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The Revitalization of Hispanic Linguistics

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There is little doubt that our field of study has changed, for many, beyond reckoning. While it remains mindful of the diachronic and synchronic themes that had occupied traditional Hispanist Studies (witness the resources offered by scholars in philology and dialectology), the current practice of Hispanic Linguistics attests to the fact that the field has been reshaped and disciplinary lines redrawn. By way of illustration, consider the now commonplace occurrence wherein the questions that guide the researcher in Hispanic Linguistics (interpreted as the study of linguistics as applied to Spanish and its speakers) are shared with those of the generative linguist:

- What constitutes knowledge of language?
- How is this knowledge acquired?
- How is this knowledge put to use?

In contemporary Hispanic Linguistics practice, the speaker whose knowledge is at issue is not just the idealized monolingual of normative Spanish, but may additionally encompass speakers of contact varieties of Spanish, those who manifest stigmatized regional and social dialects of Spanish, those who are exposed to Spanish alongside a second language from birth, those acquiring Spanish as a second language, and those experiencing Spanish language loss. Accordingly, the question of language acquisition has been restated in terms of language development, where development comprises the linguistic universals that are observed

in stages of language acquisition as well as stages of language attrition. And the third fundamental question—which has been acknowledged but largely ignored in generativist endeavors as pertaining to performance and consequently relegated to discourse/pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics—has come to the fore of attention. Thus a research program in Hispanic Linguistics might examine the alterations in the phonetic and syntactic knowledge of early Spanish-English bilinguals as the quantity of Spanish language input is reduced or its quality diminished. Stated simply, contemporary research in Hispanic Linguistics is redefining what constitutes the primary data, that is, redefining ‘Spanish.’

To be sure, innovations in technology have enormously facilitated the means by which data are gathered or elicited, and developments in software and statistical packages have advanced their analysis. (The diachronic linguist need not pour over primary texts with paper and pencil when the option of consulting concordances and statistical programs is presented.) Thus, in pursuing the above-referenced line of inquiry, the researcher might use a digital recorder for data collection and software such as Praat® for phonetic measures, timed grammaticality judgment tasks for eliciting knowledge of core grammatical properties, and story (re)telling or sentence-completion (guided by drawings to ensure consistency across speakers) to evaluate discursive knowledge. Yet, while advances in technology may have relieved many of the methodological obstacles of the past, they have not simplified the task. Indeed, the data interpretation that confronts the researcher may be more complex by the same orders of magnitude given the complexity of the speech forms of the bilingual (more pervasive than the monolingual, yet much less studied). In addition, the prospective contributions are not limited to theory-building in generative linguistics, (e.g., Minimalism for generativist syntax and Optimality for generativist phonology), but to theories that were previously deemed orthogonal, among these, language processing, disordered speech, and language regression, and the research findings have potential application in areas as diverse as computer modeling of speech, language pedagogies, and language planning.

That said, Hispanic Linguistics is necessarily multidisciplinary, and instructor and pupil alike must remain conversant in currents of analysis across a broad range of sub-disciplines. Returning to our hypothetical research project, in which linguistic theory is confronted with bilingual data, the understanding of the core subjects of phonology and syntax is enhanced along with language contact, phonetics, and language decline, each comprehensive sub-disciplines in their own right.



One welcomed development of a diversified approach has been the broader acceptance of collaboration. Thus, unlike our colleagues in Hispanic Literature, who are condemned to labor alone, scholars in Hispanic Linguistics openly enjoy the benefits of working in research groups. Widespread are ventures that cross institutional boundaries: students with faculty, faculty with peers in associated departments. Our hypothetical researcher—let's define her as a scholar of Spanish phonology with interests in bilingualism—is probably consulting a peer in syntax and in all likelihood working alongside a cadre of students whose concerns converge squarely on language contact and change, interpreted within theoretical frameworks. Such activity has led to a surge of energy that has revitalized undergraduate and graduate education in Hispanic Linguistics.

The changing nature of the discipline has likewise led to a restructuring by major educational institutions. It is no longer exceptional to locate researchers with degrees in linguistics in Spanish departments (and researchers of Hispanic Linguistics have forever been located in Linguistics departments). It is no longer enough to offer a course or two in Hispanic Linguistics; a competitive program must offer concentrations in diachronic, synchronic and applied linguistics—with primary coursework in phonology and syntax (cf., the programs at Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio State, and Penn State). Students with such training present the profile necessary for success in the contemporary market, as even a cursory perusal of professional postings in languages and linguistics would bear out.

The research productivity of the contemporary scholar and student of Hispanic Linguistics has never been more evident. One outcome has been increased attendance at specialized professional conferences such as the Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages, Spanish in the U.S., the Hispanic Linguistics Symposium, and Laboratory Approaches to Spanish Phonology, and, more importantly, the increased presence of researchers in Hispanic Linguistics at mainstream professional venues at home and abroad: Linguistic Society of America, Northeast Linguistic Society, Boston University Conference on Language Development, Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition, West Coast Conference on Linguistics, American Association of Applied Linguistics, New Ways of Analyzing Variance, and the International Symposium on Bilingualism, to name a few. Publication of Spanish linguistics research in specialized and mainstream venues has similarly surged. Cambridge journals (*Journal of Linguistics*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, *Applied Psycholinguistics*, *Language in Society*, *Language*



Variation and Change, Journal of Child Language) regularly feature research findings in Spanish linguistics, and John Benjamins' introduction of Spanish in Context speaks to that publisher's recognition of Hispanic Linguistics as a profitable area. Not surprisingly, publishers have begun to solicit manuscripts specific to Spanish and its speakers. These two publishing houses alone have in the past year printed book manuscripts in all areas of Hispanic Linguistics, and forthcoming publications suggest that neither effort nor interest has waned.

Scholars of Hispanic Linguistics in the 21st century, particularly those in the American academy, have before them unprecedented opportunities to weigh in on some of the more pressing issues of contemporary society. The research themes being pursued are consonant with questions being posed by parents and policymakers (e.g., What determines whether Spanish is maintained or lost? Should children be exposed to Spanish at school? If so, whose Spanish? How is U.S. Spanish to be characterized? Will the persistence of Spanish alter the structure of English? Supplant it?). Hispanic Linguists can also assuage the present-day resurgence of apprehensions over the perceived threat of Spanish, and the equally valid counteracting fears over the cultural isolation that is effected by heritage language demise. This and more, Hispanic Linguists do unreservedly, and with a nod towards civic mindedness, while their colleagues in literature must move stealthily towards programs in Ethnic Studies and Comparative Literature in taking up topics in the (re)presentation and identity politics of Spanish speakers in the global ecology.

Hispanic Linguistics has been revitalized, the Hispanic Linguist fortified with a stock of linguistic traditions and tools and a sense of larger purpose.

Debating Hispanic Studies: Reflections on Our Disciplines. Ed. Luis Martín-Estudillo, Francisco Ocampo, and Nicholas Spadaccini. *Hispanic Issues On Line* 1.1 (2006): 133-136.

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