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Cultural and linguistic nationalism in the Esperanto movement: The Catalan case (1887–1928)

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Abstract

The emergence of Esperantism in 1887 coincided with a nationalist movement in Catalonia that was gaining momentum. During the first decades of the 20th century, both phenomena became deeply intertwined, as Catalan nationalists embraced the constructed language and used the transnational network that developed around it to revindicate their cultural particularities. This article explores how the relationship between the constructed language and Catalanists evolved between 1887 and 1928, when a political regime unfavourable to regional nationalisms forced the Catalan Esperanto movement to reframe their activities and adopt a more apolitical and neutral position.

KEYWORDS

Catalonia, cultural nationalism, Esperanto, language, Iberian Peninsula, Transnational

1 | INTRODUCTION

During the 19th century, Catalan nationalists addressed the marginalisation of their mother tongue, which had fallen prey to a complete situation of diglossia in the region (Stillwell, 2013, pp. 68–86). Starting in the 1830s, the *Renaixença* had focused on the revival of the Catalan language and culture (King, 2005, p. 8), but the process had taken a step forward in 1841 when Joaquim Rubió i Ors (1818–1899) had asked for the cultural independence of the region (McRoberts, 2001, p. 21). Inspired by the works of Fichte and Herder, Catalans conceived language ‘as a crucial condition of individual well-being and political legitimacy’ (Patten, 2006, p. 223) and saw in its promotion a

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tool to guarantee Catalonia's uniqueness and autonomy vis-à-vis Spain and Castilian hegemony. In an ever-changing society, especially in a place like Catalonia where modernisation and a fast industrialisation process were drastically transforming the region (Giner, 1984, n.p.), the Catalan language, as well as their traditions and culture, united the long chain of generations that succeeded each other in the territory (Castells, 2010, p. 51). Furthermore, in language Catalonians also found a way to distinguish themselves from other Spaniards while remaining welcoming to the migrant workers who had found a new home in the region. Indeed, anyone interested in being Catalan could simply learn the language and show their commitment to the movement by studying it (Castells, 2010, p. 52).¹

At the same time Catalan nationalism was developing in the Iberian Peninsula, Ludwik Zamenhof was working on his proposal for a constructed language in Poland, then part of the Russian Empire. Having faced the challenges posed by a multilingual and multi-ethnic community, Zamenhof was determined to come up with a solution that could demolish these unsurmountable barriers that kept humanity divided through misunderstandings (Żelazny, 2020 [2012]). Thus, Esperanto was his attempt at creating international fraternity, at offering the world an auxiliary language that could facilitate communication and foster harmony among individuals who spoke different mother tongues.

The new planned language's vast potential was exploited by its supporters from the very beginning. Esperanto periodicals sprout first across Europe and soon after everywhere else in the world. Their content was initially devoted to the teaching of the planned language and sharing knowledge, testing thus the flexibility and adaptability of Zamenhof's creation. Yet rapidly, some early Esperantists discovered that through the transnational network of journals they had established they could also spread the word about their own communities. As articulated in 1909 by Patrick Parker, an Irish Esperantist, they could not forget their respective homelands nor their national histories (Parker, 1909, pp. 69–71). It was their duty to preserve their respective ancestral traditions and, above all, their national languages.

This paradoxical juxtaposition between Esperanto as an expression of internationalism and nationalism was, albeit surprising at first, a natural coupling and a reflection of a liberal internationalism that 'was compatible with natural patriotism' (Sluga, 2013, p. 6). The constructed language had been designed to protect languages spoken by minorities, offering a neutral alternative for intercultural communication that did not contribute to the pervasive expansion of the languages of the 'big nations' (Portugal-Esperanto, 1926, p. 39). In Esperanto, stateless nations could therefore explore their cultures and traditions while presenting them to the wider public without having to rely on a foreign national language. This process, which as we will see including translating national literature into Esperanto, allowed them to popularise their mother tongues and gain recognition.

It was under this premise that Esperantism and the emergent Catalan nationalism of the early 20th century found common ground. Although not every Catalan nationalist was an Esperantist nor vice versa, the main Esperanto journals of the time, as well as the activities organised by Catalan Esperanto associations and groups, stress the deep connection between both phenomena. Exploring this relationship contributes to the line of research opened by Glenda Sluga in *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* through which she tried to 'correct a distortion of historical vision that has featured nationalism in the foreground, while keeping internationalism beyond view' (Sluga, 2013, p. 8). In this case, Esperantism is seen as an expression of internationalism and the crucial context in which nationalist demands were made and national identities flourished without jeopardising the overall internationalist spirit of the linguistic project. The study corroborates Sluga's proposition regarding the 'neither antagonistic nor even analytically principles' (Sluga, 2013, p. 7) of internationalism and nationalism.

By adopting a regional lens, this study also grounds the global history of Esperanto on a particular context, allowing us to better understand Esperantism's intricacies and particularities without falling prey to associating it with the trite and simplistic concepts of 'pacifism', 'harmony' and 'universalism' (Alcalde, 2015; Lins, 2000).

