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The tension between norm and usage: the status of the neuter article *lo* in Catalan

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Among the syntactic innovations in the Romance languages, a particularly noteworthy phenomenon, which constitutes a distinctive mark of Spanish is the invariable article *lo* used to nominalize adjectives, thereby imparting them with an abstract or collective meaning (Gili Gaya 1980: 224). In Catalan, although *lo* is not part of the modern linguistic standard, it is widely used in everyday oral communication. This study aims to investigate the etymology and contemporary status of the neuter *lo* in Catalan, drawing on grammatical analyses, the perspectives of linguists and speakers, and its implications for the application of the standard in language teaching.

Articles in Catalan and Spanish

It is important to preface the present analysis by some contextualization of the subject matter in examining the system of articles in Catalan in comparison with Spanish, with particular attention to the so-called neuter forms.

It has been established that in most Romance languages, the definite article developed from the demonstrative ILLE (Väänänen 2003: 199). In the case of Catalan, as pointed out by Max Wheeler,

[t]he expected forms of the definite determiners deriving from Latin IL-LUM etc. would be *lo, los, la, les*, with the first two being reduced to *l, ls*,

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respectively, in enclitic position, and with *lo* and *la* being reduced to *l* in prevocalic position. This state of affairs is largely retained in the dialects of western Catalonia (*lo pare, los pares, del pare, dels pares* etc.). Elsewhere, *lo, los* have been replaced by ‘reinforced’ forms *el, els*, abducted from the enclitic variants (Wheeler 2005: 181).²

Thus, in modern Catalan, the masculine singular article in preconsonantal position is *el*, while the form *lo* is primarily retained in certain north-western varieties, some Valencian regions, and in Algerese. It also persists in specific fixed expressions (e.g., *tot lo dia*) and toponyms (e.g., *Canet lo Roig*) (GIEC 2016: 580).³

In contrast, Spanish retains three singular forms of the definite article: *el* (masculine), *la* (feminine), and *lo* (neuter). The neuter as a separate grammatical gender has largely disappeared in Romance languages as most of them lack nouns belonging to this gender. Nevertheless, vestiges of neuter persist in pronominal forms used to refer to abstract concepts or entities that are not morphologically classified as nouns (e.g., sp. *esto*, cat. *això*). With regard to the so-called neuter article in Spanish, this grammatical phenomenon does not have its origins in Latin, but is a later innovation. It is “a kind of syntactic nominalisation in which *lo* functions as a [–count] marker” (Green 2005: 94). The first grammar of Spanish, *Grammatica Antoni Nebrisensis* by Antonio de Nebrija, already provides evidence of the existence of *lo*, stating: “Neutro llamamos aquel con que se aunta este articulo .lo. como lo justo, lo bueno”⁴ (1992 [1492]: 229).

However, in addition to the referential or individuating *lo*, Spanish also features a quantifying or emphatic *lo* used to intensify adjectives and adverbs. This emphatic *lo* is always accompanied by a subordinate clause introduced by *que*, as in *lo extraña que era la situación* (‘how strange the situation was’). Notably, while the referential *lo* consistently aligns with the unmarked masculine gender, the emphatic *lo* does not impose a change

² Parallel forms derived from IPSE also exist in some Catalan dialects, particularly in the Balearic variety; however, this topic will not be explored further as it falls outside the scope of the present study.

³ *Lo* is also the form of the masculine singular direct object pronoun in enclitic position following a consonant.

⁴ “We call neuter that which is joined by this article *lo*, as in *lo justo* ‘what is just’, *lo bueno* ‘what is good.’”

of gender on the adjective, as illustrated by the example provided (NGLE 2010: 275–276).

Alternatives to neuter *lo* in Catalan

In Catalan, the neuter article *lo* is often considered a Castilianism (Fabra 1911: 34–40) and is not part of normative grammar. Instead, the masculine singular article *el* (as the unmarked form) fulfils some of its functions, although its use is more restricted than that of the Spanish *lo*. For instance, it cannot be used in non-restrictive relative clauses, where expressions such as *la qual cosa*, *cosa que*, or *fet que* must be employed as can be seen in the following example:

Spanish: Me dijo que era mentira, *lo que* me hizo sentir mal.

