

Feature

The Catalan word factory

ENGLISH
ACCOUNTS FOR
12% OF NEW
TERMS IN THE
CATALAN
LANGUAGE

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● 'Crooner', 'dream team', 'email' and even 'antibushisme' are just some of the recent contributions that the English language has made to Català. In fact, in 2007, more than 5,300 neologisms – newly-coined terms that are widely used but that cannot be found in a dictionary – were identified by the *Observatori de Neologia* (Obneo) of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra. In all, some 12% of the new terms catalogued in Catalan by Obneo are imported from English, another 15% came from Spanish, with the remainder originating within the Catalan language itself.

Of course, there is no guarantee that these terms will make it into the dictionaries or that they will remain for ever if they do. Yet, Obneo's work in cataloguing and analysing neologisms in Catalan and Spanish provides the official academies charged with regulating the respective languages, which in Catalan's case is the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (IEC), with the information they need to update the dictionary.

In order to publicise its work, as well as forging links with similar societies abroad, Obneo has just celebrated its first international conference in the Barcelona headquarters of the



Top: English in use with Bicing bike hire service. Below: Obneo presentation

IEC. The I Congrés Internacional de Neologia en les Llengües Romàniques, or Cineo for short, took place from May 8-10 and included the participation of more than 200 delegates, many from other countries.

"Our aim is to organise a series of congresses every three years and also look at creating in the future an international association of neology," says Maria Teresa Cabré, Obneo's head.

Reflecting reality

One of Obneo's concerns is to make people outside the academic sphere more aware of the phenomenon of neologisms. Rather than reflecting the paucity of a language, leaving it no alternative but to ransack the vocabulary of other tongues or simply make new terms up, Cabré argues that neologisms are a sign of a language's vitality: "A language that creates is a language that is evolving and, there-

fore, cannot die," she says.

As a reflection of the society from which they emerge, neologisms mirror the changing reality on the streets. In this sense, foreign cultures have much to offer native languages. In Catalan, for example, the effects of immigration can be seen in the adoption of a word like 'cuscús', which represents the widespread acceptance of cous-cous in local supermarkets. Naturally, a stronger influence can be detected from Spanish due to Catalonia's identity as a part of Spain and the ease with which people from other parts of the country can function within Catalonia without the need to abandon Spanish.

"When Catalan speakers are in a mixed group, being bilingual, they can very easily change to the language that everyone understands," says Cabré.

However, it seems that not all languages adopt influences from other tongues to the same degree. According to Cabré, Spanish is more open to foreign terms than Catalan, which can be seen from the fact that English terms account for a fifth of all Spanish neologisms.

"In the case of Spanish, there is a more relaxed attitude," says Cabré. "We Catalan speakers pay far more attention to our language."

INTERVIEW. MARIA TERESA CABRÉ . DIRECTOR OF THE OBSERVATORI DE NEOLOGIA

'Why "Bicing"? Because it sounds cool'

M.M.

● Born of a research group set up on 1988 and since 1994 part of the applied linguistics institute of Universitat Pompeu Fabra, for the last decade the *Observatori de Neologia* has been logging the appearance of new words used in the media and in society in general.

– What role do imported foreign terms play in the creation of neologisms?

If we look at spoken Catalan, it is very significant. Here the most frequent neologisms are imported from Spanish rather than English. However, if we look at written Catalan, most neologisms are formed within Catalan itself, although there is also the odd import, such as 'blog' or 'web'.

– How are terms from foreign languages imported?

The process of creating neologisms is the same for all languages. What does vary is the proportion in which one or another is used. Very few Catalan words are imported to other languages, while English is omnipresent, above all in certain

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fields. With globalisation, however, and the sort of cultural uniformity it engenders, the situation is changing. Before, the only words imported came from the field of technology, from



Cabré says English imports now originate from the cultural field / A.P.

computers, but now we are importing [English] words with a social use: 'freaky' is a good example. Whenever someone wants to give a term a sense of modernity, they normally refer

to English. For example, 'Bicing', Barcelona's public bicycle hire service. Why did they call it, 'Bicing'? Because it sounds cool.

– What attitude do Catalans have towards language?

If we talk about Spanish, we find a contradiction. On the one hand, there are institutions that are extremely concerned about the purity of the language but at the same time have a pan-Hispanic outlook, which means different varieties are admitted in order to preserve, before anything else, the unity of the Spanish language. The institutions count for a lot but as it has 400 million speakers, the survival of the language is guaranteed. With Catalan, the situation is a little different. Firstly, it is different because our country is very small. Secondly, it is different because Catalan speakers find themselves in a minority situation, split into different autonomous communities with different linguistic policies and different ideas about what the language should be.