

# The consolidation of an oral standard: limits and conditions

Isidor Marí

- *This article analyses the reasons why it's difficult to establish an oral standard for Catalan based on three types of factors: the territorial scope of communication spheres, the linguistic options chosen the media and the familiarity of audiences from each territory with the different types of oral standard. Depending on the limitations identified, some ways are noted to advance in this process, provided the linguistic criteria prosper in a close relationship with the expansion of territorial communication spheres and the systematic exchange of programmes produced or broadcast from different points in the territory.*

## Keywords

Standardisation, Catalan, oral language, communication area, radio, television, Catalonia, País Valencià, Balearics, communication policy.

In his talk given on 21 June 2007 at the conference “20 years of the Catalan communication area. A still possible objective?”,<sup>1</sup> lecturer Josep Gifreu weighed up, 30 years after democracy had been restored and 23 years after the first Catalan radio and television broadcasts, the deficiencies and achievements along the road to a Catalan communication area, an objective which he himself remembered having proposed 25 years earlier in his doctoral thesis.

In Josep Gifreu's authoritative inventory of the strong and weak points that can be identified in this process, he noted how one of the key weaknesses of the Catalan cultural area was the “lack of a standard of common oral language for the large broadcasting media, accepted and acceptable by all territories, similar, for example, to the rules in Spanish for spelling, which are celebrating their 75th anniversary”.

I admit that, on hearing these words, I had the feeling that such a statement, although basically true, required some nuances to help understand why a more unitary oral standard had not been established and, particularly, what might be done to move towards establishing one.

That's why I decidedly accepted, perhaps with a certain temerity, the invitation I received shortly afterwards to contribute to this type of reflection. This is what I propose to do in this article, where I shall attempt to analyse, in broad brushstrokes, the limitations that have affected the possibility to establish a common oral standard for the whole territory of the Catalan language over the last few years, and to note the conditions that would help to enable this process. And, in these considerations, I believe it is vital to distinguish, right from the start, between a number of dimensions or perspectives that must be evaluated

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separately, although the pace and direction pursued by the establishment of our oral standard may ultimately depend on them converging together at the same time.

First of all, these are well-known aspects, as they have been mentioned and commented, at least in part, in various works and proposals on the oral standard that have been published, but perhaps they have not been integrated, sufficiently explicitly and together, in a proposal that allows us to act in a converging direction from the different spheres and sectors. This is what I propose to look at in this article.

And the dimensions or perspectives I am referring to and which, to a certain extent, are implicit in the very formulation made by Josep Gifreu of the lack of an oral standard, are these three:

1. The territorial dimension of the oral communication areas achieved to date, depending on the existing media and their coverage.
  - What linguistic options can the media take and actually adopt in keeping with their present-day audiences? Is it reasonable to expect a common model of an oral standard to be established before there are established communication spheres that cover a wide audience throughout the language territory and that receive broadcasts from the different Catalan-speaking regions?
2. The formulation and transmission of proposals or language models suitable for different users of the oral standard.
  - What language principles and criteria are proposed by professionals and relevant institutions to gradually build up a common oral standard? Do they sufficiently guide the speakers and media that need to put them into practice?
3. The attitudes of the different groups, and especially of the audiences or receiving publics, towards the linguistic options represented by the proposals for an oral standard.
  - How familiar are the different regional publics with the oral standard of their own zone and with those of the other areas in the language territory? Is this familiarity approximately symmetrical and reciprocal in the different territories? Are there any significant imbalances to take into account?

Basically, these questions already suggest the context in which we need to evaluate the feasibility and current status of the oral standard, and they lead us to a key consideration or thesis, which we now put forward: the achievement of a common oral standard for the whole of Catalan-speaking society does not consist merely of correctly selecting certain linguistic elements. In fact, it particularly depends on the existence of an agreed and continual strategy to construct interregional communication spheres in the road towards a Catalan communication area. Even the relative importance, more or less marked, that is ultimately held by central Catalan in building up this oral standard will depend on the presence of the different territorial broadcasting centres in these areas of a wider audience.

We will now go over each of these considerations in a little more detail.