This article is thus divided into three sections. The first two explore how cultural demands were present in the activities carried out by the Catalan Esperanto community between 1887, the year when the first Esperanto grammar, *Unua libro*, was published, and 1928. It highlights the predominant role played by language and these early Esperantists' concern with literature, tradition, history, architecture and tourism. Alongside journals and translations,

it also analyses the impact the 5th Universal Esperanto Congress in Barcelona (1909) had on the community and how it served as a vehicle for the propaganda of their national identity. Indeed, the event provided Catalan Esperantists with a unique opportunity to present their culture and region to an international audience, introducing them to what until then they could have only experienced in writing. Together, these two sections demonstrate how Catalan nationalists in the Esperanto movement envisioned their nation and curated a national identity that emphasised the factors they considered to be key to their character.

Lastly, this paper moves on to address the efforts to create a cohesive Catalan Esperanto community that brought together Catalan speakers from different regions, regardless of their citizenship. Driven by a sense of identity that relied on language and challenged the political status quo of Europe, which had forced individuals with Catalan as their mother tongue to be separated, these endeavours led to increasing tensions with the Spanish governments and part of the Spanish Esperanto movement, as they were seen as an attempt at pan-catalanism and part of a Catalan nationalist agenda.²

These three sections paint a comprehensive picture of the close relationship between Esperantism and Catalan nationalism from the origins of the constructed language until 1928, when their connection led the Spanish government to intervene, forcing the Catalan Esperanto Federation to adopt a less Catalanist discourse. It challenges the traditional interpretation of Esperantism as a pan-nationalist movement deeply concerned with international cooperation and pacifism, rooting it instead through a regional approach that sheds some light on its links with more traditional nationalist movements.

As Esperanto was first and foremost experienced in writing, most of the activities and ideas of the early Esperantists were recorded in the form of different publications, especially journals and books. Furthermore, it was common for regional and national Esperanto associations to produce their own journals as a way to spread the word about the constructed language while keeping track of the latest developments in the movement. Although editors struggled to publish issues regularly due to economic, political and personal difficulties, they rarely desisted from their efforts (La Suno Hispana, 1904, pp. 178–180). As a result, there is a rich collection of primary sources that have been crucial to this article, most of which has been made available online by the Austrian National Library.

The journals and books selected for this article offer clear examples of how nationalism was present in the Catalan Esperanto movement. *Tutmonda Espero* and *Kataluna Esperantisto* serve as the main sources from the Catalan front as two of the most prolific journals printed in the region, while the *Kataluna Antologio* epitomises the devotion for the cultural and linguistic promotion of their national identity of these early Catalan Esperantists. Other national and international publications such as *Amerika Esperantisto* or *Espero Katolika* have been included in an attempt at exemplifying how nationalist expressions were received and interpreted by a wider Esperanto audience.

2 | CULTURAL REVINDICATION AT THE CORE OF THE CATALAN ESPERANTO COMMUNITY

‘Aduc en aquesta qüestió podem els esperantistes fer un important servei a la nostra llengua natural, cuidant nosaltres mateixos, com ja algun samideano ha començat, de donar a coneixer les produccions literaries als estrangers per medi de l’Esperanto [...]’. (On this matter, we, Esperantists, can do an important service to our natural language by taking ourselves care, as some colleagues have already done, of making literary productions known to foreigners through Esperanto) (Serdá, 1911, p. 226). The matter addressed by *Kataluna Esperantisto*, a successful and prolific Catalan Esperanto journal, in the previous lines had to do with an increasingly disturbing issue for Catalan nationalist intellectuals: the contempt with which their works were regarded in the international arena (Serdá, 1911, p. 225). The concern stemmed from the fact that Catalan literary works had hardly had any international impact. For some, this could mean that they simply lacked the merits to be translated into other languages due to their low quality. Yet Catalan Esperantists believed that the real reason was how little the world knew about the Catalan language (Serdá, 1911, p. 225).

Indeed, Catalan traditions were often mistaken with that of other Spanish regions, and those few foreigners who would eventually take an interest in them were likely to misunderstand Catalonia's long-standing customs, contaminating them in the process. This was one of the ever-present and unavoidable consequences of multilingualism and translation (Imami et al., 2021, p. 179). Of course, Catalans could have always learnt foreign languages and translated Catalan pieces into them, but this would have been a very time-consuming and imperfect process, for it was unlikely for them to master another language like a native would. Furthermore, the hours spent studying it would have kept Catalans from focusing on the production of fine literary works in their mother tongue and from polishing their grammars, dictionaries and vocabulary. After the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714) and the *Nueva Planta* Decrees (Valencia, 1707; Mallorca, 1715; and Catalonia, 1716), which established an absolutist system that promoted the imposition of Castilian laws (Ginebra, 2012, p. 105), the Catalan language had been subjected to decades of negligence that had to be addressed through hard work.³

Under these dire circumstances, Esperanto seemed to be the only possible solution. An international language that could be learnt in a few weeks without reinforcing other nations' position of power granted them access to a new public who, by acknowledging Catalan's existence and ability to produce great works, could legitimise their identity as a nation.⁴ Likewise, translating intricate literary productions into Esperanto benefitted the constructed language, proving that it was capable of transmitting and expressing complex texts. Catalans, however, did not come up with this idea. Early examples of this phenomenon can be traced back to *L'Espérantiste: organe propagateur de la langue internationale*, an Esperanto Journal that started publishing issues in January 1898, and which included a variety of national productions translated into Esperanto, like a Russian fable printed in July 1899 (*L'Espérantiste: organe propagateur de la langue internationale*, 1899, p. 20).

