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Teaching Language and Literature: A Question of Balance?

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Abstract

Regarding the teaching of Catalan, four textbooks were created in the 1970s and 80s, which included a complete work of literature, with numerous grammar and lexical commentaries, and exercises about the literary text. The author who is the link between these books is the grammarian Albert Jané i Riera, a writer and linguist who has been a leading figure in Catalan culture as the editor of the children's magazine *Cavall Fort*. Our aim with this synchronic and diachronic study is to vindicate the importance of the educational proposals we have analysed, as well as the appropriateness and the need of teaching language and literature to regain and consolidate their mutually enriching relationships.

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1. From literature to language: Albert Jané's innovative proposal

In the field of education, the relationship between language and literature has not always been a friendly one. The existence of separate curricula, the educational needs, and other factors, very often have led to linguistics education taking over the space of literature education, thus catering to the importance of our students' acquisition of an adequate communicative competence, which is often held as a priority over other skills. At the same time, literature has been one of the most common textual references for the teaching of grammar: literary texts are customarily used as examples of the linguistic phenomena addressed in the teaching units of primary and secondary school textbooks. However, it is rather unusual for a complete work of literature to become a textbook for teaching a language.

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In this study we address, analyse and assess the didactic proposals for teaching language made by Albert Jané in four books: *Gresol. Lectura i llenguatge* (1970), *Abans de l'alba* (1973), *El Pont de la mar blava: notes de viatge per Tunísia, Sicília i Malta* (1974), and *Història de Catalunya il·lustrada* (1980). In every case, the structure is similar; the textbooks offer complete literary works (except in the first volume, which is basically an anthology) and, at the end of each chapter, the didactic materials for teaching Catalan are proposed. Albert Jané i Riera (Barcelona, 1930), a writer and a linguist, has been a leading figure in Catalan culture as the editor of the children's magazine *Cavall Fort*. For this publication he has also carried out the necessary work of translating/adapting graphic stories and short stories from English, French, Italian, Spanish and Occitan. He has also done translations for television and cinema, and has authored grammars and linguistic guides. (Girons, 2010) We also want to emphasise that, as a linguist, he has worked on addressing language and literature in a unified way. He is the person who turned literary texts into textbooks with grammar and vocabulary exercises and explanations. This transformation materialised in four books printed on different dates by different publishing companies. The four volumes, which share the same methodology and goals, have the label "Books for Teaching" as an identifying element, and they are numbered sequentially through time, even if they are published by different companies. All of them were illustrated editions and were reprinted several times. The texts they contain are primarily literary, in fiction or non-fiction prose, regardless of the origin of the publication. The books show a commitment to style, to literary Catalan.

If we follow the chronological order of publication, the first one was *Gresol. Lectura i llenguatge* (1970). Published originally by Spes, and then by Aymà, it saw 8 editions between 1970 and 1982. Albert Jané (who signs the preface) shares authorship with other linguists and teachers, such as Maria Lluïsa Corominas, Renée Mathieu and Maria Rosa Rovira. The book includes twenty different texts (mostly by contemporary Catalan fiction writers), one only poem by Salvat-Papasseit, and several non-fiction pieces. The majority are excerpts from novels or short stories, but there are also two texts originally published in the magazine *Cavall fort*. The goal of the authors is clear, that of addressing the need for providing educators with a tool to teach language, within a situation that is challenging from a sociolinguistic and a political point of view:

We dare say, then, that we hope to provide teachers of Catalan in general, but particularly those working in the schools, with a work tool that is useful and beneficial, consisting in a reader (the book's main objective), that at the same time will allow educators, through minimum effort, to carry out a wide range of vocabulary, language and grammar exercises. (Jané, 1977, p. 6)

The second volume was *Abans de l'alba* (1973), by the writer L. Ferran de Pol (Arenys de Mar, 1911-1995). It was published by the same company as the first one, and it had six editions. The novel was first published in 1954, and was now reprinted as a textbook, under the auspices of the writer, critic and educator Joan Triadú. The reason for this change was the excellence of the author's prose, which made it especially suitable for school learning. The novel was started during the author's Mexican exile, and it truly stood as a bridge between Mexico and Catalonia, since its origin was the *Popol-Vuh*, or *Council Book* (the sacred book of the Maya), as it has been explained in a previous study. (Devis & Garcia, 2014)

The next volume, the third one, with Jané's linguistic participation, was *El Pont de la mar blava: notes de viatge per Tunísia, Sicília i Malta* (1974), by the politician and writer L. Nicolau d'Olwer (Barcelona, 1888-Mexico, 1961). It was published by Proa, although the first edition is from 1928. It includes travel notes of his trip through Tunisia, Sicily and Malta, and his accounts start with the island of Gerba, where he alludes to the episode of Ulysses and the lotus eaters. It is a work of creative prose, with historical explanations, but always with a literary intention. The third edition was the one that was made into a book with grammar contents. It is divided in four parts ("Tunísia", "Sicília", "Mites de la Boca del far", and "Malta"), with an initial "Invitation", and an "Epilogue: Historical Meditation".

