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'Linguistic safe spaces and stepping stones: rethinking *mudes* to Catalan through the lens of space'

Maite Puigdevall , Joan Pujolar  and Alba Colombo 

Department of Arts & Humanities, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya – UOC, Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT

Previous studies of linguistic *mudes* in minority language contexts, this is, biographical junctures where speakers enact changes in their linguistic repertoire, have contributed to our understanding of how linguistic codes are appropriated across the lifespan using a largely temporal frame of reference. However, our research in Catalan contexts also points to a spatial dimension to these linguistic appropriations. Life history narratives often include reference to particular social contexts in which the pressure for linguistic correctness is relaxed and where individuals can try out new forms of self-presentation. In this article, we want to develop and apply the concepts of 'safe spaces' and 'bridge places' used in critical feminism to sociolinguistic processes based on data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork in two spaces: *Voluntariat per la llengua* (Volunteering for the language - VxL) and *Colles de Diables* (Devil's Groups, traditional Catalan culture groups). We found that the sites we studied are spaces that act both as catalysts of *mudes* and spaces where usual speakers of Catalan can also feel safe to subvert the prevalent linguistic accommodation norm of not addressing non-natives in Catalan. Furthermore, they act as 'stepping stones' to new socialisations and give rise to alternative discourses and practices.

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Introduction

Linguistic *mudes* have become a key focus of much research on new speakers of minority languages. *Mudes* refer to sociolinguistic junctures or moments of transformation of the linguistic practices and forms of self-presentation of new speakers (Pujolar and González 2013). Previous studies have advanced a largely temporal framework, focusing on how new linguistic codes or practices are appropriated across the lifespan (Pujolar and Puigdevall 2015; O'Rourke and Walsh 2015; Puigdevall et al. 2018; Pujolar 2019). Indeed, Pujolar (2019, 174) points out that time has been addressed very rarely regarding space and the speaking subject. He continues arguing that with the study of *mudes*, time is made more evident because 'as a process set within the duration of biographical time, to study *mudes* we must expand the short temporal purview of conventional ethnographic research' (Pujolar 2019, 166).

In this article, we argue that apart from expanding the temporal framework to study *mudes* with the aim of increasing the use of Catalan, it is also necessary to pay attention to the space or spaces where *mudes* take place (Puigdevall, Colombo, and Pujolar 2019). O'Rourke and Walsh (2015, 78), quoting Pennycook (2010, 12), say that 'language is something done in a particular time and space and as such, new speakers can be seen to be "doing" language across new timespace dimensions by actively creating or constructing new linguistic identities'.

An early example of paying attention to space in the Catalan context can be seen in the work of González et al. (2014). This study of language practices amongst young people identified the ‘language density’ – understood as the relative ordinary presence of a language in a particular town or city – as the greatest predictor of language use and, above all, young people’s linguistic *mudes*. Higher density, they found, was associated not only with more *mudes*, but also with a more varied profile of new speakers of Catalan, including those from lower educational levels. Although this macro-spatial approach to the factors that produce *mudes* gives us some information on the importance of the location of speakers in the territory, we need to go deeper into understanding how space and place impact *mudes*.

Quite some time ago, Woolard (1989, 71) gave us some clues about ‘the power of location to determine language expectations’ and for language use in general across Catalonia. In her study of the ‘linguistic accommodation norm’, i.e. the social norm that guides language choices by Catalan speakers, she found that there are four main criteria that determine such choices: interlocutor choice, location, physical cues, and accent. In relation to location, she reported:

I was told that language choice depended on ‘what part of town you are in’. If the location is one considered ‘Catalan’ –an ingroup arena- then the exchange may be initiated in Catalan with a stranger by a ‘polite’ traditional Catalan. ‘Catalan’ identity of location may be attributed to rural areas, to certain neighbourhoods of the city itself, and to certain buildings of establishments that are identified with Catalonia- the Generalitat, the Music Palace, and banks, bookstores, restaurants, and other business that make explicit their Catalan identity. (Woolard (1989, 70)

As this and other sociolinguistic studies (e.g. Lamarre 2013) made apparent, speakers of minority languages need to navigate a quite complex set of sociolinguistic spatial and normative rules in order to figure out where to go and with whom to speak this language. It is important to bear in mind that as a basic principle of symbolic interactionism any interaction involves a sustained evaluation of ‘the other’, the communicative situation, the expressive genres deployed, etc. This is all the more true if they are considered outsiders or non-Catalans by Catalan speakers, since the latter rarely address newcomers, especially racialised ones, in Catalan.

