Social Semiotics

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/csos20

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To cite this article: Maria Sabaté-Dalmau (09 Jul 2024): Political protest landscapes in Catalonia: language choice, utopian/dystopian discourse and "Catalans"-"Spaniards" identities, Social Semiotics, DOI: 10.1080/10350330.2024.2375067

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2024.2375067

Published online: 09 Jul 2024.

SOCIAL SEMIOTICS
https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2024.2375067

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Political protest landscapes in Catalonia: language choice, utopian/dystopian discourse and "Catalans"-"Spaniards" identities

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ABSTRACT

Catalonia has become a rich site to investigate minorised-language identity, with the reemergence of a movement calling for independence. Our case study analyses how pro-/anti-secessionist protests are (counter)-fought in urban Linguistic Landscapes. We approach LLs as identity-markers and place-makers delivering messages of political subversion/dominance where majority/minorised-language choice and utopian/dystopian discourse become crucial for understanding their meanings during social upheaval, with renewed nationalist protests linked to an independence Referendum. We employed a content analysis based on a semiotic/semantic interpretation and thematic categorisation of the data. We show that two antithetical "Catalans"/"Spaniards" identities reemerge which mobilise either utopian projects written in Catalan or dystopian visions in Spanish, through intertextuality. The former, categorised as pro-independence "political resistance LLs," project a hopeful impossible to extend a liberating possible. The latter, pro-unionist "threats to Catalan protesters LLs," reinstate order, enforcing the suppression of dissent. This reveals that ethnolinguistic identities are newly reconfigured/resignified, unpacking how a social-semiotics focus on language choice and utopia/dystopia can prefigure social conflict development.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 February 2024
Accepted 27 June 2024

KEYWORDS
Linguistic landscapes; social conflict; nationalism; majority/minorised-language identity; utopian/dystopian discourse; Catalonia

Presentation of the study

Catalonia is a rich research space for investigating linguistic identities in bilingual minorised-language settings which gained momentum with the reemergence of a political movement that calls for independence from Spain (Byrne and Marcet 2022). The pro-independence movement as a transversal project encompassing various left-/right-leaning political parties and civil-society organisations can be traced back to the early twentieth century (Rubiralta 2020; Viñas 2021). However, at the turn of the twenty-first century, it has become a renewed focus of local and international concern, in part because debates about the legal statuses of the local majority and minorised languages

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(respectively, Spanish and Catalan) have been placed at the epicentre of current social protests among activists (including unknown individual protesters and sociopolitical groups) both in favour or against secessionism (Byrne, Bertran, and Tudela Isanta 2022; PPL 2022). This paper focuses on the semiotic landmarks of this renewed nationalist upheaval in a particular politically strategic Catalan region. We present a case study which analyses how the current pro-/anti-independence movements materialise by getting inscribed, (re)-enacted and dialogically (counter)-fought in space in the Linguistic Landscapes (LLs) of a central highway. Specifically, we zoom into a selection of 15 illustrative LL tokens mobilised by activists on both sides of the conflict who present themselves as two rivalling social groups: the (here mostly left-leaning) "pro-independentists" and the (frequently right-leaning) "pro-unionists."[1] We explore how this polarisation has led to the spatial reemergence of two dichotomised collective ethnolinguistic identities: those who fall within a Catalan-speaking "Catalan" categorisation and those who encompass a Spanish-speaking "Spaniard" identity. These antithetical identity affiliations were operative in public and private life during the mid-/late-twentieth century (Woolard 1989), and then fell in disuse, as ethnolinguistic identity was and is no longer solely attached to monolingual "native-language" attributions (Woolard 2016). And yet, we provide evidence that they have now been retaken and reconfigured/resignified by pro-/anti-independentists, only in the political-discourse realm, as part of their social-protest discursive strategies (as attested, too, by Della Porta, O'Connor, and Portos 2019).

We explore bottom-up "Catalans"/"Spaniards" identities by analysing the roles that (a) majority/minorised-language choice and (b) utopian/dystopian projects play in their spatial configuration and emplacement. These two aspects are key to understand the social meanings of multimodal sociopolitical discourse concerning the past, present and future political organisation of any society in grassroots LLs (Macleod and Ward 2002). More specifically, we zoom into Catalonia's political-protest landscapes concerning nationalism by addressing the following research questions:

(a) To what extent, and with what semiotic strategies, does nationalist conflict materialise in grassroots LLs through Catalan/Spanish language choice? What can this tell us about the reemergence of collective identities based on ethnolinguistic affiliation, in globalised minorised-language societies?
(b) To what extent have utopian/dystopian views projecting antithetical liberating futures or threatening tomorrows become key for the mobilisation of nationalist protests? What can they reveal about social polarisation in the sociopolitical discourse of the urban space?

We have organised this paper as follows. In the Theoretical Background, we detail our critical social semiotics approach to grassroots LLs, providing our definition of spatial majority/minorised-language identity and of utopian/dystopian discourse. Thirdly, we contextualise the study by historicising the pro-/anti-independence movements and the role that language plays in them. We then detail the methodology followed for the collection and analysis of the data and present our LL corpus. In the Analysis, we investigate two LL typologies: (1) "Catalans' political resistance LLs" and (2) "Spaniards' threats to Catalan authorities/protesters LLs," focusing on their dialoguing nature, which involves discursive strategies such as intertextuality, resemiotisation or erasure. We then provide

a comprehensive picture of the investigated ethnolinguistic identities by describing the political leanings which tend to co-constitute them. In the Results section, we suggest that the findings in the region under analysis provide evidence of the spatial materialisation of an increased polarisation in Catalonia into two antithetical social groups: the pro-independence, mostly left-leaning and Catalan-speaking "Catalans" and the pro-unionist, frequently right-leaning, and Spanish-speaking "Spaniards." We also discuss the implications that our study may have for analysing ethnolinguistic identity and utopian/dystopian discourse in the urban space, in minorised-language settings. This may contribute to foreground the relevance of a social semiotics approach focusing on language choice and utopian/dystopian projects for understanding sociopolitical transformations and new ways of "doing politics" from below, and for tracing protests across time and space to prefigure the development of social conflict.