The last book with the same pedagogical approach for teaching language is *Història de Catalunya il·lustrada*, by the writer and historian Ferran Soldevila i Zubiburu (Barcelona, 1894-1971). In 1980 it was published under the format of a book with grammar notes by the Proa publishing house. However, this book had already been used for school teaching purposes. In 1933, the Association to Protect the Teaching of Catalan (Associació Protectora de l'Ensenyança Catalana), together with Seix Barral, published *Història de Catalunya. Primeres*

lectures, as part of the collection *Publicacions escolars* (School Publications). It aimed at making an understandable summary of Catalan history for non-specialised readers, using plain language. In 1967, Soldevila re-worked this text and added the illustrations by sculptor and engraver Josep Granyer i Giralt, a project that ran into many difficulties with Franco’s censorship. This new 1967 printing saw for more editions. The sixth, in 1980, was the one that appeared “with language lessons by Albert Jané.” The text is divided into forty-six chapters, some of them with sub-chapters, and each paragraph is numbered capitularment. The book includes a chronological table at the end and an initial quote, in a separate page, from Ramon Muntaner’s *Crònica*. However, in 1995 the publisher took advantage of the Catalan Government’s commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of historian Ferran Soldevila to make a new edition with a new format and a prologue, “Pòrtic”, by Albert Jané (although without any grammar notes), explaining who the author was, and new notes were added to the Catalan chronology because the censorship had not allowed them in 1967.

2. The didactic proposals

Albert Jané, with the knowledge gained through the years and the enormous amount of work dedicated to Catalan language and grammar, reflects on his linguistic model in these original volumes of literary texts intended to teach language and grammar:

A very general guiding principle for all dissemination of information in the field of language is to contribute to the creation of a model that does not violate the current rules and that moves closer (the closer, the better) to the spoken language. In other words, a model which, while discarding the more or less frequent incorrect uses of the spoken language, does not lead to a contrived effect. And, naturally such model must also take very much into account the enormous phraseological wealth of the spoken language. It has often been pointed out to us, grammarians, prescriptivists and copy editors, that our knowledge of the rules is accompanied by a poor knowledge of the language. I am not sure that I, personally, have ever deserved such observation, but I can assure, from the bottom of my heart, that I have tried to teach both grammar and language. (Jané, 2014)

In order to analyse and assess the examined didactic proposals, we have thought it pertinent to distinguish two broad categories:

- Vocabulary and phraseology: we will address the sections of the didactic proposals whose goal is primarily to explain the words and expressions considered to entail some difficulty for the reader.
- Grammar discussion: we will focus on the grammar sections (spelling, morphosyntax, etc.), both from the metalinguistic point of view and from the practice of in-depth and review exercises.

2.1. Vocabulary and phraseology

The main goal of this type of proposals is to work with language. The headings of the didactic proposals we will address are the following:

Table 1. Vocabulary and phraseology

<i>Abans de l'alba</i>	- “Coneguem el sentit dels mots” (“Find out the meaning of words”): terms that could present comprehension difficulties.
	- “Comentari sobre el llenguatge” (“Comments on language”): phrases and expressions.
<i>Gresol</i>	- “Què vol dir?” (“What does it mean?”): it is, in turn, divided into four sub-sections: “Mots”

	(“Words”), “Expressions” (Expressions), “Cal dir” (“How it should be said”), and “Cal escriure” (“How it should be written”).
<i>El pont de la mar blava</i>	- “El sentit dels mots” (“The meaning of words”): terms that could present some comprehension difficulty.
<i>Història de Catalunya Il·lustrada</i>	- “El sentit dels mots” (“The meaning of words”): terms that could present some comprehension difficulty.

We can see, first of all, that the didactic proposals relating to *Vocabulary and phraseology* are only featured in two differentiated sections of the book *Abans de l’Alba*, which shows Albert Jané’s interest in addressing the side of language that is alive and real:

I tried to report on language forms I assumed were still more or less familiar to our readers, but which had been weakened by the increasing massification. It had to be done through a better strategy. [...] It was a question of highlighting, of bringing out, all the language forms that may lie, in many cases half dormant, in the linguistic consciousness of the readers, but, of course, together with simple, easy-to-apply grammar rules. (Jané, 2014).

Indeed, although in *Gresol*, within the section “What does it mean?”, there is a distinction between “Words” (corresponding to “Knowing the meaning of words”, or simply “The meaning of words” in the other three books), and “Expressions”, which focuses on the phrases that appear; in the two last books analysed (*El pont de la mar blava* and *Història de Catalunya il·lustrada*) the presence of language that is “alive and real” becomes less prominent.