Our first NEOPHON research project with adult new speakers of different profiles, socioeconomic backgrounds, and diverse origins (Europe, Africa, Asia, North America and Latin America as well as from other regions of Spain) demonstrated the necessity of everyday contact with a considerable number of Catalan speakers if *mudes* were to happen. This contact could be by proximity and frequency of relationship (with partners, offspring, new friends, or working colleagues) as well as through shared spaces and activities where they took part (study, leisure, sport, cultural activities, associations, etc.) (Puigdevall et al. 2018). These findings prompted us to keep researching *mudes* in relation to spaces in an effort to identify spaces favourable to the adoption and active use of Catalan by new speakers. We wished to know: are there spaces more favourable for *mudes* than others? What characteristics do they have? How are they accessed? By whom? As has been noted, speakers of minority languages tend to have quite clear ideas about where and with whom it is likely or safe to use the language. We want to understand how some spaces can be intentionally created or produced to favour *mudes* and to facilitate the circulation of the Catalan language as a symbolic resource.

In this article we want to develop and apply the concepts of ‘safe spaces’ and ‘bridge places’ taken from critical feminism (Flensner and Von der Lippe 2019) to sociolinguistic processes we observed in two spaces/groups: *Voluntariat per la llengua* (Volunteering for the language – VxL) and *Colles de Diables* (Devil’s Groups). Our extended observations led us to identify these as ‘safe spaces’ for *mudes*, i.e. they are social contexts in which the pressure for linguistic correctness is relaxed and where individuals can try out new forms of self-presentation that they can later apply to the more stable contexts of their everyday life (Puigdevall, Colombo, and Pujolar 2019; Ribot 2020; Walsh and O’Rourke 2020). Finally, we will also discuss the concept of ‘bridge places’ developed by anthropologist Teresa Del Valle (2001), which we have renamed as ‘stepping stones’, to understand spaces that favour new socialisations, give rise to alternative discourses and practices and

allow individuals to move to and across other spaces where they would have not gone if not for their previous experience in a ‘bridge place’ or stepping stone.

Methodology

The data that we present is based on an ethnographic study of *mudes* ‘in real time’, that is: we followed up people who were actively attempting to engage in new linguistic practices (i.e. to use Catalan in everyday life) for an extended period of time. In this article, we focus on two different spaces in which we did fieldwork for a period of three years (January 2017–January 2020). The two sites chosen were:

- (1) The *Voluntariat per la llengua* in the city of Vilagran; a programme led by the *Consorti per a la Normalització Lingüística* (CPNL) [Consortium for Linguistic Normalisation], an institution in charge of teaching Catalan to adults and promoting the use of the language at the local level (Puigdevall et al., [forthcoming](#)). This programme was established for the first time in 2002 in Cornellà del Llobregat, a city south of Barcelona, with the coordination of 19 linguistic partners. The programme was first known with another name, *Hores de conversa: parlem una estona* (Conversation time: let’s speak a while) and was created to give opportunities for practicing Catalan to learners as they experienced many difficulties in using the language outside the classrooms (Gallego and Nadal 2014). In 2003 the *Direcció General de Política Lingüística* (General Directorate for Language Policy) implemented the scheme to further 34 cities and towns. In 2019, 144,041 ‘*parelles lingüístiques*’ (linguistic partnerships) were established in 203 towns and cities around the country. Furthermore, about 2800 couples were formed in public and private organisations such as companies, hospitals, and other public health centres, cultural entities, etc. (Departament de Cultura 2020).
- (2) The *Colles de Diables* [Devil’s groups] of the city of Barcelona are popular and traditional Catalan culture groups. The origin of this tradition derives from the performance of ‘balls parlats’ (spoken dances) documented for the first time in the XIIth century (Amades 1982). Banned during Franco’s dictatorship, as were many other expressions of Catalan popular culture and identity, groups emerged again in a refashioned format in Barcelona during the democratic transition of the late 1970s through the initiative of social activists and neighbourhood organisations (Puigdevall, Colombo, and Pujolar 2019; Colombo, Altuna, and Oliver-Grasiot 2021). The *Colles* are groups of people theatrically representing fights and struggles between the good and evil, dressed as demons and performing with pyrotechnics. These groups are not set up with any goal in mind in relation to learning or speaking Catalan. However, they are traditional Catalan culture groups, the Catalan language is used prominently by their members and they are considered to contribute to social cohesion and integration (Sauri and Rovira 2015).