Nonetheless, Catalan Esperantists considerably contributed to the trend in numerous ways. *Kataluna Esperantisto* printed articles ranging from discrete short translations of contemporary texts, such as *Romantics d'ara* by Enric de Fuentes (1864–1935), which made an appearance in *Kataluna Esperantisto* in 1910 (de Fuentes, 1910, pp. 147–148), and *Balada* by J. López Picó (1886–1959) (López Picó, 1910, pp. 51–52), to essays by famous Catalan figures like Francesc Pi i Margall (1824–1901) (Pi i Margall, 1910, pp. 87–88).

Tutmonda Espero, another well-established Catalan Esperanto publication, opted from December 1910 onwards to include pictures of several Catalan landmarks to complement a series of diverse articles titled 'la antikvaj monumentoj de Barcelono' (the ancient monuments of Barcelona), which dealt with the region's most notable attractions (Tutmonda Espero, 1910, p. 152). The first of these pieces opened with a short introduction to the history of Barcelona seen through the architectural trail left by the peoples who had inhabited the region, whereas the six following articles put together a curated collage of the city. In January 1911, the editor briefly discussed the history and architecture of the *Sant Pau del Camp*, a church in Barcelona founded around the ninth century, *Capella d'en Marcús*, a 12th-century chapel, *Santa Anna*, a Romanesque church and the 13th-century *Palau Episcopal* (Tutmonda Espero, 1911a, pp. 8–9). The summary was accompanied by four pictures of the two first monuments that highlighted their most remarkable features. The religious theme continued throughout the following issues, with some exceptions such as the *Palau Reial Major*, a past royal residence turned into the General Archive of the Crown of Aragon (Tutmonda Espero, 1911b, p. 72). The series concluded in June 1911 with the *Palau dels diputats provincials*, built in the 16th century (Tutmonda Espero, 1911c, pp. 88–89), and a pointed remark by the anonymous author: 'Poste, ĝis la nuna epoko, malmultaj konstruaĵoj meritas ja esti citataj' (Later, until the present time, few buildings deserve to be cited) (Tutmonda Espero, 1911c, p. 89). Despite the abrupt conclusion, *Tutmonda Espero* continued printing images of Barcelona, including even its most modern buildings, but now without an explanatory text (Tutmonda Espero, 1911d, p. 119).

The journal's commitment to broadcasting the Catalan nation and its identity through Esperanto was not limited to these glimpses into Barcelona's history and architecture. A poem about *la sardana*, described by Joan Maragall (1860–1911), the original author, as '[...] la plej bela el ĉiuj dancoj estas kvazaŭ belega ringego balanciĝanta kun modera malrapideco' (the most beautiful of all dances is like a beautiful ring, swaying with moderate slowness) (Maragall, 1912 [1896], pp. 1–2), translated versions of literary texts by lauded authors such as Jacint Verdaguer i

Santaló (1845–1902) (Verdaguer, 1912 [1891], p. 3; Verdaguer, 1913 [1877], p. 64), and reports concerning touristic visits like the one they made to Sitges (Llorach, 1912, pp. 62–65) populated *Tutmonda Espero*'s pages until its disappearance in 1914.

Yet far from limiting their work to including this sort of pieces in issues printed by Esperanto journals, these early Esperantists embarked on more ambitious ventures. Among them, the publication of a Catalan anthology known as *Kataluna Antologio* in 1925 became their most remarkable accomplishment (Grau Casas, 1925). The collection was divided into three main sections (*Antikvaj aŭtoroj* [ancient authors], *Popolkantoj* [folk songs] and *Modernaj aŭtoroj* [modern authors]). The foreword also included a look into the history, structure and development of the Catalan language, as well as into the territories where it was spoken, an introduction to Catalan literature and its periods, an introduction to the anthology, and a bibliography. With more than 400 pages, the project vastly surpassed most Esperanto written enterprises, which were more often than not limited by scarce personal and financial resources.

Its release was preceded by an extensive transnational marketing plan for its promotion among potential readers. In late 1925, Esperanto journals from across Europe reported on its publication by including what appeared to be a standardised report on the anthology that detailed its name, followed by *Monumenta Verko en Esperanto* (monumental work in Esperanto). The short text remarked its most basic characteristics, including its length and dimensions, as well as its contents and price, while highlighting the inclusion of comparisons between the Catalan language and Spanish, French and Italian (Belga Esperantisto, 1925, p. 163; Heroldo de Esperanto, 1925, n.p.; L'Esperanto. Itala Esperanta Revuo, 1925, p. 200). Additionally, the anthology was one of the prizes awarded to the four winners of the 12th *Internaciaj Floraj Ludoj* (International Floral Games), an annual Esperanto literary contest based on the Barcelonan Floral Games (La Progreso, 1926, p. 11).