Catalan: Em va dir que era mentida, *la qual cosa* em va fer sentir malament.
(‘He told me that it was a lie, which made me feel bad’)

Additionally, *el* cannot be used before prepositional phrases headed by *de*, which require the neuter pronoun (e.g., sp. *lo de ayer*, cat. *això d’ahir* ‘yesterday’s events’), or before participles. Furthermore, Catalan does not accept the neuter article in emphatic constructions, where the interrogative *com* is used instead:

Spanish: No te imaginas *lo bien* que toca este pianista.

Catalan: No t’imagines *com de bé* toca aquest pianista.
(‘You can’t imagine how well this pianist plays.’)

However, in contexts where the neuter article is used in Catalan, the dual interpretation of the form *el* can result in ambiguities. For example, *Tu només et preocupes del públic* can be interpreted as either ‘You only worry about the public’ or ‘You only worry about what is public.’⁵ Consequently, the Institut d’Estudis Catalans recommends employing alternative structures or abstract nouns to avoid such ambiguities (GEIEC 2016: 590).

⁵ This sentence provided by the Institut d’Estudis Catalans to illustrate the aforementioned ambiguity. However, this example is somewhat contrived, as the neuter interpretation of the article *el* would be highly unusual in this context.

The neuter *lo* in Catalan prior to the establishment of the Fabrian norm

Considering that in Catalan the etymological form of the masculine article was *lo* (then replaced by *el* in modern language), this form was used interchangeably with masculine nouns and neuter adjectives. Examples of these neuter uses can be observed in the corpus of Old Catalan CICA (*Corpus Informatitzat del Català Antic*):

O si axí ho vols, digues *lo contrari e callaré (Lo somni)*.
E defensaven-se *lo millor que podien (Tirant lo blanc)*.

Other neuter constructions are also commonly found, such as the structure *tot lo que*, which appears 826 times in the corpus.

E si lo voler meu no volràs fer, fes *tot lo que* placent te sia, car pregar-te és mon ofici (*Tirant lo blanc*).

Moll observes that in medieval Catalan, the neuter pronoun *allò* also appears in place of *lo* before adjectives (Moll 1952: 325). However, the CICA corpus provides very few examples of this usage. The structure *tot allò que* is also infrequent, with only 33 attestations. Conversely, the neutral structure *ço que* appears frequently in the corpus, with 7,067 occurrences documented between the 13th and 17th centuries. Nevertheless, its usage has declined markedly from the 16th century onward. As Battle points out,

[a]l segle XVI, potser com a conseqüència del color hispànic que en general adquireix el lèxic del català durant aquest període, la partícula *ço (que)* és reemplaçada per *lo (que)*, allunyant-se del francès (*ce qui*) i l'italià (*ciò che*)⁶ (Battle 2000: 339).

If we examine 19th-century Catalan grammars, in several instances the form *el* is either not recorded or not accepted. Consequently, the sole masculine article remains *lo*, which also appears in combination with adjectives for neuter uses. This is the case, for example, in the grammars

⁶ “In the 16th century, perhaps as a result of the Hispanic influence that generally characterizes Catalan vocabulary during this period, the particle *ço (que)* is replaced by *lo (que)*, moving away from French (*ce qui*) and Italian (*ciò che*)”.

of Ballot (1815), Domènech (1829), Estorch (1857), Bofarull and Blanch (1867), and Farré i Carrió (1874).

We also find grammar companions that document the ongoing shift in the article system, marked by the replacement of *lo* with *el* as the masculine singular article. This phenomenon is observed in works from both Catalonia and other Catalan-speaking territories. For instance, in Petit i Aguilar's grammar, it is stated that the article *el* is exclusively masculine, while *lo* can function as either masculine or neuter (1980 [1796–1829]: 304–305). Similarly, Soler's Minorcan grammar indicates that the masculine article may be either *el* or *lo*, with *lo* reserved for neuter use (1858: 11). Other authors take the distinction further by explicitly differentiating between *el* as the masculine article and *lo* as the neuter article. This distinction is evident in Amengual's Mallorcan grammar (1836) and Nebot's Valencian grammar (1894). However, Nebot observes that in Catalonia, the masculine singular *lo* is still retained, whereas in Valencian it has largely fallen out of use, persisting only in certain villages (1894: 33).

