Secondary education students of immigrant Chinese origin and the development of their multilingual practices in Catalonia

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Language policy in Catalonia envisions a multilingual cosmopolitan society with the Catalan language in an articulating role. Recent school-based ethnographic research, however, identifies challenges for implementing this policy in language support "Reception Classes" (RC). In high schools, although Catalan is the language of instruction, social life often takes place in Spanish. For immigrants, Catalan language socialization often takes place in class and initially through RCs. This scalar limitation is sometimes exacerbated by Spanish-speaking practices in neighborhoods and, most importantly, by counterproductive RC experiences leading to adverse attitudes towards Catalan and schooling. Successful reception programmes exist, however, and support positive attitudes towards Catalan/Spanish bilingualism and academic success.

This study focuses on Chinese adolescent immigrants who cannot initially distinguish the two societal languages. Data includes interviews with students, relatives and teachers, as well as ethnographical observation in two schools with different population make-up: In one, most immigrants come from China whereas the other school receives a heterogeneous foreign student body.

Differences between schools are reflected in differences among students’ language practices and attitudes, but in both contexts less dependence on the RC for language socialization is revealed. Participants report a highly compartmentalized multilingualism with Mandarin and other Chinese varieties at home and in family-run businesses, Catalan dominating in academic settings and Spanish in peer social communication and family-owned stores and bars. Closer observation uncovers less clear-cut domains. Catalan appears at home when doing homework and in interactions between young relatives. Soon after their arrival, participants often act as language brokers for parents and have Catalan-speaking friends with whom they purposely practice the language. School triggers flexible trilingualism with English in relevant classes. Mandarin, Korean and Japanese appear in consumption of popular culture, at least receptively. In sum, participants’ propensity to associate different languages with distinct domains, genres and roles triggers robust multilingualism.

Keywords: Chinese immigrants, Catalonia, secondary education.