We combined ethnographic field work together with the gathering and analysis of a variety of materials (brochures, pictures, web pages and blogs, and other documents). Our goal was to dedicate time to observing and participating in different activities with new speakers. We collected data through participant observation in both sites for a total of 160 h. We conducted 19 in-depth interviews and 3 focus groups that amount to 30 h of recordings. Finally, in the Devil’s groups site, two surveys were sent: the first to 18 Devil’s groups (138 respondents) and the second to 43 groups (193 respondents).

Safe spaces or breathing spaces?

‘Safe space’ is a metaphor that has been used in multiple ways, both as a popular emic term and as an academic topic of discussion in various fields, including educational settings, applied linguistics, and later in sociolinguistics. As Flensner and Von der Lippe (2019, 276) point out ‘the concept of

“safe space” derives from the 1970 woman’s and LGBT movement and was originally used to name physical meeting places where likeminded people could meet and share their experiences in a safe environment’.¹ In the context of language learning (Creese and Martin 2006; Conteh and Brock 2011), namely in immigration and multilingualism (Capstick 2019) the concept of safe spaces is used to describe schools and other learning environments where multilingual and translanguaging practices are encouraged as creative processes that widen the scope for multiple linguistic identities. The term has also entered into the study of new speakers. In an earlier publication on this ethnographic project, we referred to our study sites as ‘safe spaces or linguistic oases [where new speakers] can speak the language without being judged’ (Puigdevall, Colombo, and Pujolar 2019, 119). *Mudes* took place, we argued, ‘when the opportunity to be in steady contact with speakers of the language existed, in safe environments that treated them as legitimate speakers’ (Puigdevall, Colombo, and Pujolar 2019, 129). Other scholars have followed suit. Walsh and O’Rourke’s study of Irish new speakers, for example, proposed

‘safe spaces’ to mean dedicated social spaces where those wishing to use Irish may do so in an environment where speaking Irish is normal and encouraged [...] the real world is very different, but such ‘safe spaces’ are strategically important in order to boost the confidence of (potential) new speakers of a minoritized language such as Irish and potentially to equip them to integrate into broader Irish-speaking publics. (2020, 154)

There are other terms that have been used in the context of revitalising minority languages and sound similar to safe spaces, for instance ‘space of linguistic assurance’ (Ribot 2020). Fishman (1991, 58, 59) called for the need to create ‘breathing spaces’ for minority languages where they could be the only language spoken in that space with no competition from the majority language:

Every pro-RLS movement must strive to provide physical breathing-space for its constituency, demographically concentrated space where Xish can be on its own turf, predominant and unharassed. Such spaces may appear abnormal or atypical vis-à-vis the outside, non-Xish surrounding reality; but vis-à-vis internal Xish reality, such spaces become potential oases of authenticity and centers of increased cultural self-regulation that seek to counteract the physical dislocation that minority life is so commonly afflicted with.

Although O’Rourke (2019) in the Galician context and Walsh and O’Rourke (2020) in the Irish context equate breathing spaces to safe spaces we see them as different. In Fishman’s use, the term seems to denote spaces where there is no presence of the majority language at all. Breathing spaces in this sense seem more like ‘bubbles’ for natives of minoritised languages rather than accessible spaces for other profiles of speakers, such as new speakers and translanguaging practices. Fishman’s use of the concept seems to suggest that it is more the language than the speakers that need the breathing. However, it is amenable to the idea that speakers also need the social context where they can activate and develop their forms of expression and identities in that language. We do not refute the usefulness of such spaces for native speakers of minoritised languages, especially in threatened and small language communities that require close-knit contact for the survival of the language. However, in the Catalan language context, the concept of ‘safe space’ would be more productive if used to describe spaces where new speakers of Catalan can feel welcome to partake in the activities and speak the language to the best of their ability without being judged and, at the same time, habitual speakers can also converse in Catalan with them even if the hegemonic linguistic accommodation norm would impel them to do the opposite in other contexts.