The promotion campaign continued well into 1926, with several other journals remarking the publication of a 20-page long collection of reviews concerning the anthology by the committee behind the *Kataluna Antologio* (Amerika Esperantisto, 1926, p. 9; L'Esperanto. Itala Esperanta Revuo, 1926, p. 219). Indeed, the compilation had been warmly welcomed by the community. *Espero Katolika* noted that '[...] Grau Casas kaj aliaj katalunaj samideanoj faris la tradukojn senescepte bonegajn, artismajn. [...] De la doktrina kaj morala vidpunkto nenio estas riproĉinda. Ni do povas ĝin plene rekomendi al niaj legantoj, kaj ĝoje ni tion faras' (Grau Casas and his colleagues produced excellent and artistic translations without exception. From a doctrinal and moral point of view, there is nothing reprehensible. We can therefore fully recommend it to our readers, and we happily do so), focusing thus more on its significance for the Esperanto movement than on the literary quality of the Catalan works (G.R., 1926, p. 305). *Hungara Esperantisto*, on the other hand, named it one of the most important books published in Esperanto so far (Hungara Esperantisto, 1926, p. 7).

Whereas most journals emphasised its contribution to Esperantism, some publications did not hesitate to explore the Catalan nation and culture. The periodical *International Language* printed a long essay on the anthology in May 1926 (International Language, 1926, p. 71). The opening paragraph acknowledged the ignorance surrounding the distinct languages spoken in Spain, and the possibility of Catalan being '[...] perhaps more cultured than Castilian itself' (International Language, 1926, p. 71). The author praised the anthology for giving 'an adequate insight into the spirit, and an appreciation of the value of the Catalan literature' (International Language, 1926, p. 71), which possessed a 'remarkable similarity to the other European literatures' (International Language, 1926, p. 71). Within the wider Esperanto community, the anthology eventually gained enough popularity as to guarantee the printing of a second edition in 1931.

The written word played indeed a crucial role in the dissemination of the Catalan culture in the Esperanto movement, as it provided Catalans with an intellectually curious international audience who were interested in learning more about its uniqueness. The anthology, as well as the cultural pieces printed in their various Esperanto journals, helped them spread the word about their existence and particularities. However, there was a crucial event that granted to their cause international recognition and boosted Esperanto's popularity in the region, at least to a certain extent: the 5th Universal Esperanto Congress in Barcelona (1909).

3 | THE 5TH UNIVERSAL ESPERANTO CONGRESS IN BARCELONA, 1909

In 1909, Barcelona hosted the 5th Universal Esperanto Congress. The annual event, which had been inaugurated in 1905 in Boulogne-Sur-Mer, had by then become a staple in Esperantism. For a week, Esperantists from all over the world gathered in a chosen city to discuss the future and current affairs of the constructed language. As the years passed and Esperanto gained more supporters, the list of attendants grew exponentially from a few hundreds to more than a thousand. These numbers, however, do not reflect the reality of the movement. Indeed, only a few privileged Esperantists could afford to travel to a remote city for over a week. Most supporters never made it to one of these meetings, living Esperanto instead through their local, regional and national associations, and, of course, in written form.

Although they were better connected by land and by sea to the rest of the European continent than most Iberian regions, Catalonians did not often attend these congresses. Only one made it to Boulogne-Sur-Mer (Adresaro de la kongresanoj en Boulogne-sur-Mer, 1905, p. 14), three to Geneva in 1906 (Nomaro de la kongresanoj, 1906, pp. 24, 28), six to Cambridge in 1907 (Nomaro de la kongresanoj, 1907, pp. 8, 24, 27) and five to Dresden in 1908 (Adresaro de l' kongresanoj, 1908, pp. 1, 13, 14, 16). But when the Universal Congress took place in Barcelona, at least 250 indicated Catalonia as their place of origin (Kvina Universala Kongreso de Esperanto [Barcelono, 5–11 septembro 1909], 1910, n.p.) out of the near 1300 participants who travelled to the city (Reed, 1909, p. 696). Furthermore, what is also remarkable is that these partial records show that more foreigners attended the congress than individuals from non-Catalan regions of Spain. French represented a majority, but there were also more Britons (8% of the total) than non-Catalan Spaniards (7% of the total) (Kvina Universala Kongreso de Esperanto [Barcelono, 5–11 septembro 1909], 1910, n.p.).

The figures highlight the potential of these Universal Congresses, especially for a small nation like Catalonia that was seeking international recognition and legitimisation. Whereas Esperanto was the language used in all communications and events, as well as the reason why they were meeting, the organising committees knew very well that these congresses were also an opportunity for the hosting nation to present themselves to the international community. Indeed, participants still had to travel to the city and find their way around it, booking hotels and restaurants, as well as finding ways to fill their schedules in-between the official Esperanto events. It was thus understood that the attendants would not be living in their own Esperanto bubble, isolated from the reality of the place where they were gathering. Once again, Catalan Esperantists did not start this trend but followed in the steps of their European colleagues who had organised the first four Universal Congresses by curating a series of cultural displays designed to introduce their public to the rich Catalan world. Some of them, as we will see, became key traditions.

Among them was a brochure printed by the *Societat d'Atracció de Forasters*, an organisation founded to promote tourism in Barcelona with no ties to the Esperanto movement. Written in Esperanto, the booklet provided its readers with all the basic information about the Catalan city: from its climate to its most significant landmarks, as well as details concerning its architecture and public transport (Societat d'Atracció de Forasters, 1909). The organising committee itself published its own book too, including what they defined as 'some advice for the trip' in which they provided its readers with useful sentences in Catalan and their corresponding translations into Esperanto, since Esperantists would have to interact with locals who did not know the international language (Komitato de la Va Kongreso de Esperanto, 1909, p. 4).

