

Hispanic Linguistics in Canada*

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Hispanic Linguistics (HL) in Canada is a vibrant, interesting and promising discipline. In the next pages, I hope to convince the reader that these are not adjectives with a vague meaning but words that truly reflect what we have done in the past and what we expect from the near future. HL in Canada is in a situation of privilege. First, linguistics can be considered a prestigious discipline, which is certainly due to the long and strong work on aboriginal languages. Second, there is a commitment at all levels in the society to multiculturalism and consequently to multilingualism. Third, Canada has a solid tradition in Hispanic and Romance philology. In spite of

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this long tradition, HL is a relatively young discipline with very few PhD programs, mostly concentrated in the province of Ontario. All these programs, as it is the case in most US universities, are part of language and literature departments, such as Spanish and Portuguese (University of Toronto) or Modern Languages and Literatures (University of Ottawa, University of Western Ontario). Being new and few in number definitively has some shortcomings but more importantly it has great advantages. First, it makes it possible to completely design a program and decide the shape it will take. Second, it promotes collaborative research within and across disciplines. Finally, it makes graduate education a clear priority, since the demand is high both to enter the program and to provide new graduates for new programs in Canada. In the following sections I will expand on these three claims with examples taken mainly from my own institution, and secondly from the other existing programs in Ontario at the University of Ottawa and the University of Western Ontario.

Strong theoretically-informed experimental focus

Although we may differ in our backgrounds and theoretical preferences, we all share an interest in theoretically-informed experimental approaches to HL. Specifically, two areas encompass most of our research: language variation and first and second language acquisition.

In our research, these two areas are usually intertwined. This is demonstrated by many of the on-going projects, which range from collaborative cross-language studies on variable object omission in first language acquisition (Pérez-Leroux, Pirvulescu and Roberge) to the acquisition of variable phonetic parameters in second language learners of French and Spanish (Colantoni and Steele). This interest in variation and acquisition is reflected on the research of our graduate students who are currently focusing on attrition of aspectual contrasts (Alejandro Cuza), the acquisition of the subjunctive in optional contexts (Jeannette Sánchez) and the second language acquisition of clitic climbing (Danielle Thomas).

Research on variation is not only limited to the study of acquisition. Cristina Cuervo is building up a corpus of radio speech to study variation in clitics. Jeffrey Steele and I have been working on the development of a

Romance Phonetics Database¹, which contains several different corpora, such as the linguistic atlas of Argentina, our experimental work on French and Spanish obstruent-liquid clusters, and Jeffrey Steele's work on the acquisition of French by Mandarin speakers. All of these research endeavors have allowed for the training of many graduate students. More importantly, they have encouraged them to explore largely understudied areas for their dissertation projects, such as the connection between hiatus resolution and velar epenthesis (Anna Limanni) or the perceptual and acoustic motivations of the alternations between labial and velar fricatives (Natalia Mazzaro).

This vital research activity has attracted to Canada many international conferences, such as the Hispanic Linguistic Symposium, organized by Joyce Bruhn de Garavito and Elena Valenzuela, or the 3rd Conference on laboratory approaches to Spanish Phonology, organized by Jeffrey Steele and myself. Crucially, the projects summarized here highlight two important further characteristics of our community: (i) our interest in Romance linguistics at large; and (ii) the existence of strong links between universities, departments and disciplines, which is illustrated in the next section.

Collaboration within and across departmental boundaries

I believe that one of the strengths of our discipline in Canada is the constant dialogue and collaboration at all levels. At the University of Toronto, this starts within our department with a continuous support from our colleagues in literature. This support allows us to establish links with other linguists and speech researchers within and outside the university. For example, here at the University of Toronto, some of our colleagues are cross-appointed in Linguistics, and we co-teach several courses with faculty members from the same and other departments, such as Microvariation in Spanish and Experimental Approaches to Hispanic Linguistics (Perez-Leroux, Cuervo and Colantoni) or the recently developed Topics in Romance Laboratory Phonology I & II (Colantoni and Steele).