Regarding the typographic and textual arrangement of the chosen terms and expressions, it is worth noting that the order is never alphabetical, but reflects instead the order of appearance in the text of reference, which makes it easier to locate them within their context. Along the same line, the words and expressions that are explained are identified typographically within the discourse—in italics in the texts of *Gresol*, and in boldface in the other three. It also becomes significant that in the four books analysed, the selected terms appear in the same form as in the text (i.e., person and tense in the case of verbs, gender and number in the case of nouns and adjectives.) We can even state that the didacticism which is especially present in these section, causes the recurrent presence of resources that break away from the academic protocol of definitions (Devis & Garcia, 2014, p. 11-12), either through the use of notably informal registers, or through definitions that refer to the everyday, popular use of the terms described. We shall note, finally, the constant presence of the didactic goal of these language proposals, which becomes particularly clear with the inclusion of “How it should be said” and “How it should be written”, within the section “What does it mean?” of *Gresol*:

The purpose of “How it should be said” and “How it should be written” is to highlight the most common barbarisms in the spoken language, and to provide the corresponding correct forms, as well as to point out spelling peculiarities that may raise the most doubts. In order to avoid confusions, which always lead to counter-productive results, and which educators so rightfully try to avert, all the incorrect forms we try to eliminate are written in quotations marks, and they are always preceded by the explicit mention of forms that must be avoided, as well as by the proper forms that have to be used instead. (Corominas, 1977, p. 6)

The spirit of correct spoken and written language is also present in the other analysed books, even though they do not have specific sections such as the ones pointed out above.

2.2. Grammar discussion

This type of proposals refer entirely to work on the different grammar aspects (spelling, verb and noun morphology, morphosyntax). They offer great diversity, as we will see below, but at first glance, we can underline two aspects that are of great interest for the analysis:

- The importance of contextualisation in the proposed grammar discussions.
- The prominent role of the “exercises” (the practice) in the four assessed works.

The following table shows the corresponding sections:

Table 2. Grammar discussion

<i>Abans de l'alba</i>	- “Notes gramaticals” (“Grammar notes”): alternation between discussions and exercises on different grammar aspects.
<i>Gresol</i>	- “Observacions gramaticals” (“Grammar observations”): discussions on different language uses. - “Exercicis” (“Exercises”): contextualised in the grammar aspects of the previous section.
<i>El pont de la mar blava</i>	- “Notes i comentaris” (“Notes and comments”): various comments on the content of the chapter, the style, the language, etc. - “Exercicis” (“Exercises”): contextualised in the different grammar aspects.
<i>Història de Catalunya Il·lustrada</i>	- “Exercicis” (“Exercises”): specifically contextualised in the different grammar aspects.

As we have just pointed out, the fact that the grammar explanations are directed to the public, to the students they are intended for, is considered of great methodological value for the time when these books were written. In this regard, they point to the normative problems deriving from the speech that is characteristic of Eastern Catalan. Also, if we look at Table 2, we can see the homogeneity of the four proposals grouped as *Grammar discussion*, even though the format is not exactly the same: although in the cases of *Abans de l'alba* and *Història de la Catalunya il·lustrada* there is one single section, “Grammar notes”, and “Exercises”, respectively, all four books feature grammar explanations and practical exercises. Nonetheless, we see two methodological differences that must be pointed out. The first one is the difference between the “Notes and comments” of *El pont de la mar blava* and the rest. In “Notes and comments” the grammar explanations are not preponderant, as perhaps it would be expected, in favour of those that aim at contextualising the historical facts mentioned in the discourses that precede them.

But the main difference between the books analysed, from a methodological point of view, concerns the contextualisation of the exercises. We have already stated elsewhere (Devis & Garcia, 2014, p. 14) that in *Abans de l'alba* the grammar exercises are the only section in all four books that follows a traditional didactic approach,

given the lack of references to the corresponding text: “we cannot consider that the exercises follow a communicative approach since, in terms of meaning, the practice is done with linguistic sequences that do not come from the text”. On the other hand, in the three other books, all the assessed didactic proposals of a grammatical nature are contextualised within the discourse that precedes them, and from where they come.

3. Conclusions

After the methodological assessment of these books (which were already reviewed at the time of their publication, for example in Mir, 1971) as an unusual and extraordinary precedent in the history of language teaching, we can summarise the following conclusions:

- The books stand as very valuable landmarks and testimonies for the history of grammar studies.
- It is surprising that these proposals, which were made four decades ago, take so much into account what constructivist psychology refers to as meaningful learning.
- The preponderance of communicative approaches is more than noteworthy: the use of the vocabulary, phrases, expressions, and set phrases is always explained in a contextualised manner with regard to the text of reference. If the learning situations are not real, they also refer to the main point of interest addressed by the text anthologies, and those materials favour that the goal of the class is to acquire not only linguistic or grammar competence, but also communicative competence.

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