

## TRIBUNE

## THE LANGUAGE OF RESEARCH, THE LANGUAGE OF THE UNIVERSITY

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One of the things that most acutely shows the social weakness of the so-called Humanities is the debate about the language of research, held, in general, more or less covertly, but which in our case always becomes bitter.

*Assumption*

I write these lines from the peace of mind of the IRCVM's crystal clear option. Those of you who have started following our journal—or publishing with us—know that you will find the texts in their original languages along with their translation into English. This has been our language policy since the appearance of the first volume of the collection *Lliçons/Lessons*—published jointly with the *Servei de Publicacions i Edicions* of the University of Barcelona—and we have maintained it within the series *IRCVM-Medieval Cultures* published jointly with the Viella. This means that our publications appear in English and Catalan, Spanish, French, Italian, Occitan or Portuguese, whenever we have authors in these languages who entrust us with their texts.

Since the question has already arisen, not in the journal, but in *IRCVM-Medieval Cultures*, if an author presents a text in English, it will also be translated, in this case into Catalan. This is what we have done in the forthcoming volume of *IRCVM-Medieval Cultures, Els catalans a la Mediterrània medieval*, the proceedings of the conference organized by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) and held in 2009, in which four of the papers were in English. Our choice, beyond other interpretations, is self-explanatory, Romance language-speaking and English-speaking researchers who are interested in doing so, will be able to access our texts.

*The Language of Research*

Our choice is based on the need to maintain a balance between the aim to disseminate as widely as possible the knowledge generated within our research fields, while maintaining, at the same time, an ecolinguistic balance that respects those same research areas and the communication skills of the authors. And this choice entails an economic effort: SVMMA is an open access journal because we bear translation and publishing costs so that publishing in SVMMA does not

require payment, as it happens in other fields, but an excellent article.

Obviously the question is: why not publish it all in English, wouldn't it be easier? Wouldn't we understand each other better? Wouldn't it save money? In my opinion, the answer is no in all three cases.

Perhaps the reason is that I belong to that generation that was schooled in Spanish and was taught French as a foreign language (which, by the way, I actually learnt), and, for starters, it seems to me unwise to ignore the language of our neighbours, but the reality is that the ignorance of the English language, at the university and the social level, is extraordinary. Again, I am talking from the standpoint of my own research field.

Because in Late Antique and Medieval philology, philosophy, history or art history there is no *lingua franca*. Since I am an art historian, I will focus on this area. To conduct a study of the Carolingian period in Catalonia, at the micro- level, it is necessary to know both Catalan and Spanish, at least, the languages in which the books or articles dealing with this topic are probably published, and of course we must have some knowledge of Latin, the language of the extant documents. Turning to the macro- level, however, we will need to read books and articles in French and/or German and/or Italian, depending on the specific topic addressed. The references in English will only be a few, at least until we reach the second half of the twentieth century. The language in which the study will be written will depend on many factors but any of the aforementioned will do, and English won't necessarily be our first option.

Let us see a case study. For an analysis of the façades of medieval churches (I have just submitted a paper on that topic to *Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel Cuxa*), one of the first places to look for bibliography (let us not call it literature, please!) is the *Enciclopedia dell'Arte Medievale* (available online at [www.treccani.it](http://www.treccani.it)) obviously in Italian, and no resource in other language can be compared to it. I look at the entries “Porta”, authored by A. Iacobini (1997) and “Portale Istoriato” authored by Y. Christe (1998). In the first, a broader topic (4<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> c.), I find references in: German(26), English(36), French(7), Italian(41), Bosnian(1), Italian translated from English(1), and Italian translated from German(1). In the second, a more specific topic (11<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> c.): German(17), English(5, from 1959 onwards, while 11 German and French are prior to this date), French(26) and Italian(2). Beyond the subjectivity of each author, the limited space devoted to bibliographic references, or their defects—for instance, Christe does not mention any work in Catalan or in Spanish when he refers to one of the key works of the period, the portal of Ripoll—does anyone believe it possible to carry out such a study knowing only English or reading only in English? After expanding the bibliography through the references included in the texts already located, my second step would be to look for this topic at the open-access portal Persée ([www.persée.fr](http://www.persée.fr)), which includes most of the scientific bibliography of French journals. If I search for *portail*

& médiéval and *façade & médiévale*, I find at least fifty relevant or pertinent references, some of them in Italian. If I turn to JSTOR ([www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)): *Romanesque & façade* yields about ten relevant results; *medieval/Romanesque & portal* yield about 5 relevant results. We should keep looking at some of the other important databases of the field: BHA, IMB/BCM, *Francis* and *Regesta Imperii*, but these examples will suffice.