We think that it is necessary to further explore and unpack the notion of safe space in new speakers’ research and connect it more closely to critical feminist literature that explores subjectivities to make more visible questions of power, privilege, and inequalities. As Pujolar (2020, 22) points out it is time that sociolinguistics participates in debates on the issue of subjectivities in a way to understand what the symbolic and economic consequences are of assuming or scaping from a given position, status, role, or social classification.

In the next two sections, we will examine the concepts of ‘safe space’ and ‘bridge place’ or ‘stepping stones’, as we like to call them, based on data from our fieldwork in *Voluntariat per la llengua* and the *Colles de Diables* of Barcelona.

Voluntaris per la llengua and Colles de Diables as safe spaces for mudes

As we have mentioned in the methodology section, one of the chosen spaces was the *Voluntariat per la llengua* (VxL) in the city of Vilagran,² a programme in which Catalan speakers, not necessarily natives, volunteer to help learners practicing Catalan in informal settings. The other space was, as we have said, a Catalan cultural group known as the *Colles de Diables* in the city of Barcelona. Both are spaces that we deemed favourable for *mudes* because Catalan is the main language used in their activities, although not exclusively. Both are quite open to new participants and bring together both habitual speakers and language learners. VxL and *Diables* differ in the fact that the former is a space that was purposefully designed for language learning, while in *Diables* language is not the main purpose but the medium in which the activity normally takes place. The metaphor of ‘safe space’ is not used by the organisations themselves to describe their aims and purposes. However, doing an active search on the web page of VxL we found a post in their Blog site that uses this metaphor and provides an ample explanation of why VxL works as a safe space. Blog posts provided rich insight into the experiences and motivations of participants, both volunteers and learners. In this example, we have a local bar owner in the city of Reus, explaining why he chose to offer his bar as a space where linguistic couples and groups could meet up, have a drink and chat ‘freely’ in a Catalan-welcoming environment.

‘LET’S HAVE A DRINK?’ A FREE AND ‘SAFE’ SPACE WHERE YOU CAN SPEAK AND PRACTICE CATALAN IN REUS

It should be noted that when Mireia (the local coordinator from VxL) proposed a collaboration between the Bar Restaurant **3 de 9** and the Volunteering for the Language Program (VxL) and specifically in the ‘Let’s have a drink’ scheme, our answer could be none other than to put our business at their disposal. Thus, every Wednesday, people from different countries gather in our premises to speak Catalan. This activity puts us in front of a paradoxical reality: the difficulties that people who move to Catalonia encounter if they want to practice the language to consolidate the knowledge acquired in class. There is a reality that we switch to Spanish without realizing, we could say, unconsciously. Why do we do that? There are many opinions (...): education, deference, to facilitate communication ... Or as I read and heard, this issue has been seized by some to make absurd and malicious accusations of [Catalan-imposed] supremacy. And what we do, no less, is a defence mechanism for years and centuries of continuous aggression, in all areas, to all those who ‘dare’ speak Catalan. So, before speaking in our language openly, we must make sure that it will not bring unpleasant consequences, which will allow us to maintain a ray of hope of everyday normality, avoiding humiliations that affect us in various ways in our personal development.

‘Let’s have a drink?’ we could say that, among other things, creates a ‘safe’ and free space (*un espai ‘segur’ i lliure*) where one can speak and practice Catalan, a space where Khatuna, Michael, Crina can talk to Enric, Dolores, Joana, without hindrances and without conjunctural interferences and where I have to make the conscious effort to not change my language when they make me repeat what I have just said, because they have not understood it well enough.³

This text provides quite a clear picture of how VxL is portrayed and considered explicitly as a safe space for speakers of the language. The feelings and sensations that the owner of the bar describes regarding what it means to be a Catalan speaker and the difficulties that Catalan speakers, especially new speakers, must face to speak the language without hindrances and negative reactions, are reminiscent of descriptions provided in feminist literature about what safe spaces are.

