'Local’ and 'international’ language uses in Catalan higher education

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This paper explores how participants in encounters involving 'local’ and 'international’ actors at Catalan higher education institutions locally interpret and challenge interactional possibilities and official norms of language use. Catalan university language policies seek to defend the 'local’ language (Catalan), on the one hand, and facilitate fluid communication in scenarios of internationalisation through 'global’ languages (especially English), on the other, by attributing specific domains and functions to different languages. Yet empirical observations suggest that more hybrid, plurilingual uses are often adopted by university actors in intercultural communications, leading us to question straightforward links between policies and practices or what we understand as communicative efficiency.

Specifically, this presentation will draw on a corpus of plurilingual interactional data involving local and international participants in different settings at university in Catalonia, as a case study of language dynamics in European higher education, collected ethnographically as part of our work on the DYLAN project (European Commission FP6) from 2006-2011. This research focused on identifying situations of language contact brought about by internationalisation and on describing, through an ethnomethodological/CA lens, the complex ways in which participants deal with and through language in accomplishing practical social actions in such settings. The results to be presented in this paper show how participants’ concerns often extend beyond the mere compliance with language policy and/or guaranteeing mutual comprehension to encompass goals such as ‘doing learning’, ‘doing welcoming’ or ‘doing understanding’ of another’s language. Such results suggest the need for a reconsideration of how we understand the role of so-called 'local’ and 'global’ language resources in international scenarios in European higher education.

Keywords: internationalisation, plurilingualism, higher education.