

## Linguistic volunteer couples: why we never thought of it before?



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English Catalan-based author Matthew Tree tells us about the main advantages of linguistic volunteering in Catalonia.

### Matthew Tree

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**Description:**

English Catalan-based writer and defender of the Catalan language. He collaborates with different Catalan publications and media.

**Vertical photo:**



Square photo:



Twitter: [@matthewtree](https://twitter.com/matthewtree)



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I have lived in Catalonia for more than forty years now, and I have given talks at [Voluntariat per la llengua](#). I used to do it and I still do, sometimes. I hardly ever do this anymore, because funding has diminished considerably since the beginning of the economical crisis in 2008.

When linguistic couples came I was there to tell them how I got to learn the language when I first came here, in 1979. I have never learned it in class, I didn't have a single class in Catalan: I learned how to speak it in a 5000 people village near Vic instead.

**What I found incredibly moving about linguistic couples who came to listen to my talks was what I saw in many of them: couples were completely different, not only in race or color but also in age.** You could see a sixty year old Catalan woman together with a twenty year old Gambian, and you could see how friendship developed. There I could also see some non-native Catalans who were teaching Catalan to others. It is a small minority we're not usually conscious about, of course, but it exists nonetheless.

The more different you look, the easier it is for Catalans to switch to Spanish. I myself had the same situation: my friends would enter shops before I did and they would ask the vendor to answer me back in Catalan, even if my accent or my ability to speak the language was not good enough yet. Whenever they see a black or an Asian person, native Catalans turn to Spanish, even if the other addressed to them in Catalan.

**Originally, Voluntariat per la llengua was just a group of volunteers who did this out of their own initiative because they realized classes in Catalan were not enough.** Many Catalan teachers and students of Catalan complained about the fact that, as soon as the learner gets out of the Catalan class, native Catalans address to him or her in Spanish.

Voluntariat solves this problem: it gets students out of the classroom and therefore it is also a much better way of learning and making Catalan used to speaking Catalan to foreigners. **The main advantage this initiative has is that the newcomer gets the chance to socialize, which is the real reason why someone wants to learn a different language in the first place.**

I believe the first volunteers were in Vic, and they decided to spread the idea all over the territory. The Generalitat, the Catalan government, helped people get together and threw a big party in the beginning of the volunteering program: there all couples were introduced to each other. After this, though, it was up to the linguistic couples to decide how often they met and how they organized themselves. Names for couples were just picked out of the hat, and friendships developed.

There was a big debate in England concerning migrants who settle in the country but are unable to speak the language. When I tell my friends about the linguistic volunteering projects in Catalonia they slap their hands against their foreheads and asked themselves: how come we never thought of this before?

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