### **1. The territorial dimension of the oral communication areas**

To a large extent, and abiding by the same assessment as Josep Gifreu in the aforementioned conference, it is true that there are strong points in the current structure of the media from our language area. Basically:

- There are autonomous political powers that allow our own communicative policies to be undertaken;
- There are public radio and television corporations that allow media products to be exchanged;
- The Catalan Radio and Television Corporation (CCRTV) plays a key role in Catalonia and, as stated by Gifreu, it has the “core responsibility of constructing a Catalan audiovisual area”;
- There is a significant dynamic of local and county-level communication established in a large part of the territory;
- There is a significant and internationally perceived presence of the Catalan area on the Internet, which can provide interesting opportunities in the new emerging forms of communication.

However, the weak points are also highly significant:

- Spanish policy in the field of the media is characterised by constant obstacles to constructing a joint communi-

cative area for Catalan-speaking territories, which it systematically treats in a fragmentary way, and due to the privileged position always reserved for state-wide media, helping to further the Spanish language and culture.

- In this context, political institutions related to the Catalan language do not question Spain's lack of respect for linguistic and cultural plurality in its communication policy in an open, firm or continual way, nor do they specify, quite explicitly, what might be an alternative and satisfactory way to organise communication areas.
- Neither is there any interregional coordination that is sufficiently consistent among communication professionals from the Catalan language area, nor from the production sectors or those responsible for spreading communication and culture that act in this area.
- As also stated by Gifreu, the private communication and culture groups that have arisen in our language area are not "decisively and continually committed to strengthening this cultural area", but are aimed at the Spanish market.

It would be redundant to repeat the seven black points finally identified by Gifreu in his assessment. For the purposes of our argument, suffice to summarise them, stressing that, in thirty years, there have been no consistent or relevant agreements between the communication policies of the institutions from the Catalan language area nor between the respective public broadcasting corporations (in this field, not even of a bilateral nature). And, as we have already mentioned, neither are there any private groups that have opted to act primarily in this area. Consequently, there is no radio or television station that addresses itself quite so explicitly and consciously to the whole of the Catalan language area. Even less a radio or television channel conceived as a place where the products and symbolic universe of the different regions in this language and cultural area can converge proportionally.

We cannot ignore nor fail to appreciate the efforts that have been made, especially in certain periods, on the one hand by the institutions of Catalonia and the Catalan Radio and Television Corporation and, on the other, by the most representative cultural associations from other Catalan-speaking areas, to ensure they can receive public media from Catalonia in their respective areas. But the insuffi-

ciency, the fragility, the indecisiveness and uncertainty of these achievements are quite evident. At best, a certain coverage has been achieved in a large part of the territory by media conceived and broadcast from Catalonia and perceived as such in the rest of the territory (i.e. relatively "local" but ultimately external).

There have been moments, such as the setting up of Valencia television, the start of the second channel of Catalonia, the Progress Pact period in the Balearic government, the start of autonomous television in the Balearics and the current return of progressive autonomous government in the islands, when it has seemed possible to start up cooperation on a large scale (or still seems so, in the last case). We will not deny the obvious difficulties that have occurred in many of these moments but, really, an ambitious, solid and generous Catalan proposal has always been lacking, one that highlights the advantages of sharing a communication project on a large scale. Even if, ultimately, such a project is not approved, its mere official presentation in public with wide coverage would have been, and still could be, a highly important factor in legitimising the situation and in mobilising society.

So, let's now remember the questions we asked at the beginning concerning this first point, focusing on the possibilities of the communication areas that are actually available:

- What linguistic options can the media take and actually adopt in keeping with their present-day audiences? Is it reasonable to expect a common model of an oral standard to be established before there are established communication spheres that cover a wide audience throughout the language territory and that receive broadcasts from the different Catalan-speaking regions?

The linguistic options of the public television of Catalonia have often been branded as too "central" or "Barcelona-focused" and not very representative of the regional variation of the Catalan oral standard, and even of the internal variation of Catalonia in a strict sense. However, it should be acknowledged that, for the time being and in spite of insufficiencies, the diversity of the types of oral standard used by the speakers on CCRTV and present in the programming of its broadcasters is clearly greater than that found on their Valencian or Balearic counterparts.

