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Thoughts on the Place of Spanish Linguistics in the American University

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An assessment of the current position and status of Spanish linguistics in American universities has to view this discipline from two distinct perspectives: its place and vitality as a subject in the undergraduate and graduate curricula, and the quantity, quality, and impact of the scholarly research being carried out by specialists in the field. For the most part, courses in Spanish linguistics are taught by faculty who hold appointments in language departments. Regardless of whether the unit is a Spanish department (which normally includes Portuguese and often another Romance language, usually Italian) or a more inclusive Modern or Foreign Languages Department, teachers and scholars specializing in linguistics constitute a small minority of its faculty. Such departments view as their main intellectual mission the teaching of and research into literature, literary theory and cultural studies. Typically, undergraduate offerings are limited to courses in Spanish phonetics, phonology, syntax, applied linguistics (normally equated with the methodology of teaching Spanish as a foreign language), New World Spanish, and often History of the Spanish language (usually taught as external history, and often by the local medievalist in light of the dwindling number of specialists in

Spanish language history in U.S. Spanish departments). For the most part, Linguistics departments are concerned with the development of linguistic theory and the nature of the phenomenon “human language” rather than the synchronic or diachronic study of individual languages or language families. Such departments tend not to hire specialists in the linguistics of a given language or family (although in some universities so-called “language linguists” do hold partial appointments in linguistics departments). In other words, Spanish linguistics in particular (and Romance linguistics in general) is not a major focus of either the relevant language departments or of linguistics departments in U.S. universities. It is worth noting that in recent years the (dwindling) Romance linguistics program at the University of Washington has been transferred from the Department of Romance Languages to the Department of Linguistics. Spanish linguistics has experienced a similar shift of home at the University of Pittsburgh.

It appears that many doctoral programs in Spanish literature have reduced or eliminated a linguistics requirement as part of the coursework in Spanish literature. Today the only linguistics training that many graduate students in Spanish receive is the teaching methods course often required of teaching assistants. Many of our future and current younger colleagues will be or are in the classroom teaching literature (which uses language as its medium) and language without receiving training in how language functions, is structured, or has evolved. Obviously the majority of doctorates awarded in Spanish are in the field of literature (broadly defined). A number of leading research universities do offer their graduate students in Spanish the opportunity to write a doctoral thesis on a linguistics subject, and each year several dozen doctorates are awarded for dissertations prepared on topics of Spanish linguistics. A review of the list of dissertations completed and in progress over the last four years in the different branches of Spanish literature and linguistics compiled by Christopher Eustis and published annually in the May issue of *Hispania* shows one clear trend. The overwhelming majority of dissertations written in the area of Spanish linguistics deal with issues in applied linguistics/pedagogy and second language acquisition. Next in number are studies in sociolinguistics. Dissertations on questions in Spanish (and Romance) historical linguistics are infrequent. The *Hispania* list does not systematically include dissertations written in Linguistics departments or programs and in which the analysis of Spanish linguistic data plays a major role in the treatment of broader issues of language structure and theory. Most vacancies in Spanish linguistics advertised in the MLA Job Information List seek specialists trained in second-language acquisition or applied linguistics. Many of these positions require the holder to be

director or coordinator of the department's Spanish language program. In contrast, very few graduate students in Spanish linguistics are choosing to specialize in historical linguistics, once the mainstay of Spanish (and, for that matter, Romance) linguistic studies. The once flourishing graduate programs in Romance Linguistics and Romance Philology at the University of California-Berkeley, the University of Michigan, and the University of Pennsylvania no longer exist. It has been years since the MLA Job Information List last announced a position for a specialist in Spanish historical linguistics (although on occasion this field appears in a list of possible desired areas to be offered by potential applicants). If this trend continues, who will teach in the future undergraduate courses on the History of the Spanish Language, a topic that, if not offered in too dry or technical a manner, has always appealed to a large number of intellectually curious Spanish majors?

Spanish linguistics is certainly flourishing as a research field in the United States. It seems reasonable to divide scholars carrying out such research into two broad categories: specialists in Spanish linguistics who study synchronic and diachronic questions as specific issues of Spanish linguistic structure or linguistic history, and specialists in general linguistics who use Spanish data to illustrate, describe, and explain broader crosslinguistic questions of language structure and evolution, or to support a chosen theoretical model. However, these are broad categories, and cannot be rigid and inflexible. Many Hispanists working on specific problems of Spanish linguistics within the context of Hispanic studies seek to link their findings to broader issues of linguistic description and theory. There exists a strong symbiotic relationship between Hispanic linguistics and general linguistics. Spanish by far dominates the linguistic study in the U.S. of Romance languages, as can be seen in the selection of papers read at the annual Linguistics Symposium on the Romance Languages (LSRL) and chosen for publication in the corresponding Proceedings volume. Another good indication of the current trends in Spanish linguistic research is offered in the choice and variety of topics presented at the annual Hispanic Linguistics Symposium (which, significantly, meets jointly with the Conference on the Acquisition of Spanish and Portuguese as First and Second Languages). As is the case in all branches of linguistics today, synchronic or descriptive studies dominate by a wide margin. This label includes descriptions of earlier stages of the language and of course descriptions of the many regional and social varieties of Spanish. All branches of linguistic analysis are active fields of inquiry by researchers in Hispanic linguistics based in U.S. universities: phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics

(especially the teaching of Spanish as a second language). The linguistic study and analysis of the varieties of Spanish spoken in the United States, carried out from such perspectives as formal linguistic theory, bilingualism and the many relevant questions posed by sociolinguistics, is a fast-developing field. Lipski (MS) offers a sweeping bibliographic overview of recent work done in the various subfields of Hispanic linguistics investigated by U.S. Hispanists.