If I examine the articles published in journals or series of reference for these topics: *Arte Medievale* (Carhus+: C), *Bulletin Monumental* (Carhus+: A), *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* (Carhus+: A), *Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa* (Carhus+: not listed), *Comptes rendus... des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (Carhus+: not listed), *Gesta* (Carhus+: A), *Hortus Artium Medievalium* (Carhus+: not listed), *Speculum* (Carhus+: A)... I find, first, an imbalance between the quality parameters that describe the journals, and my actual needs (but we will deal with this issue in another Tribune); second, American journals (*Gesta*, *Speculum*) publish only in English, whereas European journals publish preferably in their own language but also in others, including English. I do not know to what extent the latter is due to rigidity on the part of American journals and flexibility on the part of European publications, the fact is that translations are frequent from English to French or Italian but strange the other way round.

In any case, it seems clear that, if we aim to devote ourselves to research on the history of medieval art, knowing only English would not get us very far. Paradoxically, many English-speaking researchers manage to publish articles and monographs in which anything but English is only residual. A true miracle for which I find no explanation, but then again, since we are talking about the “dark Middle Ages” everything is possible.

However, although the previous case study focuses on art history, with a little imagination, it would be easy to grasp the magnitude of the tragedy in the field of philology, for example. In what language should be published the studies of Catalan, Finnish or Hebrew philology? Would it make sense for them to be published only in Catalan, Finnish or Hebrew, respectively? Possibly not. Would it make sense to publish them only in English? It would be ridiculous and absurd.

Yet these absurdities do occur. One of the best European journals of the last twenty years is *Hortus Artium Medievalium*, published at the University of Zagreb, and maybe for that reason ignored by Carhus + (although not by BHA, Architecture Data Base, AATA, EHRI or *Francis*). The texts published in the journal are the result of annual international meetings. The official languages of the meeting are Croatian and English—which allows both the conference and the journal to spread beyond a very limited linguistic and research area—and the official information is provided in these two languages. As for scientific exchange, Italian and French are the actual most spoken languages. The situation can become as surreal as the first contribution of our research group. In accordance with the call for papers, we decided to speak in English, and our

text will be written accordingly; our session during the conference, however, consisted primarily of researchers from universities in Catalonia and the Balearic Islands!

### *The Language of Teaching*

And this leads to a key point, since research cannot be conducted without a good education. From my standpoint, I can say that among students there is no international *lingua franca* either. Maybe my perception is biased, but every year I have over 100 new students and they all have troubles reading the few English titles I propose, and unfortunately, almost no chance, to read in French or Italian, which are almost absent from pre-university education. The feeling, in fact, is that they do not even have a minimum command of any foreign language. But it is merely my perception and I do not know if the University of Barcelona has conducted any survey of foreign language skills among new students.

I do know that, given the need to justify a good level of some foreign language upon graduation and the fact that, currently, no sensible person would contemplate any other language than English, professors are encouraged, even forced, to teach in English. And the question that should be asked is whether the Humanities students come to college to learn a foreign language. In order to redress the deficiencies of high school education, is having professors with no English training lecturing in that language the solution? Or maybe this tendency is due to the wish to attract students from other countries? If we want students to learn other languages, everyone knows that there is a better way to do it: offering them proper courses in other languages. Furthermore, I do not think that there are many European or overseas students who come to Barcelona to study Philology, Philosophy, History and History of Art in English, but the again, maybe I'm wrong. What I do know is that the specificity of the UB is teaching in Catalan and Spanish, as French is specific to the Sorbonne, Italian to La Sapienza and English to Oxford. Could it happen that none of these foreign students who come to Barcelona were not capable of writing a thesis on Tàpies because they could not understand the documents of the artist?

On the other hand, we have already seen what are the needs of a researcher of the history of medieval art. Therefore I dare to propose a different order of priority of the languages that should be incorporated into the training of our Humanities students: Latin (Greek), French, German, Italian, English ... This, of course, only if we want to train future excellent researchers in philology, philosophy, history or art history.

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