Pompeu Fabra and the acceptability of the neuter *lo*

As observed, 19th-century grammars show significant variation regarding the form of the masculine article. Some gravitate towards the form found in ancient texts, namely *lo*, while others accept the form *el*, which was widely used at the time. This divergence also affects the neuter article, with some references arguing that it coincided with the masculine forms *el* or *lo*, while others assert that it had a distinct form, *lo*, as opposed to the masculine *el*.

In this context, Pompeu Fabra undertook the task of codifying the modern standard of the Catalan language. In his grammar, he adopted the forms *el* and *els* for the masculine, while also noting the existence of the form *lo*, preserved in some fixed expressions in Barcelona (Fabra 2006 [1933]: 27). At the same time, he rejected the use of the neuter *lo*, considering it a Castilianism, as in Spanish, uniquely among the Romance languages, the form of the neuter article differs from the masculine. Drawing on literary examples from Old Catalan, Fabra sought to demonstrate that this distinction was unnecessary, as traditionally the masculine article appeared in contexts that could be described as neuter. Additionally, he

highlighted the restructuring of the Catalan linguistic system under the influence of Spanish:

[E]ls catalans, tenint sempre al davant el model del castellà, traduïnt constantment d'aquesta llengua, copiant-ne servilment totes les construccions, ens avem acostumat a recórrer a la substantificació de l'adjectiu amb la mateixa freqüència que ·l castellà, i, naturalment, avui ens arriba a semblar que ·ns fóra gaire bé impossible d'escriure quatre ratlles sense disposar d'un article neutre diferent del masculí. Posem-nos, porò, a traduir del francès o de l'italià i ens sortiran llargues clausules, pàgines enteres, sense un adjectiu neutre. Cada llengua té ·ls seus recursos, els seus mitjans d'expressió, i segons siguin aquests recorre amb preferència a unes construccions o a les altres. Mentre seguirem construïnt a la castellana, es clar que necessitarem els mateixos mitjans d'expressió que ·l castellà i aurem de trobar desavantatjós de renunciar a qualsevol d'ells (Fabra 1911: 38–39).⁷

Current status

Fabra's decision to exclude the neuter *lo* from standard Catalan remains valid today. Both the grammars of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans and the Acadèmia Valenciana de la Llengua emphasize that its use is not permitted in formal registers. However, both institutions acknowledge its frequent occurrence in colloquial speech (GNV 2006: 127–130; GIEC 2016: 588; GBU 2019: 178). Furthermore, the AVL highlights that this phenomenon extends beyond the traditional contexts of the neuter article in Catalan, also appearing in structures characteristic of Spanish: “En l'expressió oral espontània, la forma *lo* s'utilitza actualment de manera general amb valor

⁷ “Catalans, always having Spanish as a model, constantly translating from it and servilely copying all its constructions, have grown accustomed to relying on the substantivization of adjectives with the same frequency as Spanish and, naturally, today it seems nearly impossible for us to write even a few lines without using a neuter article distinct from the masculine. However, if we were to translate from French or Italian, we would find long clauses, even entire pages, without a single neuter adjective. Each language has its own resources and means of expression, and depending on these, it tends to favor certain constructions over others. As long as we continue constructing sentences in the Spanish style, it is clear that we will require the same means of expression as Spanish and will find it disadvantageous to renounce any of them.”

neutre, amb una distribució d'usos semblant a la que es fa en castellà”⁸ (GNV 2006: 127).

Thus, the non-acceptability of *lo* as postulated by Fabra presents certain problems. In some contexts, it can lead to unnatural syntactic structures, such as the excessive use of neuter demonstratives (Solà et al., 2002: 1473–1474). Furthermore, as Badia i Margarit notes: “s’ha de reconèixer que, en el llenguatge corrent (modalitat oral), la forma *lo* és pràcticament universal en l’ús espontani de la llengua: no estranya ningú i ningú no s’hi sent estrany” (Badia i Margarit 1994: 453)⁹. Consequently, a duality arises between the spoken language, where the neuter *lo* is deeply embedded, and the written language where its use is not permitted – a restriction shaped by schooling and linguistic discipline (Badia i Margarit 1994: 454). The renowned linguist provides several arguments in favor of accepting *lo* and its constructions, including the functional distinction it provides between the masculine and the neuter and the possibility of completing two series of homogeneous elements: articles and demonstratives (Badia i Margarit 1994: 453). Batlle observes that the inclusion of the neuter article does not destabilize the linguistic system; rather, it enhances its equilibrium by aligning and harmonizing these two series of deictic elements (Batlle 2000: 334).

