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Contemporary Spanish Sociolinguistics: Stop the Insanity!

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There are many challenges to us as professionals and researchers in the field of Spanish sociolinguistics, whether we are old hands at this or just starting our careers. Of course, there are the usual desiderata of quantitative linguistics common across the scientific disciplines: state a clear hypothesis that can be supported or refuted by data; state methods regarding sampling and data collection, reduction, and analysis such that research can be replicated, and interpret from the results reasonable conclusions, taking into account the social context of the linguistic phenomena being tested as well as what has been said in the past. Not to be overlooked is the importance of employing well-reasoned hypotheses to test, which should be informed by qualitative research, such as ethnographies, statements of language ideologies, and semantic or discourse factors that might influence the use of linguistic variables, particularly those which are morphosyntactic in nature. Another desideratum is to take into account what has been said in the literature in order to build on previous research rather than to re-invent it. Earlier

scholarship in our area has much to offer even if it might not have used contemporary methods of analysis or newer theoretical models to explain the phenomena.

Part of the insanity referred to in the title of this entry is that rather than keep an open mind about what one's research might show, some scholars look for linguistic universals in sociolinguistic research even where none exist. We sometimes operate from false assumptions, such as that once a generalization has been made about one speech community, it is true for all. This can arise from a sometimes irrational desire to reveal linguistic "universals." One such assumption is that women are normally conservative in the use of traditional forms in linguistic change, and that men are the more innovative. If this is stated as unquestioned fact, then the unequivocal influence of young women of promoting the de-voicing of [ʒ] to [ʃ] in the Rioplatense Spanish of Argentina is seen as an anomaly instead of simply another dynamic of gender roles that might be operating in the Spanish of that area. Another such assumption is that the trajectory of a sound change in one area must be the same as for another. A case in point, the Spanish of most of the U.S. Southwest and Mexico retains the strong sibilant character of both syllable-initial and syllable final /-s/, despite the fact that some lexical items, e.g., *sí*, *señor*, *nosotros*, *necesita*, may exhibit aspirated or deleted /s/ initially or finally. This would appear to contradict the facts of other dialects of this area, i.e., that of New Mexico as documented by Espinosa, in which there is a great deal of /s/ aspiration. Considering the fact that Espinosa's studies of northern New Mexican Spanish—a dialect known to descend directly from the original Spanish colonizers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries-- were published in the early 1900's, it would be reasonable to propose that the newer dialect, resulting from immigration from Mexico into the United States' Southwest, might be /s/-retentive because it has its origin in a different dialect area subject to its own social influences. The assumption of uniformity across all Spanish dialects is simply not upheld by the socio-historical facts. Sociolinguists should remember that this discipline is more a social science than a physical science, and that unexpected variability can be introduced via that

Local norms should be considered not only in quantitative work, but also in qualitative studies. In pragmatics particularly the local socio-cultural dynamic must be taken into account if we are to learn anything meaningful about the place of language in the social fabric of life. For example, if usage patterns of *tú* and *usted* are being studied, key background literature should, of course be referenced, and so should the related work done in Spanish to date. But what are the local use

patterns? How are other elements of the vocative system--e.g, nicknames, proper names, titles--work in concert with these vocative pronominals? While questionnaires about perceived use of the pronouns may be useful, ethnographies by participant-observers are needed to find the real motivations for *el trato personal*. Sensitive ethnographers must become virtual community insiders in order to know who gets along well with whom. What are the norms for the status quo, i.e., vocative usage that maintains harmonious social relationships? When harmony is threatened or is ruptured, how are the norms violated? Are there dimensions other than power and solidarity (Brown and Gilman 1977?) that explain their use? Further, unless personal relationships are well-understood, the mere reporting of an address pattern might be lost on a naive observer.

Another example of what must be studied in terms of local behavior is "politeness". Do people prefer to have their positive face acknowledged (flowery greetings, effusive thanks, for example) or is it more polite to respect negative face in the community (not calling attention to someone, leaving them alone, for example)? While in one community phatic chit-chat in a service line might be considered to be friendly, in another it might be considered intrusive. A friendly greeting to a complete stranger might be viewed positively or negatively, depending upon the local norms of the town. And the notion of speech community must be understood as well. In some cases certain norms may hold for the block or the neighborhood, and different norms may obtain outside of it. Language use in overlapping communities can be interpreted in different ways as well. In bilingual cities, the use of Spanish with a complete stranger could be a sign of ethnic solidarity with one's interlocutor, or could be perceived as an insult, implying that the ethnic addressee is not fluent in English, the local prestige language. While Spanish sociolinguistics is making great strides in the area of pragmatics, there is always fertile new ground to plow.

Another fertile area for plowing is the question of style and register in Spanish language use. Early studies have suggested that formal speech styles are found in certain activities defined by language such as, preaching, interviews, television broadcasts. However, the assumption that what has been interpreted from those studies are applicable across the board may be misguided. First, are all of the members of the community multi-style speakers? In bilingual Spanish language communities, for example, English may be the language in which many speakers have had formal education. Might this have an effect on their stylistic options in Spanish? In both bilingual and monolingual communities, how is style determined: by speech situation

(party talk, job interview, formal speech); by the number of participants or their familiarity with one another? What part do social roles play in the speech event, or relative SES status? In a recent study, style was shown to vary according to speech situation and the close familiarity of the participants (Medina-Rivera). The data were taken from actual, real-world activities rather than in elicited speech genres done for the purposes of research. It would seem that the former type of data rather than the latter would be the most convincing for answering questions of style.

And, finally, it is imperative to include more sociolinguistic information in our university textbooks for North American heritage speakers and non-heritage speakers alike. Most textbooks still strive to teach a pan-Hispanic, Latin American dialect of Spanish that is native to no one. Lexical variability across dialects is rarely acknowledged, let alone presented as alternative vocabulary in different Spanish-speaking countries. Is there so much more cost associated with extra ink on the page, or in the glossary section of beginning and intermediate textbooks that we can't include several of the more widespread lexical options? Can't textbook writers present more insight for *tú* and *usted* usage than 'one is informal and the other is formal'? Aren't greetings and leave-takings more involved than what is currently presented in review textbooks at the third-year level? Perhaps what is needed is a textbook that discusses how to *conduct life* in Spanish rather than merely how to speak it. And even though there has been a Latin American emphasis in terms of the variety of Spanish that these textbooks present, isn't it time to relax some of the older, out-dated rules, such as the sequence of tenses? While conservative norms should hold sway in literature, for speaking there needs to be a relaxing of the rules. Certainly there needs to be less emphasis on the prescriptive norms that are no longer used even by educated speakers, for example, *Si supiera, lo haría*, or *si hubiera X-do, habría X-do*. When most of Latin America uses the imperfect subjunctive or the pluperfect subjunctive in both the protasis and the apodosis clause of hypotheticals, isn't it being overly-prescriptive to insist on the conditional or conditional perfect?

All of this is to say that we need to pay more attention to what matters in language teaching and in sociolinguistic research in Spanish. Let us stop the insanity!



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