

# WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TRANSMIT SPANISH AS A HERITAGE LANGUAGE? SPANISH VALUES AT THE LATIN AMERICAN SCHOOL OF BERN

Tema

Aunque la Confederación Helvética reconoce la importancia y el beneficio de la enseñanza de las lenguas de herencia (LH) y apoya programáticamente su enseñanza institucionalizada, debido a cuestiones históricas y macroestructurales no todas las instituciones de enseñanza de LH tienen las mismas condiciones financieras y materiales. Es más, algunas comunidades ni siquiera están en condiciones de organizar este tipo de proyectos. Mientras que algunas escuelas reciben subvención estatal de sus países, otras no. Este es el caso de la Escuela Latinoamericana de Berna (ELB), una institución sin fines de lucro con más de 20 años de existencia. Se plantea entonces la pregunta de cuáles son los valores que los actores sociales involucrados en esta institución le otorgan al español como LH. A través de un análisis basado en un trabajo de perspectiva etnográfica, este ensayo responde a esta interrogante, mostrando que los actores sociales asignan varios valores al español como LH no excluyentes entre sí, sino que dependen de la perspectiva y el propósito para el cual se moviliza la LH. Estos valores muestran la importancia de las LH no solo para la comunidad de la ELB, sino, de manera general, para la sociedad suiza, que se beneficia de las ventajas de una socialización positiva en el país de acogida.

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According to official figures from the Federal Statistical Office, 25.7% of the population currently living in Switzerland is foreign, and 38% of those aged 15 and over have a migrant background. Although Switzerland — at least from a political perspective — defines itself as a plurilingual country with four national languages, this demographic reality means that a considerable number of the country's residents speak, to varying degrees, a heritage language (HL) that does not necessarily coincide with one of the Swiss national languages.

Given this demographic reality, it is not surprising that HL classes are recognised and promoted by the Swiss state with the aim of developing and exploiting synergies in children's language skills from a very early age (cf. e.g. Erziehungsdirektion des Kantons Bern, 2013). Furthermore, metalinguistic studies carried out by different linguists (e.g. Blackledge and Creese, 2012; He, 2012; Guardado, 2018; Patiño-Santos, 2018) on the values that speakers ascribe to heritage languages have shown that these cover a wide spec-

trum, encompassing a whole range of relational, identity, affective, utilitarian, cosmopolitan and aesthetic values, to name just a few. These values are not exclusive and can manifest themselves in combination in the discourses of HL speakers. Given this rich array of values connected with socialisation in the heritage language, it would be a desideratum if the different ethnic groups could have the necessary infrastructural tools to be able to carry out educational projects in their heritage languages.

In the Swiss context, HL research is still an under-exploited area. From a sociolinguistic and discursive point of view, the lack of relevant work is even more pronounced. This special issue is, therefore, intended as a contribution to filling this gap. In this essay, I intend to draw attention, through the voices of parents, pupils and teachers of the Escuela Latinoamericana de Berna (ELB), to the values attributed to Spanish as a HL that have made it possible for this school, which has been in existence for more than twenty years and which was founded as

a grassroots project on the initiative of the parents themselves, to continue to move forward. I focus on this school as a paradigmatic example of the situation of many HL educational projects in order to highlight the unequal conditions that exist in the Swiss context in relation to the cultivation of HLs outside the family environment, despite the advantages of learning them in an institutionalised way. For historical and macro-structural reasons, some national collectives receive financial and technical assistance from their respective governments to support the teaching of HLs in Switzerland, while others — such as the Spanish-speaking Latin American collective I am discussing here — lack this institutional support. It is worth mentioning at this point that there are communities which are in a worse situation than the Latin American one, as they do not have the means or resources to carry out any kind of HL teaching programme. In this regard, although the Swiss Confederation explicitly recognises the importance of HLs for the better socialisation of the population of migrant origin, it does not provide the macro-structural conditions to actively and truly promote them.

Before citing the most recurrent values of Spanish as a HL at the ELB, I will give an overview of this school as well as information on how I have collected the data analysed here. I will end the article with a final reflection on the importance of cultivating institutionalised HL teaching under equal macro-structural and financial conditions in the Swiss context.