Apart from these practicalities, the attendants were invited to join in a series of celebrations designed to showcase Catalonia's cultural background. A noteworthy event was the translation into Esperanto and the performance of a Catalan play: *Misteri de Dolor* by Adrià Gual (Aymonier, 1909, p. 8), following the example set by the German Esperantists who the previous year had translated Goethe's *Iphigenia in Tauris* (1779) and presented it at the 4th Universal Esperanto Congress in Dresden (Aymonier, 1909, p. 8). Although it received mixed reactions, especially when it was inevitably compared with Goethe's work (Corret, 1909, pp. 37–38), non-Catalan Esperantists applauded the effort and saw in Gual an author who was 'proud of his homeland' (Aymonier, 1909, p. 8). The play was accompanied by other traditional representations spread throughout the congress, such as a concert at the *Teatro Romera* on Sunday

5 September (Kvina Universala Kongreso de Esperanto, 1910, p. 12) and another the following Tuesday. On Wednesday 8 September 1909, the organising committee put together the first edition of the *Floraj Ludoj* or Floral Games, an adaptation of the traditional Catalan literary context that was to become a cultural referent in the Esperanto world (Kvina Universala Kongreso de Esperanto, 1910, p. 13). The next day the attendees were taken to Tibidabo, a hill overlooking Barcelona (Kvina Universala Kongreso de Esperanto, 1910, p. 13). The final event took place on Friday 10th: a ball at the *Palau de les Belles Arts* to which Esperantists were encouraged to wear their respective national costumes (Kvina Universala Kongreso de Esperanto, 1910, p. 13). It was during this meeting that the Catalan Esperantists community introduced its audience to their regional dance: *la sardana*. The performance, however, was regarded as unduly lengthy by the audience, as it kept Esperantists from dancing themselves (Corret, 1909, p. 39).

The cultural and touristic display put together by the Catalan committee served its purpose. Camille Aymonier, a French Esperantist who travelled to Barcelona for the occasion, remarked how they have managed to encapsulate the Catalan character: ‘Les poésies populaires chantées par cet admirable chœur [...]; les danses locales, d’une saveur si étrange; la pièce catalane, “Mistero de Doloro,” image des mœurs catalanes, œuvre d’un Catalan, fier de sa petite patrie: tous ces spectacles harmonieusement combinés, nous ont permis de nous composer du caractère catalan une image plus précise’ (The popular poems sung by this admirable choir [...]; the local dances of such a strange flavour; the Catalan play ‘Mistero de Doloro’, an image of Catalan mores, the work of a Catalan, proud of his small homeland: all these shows, harmoniously combined, have enabled us to form a more precise image of the Catalan character) (Aymonier, 1909, p. 8).

International promotion was, however, only a part of the work Catalan Esperantists carried out in favour of their national identity. As it has been remarked above, they were aware of the decline their mother tongue had experienced and tending to it was an urgent matter. Building a national community among Catalan speakers through Esperanto became therefore a priority. From a political point of view, attempts at uniting individuals from Catalonia, France, Valencia and the Balearic Islands under one Catalan Esperanto national association created substantial tensions with the Spanish state. Indeed, they form part of a wider issue within Esperantism, that of the organisation of the movement (Gobbo, 2017, pp. 41–42). Yet this did not stop Catalans from establishing a comprehensive community.

4 | WORKING FROM WITHIN: THE CONSTRUCTION OF A COMMUNITY IN CATALAN-SPEAKING TERRITORIES AND THE LEAGUE FOR THE DEFENCE AND PRESERVATION OF ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

Catalan Esperantists took two different approaches to the establishment of their own community within Esperantism. On the one hand, they worked towards the unification of all Catalan speakers under one federation that could represent and protect their interests while granting them a special space where they would share their unique experiences. On the other one, they tried to join forces with other minorities, nations without a state or small nations whose mother tongues were also being threatened by those spoken by what they referred to as ‘big nations’.

Regarding the first approach, Catalan Esperantists were determined to build a national association that grouped together Catalan speakers regardless of their official nationality, since their main focus was culture and language. Thus, politics and political divisions had not place in a social movement that aimed at neutrality and, as they put it: ‘Lingva estas nia afero, kaj ne laŭ ŝtatoj, gentoj, sklavaroj aŭ registaroj oni devas nin grupigi sed laŭ lingvoj. Se morgaŭ la tuta mondo apartenas al unu sola nacio, la morgaŭa Kongreso de Esperanto ne starigos tamen unu solan grupon por ĉiuj kongresanoj’ (Language is our business, and we should not be grouped according to states, peoples, slaves or governments, but according to language. If tomorrow the whole world belongs to one nation, tomorrow’s Esperanto Congress will not set up a single group for all its members) (Pujulà i Vallès, 1912, pp. 385–386). This was a

vital point for Catalan Esperantists because the Catalan language was not exclusively spoken in the Spanish region of Catalonia. In fact, speakers could be found in other parts of Spain, as well as in France, Italy and Andorra (Pradilla, 2001, p. 58).