The last few decades have seen a significant increase in research into linguistic historiography, the study of the development of linguistic thought and movements. Among U.S. linguists, studies in this area tend to focus on such areas as the history of research on native American languages, the rise of American (especially Bloomfieldian) structuralism, and Chomskyan linguistics. American Hispanists have shown little interest in studying the history of Spanish linguistics in the United States; Malkiel (2000, 2001), Dworkin (2000, in press), deal specifically with the beginnings and early growth of Spanish (and Romance) historical linguistics in American universities. This situation contrasts with that in Spain, where this relatively new subfield is flourishing and where specialists have founded the Sociedad Espanola de Historiografia Lingüística, which has now organized five international congresses, followed by the prompt publication of multi-volume conference *Actas*.

I wish to conclude these general thoughts on the current state of Hispanic linguistics in the United States with some specific remarks on the status and future prospects of the discipline that has been the focus of my teaching and research activities for thirty years. Observations on Spanish historical linguistics should perhaps include in their purview the broader field of (comparative) historical Romance linguistics. In the years following the establishment of Spanish (and Romance) linguistics as fields of scholarly activity in American universities in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, these disciplines were primarily diachronic in focus. With the advent of European and American structuralism, synchronic approaches gradually gained the ascendancy and, since the so-called Chomskyan Revolution, have dominated by far scholarly activities in Spanish linguistics. Only rarely are papers on topics in diachronic Spanish linguistics presented at the above-mentioned Linguistic Symposium on the Romance Languages and the annual Hispanic Linguistics Symposium. Some recent calls for papers for forthcoming conferences in the United States on Hispanic linguistics do not explicitly include Spanish historical linguistics as topics on which papers can be submitted. A notable exception is the three-day parasession at the 1999 edition of the LSRL devoted to the theme *New Approaches to Old Problems: Issues in Romance Historical Linguistics*,

from which thirteen papers were published in a volume with the same title (Dworkin and Wanner 2000). Over the last number of years Joel Rini has regularly organized sessions on Spanish historical linguistics at the annual Kentucky Foreign Languages Conference.

Within the field of general linguistics, historical linguistics has been enjoying a rebirth, with the focus of research being on the nature of language change as a linguistic phenomenon rather than on the individual details of the history of a given language or a language family. I believe that it is safe to state that there are two kinds of practitioners of Spanish historical linguistics: those who study the historical evolution of Spanish for its own sake (an approach still favored by many European Hispanists and Romanists), and those who attempt to place their findings on the historical evolution of Spanish into the wider framework of general historical linguistics and its emphasis on the nature of language change. Within the American university it is this latter stance that will best serve to revitalize Spanish (and Romance) historical linguistics. Recent years have seen a number of studies that seek to apply to specific problems of Spanish historical linguistics the insights first formulated by linguists working with synchronic models that concentrated primarily on English language structures. Students of sound change in Spanish have sought to avail themselves of the possible insights afforded by Optimality Theory, while specialists in syntax turn to the theoretical premises of the Minimalist Program in an effort to explain issues of syntactic change. Worthy of further discussion is the question whether such theories, originally formulated as models of linguistic description, actually offer new insights into language change, or do they merely restate in the language and jargon of a new formalism what has long been known.

I wish to refer the readers of this essay to the discussion “Romance Historical Linguistics: Death of a Discipline?” which I organized and edited and which has appeared in two installments in the pages of the journal devoted to Hispanomedieval studies *La corónica* (Dworkin 2003, 2005). Although the discussion focused on historical Romance linguistics, the majority of the contributors were veteran North American and European Hispanists. Most took the position that in order for the discipline to flourish, researchers had to emphasize the noun “linguistics” in the phrases “historical Spanish linguistics” and “historical Romance linguistics.” Insights developed in such fields as discourse analysis, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, grammaticalization and typology may throw new light on the evolution of Spanish over time, especially on questions of syntax and semantics, fields in which there remains much to be done from a diachronic perspective (beyond the presentation and classification of relevant data, an important first step.)

In other words, contemporary Spanish historical linguistics as practiced in the American academic setting will have to acquire its intellectual *raison d'être* as a vital and integral part of general historical linguistics rather than as a subfield of Hispanic studies. However, students of Spanish language history, even those operating within the parameters of general linguistics, would do well not to lose sight of the social and cultural background against which the language developed. Spanish historical linguistics as a discipline should seek to position itself in such a way that it benefits from and contributes to both general (historical) linguistics and literary and cultural Hispanic studies, regardless of the academic departments in which its practitioners find themselves.

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