As I have pointed out above, because HL schools in Switzerland emerge in different historical and structural contexts, their economic and professional situation is varied, depending precisely on the migration history of the national collectives and the institutions and bodies that organise and fund them. Moreover, the situation of these schools varies greatly from canton to canton (Sánchez Abchi & Calderón, 2016). Taking these factors into account, HL schools in Switzerland can be classified into three different types: a) those funded and organised by the country of origin through embassies; b) those supported by other non-governmental organisations; and c) those organised and funded by associations or foundations, many of them created on the initiative of parents and private organisa-

tions (Sánchez Abchi & Calderón, 2016). While countries with a long tradition of migration to Switzerland, such as Spain, Portugal and Italy, subsidise schools for the children of their citizens in Switzerland, Latin American HL schools, such as the ELB, do not receive any such continuing financial support to subsidise their development. This has repercussions on the infrastructure of the schools and on their professionalisation, since in this type of parent-financed school salaries cannot compete with those paid in Swiss state schools, nor do they have the technical and pedagogical support provided by a national government such as that of Spain through its technical advisory departments abroad. For these reasons, the staff of these grassroots schools often engage in this work on a supplementary basis and not as their main professional activity, often motivated by a spirit of volunteerism (Sánchez Abchi & Calderón, 2016).

Turning to the ELB specifically, this complementary school was founded in 1997 as a response by a group of parents to the decision taken by the Spanish government (Real Decreto 1027 of 1993) to limit access to its HL schools to the children of Spanish citizens (Sánchez Abchi, 2018). In response to this, in 2000, the non-profit Asociación Fomento Escuela Latinoamericana de Berna was created with the aim of developing oral and written language skills in Spanish, transmitting and promoting Latin American culture and fostering a space for intercultural exchange that favours the integration of migrants in the Canton of Bern (*Estadutos de la Escuela Latinoamericana de Berna*). The statutes of the Asociación show clearly that its objectives are not confined to the field of education and that it also seeks to provide support for the

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Latin American community in the host society. For this reason, the school also organises talks and courses in Spanish for parents relating to family education and provides information on the Swiss school and professional system. Concerning the profile of the parents who enrol their children at the ELB, it should be noted that they are generally professional men and women with tertiary education in their countries of origin and many of them have transnational experience.

which the ELB is organised and financed. Examples of the difficulties that arise include renting suitable premises with all the infrastructure required for a school of this size, recruiting and paying professional administrative staff to run the school in a sustainable way and ensuring the recruitment of qualified teachers at fair and competitive salaries.

The data presented and analysed here come from an ethnographic perspective, with research conducted at the ELB between October 2019 and March 2020. The research had to be concluded prematurely due to COVID. The data comes from interviews with different stakeholders (parents, mothers who work voluntarily in the school commission, administrative staff and teachers), notes from participation in two parents' assembly meetings, informal conversations in the school cafeteria and from two activities with pupils from the fourth/fifth class and the DELE class. This research has been supplemented by additional interviews with four other mothers during December 2021. 1,520 minutes (approx. 25.5 hours) have been recorded and transcribed in full. For further information about the methodology see Bürki (2022).

In the following paragraphs, I will focus on some of the more frequently mentioned values that Spanish as an HL acquired in the ELB. I understand these social values as discursive constructions on the basis of which social actors explain and justify the motivations for developing and maintaining Spanish as an HL in Berne.

A recurring discourse that emerges in the conversations and interviews conducted at the ELB with both parents and pupils is the importance of Spanish as a relational language, that is, the need to be able to maintain family ties through Spanish, especially with parents (and grandparents) living in Latin America. Corina<sup>1</sup>, for example, a mother of Uruguayan origin married to a Swiss man and with two children enrolled at the ELB when I interviewed her, comments emphatically that "mis padres no saben otro idioma más que el español, por lo que el único idioma de comunicación con los abuelos es el español" (Eng.: 'my parents don't know any language other than Spanish, so the only language of communication with the grandparents is Spanish'). What