The first step towards the unification of a Catalan community within the Esperanto movement was taken in 1904, when Pau Berthelot (1881–1910) founded *l'Aplec Esperantista de Catalunya*, an association welcoming Esperantists from both sides of the Pyrenees (Margais Basi, 2020, p. 35). Its first congress in Barcelona brought together a diverse group of Esperantists who, while conversing in French, Catalan, Spanish and Esperanto (Margais Basi, 2020, p. 36), decided to hold a second congress in Amélie-les-Bains, France (Margais Basi, 2020). However, the increasingly tense political situation forced *l'Aplec* to cease its activities in early 1906 (Margais Basi, 2020, p. 42). A new attempt at hosting a Catalan Esperanto Congress beyond the political borders of Catalonia was not carried out until 1925, when the *Kataluna Esperantisto Federacio* or K.E.F., established in 1910, met in Palma de Mallorca, the Balearic Islands (Bofill, 1925, p. 81), following an expansion of the K.E.F. to include several new local and regional associations from Catalonia and Mallorca (Margais Basi, 2020, p. 69). These initiatives were more often than not received with suspicion by the Spanish central government and Spanish nationalist Esperantists, who considered any effort to represent all Catalan speakers and host events in what were considered to be 'Catalan territories' without being part of the four provinces that comprised Catalonia an attempt at 'pan-catalanism' (Garvía, 2021, p. 139).

Disagreements concerning the structuring of the movement marked the years that followed the First World War. With an Esperantist community now well-established in the Iberian state, but especially in Catalonia, its members started to consider how to make the most out of their scarce resources, maximising their productivity and encouraging cooperation among local, regional and national groups. Talks concerning the foundation of an Iberian Confederation or *Iberia Esperantista Konfederacio* as a home for all regional federations started in 1913, but it was not properly discussed again until 1919 when the *Unua Diskutanta Kunveno de Esperantistoj de Iberiaj Landoj* (First Discussion Meeting of Esperantists from Iberian Countries) met (Hispana Esperantisto, 1920, pp. 98–102).

Although initially interested in the project, the Catalan Federation soon stepped away from the discussions after having been granted membership to the *Konstantan Reprezentantaron de la Naciaj Societoj* (Permanent Representation of National Societies), a transnational Esperanto institution, in 1923 (Dekkvara Universala Kongreso, 1926, p. 9). This achievement reflected Esperantism's commitment to the protection and fair representation of all nations, regardless of their political status, within the movement. For Catalan Esperantists, on the other hand, it meant that the Iberian Confederation had little to offer them in terms of international projection, since they were capable of establishing international relations on their own (Garvía, 2021, p. 136).

Despite declaring their full support to the Iberian Confederation 'from the point of view of propaganda' (Kataluna Esperantisto, 1923, p. 55), the Catalan Federation still faced backlash for their decision. At international congresses, the Spanish representative had already been keeping his Catalan colleagues from addressing the audience in the name of Catalonia (Gili Norta, 1921, p. 112) and continued to do so after the Catalan Esperanto Federation's admission into the *Konstantan Reprezentantaron* (J.M.R., 1925, p. 116; Solà, 1924, p. 32). As the Spanish Esperantists put it, giving the floor to the Catalan Esperanto Federation as a national society would have been recognising a political problem, which was against the regulations (J.M.R., 1925, p. 116).

Since the Catalan Esperantists' influence and popularity continued to grow in the wider Esperanto community, their relationship with their Spanish counterparts soured. Their independence within Esperantism, as well as their cultural and linguistic revindication, alongside their intentions to unite and represent all Catalan speakers were now perceived as suspicious, a cloaked attempt at pan-catalanism and separation from the Spanish state. The conflict concluded in 1928 when a military office with jurisdiction over the province of Barcelona asked the Catalan Federation to stop identifying itself as Catalan and to join the Spanish national federation (Milans del Bosch, 1928, p. 89). Rather than complying with these instructions, the Catalan Federation's committee resigned.

As a new committee took over the federation and resumed its publications through the *Kataluna Esperantisto*, they did so following the requirements established by the Spanish government, renouncing Catalan in their journal and publishing instead in Spanish and Esperanto. These issues, however, were not considered to be part of the

original *Kataluna Esperantisto's* legacy, for they were not genuine: ‘Volem fer-la servant fidelitat a la tradició de la K.E.F. I mostrant una continuïtat encoratjadora ... Però no podem fer-nos solidaris dels qui darrerament han prostituit la nostra ànima i han ignorat la història de la nostra Federació i de la nostra Revista. [...] Considerem autèntics els números de l'òrgan oficial de la K.E.F., que indiquem a continuació [...]’ (We want to do it using the fidelity to the tradition of the K.E.F. and showing and encouraging continuity ... But we cannot show solidarity with those who have lately prostituted our souls and ignored the history of our Federation and our journal. [...] We consider the following issues of the official organ of the K.E.F. to be authentic [...]) (*Kataluna Esperantisto*, 1930, p. 1).

Nonetheless, as it has been shown with the *Konstantan Rerezentantaron*, Catalan Federation's attempt to represent all Catalan speakers regardless of their homeland was not limited to its activities within Spain. At an international level, some early Esperantists soon identified in Esperanto an instrument they could use to ensure the survival of their own small nations. Among them was the previously mentioned Patrick Parker, an Irish priest who spoke of establishing an Esperanto league for the defence and preservation of their endangered languages in 1909, aiming at protecting small nations' mother tongues from the pervasive influence exercised by the ‘big nations’ (Parker, 1909, pp. 69–71).

