

The Perceived Effects of Language and Culture Suppression in the Catalan Region of Spain

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ABSTRACT

The Catalan language has had a complex history. The suppression of the Catalan language had a profound impact on the Catalan culture and identity. This study addresses the interaction between language and culture according to students in a Catalan university. The purpose was to evaluate their insights and report the perceived connection between language and culture. An experimental study was conducted to investigate the interrelationship between language and culture and whether it is perceived that language loss affects cultural loss, and both are intertwined. 67 undergraduate university students between the ages of 18 and 22 years participated in this study. They responded to a questionnaire that included general questions on history, language, and culture. The results suggest that the participants feel there is an interdependent connection between language loss and culture loss. This research puts into focus people's identification with their own language, culture, traditions, and history, which reinforces the difficulty of separating one's cultural and linguistic history.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Catalan language suppression refers to the historical process through which the Catalan language was limited or banned under the Francoist regime (1939–1975). During this period, the government strove to impose a cohesive, Castilian-cantered image of Spain and repress the linguistic and cultural diversity of the nation (i Massana, 1987; Llobera, 1989; Pujolar & Puigdevall, 2015; Pujol Casademont, 2020). Catalan was prohibited in all public venues, including schools, government papers, and the media. Books written in Catalan were prohibited, and Catalan writers were occasionally prosecuted or imprisoned. The Franco regime also attempted to eliminate Catalan culture and customs, including the suppression of political Catalan identity manifestations.

The phrase “Catalan genocide” is contentious and highly political, referring to the measures conducted by the administration of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco against the people of Catalonia after the Spanish Civil War (Vilanova, 2017). Many Catalans were imprisoned, tortured, or murdered for their perceived resistance to the rule. Several academics and activists contend that Franco's administration committed genocide, as defined by the United Nations, as acts made with the intention to eliminate, either in whole or in part, a national, racial, ethnic, or religious group (Kunz, 1949). They cite the regime's persistent suppression of Catalan language, culture, and political autonomy as proof of an intention to eradicate Catalan identity and way of life (i Massana, 1987; Llobera, 1989; Pujolar & Puigdevall, 2015; Pujol Casademont, 2020). Nevertheless, not all academics and professionals agree on the word “genocide,” owing in part to the national government's refusal to recognize linguistic and cultural oppression. The dispute as to whether the acts of the Franco government constitute genocide is continuing, complicated, and affected by political and ideological considerations.

This article serves to determine whether Catalan undergraduate students understand the connection between language and culture and how the suppression of language affects one's identity. We begin by discussing the connection between language and culture, followed by a brief history of Catalonia and the Catalan language. Finally, the study is presented with a cover story of language suppression in a different culture to determine the perceptions of students from an outsider's point of view.



1.1. Language and Culture

The connection, influence, and interdependence between language and culture have historically been agreed on by anthropologists, linguists, and philosophers. Language is a fundamental aspect of culture, as it is used to express cultural ideas, beliefs, and practices. Through language, individuals communicate their identities, express their emotions and ideas, and connect with others. [von Herder \(2002\)](#) sustained the idea that language does not determine thought; rather, it forms the structure for how the speakers of that language feel. The linguist [von Humboldt \(1999\)](#) went even further to say that language is the foundational organ of thought and that languages and cultures express “the spirit of a nation” ([Bolikulovich, 2020](#), p. 57). However, a language cannot be just the representation of a nation, especially when a nation may have more than one official language and may be comprised of autonomous cultural regions, such as in the autonomous regions of Spain. In such regions, languages are part of the core values and contribute to peaceful negotiations as part of the democratic states ([Conversi, 2010](#)). Language provides a framework for understanding and interpreting the world around us, and it is shaped by cultural norms and values. In turn, language also shapes culture by reinforcing or challenging cultural beliefs and practices. [Boroditsky \(2011, 2018\)](#) supports the idea that the language we speak shapes our thoughts and our vision of the world. She clarifies this with the discussion of the concept of time. Depending on the language one speaks, one will think, understand, and express time differently.

People in different cultures or groups have been shown to differ in whether they think of time as stationary or moving, limited or open-ended, as distance or quantity, horizontal or vertical, oriented from left to right, right to left, front to back, back to front, or in cardinal space as an example East to West ([Boroditsky, 2011](#), p. 653).