Chris Waugh (2019) in his defence of ‘safe spaces’ in the context of Higher Education turns to the work of Nancy Fraser regarding ‘subaltern counterpublics’ (1990) and her critique of the ‘single public sphere’ envisaged by Habermas (1991). As Waugh (2019, 154–155) describes:

Fraser argues against the idea that there is one sole public sphere of which we are all part. While there is a public sphere each individual and group forms their own ‘counterpublics’ where the rest of the actors in the public sphere are not necessarily welcome (...). Fraser argues that social movements, feminist organisations and the like, function as counterpublics for people with some shared political aim or experience of discrimination. These counterpublics, however are not separatist organisations but spaces for recuperation, a place where individuals and groups can think about how best to face issues in the public sphere; (...). Fraser

singles out particular counterpublics formed by vulnerable and subordinated groups as subaltern counterpublics which are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs. (Fraser 1990, 67)

One could argue that both VxL and *Diablos* are forms of counterpublics in the sense that they are spaces that allow Catalan native or habitual speakers to transgress the dominant linguistic accommodation norms that impel them to address and reply in Spanish to new speakers (Woolard 1989; Vila i Moreno and Galindo Solé 2012). VxL in particular, but also *Diablos* would be spaces where new speakers can get used to speaking Catalan in new settings without being rushed or judged, get acquainted with what it means to speak Catalan in a meaningful way, linked to specific activities that require specific words and language constructions and registers; develop strategies to navigate the complex sociolinguistic rules to become Catalan speakers and build the necessary confidence to speak the language outside these spaces, in other settings and with new people. One key aspect of these spaces is that prevalent or hegemonic forms of evaluation and interpretation can be renegotiated, such as the partly stigmatised practice of speaking Catalan to foreigners.

Our fieldwork data provides us with many instances and examples that can relate to Waugh's conceptions of safe spaces. Let us take the example of Jamila, who tries to find a way to change the language that the teachers of her daughters use with her in meetings at the school.⁴ Jamila is a 33-year-old Moroccan woman, born in Rabat and married to a Moroccan husband of Amazigh origin. She moved to Vilagran nine years ago, thanks to the family reunification policy that allows spouses and offspring of migrants with a residential permit to bring their families to their place of residence. Jamila has two young daughters of school age. We met her for the first time in April 2018 when she was enrolled in a B1 Catalan language course at the Consortium and joined the VxL programme so she could practice and improve the language. I [name of researcher] met her regularly once a week for a chat or a walk through the city of Vilagran. Sometimes we sat down in a bar to have a coffee and work on her Catalan language homework. In one of our meetings at the coffee room of a local library, she reported what had happened that week in her daughters' school. She told me that she had finally found the courage to ask the teachers to speak in Catalan to her. The next excerpt is the reproduction of the notes I took during the meeting:

Excerpt 1:

Jamila: You know? This week I have practiced Catalan a lot with the teachers. I asked Blanca why she has this label for me, why she speaks Spanish to me... She said nobody has ever spoken to her of this. The meeting has been more useful for me than for my daughter. Blanca said that ok, that from now onwards she will be speaking to me in Catalan. Now I have the strength to overcome this barrier. The teacher told Aiza that her mother was very intelligent and that she spoke Catalan very well. Blanca was shocked! She told me, tell your language partner that she is fantastic. If you build these barriers, we can't overcome them, I told her. Blanca did not know about VxL, I described her what it was. It exists because 'you' don't give us the language (...). I feel different, a woman that has rights when she speaks Catalan. I have changed, you know?

As we see in Excerpt 1, Jamila's experience in the VxL authorised her to demand to be spoken to in Catalan. Thus, VxL is not only a safe space that gives the opportunity to build up the language but also to build up the confidence and ability to develop what Fraser calls 'vocabularies of dissent'. Waugh, elaborating on this concept from Fraser (1990, 67), argues that 'safe spaces expand discursive space ... [A]ssumptions that were previously exempt from contestation will now have to publicly argued out as well as equipping members of subordinated groups with the language to begin their own strategies of resistance' (Waugh 2019, 155–156). As a space created precisely for practicing Catalan, VxL favours metalinguistic language use that includes sociolinguistic concepts and understandings that fuel 'vocabularies of dissent' of linguistic normativities for both native and new speakers.

Spaces that boost *mudes*: bridge places and stepping stones

If social spaces such as Vxl and the *Colles de diables* can be considered catalysts or enablers of *mudes* they are also spaces that can boost and strengthen the linguistic appropriation of a minoritised language by allowing new speakers to try their newly gained language skills and ‘vocabularies of dissent’ to new places and with people they know, and with whom they can negotiate, such as friends, colleagues and family, as well as with new people in new places.

These spaces, we suggest, act similarly to what feminist anthropologist Teresa Del Valle has called ‘bridge places’ (2001). Del Valle develops this image to describe the kind of transformational change and capacity building that takes place in woman’s networks and woman’s associations. Participating in such associations, she says, can be transformative in different ways.