Theoretical background

Following a critical social semiotics approach to LLs (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010; Martín-Rojo and Díaz de Frutos 2014), we understand highway roadscapes (graffiti in roundabouts, tunnels, etc.) as disputed place-markers/makers which serve to mobilise confrontational discourses that are conducive to the materialisation of territorial and social place (Edensor 2003), including inclusionary/exclusionary identity affiliations (Lefebvre 1991; Martín Rojo 2014a; Themistocleous 2019). This is particularly so during periods of social unrest (Harvey 2012), when urban spaces are struggled over through LLs based on rivalling "frontiering" messages proclaiming dominance-regimentation (hegemonic power) or dissent-subversion (counterpower) to the established sociopolitical order (Blackwood, Lanza, and Woldemariam 2016; Rubdy and Ben Said 2015).

Following this approach, we zoom into two research fields: collective spatial ethnolinguistic identity in minorised-language contexts and utopian/dystopian projects in political-protest discourse. Concerning the first field, we understand LLs as venues where to investigate public sociopolitical identity constructions, negotiations and enactments mediated through majority/minorised language choice (following Cenoz and Gorter 2008; and Sebastian 2019). We suggest that, in bilingual settings, majority-/minorised-language choice is a marked option, a political act to represent a group's voice: "a statement of socio-cultural membership […] in the language I have chosen" (Spolsky and Cooper 1991, 84). We argue that, while research on identity in LLs is vast (Shohamy, Ben-Rafael, and Barni 2010), investigations on the identity-driven meanings that language choice has in minorised-language spaces is scarcer (with noticeable exceptions; see, e.g. Bruyèl-Olmedo and Juan-Garau 2015, 2022; Byrne and Marcet 2022; Comajoan Colomé and Long 2012; and Lado 2011).

The second research area concerning the roles of utopian/dystopian discourse, which in the field of critical urban studies is associated with the work by philosopher, sociologist, and geographer Henri Lefebvre, has been underexplored in the LL domain (LL14th 2023). Since there is no consensus on a definition of utopianism/dystopianism, our use of these two terms requires clarification. We understand political utopian discourses as talk-in-space which projects, proclaims and emplaces a hopeful impossible to extend a more egalitarian possible for the future of one's group (Lefebvre 1976 [1973]). Thus, utopian discourse encompasses specific strategies which explore the material conditions and

possibilities of civilian intervention to initiate a realistic process of sociopolitical transformation based on a liberating rupture from below (Lefebvre 1975; 2002 [1961]), turning the "impossible" into an achievable "possible" (Pinder 2013, 31). By contrast, dystopian discourses draw on the tenets of (totalitarian) social control to proclaim the hegemonic maintenance of the status quo of those in power (Lefebvre 1976 [1973]), asserting the efficient suppression of nonconformity through discursive elements which encompass hostility, warning and insult towards the dissidence.[2] Dystopian discourses reinstating the established order tend to emerge after a challenging historic political event in society. In our context, such event was the celebration of a referendum on Catalonia's independence questioning the Spanish nation-state's territorial/political boundaries (see Context).

Utopian/dystopian projects gained more visibility in urban LLs at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Martín Rojo 2014b). This is so because they are a product of the political socioeconomic conditions of modern times which speak of the intense transformations of the global era (Vieira 2020). This explains why the current use of political utopian/dystopian talk envisioning, claiming or fearing different alternatives or futures is key to understand civilian protests (Fernández Nadal 2010).

Utopia/dystopia is also essential to unpack how organised sociopolitical movements make use of (oppositional) ontologised appropriations and reconstructions of "history" (Roig 1987) to project their fights in the urban space. That is, in utopian/dystopian talk, national "history" is a discursive resource to legitimise (past, present and future) territorial ownerships and to reclaim a voice in the conflict. This allows for a comprehensive understanding of the rationalities behind the historical political aspirations of rivalling nationalist groups in LLs (Huebner 2006).

Context: Catalonia and the independence movement

Catalonia is a bilingual society of about 7.9 million inhabitants (IDESCAT 2023) located in Northeastern Spain where the Spanish and Catalan languages coexist in a complex manner. Spanish is a global language which is the official language of the nation-state (Spain), and Catalan, with a long history of socioeconomic, political minorisation, is the co-official language of Catalonia (Bastardas i Boada, Boix-Fuster, and Torrens Guerini 2018; Vila i Moreno 2016).