As an example of this, native speakers of Spanish are much more flexible when talking about time than native speakers of German. Spanish has more verb tenses than German, and therefore the speakers have more flexibility to express the concept of time in terms of reality and hypotheticals ([Poppel, 1988](#)). Because of this, a stereotypical cultural behavior was formed where Spanish speakers do not view tardiness as seriously as German speakers may. Additionally, when comparing Russian, German, and English speakers, [Rogova and Fedorenkov \(2010\)](#) found that Russian speakers view the future as being uncertain since the grammatical structures in the Russian language separate the past, present, and future with no overlap, whereas German and English speakers tend to have more certainty of the future based on the overlap of grammatical tenses in their languages.

According to [Mahadi and Jafari \(2012\)](#), a language is thought to be more of a symbolic representation of a culture and what that culture means. Language not only represents the associated culture, but languages are “inextricably embedded” in cultures ([Mahadi & Jafari, 2012](#), p. 234). This suggests that language and culture are not only linked; rather, they are interdependent. Language and culture form our personal identities as individuals and as members of society. Understanding the culture of a language allows for communicative interactions that go beyond the individual meanings of the words of that language ([Diedrichsen, 2020](#)). A particular language is part of a particular culture, and this language characterizes and distinguishes this culture from other cultures. [Jiang \(2000\)](#) supports the connection between language and culture and further describes the relationship in which the meanings of the words in a spoken language are associated with the meanings embedded in cultural values.

Everything we say in language has meaning, whether designative or sociative, denotative or connotative. Every language form we use has meaning and carries meaning that is not in the same sense because it is associated with culture, and culture is more extensive than language ([Jiang, 2000](#), p. 329).

[Jiang \(2000\)](#) further explains how culture and language are intrinsically related using an analogy of a swimming pool as a representation of society. Using this metaphor, she suggests that society is represented by the swimming pool, where the culture within that society is the water, and the language spoken by the people is the swimming skill. When both the swimming skill and the water are present in the pool, swimming is optimal, and the people can communicate successfully. This is because the swimmers are confident in familiar water. However, should the swimmers move to a new pool where the water is unfamiliar to them, such as when speakers are embedded in a foreign culture, they swim more slowly and cautiously. Three elements are needed for optimal swimming: a swimming pool, swimming skills, and the water. If the water (culture) is removed, the swimmer (speaker) feels lost and cannot swim. In the cover story presented to the participants of this study, the water was removed from the swimming pool when the children were removed from their homes and placed in residential schools. [Jiang \(2000\)](#) claimed that “*between language and culture, there is always an interactive influence: the two cannot exist without each other. They combine to form a living organism*” (p. 339). This suggests that language and culture are a whole; they complement each other, and thus, when one is missing, the other will always be affected.

1.2. Catalonia and the Catalan Language

Catalonia is an autonomous region located in the north-eastern part of Spain. The Catalan language, literature, values, customs, and history are central to understanding the Catalan identity (Crameri, 2000). The Catalan region had once experienced the suppression of their language, threatening their cultural identity since the Catalan identity could not be understood without its language, history, or culture.

Catalan is sometimes confused as being a Spanish dialect, but it is a language with six varieties (Brown & Ogilvie, 2008) and 9.2 million speakers in total, with 4.1 million native speakers (Eberhard et al., 2022). The varieties include Valencian, North-western Catalan, Central Catalan, Rousellonese, Balearic, and Alguerese and the language is spoken in Spain, France, Andorra, and Italy.

1.2.1. A Brief History of the Catalan Culture

“En aquesta terra acollidora on tothom és benvingut la llengua és la penyora per no restar un poble mut (. . .) si cultura és riquesa, la llengua és el nostre tresor [In this welcoming land, the language is the pledge to avoid becoming a silent people (...); if culture is wealth, language is our treasure.]” (part of the song *Correllengua* by the Catalan folk-rock group *Mesclat*, 2002).

Iberians and Greeks first settled in the territory of Catalonia in the middle Palaeolithic era (Tarradell, 1979). In 220 B.C., the Romans arrived, bringing with them their language, Latin. Tarraco, which is now known as Tarragona, became one of the wealthiest cities, and the people of this region further founded Barcino, now known as Catalonia’s capital, Barcelona (Alcoberro, 2015). In A.D. 801, the Frankish Empire conquered Barcelona, and the region became part of the *Marca Hispanica*, a territory belonging to Charlemagne’s Carolingian Empire and the Moors (Salrach, 2004). This area became extremely powerful, and in the 12th century, the first written documents in Catalan appeared, along with the first references to the territory today called Catalonia. After Charlemagne’s death in the medieval era, Catalonia became part of the Crown of Aragon. In 1469, the Crown of Castile and Aragon were unified with Ferdinand II of Aragon, and Queen Isabella I of Castile’s marriage and Catalonia became part of a unified Spain (Alcoberro, 2015).

