

# A life spent immersed in all things Catalan

Alan Yates, co-author of *Teach Yourself Catalan*, tells Rebecca Warden how he came to be the UK's one and only professor of Catalan at Sheffield University

**Y**ou never really know where a chance decision may take you. Britain's one and only professor of Catalan began his lifetime's involvement with the language in a casual enough way. In the 1960's Alan Yates was an undergraduate studying modern languages at Cambridge. "Catalan was an option and I took it for no particular reason, mainly because I liked the guy who did it," he says, "I got involved in research on Catalan matters and then got a job in a department where Catalan was on offer."

From these humble beginnings came a lifetime's involvement in all things Catalan. This saw Yates becoming professor of Catalan at Sheffield University, an expert in modern Catalan narrative and in the teaching of Catalan to foreigners and the author of several books on the subject. It has also given him a perfect Catalan accent. He is prone to switching between this and northern English with unnerving ease.

Now retired, he still teaches on a joint programme in Catalan philology between Sheffield and the Universitat de les Illes Balears and was recently awarded a prize for his services to the teaching of Catalan. Yates was recently in Barcelona to combine a spot of hill-walking with service on the Jury of the Sant Joan prize for new Catalan literature.

Anyone who has struggled to get to grips with Catalan will be familiar with Yates's best-known book *Teach Yourself Catalan*, part of the Teach Yourself language series by Hodder and Stoughton Educational. The book, published in 1975, is now out of print. However Yates has been involved in updating the new edition, due out later this month on June 24.

When the publishers asked Yates to produce the new edition, he at first refused, but feeling it was too much work for someone recently retired. "Then I felt bad because it

meant it was possibly going to disappear from the market or somebody else would take it on and I wouldn't have any control over it," he says, "I do have a sentimental attachment to the thing. I have been associated with it for a long, long time."

Yates is eager for the book to be reprinted for more than just personal reasons. "For *Teach Yourself Catalan* to have been there in Franco's days, in the transition days, in the democracy days and then disappear would have been a bit of a contradiction," he says. The new edition is mainly the brainchild of Anna Poch, a Catalan philologist from Cornellà del Terri near Girona, with Yates "very much as second author," he says. Catalonia Today will be featuring an adaptation of materials from the book by Anna Poch in a regular column on Fridays.

On the question of whether the language will survive, Yates notices a big boost in the usage of Catalan since he first began visiting the country in the final years of the Franco regime. He believes the two key factors in consolidating Catalan are its use as the language of instruction in education and the launch of Catalan language media such as TV3 and Avui. While this is clearly a success story, it is not smiles all round. "The sense of importance of the differential factor has got diluted because of a lot of reasons, so it does not have the charge that it had in the late Franco years," he says.

The current state of publishing in Catalan, always a good measure of the vitality of a language, seems pretty acceptable to Yates. He points out that there are as many books published per year in Catalan as in Portuguese, "and in terms of quality as well as quantity, I think it is fairly comparable," he says. But this does not mean the future is assured. "If you were a Martian, landing in Barcelona and making a comparative judgement about the health of Catalan literature, you would say, yes it is working, there are enough new novels, poetry, theatre and debate. You would say it is a normal set-up," he says, "But when you look beyond that, you may say, hang on a minute, it's a green house or artificial thing, and its future is conditional upon the future of the Catalan language which itself is a matter of debate. But then it has been a matter of debate since 1840 and it is still here." Sitting back, smiling gently, Alan Yates is happy to be part of this debate.

## Teach Yourself Catalan

ANNA POCH



Welcome to *Teach Yourself Catalan*. This section, published every Friday, is aimed at people who want to acquire a good working knowledge of Catalan. Whether you live here or are just passing through, you may have already found yourself needing to communicate in Catalan. Learning the language can make you feel more a part of the community: you will be able to attend cultural events such as theatre, cinema or debates, understand signs and, most importantly, talk to people. Remember that Catalan is also an official language in the Balearic Islands and Valencia.

Once a week in this section, you will be presented with a real-life situation followed by vocabulary, grammatical explanations and some exercises. The aim is to offer you a quick and effective way to develop communication skills in Catalan. This material used here is inspired by, and, in some cases adapted from *Teach Yourself Catalan*, a new book by Anna Poch and Alan Yates, due to be published at the end of June. (Hodder & Stoughton Educational, London: 2004, ISBN 0340870559)

### 1. Com va això? How are things?

Mark, a German exchange student, has just arrived at Barcelona airport. He is welcomed by some Catalan students.

- Xavier** Hola, bon dia. Ets en Mark, oi?  
**Mark** Sí, sóc jo.  
**Xavier** Com va això? I el viatge?  
**Mark** Molt bé, gràcies.  
**Xavier** Jo em dic Xavier i ella és la Judit, una amiga.  
**Mark** Molt de gust.  
**Judit** Igualment.

hola	hello
bon dia	good morning
ets	you are
en+masculine name	personal article
oi?	is/isn't that so?
sí	yes
sóc jo	I am
i	and
el viatge	the journey
(molt) bé	(very) well
gràcies	thanks
jo em dic	my name is
ella és	she is
la+feminine name	personal article
un amic/una amiga	a friend (male/female)
molt de gust	nice to meet you
igualment	likewise

### Grammar

#### A. The verb SER and personal pronouns

- (jo) sóc I am  
 (nosaltres) som we are  
 (tu) ets you are  
 (vosaltres) sou you are  
 (ell) és he is  
 (ells) són they are  
 (ella) és she is  
 (elles) són they are

The personal pronoun in Catalan is very often omitted, as seen in *Ets en Mark...*, even when no other subject of the verb is expressed. This is possible because the part of the verb itself conveys which person is indicated. *Sóc* means *I am*, *són* means *they are*, and so on. When the pronoun is used, it is to give emphasis or to avoid ambiguity, as in *Jo em dic Xavier i ella és la Judit*.

#### B. The verb DIR-SE

- (jo) em dic my name is  
 (nosaltres) ens diem our names are  
 (tu) et dius your name is  
 (vosaltres) us dieu your names are  
 (ell) es diu his name is  
 (ells) es diuen their names are  
 (ella) es diu her name is  
 (elles) es diuen their names are

In later editions, we shall look more closely at «reflexive» verbs like *dir-se*.

#### C. The personal article

As shown in the dialogue, personal names and surnames are preceded by a definite article (**en Mark** and **la Judit**): **el** and **en** are used before masculine names beginning with a consonant **en Martí, el Lluís**; **la** before feminine names beginning with a consonant **la Montse, la Carme**; **l'** is used before masculine or feminine names beginning with a vowel or **h + vowel: l'Eduard, l'Helena**. Note that it appears with **ser**, and with the majority of the verbs, but not with *dir-se*: **sóc en Francesc**, but **em dic Francesc**. Also note that this article is not used when the person is addressed directly (**escolta, Mercè** listen, Mercè).

### Activities

#### 1. Translate into Catalan:

- I'm Mònica.
- His name is Miquel.
- He is Carles, a friend.
- You are a friend, Maria.
- Their names are Isabel and Josep.
- We are Sandra and Ester.

#### 2. Match each sentence on the left with one on the right:

- |                        |                       |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Bon dia, Sílvia!    | a. I jo sóc l'Andreu. |
| 2. Com va això?        | b. Hola!              |
| 3. Et dius Alba?       | c. Molt bé, i tu?     |
| 4. Jo em dic Salvador. | d. Sí, i tu?          |

(The correct answers will be given next week.)