Catalan is the 13th most used language in the European Union, and there are currently 11.5 million Catalan-language users, not only in Catalonia but also in neighbouring Catalan-using regions (e.g. Saragossa) and other Spanish regions (e.g. Madrid) (INE 2023). However, the number of Catalan "native" speakers has reduced from more than 95% of the population at the beginning of the twentieth century to 34.3% (PPL 2020). Besides, in this bilingual context, Catalans' self-reported practices show that the most frequently chosen language of social use in Catalonia is Spanish (as reported by 48.6% of Catalans), followed by Catalan (with 36.1% of self-reported habitual users) and by Spanish/Catalan bilingualism (i.e. by 7.4% of Catalans who report not to foster any of the two languages but to use both interchangeably for socialisation purposes) (IDESCAT 2019). These factors may be partly explained by the fact that, in the 1960s-1980s, Catalonia experienced a notable inward migration of working-class monolingual Spanish-speaking people (see details in Sabaté i Dalmau 2014, 13), and, during the first

decades of the twenty-first century, of people born abroad (17.2% of Catalonia's population; mostly from Africa, the European Union and South America; IDESCAT 2023). Added to these demolinguistic factors, the decline in Catalan "native" speakers and in the self-reported use of Catalan may also be due to the successive Spanish governments' actions towards linguistic "recentralisation" (Pujolar 2015),[3] which explains why Catalan is still undergoing a process of "linguistic normalisation" (Ninyoles 2008); that is, a process of normalising its use in all spheres of private and social life.

Beyond (self-reported) language use, in terms of language-based identity affiliations, Catalonia follows a global trend where self/other-ascribed linguistic categorisations are no longer based on fixed monolingual language-user ascriptions, but on demolinguistically pluralised, fluid identities (De Fina 2016). In fact, majority-/minorised-language choice is increasingly detached from "either-or" "Spaniard"/"Catalan" ethnolinguistic categorisations (Pinho dos Santos 2021, 430) in favour of more hybrid bilingual "both-and" identities revolving around Catalanness (Woolard 2016). Despite this, only in the political-discourse arena concerning pro-independence/unionism issues, language remains central as an ethnolinguistic identity marker (Cetrà 2019; Miley and Garvía 2019), with monolingual Catalan-language use indexing pro-secessionist Catalan identity alignments; and with monolingual Spanish-language choice indexing pro-unionist Spaniard-identity dispositions (Byrne and Marcet 2022, 3).

Concerning nationalist movements, after a civil war, Spain underwent an ultra-Catholic, Spanish nationalist dictatorship which, based on the tenets of fascism, suppressed Catalonia's socioeconomic-political autonomy between 1939 and 1978 and forbid the use of Catalan in all social spheres (Preston 1997). Since then, the Spanish and Catalan governments' negotiations to achieve more political autonomy and to reconsider the legal statuses of Spanish and Catalan (as official, co-official, vehicular, curricular languages, etc.) have been tense (Newman, Trenchs-Parera, and Corona 2020).

In recent history, we highlight the reemergence of a movement calling for Catalonia's independence which led to the escalation of political upheaval (Balcells, Dorsey, and Tellez 2020, 4), particularly since 2010 when the 2006 Statute of Autonomy voted in referendum by the majority of Catalans was not accepted by the Spanish authorities. The massive call for secessionism was epitomised with the 2015 Catalan elections, when the pro-Catalan forces won, and the Catalan government passed a Law on the Referendum on Self-determination (DOGC 2017). The conflict reached the global arena, since international newspapers (e.g. The New York Times, Al Jazeera) and transnational institutions (Human Rights Watch) considered it Spain's biggest sociopolitical crises in modernity (Balcells, Dorsey, and Tellez 2020).

This Law was suspended by the Spanish Constitutional Court. However, on the day in which Catalans were called to vote (October 1, 2017; henceforth referred to with the numeronym "1-O"), the referendum took place, and 2,286,217 people voted (a turnout of 43%). Of the valid votes, 90% were in favour of independence, 8% were against it, and 2% were blank ballots (GC 2020). The subversive celebration of the referendum was repressed by the Spanish forces with extreme violence, which led to the imprisonment and exile of thousands of nonviolent Catalan protesters and politicians like the then Catalan president (Human Rights Watch 2017). Besides, the Spanish government also enforced the suppression of Catalonia's autonomy between 27/10/2017 and 2/6/

2018, through the application of a Decree linked to article 155 of the Spanish Constitution (since then, "155" stands for "the suppression of Catalonia's autonomy").

At present, 52% of Catalans foster unionism; 42% foster independence in agreement with the nation-state, and 6% do not show positioning (CEO 2023, 67). Added to this, 33% of Catalans would like for Catalonia to be an independent state; 31% would prefer to continue being part of a Spanish "Autonomous Community"; 23% would foster a Catalan independent state within a Spanish federation; and 7% would like for Catalonia to have no distinctive autonomy (CEO 2023, 70).

Finally, it is worth noting that, after the violent events that followed the referendum, 69% of Catalans claim to be (totally) dissatisfied with Spanish democracy (CEO 2023, 86). Besides, 59% of Catalans consider social protest useful to achieve political goals (CEO 2022, 52), which may explain why the nationalist conflict has gained visibility in Catalonia's LLs.

Materials and methods

The data consists of a selection of LLs photographed in a main highway called A2, here understood as a "roadscape"; that is, as a geography of intense circulation "enmeshed within […] multiple flows of ideas, […] spaces and times, narratives, and socialities" (Edensor 2003, 151). We selected this highway because it connects a politically strategic medium-sized city, Igualada, located in a central Catalan *comarca* (region) called Anoia with Barcelona city in approximately an hour (see Figure 1).[4]

As a daily users of the A2 roundabout, the author ethnographically collected a corpus of 30 LLs dealing with pro-/anti-independence issues between November 2022 and January 2023, as a first step of the data-collection phase.[5] We then decided to focus on