In 1492, the Spanish colonization of America began, and the political power increasingly shifted towards Castile, which provoked tensions between Catalan institutions and the monarchy. The Catalan economy experienced a decline; there were plagues, and peasants’ revolts (Alcoberro, 2015), concluding in the Reapers’ War (1640–1652), in which the Catalan Republic (van Gelderen & Skinner, 2002) was briefly proclaimed on the 17th of January under the French monarchy’s protection (Grau, 2012).

The XVI century was marked by the Spanish War of Succession (1701–1714) between Spain and France, and this ended with the fall of Barcelona and the Catalan surrender on the 11th of September 1714 (Alcoberro, 2009). Catalonia lost its independence and was transformed into a province. At first, Catalonia tried to retain its own institutions and traditions that people had been building for centuries. Nevertheless, the King Philip V of Bourbon banned the political institutions and people’s rights. The Catalan language underwent a period of decline due to the new laws promoting the use of the Spanish language. Politics, literature, traditions, language, and ultimately culture were eclipsed until the 19th century (Morone, 2012).

1.2.2. The First Revival of the Catalan Language

Between 1840–1880, Catalonia experienced a period known as “La Renaixença”, the revival in English. A wave of artists, authors, and playwrights wished to recover what had been lost and put all their efforts into reviving the Catalan language and culture (Bacardit, n.d.). The movement’s main effort was to highlight the importance of the identity between language and nation (Marfany, 1993). In the second half of the century, universally famous works in poetry, literature, theatre, and journalism were produced (Thomàs, 1998). The language was given importance again, people started studying it, dictionaries were created, and the Catalan language was introduced in the daily press in Catalonia.

1.2.3. Franco’s Dictatorship and Catalonia’s Resistance and Revival

All these improvements did not last long and were severely affected by the Napoleonic and Carlist Wars when the territory was temporarily segregated by Bonaparte. The effect was that after the 3rd Carlist War (1872–1876), Catalan identity and nationalism were strengthened (Balcells, 2013). At the beginning of the 20th century, the Catalan nationalist parties campaigned for the teaching of Catalan in schools, its use in the administration, as well as the creation of a unified grammar. In 1931, Spain became a republic and gave Catalonia semi-autonomous status. Catalonia recovered its government, and Catalan was declared an official language, with the consequent state support for teaching it (Ministry of Education, 2015).

During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the Catalans found themselves fighting a losing battle. Consequently, in 1939, when the dictatorship of Francisco Franco arrived, several changes were made.

His repressive political movement officially banned Catalan (Thomàs, 1998), as well as any other languages in Spain that were not Spanish, repressed its traditions, customs, and culture, took out its autonomy, parliament, and police force, and persecuted the “outlaws” such as the former Catalan president Lluís Companys, who was eventually executed (Culla, 1991). Between 1939 and Franco’s death in 1975, Spanish was the only language allowed for public life, which included appearing in the newspapers, media, education, culture, and public conversations. Catalan was not legally spoken; however, it was used in private conversations and in homes, where it was taught from parents to children. Casademont (2019) asserts that “the Franco regime attempted to commit cultural and identity genocide against Catalonia” (p. 1). The generation that existed during this time was forced to study Spanish and never learned the Catalan language in terms of its syntax, lexis or phonetics; rather, they could only learn through verbal conversations with their parents or by listening to the Pirenaica, a clandestine radio transmitter. Calders (2011), a Catalan writer exiled in México, wrote in his book *Catalans pel món* the following:

“Many were the things which made us different, but there was a language and common memories which made us one.” (Calders, 1955, as cited in Calders, 2011).

The Catalan language resisted and survived. The people kept it alive. After Franco’s death in 1975, Catalonia regained the position of an autonomous region with its own parliament, government, flag, and anthem. Moreover, the 1978 constitution acknowledged the linguistic plurality of Spain, recognized Catalan (together with other languages) as co-official, and allowed Catalonia to rule over their territory. When Catalan started to be taught, it became the language of the local government, the businesses, the culture, the newspapers, and public life (Anguera, 1998). Additionally, the people in this region value bilingual and multilingual education (Byrne, 2020). In public schools, Catalan started to be taught to immigrants who arrived as a process of immersion, and today, everyone can learn it at school (Urmeneta & Unamuno, 2008).