Thus, in the bridge space the starting point has been left behind and a new condition of change occurs or is experienced. Not all bridge spaces lead to the other shore. There will be people that will return to their starting point and reject the experiences of change. Some may return to the starting point, but because of the experience lived in a bridge space, they will live their previous reality differently and they still will try to change it. Others, from the bridge space, will create intermediate spaces that will bring some advances. Finally, there will be those who on the other shore will face creative changes. (Del Valle 2001, 146)⁵

Del Valle stresses that woman’s associations, apart from giving women spaces to understand gender as a power system through shared dialogue, debate, contextualisation of criticisms, complicity, support and new models and aspirations they make also evident that changing their conditions is very difficult and requires collective action (Del Valle 2001, 143). Only through collective agency new socialisations will be possible given that social identities are constructed interactively and hence require conversational others. This rings remarkably familiar with how we have been understanding linguistic *mudes* by new speakers. As Pujolar (2019, 186) points out

[y]ou cannot do a *muda* on your own, probably not either with a single successful exchange; but by establishing categories of events in which a given mode of communication (language, dialect, register) participates in the production of new social relations.

We prefer to use the term ‘stepping stones’, as we see them to be more of a concatenation of movements across different spaces (the stones) rather than a unique and seamless path to the ‘other shore’. New speakers circulate to other places where they might not have gone and tried to speak Catalan if it was not for their previous experience in a safe space. Gina’s experience provides us with a good example of the significance of the *Colles de Diables* as stepping stones in her process of becoming a new speaker of Catalan that has required time and circulation from one space to another, building up her skills and authority as a Catalan speaker. Gina is a 24-year-old English woman that moved to Barcelona in 2013 to work as an English TA in a Catalan primary school. In 2014 she enrolled in a Catalan language B1 course at the Consortium when she decided to stay one more year and because she felt guilty for not being able to speak Catalan to people and having to say ‘I’m sorry I don’t speak Catalan’ all the time. As we can see in Excerpt 2, through work, she met a girl with whom she started practicing a bit of Catalan and she invited Gina to her first *Correfoc* (Devils’ fire-run):

Excerpt 2:

Gina: Then in my second year: a girl that worked in the school in the bar (.) ehm: she told me ‘have you ever been to a fire-run?’ and me like ‘what is a fire-run?’ (.) and she invited me to my first fire-run and of course the people in the fire-runs are normally and more typically Catalan, so they were speaking Catalan among them all the time and I was there ‘well, let’s see what I understand’: ‘what can I do’ because, well after a year: I was a bit more- after the conversation course I took and all ...

Gina told us that she got confident using Catalan in the *Colla*, where Catalan was the main language used among all the members, and it has been of great help to try and use Catalan in other spaces and with other people. Although she was first a member of the *Colla de Diables* of

a specific neighbourhood of Barcelona, in a fire-run she met other people of another neighbouring district's *Colla* and it is where she later met her current boyfriend. They used Catalan when they first met and now she also speaks Catalan with him. As she was building her confidence and knowledge of the language through her participation and various meetings and activities in the *Colla*, she asked her friends and colleagues in the school where she worked to speak Catalan to her, so she could expand it further and present herself as a Catalan speaker. She later enrolled in a teacher training course degree where she met a new friend that corrected her Catalan, helping her to differentiate between Catalan and Spanish. Gina tended to mix both languages and it was important to her to separate them. When we interviewed her, she was in her second-year English language degree at the University, and she wanted to become a teacher of English at the Catalan public school system. For that, she said she would need to get a Catalan C2 certificate. She was open to recognise that her Catalan, as well as her understanding of local culture and society, would not be the same if not for being part of the *Colla de Diables* where she found a space away from her linguistic vulnerabilities, a space to develop her language and friendships that gave her 'opportunities' and as we see in Excerpt 3, opened new pathways to live and see things from another perspective:

Excerpt 3:

Interviewer: and your relationship with Catalan, how would you define it in terms of emotions?