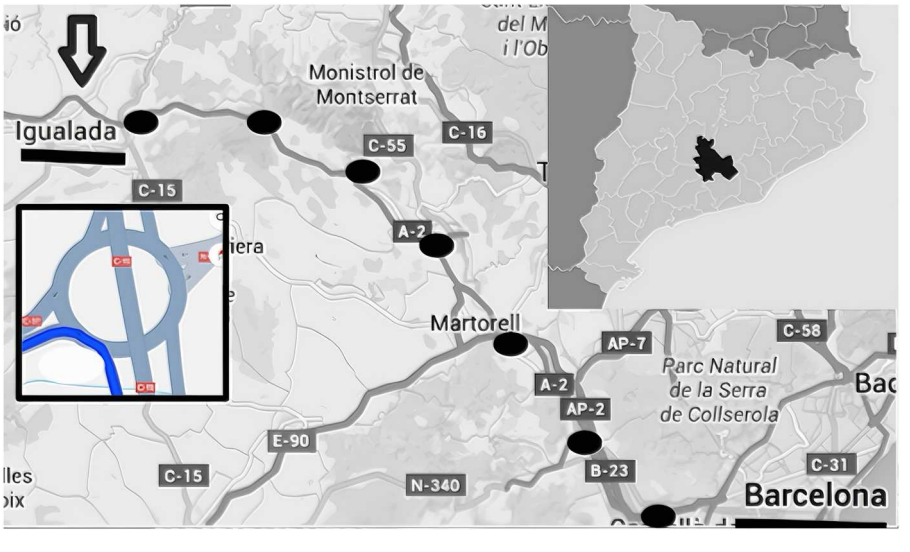

Figure 1. Catalonia's map with the investigated *comarca* (Anoia) in black (top, right). Highway A2 connecting Igualada with Barcelona is dotted, with the photographed zone indicated with an arrow (see an enlarged image of its main roundabout below it).

a "telling case study" (Andrews 2017) consisting of 15 LL tokens mobilised by social activists on both sides of the conflict. These were selected on the grounds that they (a) addressed pro-/anti-secessionism issues, (b) showed explicit (dis)-alignment with a collective ethnolinguistic identity, and (c) contained utopian/dystopian discourse concerning Catalonia's future. Thus, this case study provides a micro snapshot picture capturing the conditions of production and circulation of LLs that may expose and instantiate unique, underexplored aspects concerning the discursive dynamics of nationalist agitation. Besides, it contributes to the exploration of identity conflict in LLs of smaller yet geopolitically key Catalan cities (in line with Byrne and Marcet 2022).

We employed a critical interpretive qualitative content analysis framework adapted from Ben Said and Kasanga (2016, 74). This framework is based on a semiotic/semantic interpretation of the visual materials and a thematic categorisation of the data, grouped according to majority/minorised-language choice. Relevantly, perhaps because language choice is a means to "take sides" in the conflict, no Catalan/Spanish bilingual LLs were found in the analysed roadscape.

We classified the tokens according to an adapted version of Byrne and Marcet's (2022, 9) list of thematic categorisations addressing nationalist positionings, which was in turn based on Debras (2019) model. Following suit, we analysed the discourse frameworks of pro-independence utopian "political resistance LLs" written in Catalan and of pro-unionist dystopian "threats to Catalan authorities/protesters LLs" written in Spanish, both of which are central for protesters to configure (language-based) oppositional political personhoods (Fernández Nadal 2010).

Analysis

Pro-independence utopian projects: political resistance

Figure 2 provides the first insights on how pro-independentists drew on utopia, using Catalan to proclaim a "tangible" project to achieve Catalonia's independence. The rationale behind this discursive troupe is to display a plausible counterhegemonic strategy to overcome the "exclusionary" Spanish legal system and reach political emancipation.

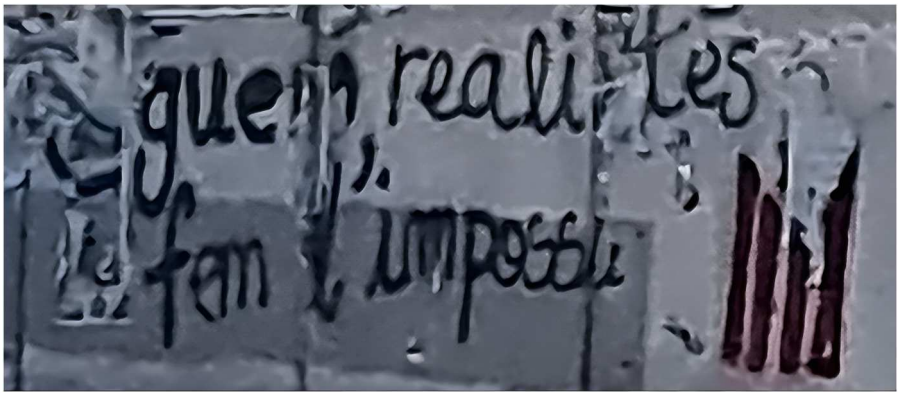

Figure 2. "Siguem realistes, fem l'impossible" (Let's be realistic, let's do the impossible).

Figure 2, partly damaged, reads "Let's be realistic, let's do the impossible," and is presented along with the pro-independence Catalan flag ("estelada," in red, but partly covered with white paint). Through intertextuality strategies (described in Fairclough 1992), it draws on the utopian motto "Be realistic, demand the impossible," attributed to the fight against people's oppression by Marxist socialist philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse (1964). This utopian statement went global as a massive call during the political protests in the United States and Europe in the 1960s–1970s, when it was "reterritorialised" in different spaces and intertextualised in various discursive forms by left-leaning protesters who urged for a radical revolution (Zubero 2018). In the twenty-first century, with the emergence of the information and communication technologies and social media platforms, Marcuse's motto was similarly adopted and adapted by diverse global protesters who put forwards counterpower projects to combat top-down neoliberal governance, in an unexpected, coordinated manner, worldwide. Marcuse's utopian statement, therefore, epitomised a turning point in the ways of doing politics for the people and by the people. Lay citizens now, networked and self-informed, partook of horizontally envisioning specific territorially-grounded though global-minded utopian projects against the dismantling of the welfare state and the rise of all sorts of inequalities. With the creation of interconnected chains of intertextual LL discourses demanding the "hopeful possible," activists occupied the public space *en masse*, expanding what was until then considered "the political space" in an unprecedented manner (Martín Rojo 2014a).