“The Irish writer Colm Tóibín defined the Catalan sense of identity while living in Barcelona in the 1970s. People lived in a private realm. The parents had moved into that realm at the end of the Civil War, and they had remained in that realm . . . But what was also interesting was that Catalan, the language, was considered a way of being free . . . No one was talking about history. No one was talking about politics. But people were talking in Catalan. And they considered that a fundamental way of resisting [. . .].” (Castro, 2014, para. 3).

Because of the history of Catalonia and the suppression of the Catalan language, the Catalans are very passionate about maintaining their culture through cultural events and language education. This passion for identity allows the people of this autonomous region to identify their uniqueness, and this led to a referendum vote in 2017 where the people voted to leave Spain and become an independent country. For political reasons, the desire to separate could not come to fruition. However, the acknowledgement of this distinct culture was recognized, and the discussion of the referendum remains an emotional and heightened discussion topic in this region.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to discover and understand how university students in the Catalan region of Spain perceive the effects of culture and language suppression, as well as the possible relationship between language and culture.

The research questions are as follows:

1. Do Catalan university students perceive there to be a connection between language and culture when discussing culture loss in a cover story?
2. How do Catalan students perceive that language loss would affect culture loss?

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

67 undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 22 years participated in this study. These students were Catalan-Spanish bilinguals, and they were undergraduate students in various programs (journalism, history, English, law, public relations, communications) at a university in the Catalan region of Spain.

2.2. Materials

A digital questionnaire in Catalan was used using Microsoft Forms that could be easily accessed by the participants’ mobile devices, as well as computers. The questionnaire was formatted in Catalan so

that the participating students would understand the context and the questions being asked. The data from the questionnaire was collected and further analyzed using JASP Statistical Software.

2.3. Procedure

The participants were first given a debriefing about the Residential School System in Canada. They were then asked to complete the questionnaire, which followed two main guidelines. The first part of the questionnaire asked questions regarding the participants' knowledge of the history of Canadian Residential schools. The purpose of the introduction and initial questions on Canadian history was to distance the participants from the story and to view the questions objectively from an outsider's point of view. The students were then asked a series of questions regarding their personal beliefs on the relationship between language and culture.

The responses to the questions were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The long answer questions focused on the participants' attitudes and the way they expressed their opinions rather than on the data. Consequently, for the majority of the questions, the participants responded in a long answer format to express their opinions. The researcher gathered and classified the opinions drawn from their responses and formatted this data into Likert responses, focusing notably on the quantitative data drawn from the qualitative questionnaire.

Nevertheless, there are three questions that were not converted into numerical data as the responses were highly qualitative. These responses are explained in the results section to demonstrate the students' beliefs and opinions.

3. RESULTS

The first part of the questionnaire functioned as a cover story, was designed to give a context of language and culture suppression from a different part of the world so that the participants would respond to the second set of questions objectively. Thus, we recorded the responses in the first part using descriptive statistics since we were interested in general trends.

3.1. Cover Story Responses

In response to the question of whether the students felt the subject of the residential school system was rendered invisible and not taught, 92% of the participants either strongly agreed or agreed that they felt the information on this subject was suppressed. When asked whether this subject should be taught in schools, 100% of the participants agreed that this information should be part of the curriculum to explain the history and culture of the country. While most of the students (54%) could not identify a particular indigenous group in Canada, the majority (95%) responded that they felt, based on the information they had been given, that the residential school system resulted in genocide in that country.

3.2. Language, Culture, and Identity Responses

Once the students had responded to the questions on the Canadian residential school system, they were presented with questions on language, culture, and identity. These questions were converted numerically and analyzed in JASP using Chi-Square Goodness of Fit tests for general tendencies. The participants agreed with each of these statements, and the results were significant, as can be seen in [Table I](#).

The analysis shows the variance between the expected responses, should the participants be answering randomly to the actual responses. For each of the questions in [Table I](#), the responses are significant, which indicates the likelihood that the answers of this sample could be generalized to the population they represent, such as Catalan university students in law and humanistic studies.

TABLE I: LIKERT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS ON LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY

Question	Strongly agree	χ^2	df	p
Does forbidding a child to speak their native language suppress their culture?	Yes	272.00	4	<0.001
Does forbidding a child to speak their native language affect their individual and collective identity?	Yes	272.00	4	<0.001
Are language and culture interdependent?	Yes	199.21	4	<0.001
Does the first language you speak help to shape your identity?	Yes	207.74	4	<0.001
Does the culture we are raised in shape our identity?	Yes	190.53	4	<0.001
Is our behavior and the way we see the world determined by our language and culture?	Yes	150.82	4	<0.001

There were three questions that were not quantitatively analyzed. The details of the responses to these questions are summarized in the following subsections.