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The ELB currently offers courses in Spanish as an HL at nine different levels, including pre-school classes for children aged 5 to 6 (see [Escuela Latinoamericana de Berna, Las clases](#)). As of 2019, it also includes preparatory classes for the official exams of the Instituto Cervantes which certify the degree of competence attained in Spanish (DELE) on behalf of the Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional de España. As the ELB has the legal status of a non-profit association, a key part of its structure is the school committee, comprising parents who are engaged on a voluntary basis in organising the school. In recent years, the ELB has made great efforts to professionalise itself and to modernise and systematise its curricula. The teaching staff are of Latin American origin, mostly female, and have studied education-related subjects both in their home countries and in Switzerland. With 140 students (information obtained orally from the current director), the ELB is a complementary school that has grown considerably in recent years, demonstrating an evident interest on the part of Spanish-speaking parents of Latin American origin in socialising their children in their HL. However, the professionalisation of the school and the increase in the size of the student body are not only good news for the vitality of Spanish as a HL in Bern; they also create problems and new challenges precisely because of the way in

<sup>1</sup> All names are fictitious. I have explicit permission from all individuals to use the transcripts of the interviews conducted.

is particularly interesting is that many parents seem to have transmitted to their children this notion of the importance of Spanish as a language of communication with relatives, especially grandparents, as shown in an activity carried out with pupils of the fourth and fifth classes in which, out of 14 pupils who took part, nine indicated that Spanish is important for talking to the family in general and eight explicitly mentioned communication with grandparents.

The nominal locution "nuestras raíces" ('our roots') also emerges constantly, pointing to the identity value of the language. Thus, Mirna, a Paraguayan, who was president of the school committee when I carried out my fieldwork in the ELB, told me in an interview I had with her: "porque acá lo que venimos a aprender y a valorar es nuestras raíces. Nuestra cultura. Nuestro idioma. ¿entiendes?" (Eng.: 'Because what we come here to learn and to value is our roots. Our culture. Our language. Do you understand?'). Another recurrent word that emerges in the discourses is "bina-cionalidad" ('binationality'), in the sense of the "pride" (Heller & Duchêne, 2012) that many parents feel in having their children grow up between two languages and two cultures, which refers to the hegemonic discourses of the nation-state disseminated from Europe between the 18th and 20th centuries and according to which language is conceived of as an emblem of cultural and national identity. It is interesting to note how this idea, naturalised in Latin American as well as in European countries (Bürki, 2022), is reproduced in the ELB. This shows how ideologies are reproduced and disseminated from the top down.

One aspect that I would like to highlight in connection with the identity and affective value of HLs is what Guardado (2018) calls emotional validation, in the sense that HLs contribute to reinforcing the self-esteem of social actors, a topic that would be worth exploring further in subsequent research. This emotional validation provided by HLs is explained by a Chilean mother, Eliana, whose daughter was integrated into the Bernese state school upon arrival from Chile, thus without prior knowledge of German. For her daughter, as Eliana says, the possibility of attending the ELB and being able to speak in her mother tongue became

"su espacio feliz. Porque no le prohíben hablar español, porque ella ve que es competente [...] y ese ha sido como ese espacio en donde se ha sentido segura porque su idioma afectivo emocional materno es el español" (Eng.: 'her happy space. Because they don't forbid her to speak Spanish, because she sees that she is competent [...] and that has been like that space where she has felt safe because her affective and emotional mother tongue is Spanish'). This testimony shows the emotional importance that the ELB offers as a transit space for children who arrive and are inserted into Swiss state school without knowing the national language and how this lessens the impact of the potentially traumatic experience of suddenly finding themselves in a situation in which their capacity for linguistic expression is drastically reduced.

**As is evident from the observations made by social actors from the ELB and quoted here, socialising institutionally in an HL fulfils a broad spectrum of values, ranging from emotional grounding to competent literacy, from which, of course, not only the students of Latin American origin who attend the ELB benefit but also Swiss society in general, as the cantonal guidelines on "heimatliche Sprache und Kultur" recognise. |**

Also constant in the discourses is the mention of Spanish, understood as an international language, as "a plus" or as "a language that opens doors", locutions that point to an instrumental value of the language (Urciuoli, 2008). For example, Violeta, another Uruguayan mother married to a Czech man whose daughter goes to the ELB, explains that Spanish is important "no solo por la familia de ella, sino porque me parece que el español abre puertas hoy en día, es un idioma sumamente rico" (Eng.: 'not only because of her family, but because it seems to me that Spanish opens doors nowadays, it is an extremely rich language'). Martín, a Paraguayan-Swiss father with three daughters enrolled at the ELB, argues in the same way, since with Spanish his daughters: "tienen las puertas abiertas

a un mundo muy grande que es toda Sudamérica, que es España, que es un idioma muy esparcido en el mundo, digamos" (Eng.: "They ([his daughters] have the doors open to a very large world, which is all of South America, which is Spain, which is a language that is very widespread in the world, to sum it up'). This utilitarian value of Spanish is also reflected in the pupils themselves, in the same way as we had observed regarding the relational value of the language. In the activity I carried out with pupils in the fourth and fifth classes, eight pupils mentioned Spanish as a useful and practical language because "hay mucha gente que habla español" (Eng.: 'there are many people who speak Spanish'), "te abre varias puertas en el mundo del trabajo y puedes comunicarte con mucha gente"