As observed by some of the work analysing the linguistic options, in general local and regional radio and television have shown a very clear tendency to exclusively use the regional options of the oral standard, often combined with the sporadic appearance, without justification, of people or programmes that conform to the oral standard of central Catalan<sup>2</sup> or that, at the other extreme, make a totally spontaneous use of the most uncontrolled local speech.

Sincerely, we believe that much more could not be expected, if we take into account the regional compartmentalisation of most of the real communication areas, the particularist or openly secessionist ideology of some autonomous governments on the islands or especially in Valencia, the desire (real or pretended) to help immediate audiences identify as much as possible with the language model adopted and, as we have already mentioned, the absence of any (proposal for) joint programming or the habitual exchange of production between the media of the different regional communication areas.

To some extent, and with regard to the degree of approximation achieved between the different regional types of the oral standard used, I would dare to say that the media's language options have gone even further than that propitiated by the territorial scope of the real communication areas and the difficulty in exchanging their respective products. And I would say that this progress is not precisely due to the politicians in charge of the respective media but particularly to the sense of responsibility of communication professionals, of media language advisors and university and academic centres that have been able to take part in defining appropriate language criteria.

## **2. The formulation and transmission of proposals or language models suitable for different users of the oral standard**

In effect, a highly notable linguistic work has been carried out over the years, and from different fronts, in order to define the ideal characteristics of an oral standard for the media. This is shown by the growing number of works

appearing in this field, from proposals for an oral standard by the Institute of Catalan Studies, which gathers together work initiated previously by university linguists with other work associated with the media themselves, including criteria aimed at a specific territory and even the specific style manuals for a certain broadcaster. At least quantitatively, we cannot say that the oral standard's deficiencies are attributable to a lack of linguistic guidelines.

However, let us look at this more closely and remember the questions we asked previously on this point:

- Do they sufficiently guide people? Do they really respond to a growing intention to come together on the part of territorial models?

Qualitatively, it must be noted that the formulation of some of these criteria does not make it at all clear whether their main function is to legitimise the valid features of each of the oral standard's territorial options or to particularly help these regional types of the oral standard to come closer together. In reality, early proposals for the oral standard had to satisfy both aims at the same time and this could not always be achieved with the clarity required, given the very complexity of the situations of use. We shall attempt to explain.

The first issue tackled was: do we need to present a model with internal variations or different territorial models? The first working meetings, prior to the IEC's proposals, thought that it was preferable to propose a single model of the oral standard with internal variations, for several reasons:

- (1) to reinforce the idea of unity,
- (2) to overcome the hierarchical nature between a supposed central standard and those which some people called regional *parastandards*, and
- (3) to avoid the abusive territorialisation of certain options, which did not coincide either with the limits of the geographical varieties of Catalan or with administrative demarcations (as is the case of verb endings, or specifically the 1st person of the present indicative, which is usual in the north of the País Valencià, or the possessive pronouns *meua*, *teua* and *seua*, which are not exclusively Valencian).

2 Except, in this point, Valencian autonomous television, which has scrupulously avoided the appearance of any broadcast in non-Valencian versions of the oral standard.

At the same time, the presentation of an integrated proposal had to serve to legitimise all variants throughout the territory, giving, on the one hand, local users the necessary confidence in their own variants, which they might otherwise have doubted as they do coincide with the most widespread variants and, on the other hand, to raise awareness in the rest of the territory that these were valid forms in standard use and not simple dialectal variants.

With the perspective of the years that have passed since then, we may state that we have made progress in this direction but that the appearance of territorial models or specific style manuals for a medium (also territorial) have tended to reinforce a regional compartmentalisation of the oral standard, so that minority options in some administrative demarcations have tended to fall into disuse, although they are the most widespread in the whole of the language territory. The two examples we have given before demonstrate this. The ending *-e* is used in the País Valencià and, in the rest of the territory, the possessive pronouns *meua*, *teua* and *seua* disappear from the standard. In practice, therefore, the application of a common oral standard with internal variations has been superseded by the dynamic of regional particularities and parcelling, as a consequence of the very structure of the media and audiovisual communication areas. Speakers, advisors and professionals in the media are not very aware of options from other territories nor of the most general options, but primarily the most usual ones in their own territorial communication area.

