodies shows how the social-scientific lexis has managed to permeate the discourse of civil society organisations (concepts such as racisalisation and intersectionality, which also came up during the interviews, would be similar cases).

We believe that bringing the concepts of linguistic inequality and equality to our conversations with participants was productive. Their unfamiliarity with the terms *did* force them to move away from established language policy discourses in Catalonia that have, in general, constructed languages rather than social actors as central policy elements. And when actors have been foregrounded, it has mostly been from an identity/symbolic angle, or in Fraser's words, on the recognition front. Yet, in our data, we observe how several participants link (in)equality with issues of access to material resources, bringing a different situated order of sociolinguistic justice to bear (see Rosa in this theme series for an in-depth discussion). We argue that this redistribution focus is novel, and it may indicate that a more balanced relationship between the material and the symbolic may be underway in discussions of language, not just in Catalan policymaking, but also in Catalan society at large. This is important because it should force policy makers to be more attentive to the ways in which Catalan is experienced by some actors as compounding the intersecting inequalities that shape their lives, and which language policies often ignore.

In that sense, the exploration of civic discourses on language (in)equality opened a space for discussing the socioeconomic implications of language revitalisation agendas. This, we believe, is an integral part of the recent attempts to rethink the contribution of conflict sociolinguistics to general sociolinguistic and social theory (Pujolar 2021; Costa 2023) and to develop materialist frames of analysis 'in which equality is not akin to recognition alone, but also to a fair distribution of material resources' (Costa 2023, 340). Indeed, the sociolinguistics of conflict, especially as it was formulated by Ninyoles (1969), framed the language conflict as an index of an underlying social conflict in which the subordinated language was, in fact, the language of the dominated social group. Reversing linguistic subordination could only be predicated on the reversal of socioeconomic (and ideological) domination. The uptake in Catalonia of the sociolinguistics of conflict, probably because of the structurally different position of Catalan there, tended to erase the issue of socioeconomic inequalities and foregrounded the language rather than the people. Lafont warned against culturalist revitalization agendas

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and the dangers of 'monumentalizing language' (Costa 2023, 11), but he also warned against the fact that the 'normalisation' of Catalan was grounded on an 'abstract linguistic moralisation' (Lafont 1998, 32) that may reverse the conflict, not erase it. That is, he argued that unless the ways in which language intersects with socioeconomic inequalities are addressed, the conflict will still be there—only in some other shape. And this may even be more detrimental for some revitalisation agendas; certainly so, we believe, for the case of Catalan. Our data compel policy makers and sociolinguists alike to address the big elephant in the room: How to link a redistribution agenda to a language revitalisation agenda that clearly answers the question, 'what's in it for me in learning/speaking Catalan?'.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] See, for example, the approval in 2023 of the Act for the Substantive Equality of Canada's Official Languages. https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/AnnualStatutes/2023_15/page-1.html.

[2] Literally, 'Citizens'.

[3] https://llengua.gencat.cat/ca/pactenacionalperlallengua/detalls/article/presentacio-en-00001.

[4] We draw on these concepts by van Parijs (2011) because they are useful for us to conceptualise the distinctive focuses of the different discursive strands that emerge from the data. However, this article does not engage with Van Parijs' (2011) argument regarding the global spread of English as a matter of justice and equal opportunities, which has been criticised, among others, by May (2015) and Soler and Morales-Gálvez (2022).

[5] The corpus belongs to the wider project 'L'egalité linguistique: entre multilinguisme et monolinguisme', headed by Dr. Mireille McLaughlin (University of Ottawa).

[6] Transcription conventions used: a:: lengthening of sound [beginning of overlap - self-interruption = latching \falling intonation /rising intonation

[7] We provide translations into English of all in-text interview extracts in order not to disrupt the narrative. By contrast, all the excerpts that are presented for analysis contain the original version in Catalan or Spanish followed by an English translation. We have decided not to edit non-standard, conversational, and dialectal features. We believe the representation of participants' dialectal features does not compromise their anonymity since the data were collected a few years ago and there is a relatively high turn-over rate in these associations' leading positions.

[8] Although we would argue that being able to access healthcare in one's own language is essential to a good service.

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