Catalonia was quick to respond to Parker's article. Indeed, by then, the region had fully embraced Esperanto and numerous groups and societies had been established throughout its four provinces on the eve of the 5th Universal Esperanto Congress. In Barcelona, where the movement found most of its supporters, almost 40 societies had emerged between 1887 and 1928. This localised success within the Spanish state could have been a result of Catalonia's intrinsic pro-European and international stance, as well as because of its already bilingual population (Giner, 1984, p. 4–5, 9). Nevertheless, one way or another, by 1909 Catalonia was not only ready to support Parker's proposal but also to provide other small nations with an example to follow if they wished to use Esperanto to preserve their particularities.

This example of transnational nationalism sheds some light on the cooperative nature of Esperantism and, more notably, of small nations and/or nations without a state. It was understood that despite their intrinsic historical, political, cultural and linguistic differences, which qualified them as independent nations, they still shared similar struggles. Establishing an Esperanto league through which they could revindicate their particularities and present themselves to the world, while learning from each other and providing each other with support, could help them legitimise their identities in the international arena. Thus, making it more difficult for said ‘big nations’ to erase them with their centralisation policies that encouraged state unity through cultural and linguistic homogenisation.

Despite the enthusiasm with which Catalan Esperantists welcomed Parker's idea, the league did not make it into the official documents produced during the 5th Universal Congress. By 1911, however, the project seemed to have taken shape. Oscar van Schoor, who co-presided the 7th Universal Esperanto Congress in Antwerp alongside Amatus van der Biest-Andelhof, encouraged those interested in attending the meeting held by this league to contact him beforehand (*Kongresa gazeto de la Sepa Internacia Kongreso de Esperanto*, 1911, n.p.). The two main Catalan Esperanto journals printed at the time, *Kataluna Esperantisto* and *Tutmonda Espero*, published their own reports about the Universal Congress, but did not mention whether any Catalan representatives took part in the meeting hosted by the *Ligo por la defendo de la lingvo kaj nacieco de malvastaj nacioj* (League for the defence of the language and the nationality of small nations) (*Kataluna Esperantisto*, 1911, pp. 292–296; *Tutmonda Espero*, 1911e, pp. 113–116).

In fact, the congress in Antwerp was a sour one for Catalan Esperantists. Months after it took place, Frederic Pujulà i Vallès (1877–1962), a Catalan Esperanto pioneer and determined defender of the Catalan nation, penned an article condemning the Belgian Esperanto Organising Committee's attitude towards Catalonia almost a year later: ‘[...] Sed vere grava estas, ke ĉar oni apartigas la esperantistojn laŭ lingvoj, oni enmiksas nin, baskojn kaj kastilojn en saman grupon. Kaj sub saman nomon. Ĝenerala regulo por ĉiuj povas esti nelogika; sed excepto por unu, aŭ kontraŭ unu estas nekonvena’ (But what is really important is that although we separate Esperantists according to languages, we [Catalans] were mixed with Basques and Castilians in the same group and under the same name) (Pujulà i Vallès, 1912, pp. 385–386).

As Pujulà highlighted, other small nations like the Poles, Finns, Scots and Icelanders had been granted their own groups, but Catalan speakers had been divided in a way that created inconsistencies, for France was home to as many Catalan and Basque speakers as was Spain and residing in Catalonia did not make one fluent in Spanish (Pujulà i Vallès, 1912, p. 386). The categorising methodology adopted by the Belgian Esperantists might have been especially hurtful considering that when Barcelona had hosted the same event only 2 years prior, Catalan Esperantists had put considerable effort into differentiating themselves from the rest of Spain and educating their fellow Esperantists. Furthermore, both Belgian presidents, Amatus van der Biest-Andelhof and Oscar Van Schoor, had attended it (Kvina Universala Kongreso de Esperanto, 1910, p. 63). This misunderstanding poses a new question, one that delves into the real impact these national initiatives in the Esperanto movement had.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Catalan nationalism took different shapes in the Esperanto movement. The apolitical and neutral position of the auxiliary language, as well as the pressure exercised by other Esperanto communities and the Spanish central government itself, forced Catalan Esperantists to advocate for a form of nationalism that focused on cultural and linguistic factors rather than on political demands. Thus, during the first years of the Esperanto movement, curating a national identity that was true to their linguistic, cultural and historical roots remained a priority for these early Catalan Esperantists. Their commitment was therefore not only to the promotion and spread of the auxiliary language itself but also to present themselves to the world and let the international community know about their struggles and particularities as a small nation awakening from its sleep.

As the written word was Esperantism's main vehicle for dissemination, especially during the first decades, Catalan nationalism infiltrated their regional Esperanto journals in the form of literary translations of Catalan works, articles about their history and architecture, short pieces about tourism and pictures highlighting their most notable buildings and landscapes. The pinnacle of their cultural campaign was the publication in 1925 of the *Kataluna Antologio*, which provided Esperanto speakers with a comprehensive overview of Catalan literature alongside a short historical and cultural introduction to the region. According to the foreign Esperanto press, the work, whose widespread success guaranteed a second edition in 1931, managed to put Catalonia in the map, setting it apart from the idea of Spain.