The expectation that proposals of a *general area* would gain ground over those of a *restricted area*, insofar as there are communication areas that are also general, has not been fulfilled precisely because, as we have already mentioned, there are practically no general communication areas<sup>3</sup>. If these general areas existed, this would probably help to reduce the merely formal variation, which does not provide any significant nor stylistic accuracy (as is the case, in general, of verbal morphology), but would allow local

lexical variants and expressions to be generally adopted that would enrich the common standard's significant and stylistic functionality. Their absence, however, has emphasised the emblematic and demarcational nature of local variants without any gain in functional terms.

In this respect, we must certainly specify one of the criteria insisted on by the initial proposals for the oral standard: the need for speakers in each location to ensure they make a coherent selection of the oral standard's variants and avoid using both general and local forms in the same text. Although this principle seems generally valid because texts are not unjustifiably hybrid, it must be admitted that the process towards a more unitary oral standard must surely involve the acceptance of a certain degree of inter-territorial interference (the presence, in the same text, of pronunciation, morphological features or words that do not strictly belong to the local type of the oral standard). Criticising speakers who do not keep their original accent with total authenticity may be counterproductive to ensuring more general solutions come together.

In any case, the coming together of regional types of the oral standard must move forward with audiences identifying with the new linguistic options because, in short, the standardisation process is primarily a social process, and this is the third aspect we wish to focus on.

### **3. The attitudes of the different groups, and especially of the audiences or receiving publics, towards the linguistic options represented by the proposals for an oral standard**

As I have stated previously, the justification (or pretext) often given by those in charge of the media, when they have been accused of adopting linguistic options that are too local or colloquial, has been the need to get their audiences to identify with their own credible language. This criterion is reasonable but must be evaluated in terms of the territorial

3 We note that the more general options in the oral standard were identified, although this selection could be improved upon. The fact that interregional confluence has not gone further is not at all due to a lack of linguistic proposals. However, it is undeniable that, in some communication genres, considerable progress has been made towards very much an officially approved style throughout the language territory as a whole, as would be the case of the news and broadcasts of football matches.

scope of each medium, of the character of each of the areas and how programming has evolved over time.

In more informal or spontaneous programmes it's natural for local media to opt for an oral standard that is markedly close to local speech. But the programming grid is usually quite varied because, right from the start, there have been programmes such as the news, where the audience has repeated contact with the more formal style of the local standard and, over time, there should be no difficulty in there being broadcasts that gradually familiarise the local audience with the more general oral standard and with standard types from other territories.

And if this requirement is valid for local media, it is much more so for those with wider geographical coverage, regional or super-regional. In this last case, it would be better to ensure that more local or colloquial examples are not only those immediately related to the point of broadcast (whether this be Barcelona, Valencia or Palma) but are sufficiently representative of the main speech types of the medium's area of coverage. The audience's perception that the speech type that belongs most to the broadcasting centre is overrepresented surely explains the complaints received by the most far-reaching media concerning their "centralism". We should also add here that it's not easy to represent different accents proportionally, and we should not imagine that this can be resolved by the broadcasting centre hiring a staff of speakers from different dialectal origins (even if this were possible, they would end up adapting their accent to that of their immediate work environment), but rather via programming that follows a systematic policy of both general and local broadcasts on the same channel, with audience participation and collaborators and exchanging products with other broadcasters.

In any case, it's true that the media's starting point must be their audience's initial familiarity with some particular standard options they can identify with, although it is even truer that familiarity with the different types of the standard, from the most local and elementary to the most general and elaborate, is built up gradually precisely by dint of including different examples of these in the programming.

However, after all these years, let us once again look at the questions I had asked at the beginning and weigh up the evolution:

- How familiar are the different regional publics with the oral standard of their own zone and with those of the other areas in the language territory? Is this familiarity approximately symmetrical and reciprocal in the different territories? Are there any significant imbalances to take into account?