3.2.1. *What Can Be the Effects of Banning a Language?*

This question generated complex and varied responses. The majority of the students responded that they believe the language will disappear, and this is the main consequence. However, others argued that this would create a division of communities in this area and that this violates freedom of speech and identity and can lead to genocide. Additionally, they felt the loss and extinction of traditions, beliefs, religions, and culture are linked to language suppression.

3.2.2. *If a Child is Deprived of His or Her Language and Culture for Years, How Do You Think This Will Influence His or Her Integration into Society?*

The responses to the second question regarding integration into society were also diverse. Several of the participants argued that if a child is removed from their environment and then needs to reintegrate, this child would feel like an outsider within their own culture and this child would have difficulty within their family and culture since he or she would not be able to speak the language of their people. Other participants felt that this child would feel inferior to the other members of their community. Additionally, some participants felt this child would feel rejected and would therefore try to integrate into the dominant culture, which is precisely what happened in some cases in the Canadian Residential School System. One student talked about resilience, a highly important word for this study, and argued that human resilience will help them heal, even if they suffer from trauma, as our mother tongue is the basis of our society. Further, one participant responded, *“The child will drift aimlessly, neither feeling part of their own culture, nor from the colonizer’s one”*.

3.2.3. *What, in Your Opinion, Shapes a Culture?*

The majority of the participants felt that a culture is shaped by the following: the language, the traditions, the religion/s, the life perspectives, the beliefs, the food, the histories, the songs, the territory, and the values. One of the participants further mentioned that the weather and climate of a region is part of the culture. As an example, people often think of the sun when they imagine being in Spain. These responses demonstrate that the participants felt the language was linked to culture, but there are additional elements that define what that culture is.

4. DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this study was not to draw a comparison between historical events where languages and cultures have been suppressed. However, the aim was for the participants to respond objectively. While the research questions did not seek to uncover what the participants knew of the genocide that took place in Canada when the indigenous children were forced into Canadian Residential Schools, it was revealed that the participating students felt that this topic had not received enough attention. They further believed that the history of the residential school system should be part of the school curriculum since it explains not only the history of the area but also the traditions and culture of the country.

We wanted to determine whether Catalan students perceive that there is a connection between language and culture. The students generally agreed that forbidding a child to speak their native language would, in turn, suppress their culture and also affect their individual and collective identities. The participating students also felt that the language they speak influences their perceptions and the way they see the world. Therefore, the responses to the questionnaire indicate that language and culture are perceived as being interdependent. Additionally, when investigating whether language loss would affect culture loss, the participants responded that forbidding one to speak their language would suppress not only their language but also their cultural and collective identity. The participants further believe that the language one speaks shapes their identity and culture, which is linked to behavior and attitude.

In addition to the responses to our main research questions, the participants felt that language suppression violates freedom of speech and freedom of identity, it separates communities, and, in extreme cases, it could lead to the genocide of a minority group. They also felt that those removed from their environments would have a difficult time reintegrating back into the environment, potentially due to linguistic difficulties. Further, they felt that culture is not only shaped by the language we speak, but is also influenced by traditions, history, food, religion, landscape, and climate.

The cover story used in this study was effective in preventing researcher bias since the researcher who collected the data failed to notice the link between the questionnaire and Catalan culture. This researcher was surprised at the conclusion of this study when told that the aim was to seek objective

responses to how Catalan students connect their language to their culture. However, the participants' responses, despite not being taught about the Canadian Residential Schools, identified what they believed to be clear links between language and culture. The cover story did not eliminate emotion from their responses despite relating the questions to a different context. Further, the participants identified that the stories of atrocities where culture is suppressed should be a part of the education system, and we should tell these stories to ensure that what has happened will not be forgotten.

Language and culture are intricately intertwined; to comprehend one, it is necessary to comprehend the other. Through studying language and culture, people may develop a deeper awareness and comprehension of the variety of human experiences. Hence, the suppression of a language destroys not just the related linguistic and cultural group but also diversity and our knowledge of human attributes.

5. LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

This study surveyed undergraduate students who study subjects related to law and the humanities. The information collected was mainly qualitative. Further research should be done to find the opinions of participants from other disciplines using a mixed-method design.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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