¹ <http://r1.chass.utoronto.ca/rpd>

This collaboration at the micro level translates into larger projects such as the Languages and Linguistics at the University of Toronto¹ and the Speech research forum². The former group has organized workshops where graduate students, working in linguistics in several departments, and faculties share their research once a year. The Speech Research Forum gathers linguists, engineers and speech pathologists and has promoted collaborative projects among faculty members and students from different schools.

This collaboration extends beyond the university limits. Three years ago, Joyce Bruhn de Garavito, Juana Liceras and Ana Pérez-Leroux suggested the idea of organizing an informal gathering of faculty members and students working on acquisition, given the high concentration of experts in the field in the province of Ontario. In this way, the Ontario Dialogues on Acquisition were born. Our first meeting took place in 2005 at the University of Western Ontario. Last year we met in Toronto and this year the meeting took place in Ottawa. Crucially, this meeting is a forum to give our students an opportunity to present their research and get valuable feedback. The fruits of this endeavor are starting to become visible with students presenting more and more at the Hispanic Linguistics Symposium and at the Linguistic Symposium of Romance Languages. The Ontario Dialogues are also an example of the last important characteristics of HL in Canada, namely, our commitment to graduate education.

Commitment to graduate education

The future of HL in Canada depends on the training of our students and their success. As such, we have invested time and resources to make sure that our graduates receive the best theoretical and experimental training and have opportunities to discuss their research in national and international forums. This translates, first into the creation of new graduate programs and in the review of existing programs. In the past few years a new PhD program in HL was created at the University of Western Ontario.

¹ <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/linguistics/DLL>

² <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/french/speechforum/index.html>

This program has a clear focus on L1 and L2 acquisition¹, with a particular emphasis on the acquisition of syntax and semantics. At the University of Toronto, we have recently re-structured our graduate program. This restructuring has involved the definition of a sequence of theoretical courses for our MA and PhD students, the development of two graduate courses aiming at training our students in experimental approaches to HL, which are taught in collaboration by the three faculty members in the area, and changes in the comprehensive exams, which include the public defense of the dissertation proposal.

I believe that we can proudly say now that our commitment is starting to bear its fruits. In the case of University of Toronto our first PhD students are about to graduate and they have already found jobs in top places in the US. The number of applications to our graduate programs is increasing, with a growing number of applicants from the US, Europe and Latin America.

Where is HL in Canada going?

If the future is a reflection of the past, HL in Canada will continue growing. Not only we are seeing an increasing number of students in our undergraduate and graduate programs, but also we are witnessing a growing number of positions in HL in Canada, which demonstrates an interest in expanding the area and building new graduate programs. This is exemplified by the creation of positions at the University of Alberta and Montreal, as well as by the recent searches at the University of British Columbia and Windsor.

This growth is being accompanied by a clear definition of the identity of HL in Canada, which will hopefully continue to be characterized by an interest in data driven-approaches as well as in interdisciplinary research. In particular, the existence of strong programs in French linguistics has sparked an interest in revitalizing existing programs in Romance linguistics that focus on the study of variation and acquisition not only across Spanish but also across Romance varieties.

The vitality of HL in Canada has become apparent in the last few years in the number of conferences that have taken place, starting with the

¹ L1 refers to the acquisition of the speaker's native language. L2 refers to the acquisition of a non-native language by the speaker.

Linguistic Symposium of Romance Languages in 2002 to Laboratory Approaches to Spanish Phonology and the Hispanic Linguistic Symposium in 2006. These major conferences have contributed to raise the profile of HL outside Canada and will be the seed for future events.

Finally, the past achievements and our plans for the future are the result of our strong motivation to work together in the pursuit of clearly defined research and teaching goals. Indeed, our ability to work together and to cross disciplinary boundaries would not be possible without a profound respect of our colleagues' interests. Moreover, this would have never been possible without a clear understanding that we are part of a language program and a linguistic and philological tradition that understands language as an essential part of our culture. I believe that this makes HL in Canada unique, and explains why this is a vibrant, interesting and promising discipline.