(Eng.: 'it [Spanish] opens many doors in the world of work and you can communicate with a lot of people'), "así puedes tener mejor trabajo" (Eng.: 'so you can have a better job') or "es mejor si quieres trabajar bien" (En.: It is better if you want to work well'). It is interesting to observe how the discourse of "profit" (Heller & Duchêne, 2012), driven by the ideologies of late capitalism in a highly globalised, transnational world marked by the tertiary economy, is present in the thinking of both parents and ELB pupils; they understand languages as instruments that increase the opportunities of individuals in the labour market (Urciuoli, 2008), which offers a palpable sign that hegemonic discourses are processed in society from the top down and in a reticular way. Let us recall here that the DELE has been introduced in the ELB precisely because parents seek to transmit Spanish (and its culture) to their children not only as a symbol of ethnic and national identity but also because of its instrumental function.

Finally, in the ELB, Spanish also acquires a value of distinction (Bourdieu, 1991b), with parents mentioning in their discourse that it is not enough just to speak Spanish but that it is also important to know how to write it and handle grammar correctly. As Iris, a Peruvian married to a Swiss man, says: "desde mi punto de vista era importante que aprendiera el idioma, no solamente hablarlo, sino también conocer la gramática y la forma de hacer la escritura" (Eng.: 'from my point of view, it was important for me [that my daughter] learns the language, not only to speak it, but also to know the grammar and the way of writing'). Systematic and institutionalised learning certainly distinguishes the pupils from those who acquire it only in a familiar context, characterised by the acquisition of colloquial repertoires (Blackledge & Creese, 2012; Abbot & Martínez, 2018). This distinction, however, is linked not only to the utilitarian value of HL but also to its identity value, in the sense that parents also want their children to appreciate and value the linguistic and literary richness of HL, as this Mexican mother points out: "porque también eh, lo tiene que saber leer. La literatura española, castellana no es la misma que la literatura de lengua alemana. Y traducciones no son lo mismo. Entonces, sí creo que es importante. Es muy muy

importante que ella, aparte de hablar que eso lo va— lo aprende en la casa, pero que lo sepa escribir" (Eng.: 'because you have to be able to read it. Spanish, Castilian literature is not the same as German-language literature. And translations are not the same. So, I do think it's important. It's very, very important that she [her daughter], apart from speaking, which she learns at home, but that she knows how to write it').

These examples of the discursive constructions of Spanish as a HL that circulate among ELB social actors show that the different and varied values given to Spanish are related to the production and re-production of linguistic, cultural, symbolic and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1991a), as Guardado (2018) has also shown for Spanish as an HL in Canada. These values are not mutually exclusive but can coexist in the same social actor, depending on the perspective and purpose for which the HL is mobilised, as we have seen clearly in the case of Spanish with regard to relational and instrumental value.

As is evident from the observations made by social actors from the ELB and quoted here, socialising institutionally in an HL fulfils a broad spectrum of values, ranging from emotional grounding to competent literacy, from which, of course, not only the students of Latin American origin who attend the ELB benefit but also Swiss society in general, as the cantonal guidelines on "heimatliche Sprache und Kultur" recognise. In order to ensure that ethnic and linguistic communities residing permanently in Switzerland and seeking to set up their own heritage language teaching programmes can count on equal opportunities and structural conditions, the Swiss Government and the cantons should not only recognise the linguistic and cultural advantages offered by these schools to the children attending them and being educated in Switzerland but should also provide financial support to enable the successful implementation of these projects. After all, this is a matter of social equity, because we are not talking about elite schools but about institutions that strengthen socialisation in the host country and, as the guidelines of the Council of Europe (2016) state, build bridges to "linguistic diversity, mutual understanding, democratic citizenship and social cohesion".

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