Firstly, it is quite evident that the media's language options, communication flows and scope have led to a relatively general familiarity with the central type of the standard, albeit less so in the Balearics and the País Valencià.

Secondly, as radio and television broadcasters in the País Valencià and the Balearics have achieved audiences in the Catalan language, their respective publics have started to become quite familiar with their own territorial standard, although this familiarity is still very limited.

But, thirdly, it must be admitted that the audience in Catalonia, the most used to broadcasts in Catalan in terms of timescale, certainly continues to be quite unfamiliar with the types of oral standard from other territories, as they have very few opportunities to hear them, at least much fewer opportunities than the Balearics or País Valencià have to hear the central type. And this also becomes an erroneous perception (at least in my impression, which needs to be confirmed) of the other types of the oral standard as dialectal, inadequate or even incorrect.

And we must not forget that, to a large extent, this is due to the fact that Catalan programmes from radio and television stations in the Balearics or the País Valencià are not broadcast in Catalonia, reciprocating the reception of CCRTV media in these territories, one of the darkest and most inexplicable points in the Catalan communication area.<sup>4</sup>

It is therefore obvious that an approximately symmetrical and reciprocal familiarity has not been achieved of all

4 Too often, the argument that has been used to avoid this reciprocity of broadcasts, such as the small quantity or low quality of broadcasts in Catalan, have frankly sounded like excuses, leading to the malevolent supposition that the real aim was to avoid sharing advertising revenue.

audiences with all territorial variants of the oral standard but that, on the contrary, there are highly significant and negative imbalances.

Once more, overcoming these imbalances is not a question of building up a certain language model nor of each broadcaster hiring teams of speakers where the representation of each accent is proportional to their demographic base. As already mentioned, the solution is that each broadcaster (and especially those with wider audiences) should consciously carry out programming that follows a systematic policy of both general and local broadcasts, of audience participation and collaborators, and should exchange products with other broadcasters throughout the territory.

If those in charge of programming and those in charge of language seriously take this upon themselves and work together in this direction, I think we might find an extensive range of possibilities of this type, both in live broadcasts and also in jointly produced programmes or by broadcasting dramatic productions, documentaries or dubbing from other zones in the territory.

And above all, we should stress one point: namely, that it's the media with the widest audiences that must forge this path. And these media, at the present time, are those of CCRTV. Because it is undeniable that they are the benchmark and because it is via these media, and from Catalonia, where we can most effectively destroy the prejudices of the other media and of their respective audiences, if we know how to act generously and audaciously.

For example, there would be no more effective argument to deactivate Valencian reticence to exchanging broadcasts or products than a powerful, unilateral and explicitly publicised initiative by the Catalan media to hire and broadcast an extensive sample of quality Valencian audiovisual production.

Would it be so difficult for some radio or television stations from the different Catalan-speaking areas to launch some programmes (entertainment, children's, sports, with audience participation, etc.) produced and broadcast jointly, in which participants take part from the whole territory?

### **Some suggestions by way of conclusion**

In short, it's true that the oral standardisation of the Catalan language has deficiencies and limitations, but overcoming

these does not depend on strictly linguistic proposals that are more appropriate and more unitary. The basic condition for oral standardisation to advance is when linguistic criteria can come together in a close relationship with the expansion of the territorial communication areas and the systematic exchange of programmes produced or broadcast by different points in the territory.

As mentioned at the beginning, the main problem is that there is no radio or television station that addresses itself quite so explicitly and consciously to the whole of the Catalan language area. Even less a radio or television channel conceived as a place where the products and symbolic universe of the different regions in this language and cultural area can converge proportionally.

More than the lack of a common oral standard, then, what limits the project for a Catalan communication area is a lack of a communication policy that helps to construct, interconnecting the present-day communication areas, shared areas in which the confluence of the oral standard's territorial variants would advance towards more unitary forms.

An initiative from Catalonia, on the part of those in charge of policy or by media managers, should open up the way towards constructing these areas of shared programming in which the oral standard could grow at the same time as constructing the Catalan communication area.

Should this initiative not arise from the conventional media or from institutions, perhaps the new online communication modes might be a good place to test out the oral standardisation of Catalan.