Despite its prominent role in the movement, the written word was not the only medium through which Catalan Esperantists raised awareness among their colleagues. The 5th Universal Esperanto Congress that took place in Barcelona in 1909 also contributed to the popularisation of the nation. Theatre, music and dances, as well as tourism, played a key role during the week-long meeting, bringing the reality of Catalonia into the lives of those Esperantists who until now had only had the chance to see it in writing.

Yet showcasing their personality to the wider world was not Catalonia's only concern regarding Esperanto or their own nationalism. Building a strong and cohesive community that embraced their uniqueness and worked towards the perfection of their mother tongue and the use of Esperanto as an international auxiliary language soon became a priority. Thus, the Catalan Esperanto movement sought to unify and represent all Catalan speakers regardless of their citizenship or place of origin. These efforts were accompanied by an international initiative to establish an Esperanto league for the protection of small nations and their national languages, an Irish enterprise that was warmly welcomed by their Catalan colleagues. Unsurprisingly, it was in this sphere where Catalan Esperantists faced the most challenges, as the political implications of a movement that jumped over traditional borders raised alarms concerning any possible idea of pan-catalanism.

The effectiveness of these projects can hardly be assessed. The Esperanto community, according to their reports, seemed interested in learning about nations like Catalonia and responded positively to their attempts at internationalising their struggles. However, as the Belgian case has proven, how much information Esperantists really understood and absorbed must be put into question.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ In a similar manner, Basque nationalism has highlighted the role played by culture in nationalisation processes (Ostolaza-Porqueres, 2002, pp. 281–310). Before the turn of the century, Basque and Catalan identities were compatible with Spanish nationalism, as both regions experienced ‘dual patriotism’, but the emergence of discourses that were in complete competition with the Spanish identity challenged the status quo (Balfour & Quiroga, 2007, pp. 129–130). Esperanto was also considerably successful in the Basque Country at the time, with around 100 Esperantists registered in San Sebastian in 1911 (Blanco Arbe, 2004).
- ² It is thus not surprising to see a deep historical connection between Esperanto and anarchism. As Xavier Alcalde has noted, ‘At that time [1937], in cities such as Barcelona and Valencia, there were Esperanto courses and groups in every ateneo (anarchist social center)’ (Alcalde, 2018, n.p.). Anarchist internationalism’s determination to negate state divisions, using ‘place and will, not character to define the nation’ (Kinna, 2021, p. 988) suited Catalan Esperantists and their idea to unite all Catalan Esperantists regardless of their citizenship (Zimmer, 2023, p. 141). Indeed, *Kataluna Esperantista Federacio* (the Catalan Esperantist Federation), founded in 1909, had been established by a group of nationalists, republicans, radicals and anarchists in Sabadell (Merello Guzmán, 2019, p. 189). Nonetheless, both phenomena were not only intertwined in Catalonia but globally. In Portugal, anarchists founded the *Anarkia Grupo La Vero* in 1921 (Apolinário Ribeiro Gomes, 2016, p. 250), whereas in Japan ‘[...] Esperantism was one of the earliest expressions of an anarchist cultural revolution [...]’ (Konishi, 2013, p. 295).
- ³ This concern with education, language and culture stemmed from the rapid industrialisation process Catalonia experienced before the turn of the century. Workers migrating from other Spanish regions to Barcelona to work in the food and textile industries radically transformed the demographics of the city (López Guallar, 2004, pp. 69–92; Recaño Valverde, 1996; Tatjer, 2006) leading to the emergence of a growing proletariat, increasing tensions among social classes and the establishment of violent groups (Marinello Bonnefoy, 2014). Initiatives to educate the masses emerged across Catalonia, being the *ateneus* (atheneums) one of its most significant expressions. These centres, defined as ‘institució d’iniciativa privada creada per tal de difondre la ciència i la cultura modernes entre els associats i la població en general’ (private institution established to disseminate modern science and culture among members and the general public) (Diccionari d’història de Catalunya), played a crucial role not only in the education process of the population but also in the popularisation of Esperanto through the establishment of Esperanto groups, associations and journals (Merello Guzmán, 2019, p. 191; Margais Basi, 2020, p. 55). Their ideologies were closely connected, as atheneums sought to popularise and democratise knowledge and culture, and by the second half of the 19th century, workers had identified them as the key to educate workers and allow them to ‘sortir de la seva secular misèria’ (get out of their secular misery) (Izquierdo, 2017, p. 156).
- ⁴ As Lawrence Venuti has pointed out, ‘[...] nations do indeed ‘profit’ from translation. Nationalist movements have frequently enlisted translation in the development of national languages and cultures, especially national literatures. A language, [Victor] Hugo remarks, “will later be strengthened” by translation, even if “while waiting it is indignant”’ (Venuti, 2005, p. 178). The interest in translating Catalan works (or any other national literary production) into international languages has therefore not been limited to Esperanto. Nonetheless, the real impact Esperanto had on the international stature of the Catalan language is difficult to assess. Yet within the Esperanto movement, as it will be explored, Catalan gained significant popularity.

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