The alleged lack of genuineness of this structure is also a controversial issue. Batlle, drawing on diachronic arguments, asserts that the aforementioned neuter structure *ço que* had functions similar to those of the modern article *lo*. When *ço* in this construction was replaced by *lo*, the article assumed the semantic value of the particle it had replaced. The tendency to expand the functions of *lo* might be attributed to Castilian influence, but an independent evolution of the Catalan language cannot be ruled out. It is at this point that a divergence occurs between Catalan and languages such as French or Italian, which retain their corresponding pronominal forms (fr. *ce qui*, it. *ciò che*) and display a very limited use of the masculine article with a neuter value (Batlle 2000: 337–338).

⁸ “In spontaneous oral expression, the form *lo* is currently used widely with a neuter value, with a distribution of uses similar to that in Spanish.”

⁹ “It must be acknowledged that, in everyday language (oral modality), the form *lo* is practically universal in spontaneous language use: it does not surprise anyone nor does anyone feel estranged by it.”

The issue of *lo* is of interest not only to linguists but also to a broader audience. Shortly before the publication of the IEC's current normative grammar, a debate arose in the digital magazine *Núvol* regarding the potential incorporation of *lo* into the linguistic standard. This discussion involved numerous writers, translators, and editors and expanded on social media. In his article *Lo de l'article neutre*, Ignasi Moreta (editor, translator and literature professor, specializing in the works of Joan Maragall) argues that the controversy surrounding *lo* stems from a linguistic problem created by the prescriptive norm, which contradicts the natural intuition of speakers. It is worth noting that he received support on Twitter by Quim Monzó, one of the most important and highly regarded authors in contemporary Catalan literature. Moreta emphasizes that

[t]ota gramàtica normativa s'ha de construir sobre una gramàtica descriptiva. Primer ve l'ús; després, la norma. En el cas de l'article neutre s'ha volgut actuar a l'inrevés: primer hi ha hagut la norma, però l'ús, cent anys després, encara no l'ha acompanyat. ¿No ho hauríem de repensar?¹⁰ (Moreta 2013).

The author notes that the Fabrian norm has consistently failed to eliminate the neuter article from spontaneous language use. Furthermore, the proposed alternatives often result in problematic hypercorrections, such as the overuse of the demonstrative *allò*. This decision also poses significant challenges for expressing complex ideas in Catalan, particularly in the field of philosophy, where the neuter article proves highly useful for coining abstract terms. Consequently, “l'expressió filosòfica i científica en llengua catalana, ja prou dèbil històricament, es veu seriosament perjudicada en aquest punt”¹¹ (Moreta 2013).

The writer Pep Coll adopts a similar stance. In his view, the neuter *lo* is neither a dialectal feature nor a calque from Spanish, but rather a genuine linguistic resource for referring to abstract concepts. It is particularly necessary when used before adjectives and relative clauses to distinguish

¹⁰ “[E]very prescriptive grammar must be built upon a descriptive grammar. Usage comes first; the norm follows. In the case of the neuter article, the process has been reversed: the norm was established first, but even a hundred years later, usage has yet to align with it. Should we not reconsider this approach?”

¹¹ “philosophical and scientific expression in the Catalan language, already historically weak, is seriously hindered in this regard”.

between masculine and neuter meanings. Coll also highlights the challenges faced by translators of philosophical works into Catalan. He concludes his article with a forceful statement: “Envejo els escriptors de llengües normals, (o sigui, lliures), que no se senten obligats contínuament a fer de filòlegs i encara menys de gramàtics”¹² (Coll 2013).

Nonetheless, it is precisely the fragile sociolinguistic situation of Catalan that underpins the rigidity of the normative framework concerning the assimilation of Castilian influences. Another writer, Joan-Carles Martí i Casanova, underlines that advocating for the inclusion of the neuter *lo* in Valencian exemplifies linguistic secessionism and challenges the unity of the language (Martí i Casanova 2013). Similarly, linguist Jaume Macià argues that admitting *lo* into the standard would exacerbate the destabilization of the linguistic norm, leading to confusion among users and fostering distrust among language learners. He further contends that such a move would signify “avançar en la subordinació d’un idioma ja massa desfigurat en l’ús quotidià oral”¹³ (Macià 2013).