The utopian discourse in Figure 2 joins this global shift towards a bottom-up politics, turning Marcuse's call to "demand the impossible" into a call to make it effective through direct action (with "let's do"), following the idea that radical alternatives like the establishment of unilateral independence are possible and can been created in the present (Graeber 2009).

This demand for democracy can be observed in Figure 3, which is a one-word message reading "FREEDOM!" accompanied by the "estelada" with the red star and four strips. This LL has been carefully worked on, as it aesthetically uses large capital letters emulating typography, as opposed to handwriting. Besides, it is framed upon a delimited black surface which occupies the entire road bend, turning it into a "liberated" Catalan zone.

We now focus on the first thematic aspect upon which pro-independentists base their project: the present-/future-oriented discourses topicalising on "political resistance" after continued political grievances by the Spanish nation-state (Byrne and Marcet 2022, 17).

Figure 3. "LLIBERTAT!" (FREEDOM!).

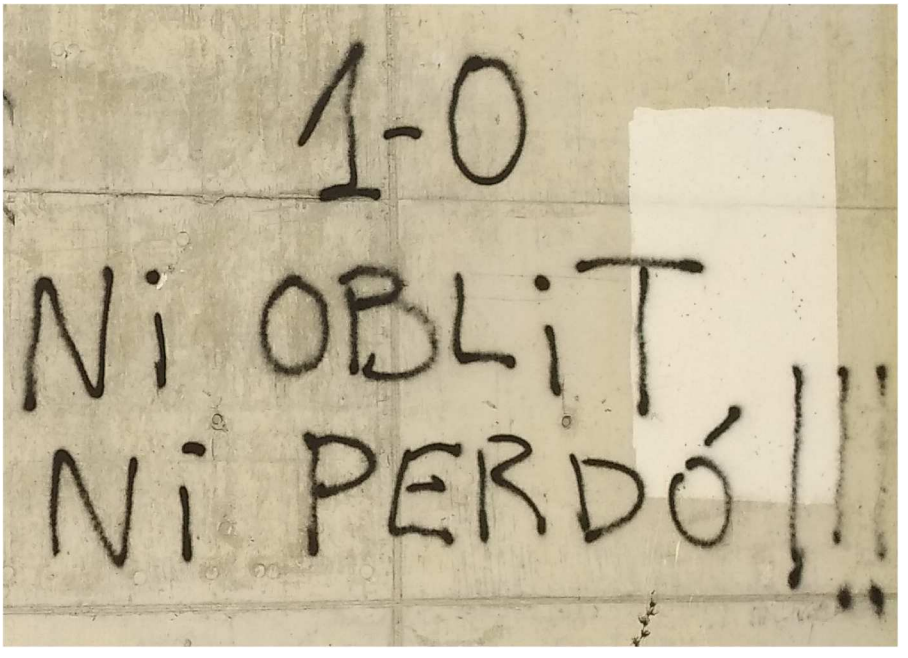

Figure 4. "1-O NI OBLIT NI PERDÓ!!!" (1-O NEITHER FORGET NOR SURRENDER!!!).

Figure 4, reading "1-O NEITHER FORGET NOR SURRENDER!!!," displays resistance to the violence exercised by the Spanish police during the referendum, openly confronting the Spanish governmental forces. The claim asserts that this violence will remain in the collective memory ("history") and that it will not be forgotten as part of the continued anti-democratic prosecution of voters and secessionist activists, which included forced exile and indictments for rebellion and sedition. Figure 4, in turn, proclaims "no surrender," asserting that the present fight against nation-state power and towards a future Catalan nation-state has never been abandoned. It also shows that pro-independentists allocate the moral worth of their claims in the ideological realm of "democracy, civism and human rights," conceptualised of as being opposed to the "authoritarian, totalising" ideological framework that they attribute to pro-unionists (Pinho dos Santos 2021).

Considering graphematic elements, Figure 4 uses capital letters throughout (like Figure 3). These provide further emphasis of the "Catalans'" open fight against the prosecution of the dissidence and against pro-unionists' political hegemonism. This non-conventional capitalisation becomes an attention-gathering strategy to mark the roadscape as "Catalan," providing the self-determination project with "enhanced visibility in the LL" (Lado 2011, 43–44). In turn, the statement is phrased as a cry for emancipation, emulating sound speech (a loud voice with raised pitch), through the non-orthodox use of orthotypographic signs (Bruyèl-Olmedo and Juan-Garau 2022); in this case, three consecutive exclamation marks (both in Figures 4 and 5) whose objective is to turn the LL into "a loudspeaker for […] resistance" (Lado 2011, 44).

Figure 5 draws again on a utopian discourse which emphasises that repression has not annihilated the pro-independentist movement, with the statement "WE ARE HERE!!!" accompanied by the "estelada." Similar statements were mobilised, e.g. by Greek

Figure 5. "HI SOM!!!" (WE ARE HERE!!!).

protesters during the abovementioned twenty-first century demonstrations. This provides further evidence of the independentists' interconnections with left-leaning counterpower activists worldwide and of the intertextual nature of their discourses (Martín Rojo 2014b).