Gina: do I need to tell you about emotions? (.) ehm: (0.7) I don't know (2.0) I don't (1.7) m It could sound a bit naff or something like ... I rather see it as a key as a key that I don't know how it has open (.) m: (2.4) not only opportunities but (1.0) friendships or: (0.8) no, no, because (0.6) if I didn't speak Catalan that (0.9) I wouldn't be friends with them, no but (.) yes (.) yes (.) I don't know is like another (0.7) another pathway has opened (1.2) because (1.0) still: I still see people that have lived (.) here for many years and do no speak Catalan (1.5) and they still need to say (0.8) 'hey, so- sorry can we speak in Spanish?' or: (.) in a restaurant or whatever, always, I don't know m: (1.5) I don't know I see Catalan as (.) yes as another pathway a: in parallel (.) or: I see it (1.5) I don't know how I would say it with emotions (2.1) I don't know.

Conclusions

Studying and understanding why and how linguistic *mudes* by new speakers of Catalan occurred, we have seen how paramount it is to pay attention to the intertwining of time and space in socio-linguistic processes. If language biographies allowed us to grasp and made time visible, participant observation has made evident the salience of space and especially it has allowed us to see how people circulate through different spaces and with what consequences for them in terms of becoming new speakers. Access and movement to, through, and across spaces is not as seamless and easy as we might think. There are invisible barriers that hinder and condition our movements and access to resources, both symbolic and material. Our movements and possibilities of participating and circulating through spaces in minoritised language communities will depend not only on our knowledge of the language, but also on our authority and legitimacy as a speaker of that language, which is not easily gained and recognised; and this is especially in the case of racialised individuals.

As we have seen, *VxL* and *Colles de Diables* can be described as linguistic safe spaces in a similar way to those developed for women and LGBT groups in university campuses of the US and the UK in the late 1970s. As our examples have shown, both these spaces provide shelter to two different forms of subjugation and vulnerabilities to reconfigure collectively, using Nancy Fraser's terminology (1990), as 'subaltern counterpublics', and the development of 'vocabularies of dissent'. Furthermore, as Ho (2017, np) pointed out, these spaces can be both spaces that offer emotional protection but also safety to feel unsafe or vulnerable when taking risks and exploring new ways of self-representation.

VxL and *Colles de Diables* are safe spaces thanks to the fact that they gather a predominance of Catalan speakers, both native and new speakers, and Catalan is the language by default, although

translanguaging practices are quite common. They act as catalysts and boosters of *mudes*, providing new speakers the space and time to build up the new language, strengthen their confidence and legitimacy. Linguistic safe spaces such as the ones we present in this article must be relatively accessible or open to the incorporation of new participants, whatever their conditions and origins. They must be linguistically tolerant and act as ‘training’, experimentation, and development grounds for new forms of subjectivities as speakers of the new language. In these spaces, both natives and new speakers, can dispute and act against hegemonic sociolinguistic norms that compel natives to address strangers in Castilian and represent newcomers as non-Catalan speakers. Moreover, as we have seen in Gina’s case, these spaces act as stepping stones to new places and people based on the skills, authority and security gained there thanks to the collective action. Through the passage from space to space, from stone to stone, the *muda* gets established and brings to new speakers more possibilities to incorporate Catalan to their everyday language repertoire and, in some cases, making Catalan their main language of socialisation and identification.

To sum up, both VxL and *Colles de Diables* provide new speakers near-ideal conditions to take complex and risky steps and actions, i.e. acquiring and becoming used to speak a minoritised language, with all the complications and hindrances that this entails, without being too exposed to the habitual linguistic appraisal of society at large. They also fulfil a function that Catalan society would otherwise deliver spontaneously if its use were fully normalised and available in all fields of social life. As Jamila told Clara, the teacher of her daughter, VxL exists because Catalan speakers ‘don’t give’ the language to newcomers. Hence, spaces such as VxL and *Colles de Diables* can be efficient ‘instruments’ to promote the use of minority languages. We think that it is worth keep exploring the way in which this kind of spaces can be either created or enhanced both by language planning authorities and grassroots language organisations (Soler and Darquennes 2019).

Notes

1. See Waugh (2019) and Ho (2017) for debates and useful distinctions regarding the term “safe space”.
2. We prefer to use a pseudonym for the city where this part of the fieldwork was conducted.
3. This and all other translations from Catalan are by the authors. The text was published on 13 January 2020 in the VxL Blog at the following link: <https://www.vxl.cat/node/265315>
4. All names of participants are pseudonyms.
5. Authors’ translation from Spanish

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ORCID

Maite Puigdevall  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7821-5517>

Joan Pujolar  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0324-6033>

Alba Colombo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8519-5203>

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