Final remarks in the context of teaching Catalan as a foreign language

As demonstrated, the issue of the neuter *lo* in Catalan is highly complex from various perspectives. However, the divergence between the normative standard and colloquial usage poses challenges not only for native speakers but also for teachers and learners of Catalan as a foreign language. This concluding part briefly outlines some of the difficulties identified in this context as inferred from the preceding sections.

Firstly, it is important to note that the potential inclusion of *lo* in the oral standard would address only a subset of the uses characteristic of Spanish, focusing exclusively on the individuating *lo*. The emphatic *lo*, by contrast, is clearly a construction borrowed from Spanish and does not originate from traditional Catalan usage.

Let us examine how this topic is addressed in the reference grammar for learners of Catalan as a foreign language, namely the *Gramàtica pràctica de català* by Bastons, Bernadó, and Comajoan (2011), designed

¹² “I envy writers of normal (that is, free) languages, who do not feel constantly obliged to act as philologists, let alone grammarians.”

¹³ “advancing in the subordination of a language already excessively disfigured in everyday oral use.”

for levels A1–B2. This work is particularly significant because, firstly, it is tailored for non-Spanish-speaking learners, and secondly, it is grounded in actual language use. It incorporates key linguistic phenomena that reflect the reality of the language, even when these are not included in normative grammatical descriptions (Miquel 2011: 3).

In this grammar, the article *lo* is introduced in the chapter dedicated to the neuter article, accompanied by the following theoretical explanation:

C.1 En un registre col·loquial, sobretot oral, s'usa la forma no normativa *lo* com a article neutre. En un registre formal fem servir *el* o altres expressions (*allò, la cosa, les coses, el més + adjectiu i el que és + adjectiu...*)

C.2 En un registre col·loquial i oral, usem *lo + possessiu* o *lo + de + nom / adverbi* per parlar de les coses en general a què fa referència el possessiu, el nom o l'adverbi. En aquests casos, l'estructura amb *lo* es pot substituir per *les coses, allò, això* o un nom¹⁴ (Bastons et al. 2011: 59–60).

This information is somewhat limited and does not clarify when the proposed alternatives can be used. In the examples provided in section C.1, we observe the following pair of (presumably equivalent) sentences:

Lo important és participar.

El **més** important és participar.

In the normative version, the adverb *més* 'more' is added without explaining any potential shift in meaning, or why the article alone is not used, i.e., *l'important*. This example is noteworthy because the expression *l'important* appears in the aforementioned article by Moreta (2013), where the author asserts that it is not (and cannot be) a genuinely Catalan form, as it has never been used in that way.

¹⁴ “C.1 In a colloquial register, especially in oral speech, the non-standard form *lo* is used as a neuter article. In a formal register, we use *el* or other expressions (such as *allò, la cosa, les coses, el més + adjective*, and *el que és + adjective...*). C.2 In a colloquial and oral register, we use *lo + possessive* or *lo + de + noun/adverb* to refer to things in general to which the possessive, noun, or adverb points. In these cases, the structure with *lo* can be replaced by *les coses, allò, això*, or a noun”.

Nor does the chapter in question address the restrictions of the neuter *el*. In one of the exercises in which this form is to be used, the following answers are provided:

Com que estic embarassada, no puc tastar *les coses picants* [= el picant].
L'Eulàlia és molt clàssica, per això odia *les coses modernes* [= el que és modern] (Bastons et al. 2011: 60).

A student might therefore question why, in the second sentence, the answer is not *el modern*, analogously to *el picant*. The fact that the article *el*, when used with a neuter function, does not perform the same roles as the neuter *lo* and that these forms are not always interchangeable, can lead to confusion. In this context, it is important to consider that when teaching Catalan as a foreign language outside the Catalan linguistic domain, not all learners are necessarily Spanish speakers (or Spanish speakers with high levels of proficiency). This adds complexity to the issue, as efforts are often made to eliminate an interference that may not exist, without adequately addressing how *lo* functions in spoken Catalan, because a simple substitution of *lo* for *el* in many contexts would result in anomalous expressions, which would, in fact, also constitute syntactic calques of Spanish.