The discourse in Figure 5 appears twice, on two adjacent sides of the road. Through this "message reduplication" strategy (Martín Rojo 2014a, 639), the multimodal sign occupies the entire road bend, marking it, once more, as a pro-independence, Catalan-speaking zone (as in Figure 4). Again, capitalisation and the use of three exclamation marks are employed for emphatic purposes, to reassert and warn about the growth of an increasingly spreading, subversive Catalan nation-building project.

Overall, these "political resistance" LLs draw on the power of the collectivity, as all of them (except for the single noun in Figure 3), employ first-person plural forms of address (at times through ellipsis). This is the discursive element through which pro-independentists present themselves as a "we" (a self-ascribed sociopolitical identity), which indirectly constructs pro-unionist "Spaniards" as "the other" (the "*not* us"), mobilising the idea that the political space is fought by two dichotomic groups.

Pro-unionist dystopian projects: threats to Catalan politicians/activists

We now unpack the discursive elements through which pro-unionists mobilise dystopia in Spanish with the use of present-/future-oriented "threats to Catalan politicians/activists," constructing Catalonia's independence as having catastrophic contingencies for Spain.

Figure 6, in blue, describes pro-independentists as "sectarians," and it includes a swastika sign (also in blue) superimposed on a black pro-independence star (now crossed out/silenced). The word "sectarian" is used to criminalise and dispossess individuals of rationality (Sazo Arratia 2010). In political discourse, it has become an insult employed by pro-unionist politicians who dismiss pro-independentist "others" as members of a subaltern, potentially dangerous "sect." Thus, it may be the case that the swastika, now a global sign indexing overt hatred, authoritarianism and supremacism (Pérez Ruiz and Vicente Castro 2013, 552–553), provides the LL with some connotations of the Nazis' attempts to annihilate, e.g. communists and Jews, then ideologised as a "sect." In this sense, its use may be a strategy to recall the "history" (a past collective memory) of what happened to the dissidence during Nazism. Overall, the message, placed on the same wall of the roundabout

Figure 6. "SECTARIOS" (SECTARIANS).

along with pro-independence messages such as the one presented in Figure 5, transmits a serious warning, a belligerent threat, to nonconformist "rebels."

Similarly, Figure 7 (in blue), consists of a wordplay which amalgamates the words "separatists" (an insult to pejoratively name "Catalans"; Pinho dos Santos 2021, 433) and "rats": "separrats." Thus, it dehumanises pro-secessionists, categorising them as undesirable animals. This dystopian message, moreover, employs a historical "fact" as a "veracity" (i.e. credibility; Fernández Nadal 2010, 147) resource that may serve as another warning for the dissidence: the alarming, omnipresent possibility that the Spanish forces suppress, again, Catalonia's autonomy and enforce the protesters' imprisonment, as explicitly indexed with the symbol "155" (painted twice in black). Overall, Figure 7, by drawing on the fact that the Spanish nation-state's power is "successful" in the annihilation of any alternative national aspirations, provides the dystopic discourse with hostile, aggressive overtones.

Figure 7. "SEPARRATAS" (SEPAR(R)ATS).

Figure 8. "LAPORTA MUERETE" (LAPORTA DROP DEAD).[6]

Figure 8, appearing next to the "155" sign and placed inside a big circle and a cross in the middle which together emulate the Francoist dartboard, reads: "LAPORTA DROP DEAD." Another black dartboard with a small, rushed shape is visible (top, right). The dartboard is known as "Cruz Celta" ("Celt Cross"), which in Spain was taken up in substitution for the swastika by Fascist and right-wing groups to show that the dissident protesters to be "eliminated" were being prosecuted on an individual basis (Pérez Ruiz and Vicente Castro 2013). This semiotic element allows for message personification. In Figure 8, the group to be prosecuted (as a whole-bounded collective entity) is signalled through the naming of a well-known figure that serves as a metonym for the independentist group. The person targeted here is Joan Laporta, president of Barcelona's football club, who positioned in favour of self-determination. This multimodal act of symbolic violence towards a named individual serves to threaten the whole movement with the execution of a "totalising solution" (Balasopoulos 2006, 62) to the "Catalan problem" (note that the dartboard may also stand for a crosshair).

These dystopian LLs also employ capitalisation, providing discourses with visibility and communicative force. Besides, they use the second-person singular and plural forms of addressee, signalling an "othering" dismissive "you" without mobilising any self-categorisation. Anti-secessionists, therefore, proclaim space occupation by opposition. That is, they define themselves through the other-centred discursive construction of "what *you* are and we are *not*," as opposed to pro-independentists, who resort to self-centred "what we *are*" identity displays without a direct mention of the "other" against whom they stand. Thus, the political conflict between the pro-/anti-independence groups is constructed through the mobilisation of two antithetical groups, leading to the spatial inscription of social polarisation along "Catalans"/"Spaniards" ethnolinguistic lines, as shown in the following section (particularly with Figure 9).

Other dimensions of "Catalans"/"Spaniards": right-/left-leaning political selves

We here explore how the analysed utopian/dystopian projects tend to intersect with left-/right-leaning ideological positions, to provide a more comprehensive, multidimensional

Figure 9. The resemiotisation of "LLIBERTAT!" (FREEDOM!).

picture of the dichotomic "Catalans"/"Spaniards" identities, providing further evidence that they emerge in dialogy by being rewritten, edited and/or erased with intertextuality resources.

Previous research has attested that being Spanish pro-unionist is associated with right-wing ideologies, with the referendum bringing to the fore residual examples of Francoist and fascist discourses standing against Catalonia's independence (Bernat and Whyte 2020), as observed in Figures 6 and 8 (respectively with the swastika and "Cruz Celta"). A further example of the polarised dialogue between extreme right-wing anti-secessionists and left-leaning pro-independentists is displayed in Figure 9, where the claim for "FREEDOM!" with a red star in Figure 3 has been resemioticised through the placement of 10 black swastikas onto the original letters and the exclamation mark (this was documented because the LL was photographed at the beginning and at the end of data collection).

By contrast, pro-independentist supporters tend to present themselves as being anti-nazis, anti-fascists and anti-Francoist, as shown in Figures 10 and 11, respectively reading, in Catalan, "DOWN WITH NAZIS!" and "DOWN WITH FASCISTS," in red capital letters.

Figure 10. "FORA NAZIS!" (DOWN WITH NAZIS!) (1).

Figure 11. "FORA FEIXISTES" (DOWN WITH FASCISTS).

Anti-fascist/nazis supporters do not necessarily need to be pro-secessionists. However, a second and more explicit example of the fact that the pro-/anti-unionists' fight is frequently mobilised through the display of respectively right- and left-leaning positionings is presented in Figure 12, where the Francoist dartboard has almost been crossed out with the addition of a Catalan message reading "DOWN WITH NAZIS."

Partly covered, Figure 12 displays the "estelada's"star and the hammer-and-sickle communist sign, on top. This illustrates that being pro-independentist is associated with being more liberal (Gillespie 2020), with the "Catalan" group presenting themselves as anti-right-wing and left-leaning. In fact, the choice of red in the "estelada"(in Figures 2, 3, 9 and 12) stands for "Independence and Socialism" (MDT 1985). The dialogic nature of the conflict in the ideological realm is also observed in Figure 13, where the communist sign has been resemioticised and turned into a spiky, smiling emoticon, providing it of mockery overtones.

Figure 12. "FORA NAZIS" (DOWN WITH NAZIS) (2).

Figure 13. The hammer-and-sickle sign turned into a smiley.

These political oppositions emphasising a discourse of separation are displayed through the use of colour as a semiotic resource giving material "texture" (cohesion) to each group's positioning. As stated by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002, 348), colour "can be used to denote specific people, places and things as well as classes of people, places and things." The 15 figures analysed reveal that, apart from the default use of black in both nationalist camps, Spanish unionists tend to choose the blue colour, which may bear associative meanings with "order" and "regimentation." By contrast, Catalan independentists foster red, which may stand for "revolution" and "change" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2002).

Overall, the intertwined nature of these semiotic resources further reveals the emergence of two collective social groups who draw on opposed nationalist claims and divergent political worldviews. These findings are in line with LL studies which show that the materialisation of polarised collectivities is accomplished through a discursive "tactic of adequation or distinction/opposition" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 599; Byrne and Marcet 2022, 17) whereby activists foreground in-group similarities and reject any ethnolinguistic identity feature attributed to the "other." Thus, Catalan-speaking "Catalans" in this roundabout emerge as being pro-independentists, left-leaning, and defenders of participatory politics, etc.; and "Spaniards" emerge as being Spanish-speaking anti-independentists

Figure 14. "VIVA CAT[ALUNYA]/ESPAÑA" (LONG LIVE CAT[ALONIA]/SPAIN).

Figure 15. "VIVA CAT[ALUNYA]/ESPAÑA" (LONG LIVE CAT[ALONIA]/SPAIN).

(pro-unionists), right-leaning and guardians of the established order (conservative, defending authority, tradition, etc.).

We finish this section by providing two sound pieces of evidence of this dialogic binarism and increased polarisation. Figure 14, in capital letters, reads "LONG LIVE CAT[ALONIA]/SPAIN" with a first call to support a Spanish nation-state ("LONG LIVE SPAIN"; written in Spanish, in red) later edited by using three black letters ("CAT") which stand for "CATALONIA" (two of them superimposed on the first and the third letters of "SPAIN"). It shows how pro-independentists tried to erase the original message by turning it into the opposed claim, i.e. by making it a call to support a Catalan nation-state ("LONG LIVE CAT[ALONIA]").

The same process is observed in Figure 15, which, in this case, displays how a LL reading CAT[ALUNYA] ("CATALONIA"), in black, was almost erased through the writing of the word ES[PAÑA] ("SPAIN") in red upon it, with the addition, on top, of "LONG LIVE," in Spanish. That is, the original message "CAT[ALONIA]" was entextualised to issue the opposite discourse: "LONG LIVE SPAIN."

Figures 14 and 15 show that the two groups use territorial regional/nation-state naming (the geodemographic categories "Spain"/"Catalonia," with delimited borders), also employed, institutionally, by the Spanish and Catalan governments when presenting their opposed nation-building projects, instead of nationality naming (the controversial "Spaniards"/"Catalans"). This is a discursive strategy to extend a group's self-ascribed affiliation to the community of citizens of the territories under dispute. Thus, the use of regional/nation-state names is an expression of belonging to a whole (imagined) nationhood, showing that these ethnolinguistic identities are meant to be attributed not only to individual protesters or groups but also to two bigger rivalling collectivities.