However, it must be acknowledged that the aforementioned grammar represents an important step in the teaching of this phenomenon, as textbooks typically only provide alternatives for all the uses of *lo* without delving into their potential genuineness or level of acceptance in spoken Catalan. If we examine the most recent and widely used method for teaching Catalan as a foreign language in universities abroad, *A punt* (Vilagrasa 2020; Vilagrasa 2021; Vilagrasa 2022a; Vilagrasa 2022b; Vilagrasa, Nyop 2023a), we observe that the topic of the neuter article is directly addressed only at the C2 level. This raises the question of why this phenomenon is considered so complex in Catalan when, in the case of Spanish, it is introduced at the B2 level according to the *Plan curricular* of the Cervantes Institute (IC 1994). It seems improbable that students would not have encountered it in lower-level contexts, particularly when engaging with cultural content in Catalan.

In the aforementioned textbook, *A punt 6* (Vilagrasa, Nyop 2023a: 27), no grammatical explanation is provided, reflecting its task-based learning approach. Learners are required to complete a table by identifying neuter

constructions in the text from a prior exercise and providing potential equivalents thereof. Notably, the textbook does not reference the existence of the neuter article *lo* at any point. The workbook includes a related exercise comprising 17 sentences for correction (Vilagrasa, Nyop 2023b: 15). However, in this case, all the sentences exclusively feature constructions with *lo*, encompassing instances of both the neuter *lo* and the emphatic *lo*, as well as fixed expressions that appear to be direct calques from Spanish. This implies that students are presumed to already have a solid understanding of these structures, as the exercise does not include introductory explanations or explicit guidance on their use or status. The teacher's book suggests: "Expliqueu, alhora, que l'ús de la forma *lo* no és recomanable en els registres formals ni en l'escriptura, per bé que és ben viva en els registres col·loquials orals¹⁵" (Vilagrasa et al., 2023: 22). This framing positions *lo* as a commonly used structure that requires restriction. Nevertheless, questions arise regarding whether foreign learners, especially non-Spanish speakers, genuinely exhibit such interferences. Furthermore, it is worth considering where learners might acquire the ability to discern which forms can be appropriately used in colloquial registers and potentially recognized within the oral norm, and which forms are unacceptable because they constitute clear calques from Spanish. This consideration is especially pertinent given that a speaker at the C2 proficiency level is expected to possess such competencies.

The aim of this article is not to present arguments for the normative recognition of *lo*, as both its proponents and opponents offer compelling reasons. Instead, it seeks to highlight the existence of a double linguistic reality, which carries significant consequences. On one hand, this situation affects translation and literary production in Catalan, as evidenced by the debate in *Núvol*: if readers begin to perceive Catalan versions as artificial and disconnected from their linguistic reality—a concern that extends beyond the mere use or non-use of *lo*—there is a risk that they may resort to reading in Spanish. On the other hand, the teaching of Catalan as a foreign language also struggles to address these issues. Textbooks typically present a version of the language devoid of Castilianisms, under the assumption that students will independently acquire the colloquial register. However,

¹⁵ "Explain that the use of the form *lo* is not recommended in formal registers or writing, although it is widely used in colloquial oral registers".

this approach prevents the explanation of which linguistic elements are acceptable and which are not.

It remains to be seen whether the future will bring a relaxation of the normative grammar regarding *lo*. In the meantime, both teachers and learners of Catalan must strike a balance between applying the rules and understanding actual usage, while taking into account the challenging sociolinguistic situation of Catalan, one which is increasingly influenced by Spanish. A firm standard serves as one of its key defenses.

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Summary

The neuter article *lo* in Catalan is widely regarded as a notable Castilianism and not endorsed by the linguistic standard. Nevertheless, this grammatical phenomenon is highly prevalent in everyday spoken language and perceived as unremarkable by speakers. This results in a duality between the spoken language, where the neuter article is deeply entrenched, and the written language where its use is not sanctioned. This study aims to examine the current status of *lo*, focusing on the disparity between the prescriptive norms and its actual usage, while also exploring whether some of its uses could result from the natural evolution of the Catalan language rather than external influence. These reflections may prove useful in addressing this topic in the context of teaching Catalan as a foreign language.

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