Results and discussion

The results of the analysis show that in the grassroots political domain the older "Catalans"/"Spaniards" binary ethnolinguistic identity affiliations have reemerged, increasingly occupying the Catalan urban space as a way for pro-/anti-independence activists to take action during sustained nationalist confrontation. This confirms Byrne and Marcet's

(2022), Cetrà's (2019) and Della Porta, O'Connor, and Portos (2019) findings concerning the recent spatial emplacement of a social division and polarisation in Catalonia's LLs, to which we have contributed in two ways, in a specific region with its own sociolinguistic configuration.

Firstly, we have provided a historicised, fine-grained picture of the development of the communicative meanings of these antagonist political identities after the 2017 referendum. Thus, we have tracked down the discursive shifts and transformations that co-constitute these LLs today, for example, by unfolding the resourceful use of past 1960s' mottos along with current global-protest calls, or the employment of older iconography (svastikas, sickle-and-hammer) combined with more modern nationalist symbology ("Cruz Celta," "estelada,"1-O). Thus, we have provided a comprehensive multidimensional analysis of the rationalities behind present-day ethnolinguistic (dis)-affiliations in LLs, revealing the ways in which these have been re-shaped/resignified with a renewed force in the public political realm.

Secondly, we have unpacked the relational nature of such polarised identities, as we have conducted a nuanced analysis of the range of semiotic discursive resources that they employ in their competition for space occupation. Providing further evidence to Bruyèl-Olmedo and Juan-Garau's 2022; Debras' 2019 and Martín Rojo 2014a, 2014b findings in political-protest LLs, we argue that the "Catalans'"/"Spaniards'" LLs are dialogically mobilised through intertextuality, resemiotisation, erasure, graphemology and colour resources, and through textual elements like the use of geodemographic naming and of either first- or second-person terms of address.

Concerning our first research question about the less-explored role of majority/minorised language use in nationalist LLs, we have shown that a focus on either Catalan or Spanish choice in public ethnolinguistic-identity discourse is crucial to display the extent to which social confrontation is mediated in/through language. Thus, we have attested that "Catalans" present themselves as only Catalan-language users, and that "Spaniards" self-assign a solely Spanish-using identity, which explains why, relevantly, Catalan/Spanish bilingualism is not mobilised in political-protest LLs, contrary to what happens in present-day interpersonal communication in Catalonia. This provides further evidence that "cleavages of language […] are reflected in, and indeed have been exacerbated by, the ongoing political conflict between pro-independence and pro-unionist camps" (Miley and Garvía 2019, 1), in the urban space.

Regarding our second research question on the unchartered role of utopian/dystopian discourse in public-protest talk, we have shown that utopianism/dystopianism is pivotal to understand the (re)-constructions/(re)-appropriations of past, present and future (counter)-power projects and nation-state building aspirations or suppressions. In this regard, we consider that these "tangible" futures reveal the ways in which "history" is used as a resource to provide national fights of verisimilitude. This suggests that utopian/dystopian discourse shall be foregrounded in critical urban studies, particularly, too, because they are the basis for the constitution of oppositional personhoods (Fernández Nadal 2010; Lefebvre 1976 [1973], 1991; Pinder 2013).

Our case study is limited and may not allow for the generalisability of findings. However, it has provided a revealing snapshot of how citizens' mobilisation through space occupation, in this case during sustained nationalist upheaval, is "transforming […] the way of doing politics" (Martín Rojo 2014a, 623) from the bottom up, in an

unprecedented manner. It has also shown that a critical social semiotics approach focusing on language choice and utopian/dystopian discourse is crucial to understand sociopolitical transformations (like new possibilities for citizenship governance) and to trace protests across time and space to prefigure the development of social conflict. Overall, this may have implications for, and contribute to, further investigations on the emergence of discursive sociopolitical polarisation in minorised-language societies of the global era.

Notes

1. The pro-independence movement encompasses both right-/left-wing parties, and not all Catalan left-leaning parties foster pro-independence (Rubiralta 2020). However, there is a tendency for left-leaning parties to align with pro-secessionism and for right-leaning groups to foster unionism (Bernat and Whyte 2020; Gillespie 2020), particularly in the investigated region, as evidenced in the Analysis.
2. We assume that "dystopia" encapsulates the notion of "anti-utopia", as our dystopian LLs already encompass the anti-utopic "passion to denounce and to warn against utopian programmes in the political realm" (Jameson 2007, 199).
3. This linguistic recentralisation includes, e.g., the requirement of a basic level of Spanish (not Catalan) for "naturalisation" in Catalonia (BOE 2015, 105524); the establishment of a Spanish-only regime for accessing online public administration (Sabaté i Dalmau 2014); and the obligation to teach 25% of subjects in Spanish in several schools where official bilingual linguistic programmes were already being implemented (PPL 2022).
4. We render Anoia a pro-independence *comarca* because 92% of its inhabitants voted in favour of secessionism (Diari d'Igualada 2017). Also, 56.5% of them opted for a pro-independence political party in the 2021 elections. This is remarkably different from other neighbouring *comarques* in the Barcelona metropolitan area (like "Baix Llobregat") where neither the pro-independence option nor Catalan-nationalist political parties won (Nació Digital 2023). Igualada was a strategic city for the mobilisation of the pro-independence movement where, e.g., the Spanish police found 100 hidden ballot boxes, 2.5 million ballots and four million envelopes, ready to be used for the referendum (RTVE 2017).
5. The researcher, raised in the area, was born into Catalan families. She lived in Igualada and witnessed the local sociopolitical events that occurred before and after the referendum. She was therefore familiar with the social/protest movements of the *comarca* on both sides of the conflict.
6. The standard verb form is "muérete".

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation under Grant PID2022-137554NB-I00; and Agency for Management of University and Research Grants under Grant 2021-SGR-00581.

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