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Expansion in Hispanic Linguistics Needs More than Numbers

Rafael Núñez-Cedeño
University of Illinois at Chicago

The editors of *Hispanic Issues* have asked me to share my thoughts on the current status of Hispanic linguistics in U.S. Academia, which is my understanding of what they mean by “American” academia. Being myself a graduate of the early development of the profession during the 1970s, I thought it would be appropriate for me to begin by offering my personal experiences as the backdrop to understanding why I believe the following.

While it is true that practicing linguists in our field have managed to survive in the job market over the past ten years, the stark reality is that Hispanic linguistics is not positioned to grow dramatically any time soon. This is so because linguistics’ overspecialized scholarship and the unyielding strength that most literature programs exhibit and wield, prevent it from developing its full potential or perhaps even flourishing.

My first exposure to Hispanic linguistics took place during my undergraduate years at New York University in 1968 and came in the form of reading Bull’s 1965 classic applied linguistics textbook *Spanish for Teachers*, aimed, as the title indicates, at teachers of the Spanish language to help them improve their teaching techniques and learn about the structure of the language. A few years later after graduating, I found myself actively engaged in a student-led political movement that was

seeking to establish a graduate Hispanic linguistic program, in any of its theoretical orientations, in the department of Spanish and Portuguese of that university. Those aspirations did not crystallize but the idea remained hovering in the department, which at least resulted in the university's administration meeting some of our demands in the form of granting two visiting appointments, one of which was occupied by Gary Keller, founder and editor of the Bilingual Review Press, who would spark our interest for generative grammar, and made us wonder about the new Chomskyan buzzword of the time, that of 'kernel sentence,' and its importance for analyzing or comprehending some Spanish grammatical structures. The other position went to Larry Grimes, a structuralist to the bone and fierce critic of the emerging Chomskyan generative theory, who was later to produce his significant and enduring 1978 piece, *El tabú lingüístico en México: el lenguaje erótico de los mexicanos*. He introduced students to works on structuralism, whose most prominent representatives at the time were Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, Gerard Genette, and A. J. Greimas, who approached it interpretively and aesthetically through the prism of a linguistic-structural approximation. Surprisingly, the strongest endorsement to our linguistic concerns came not from the folks in applied linguistics in the College of Education but from literature scholars. The Cervantist Anthony Zahareas, and the famed Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo were then fascinated by structuralism and saw its interaction with literature as an analytical means for exploiting the immense potential it could offer to the field of literary criticism. They transmitted to us their passion and interest through their thought-provoking and challenging lectures. They further deepened our interest in what we perceived to be the nascent field of Hispanic linguistics, perhaps judged so erroneously because other Spanish departments, i.e., Indiana University's, had already a modest, yet well-established program. Unfortunately, just a few ventured or followed on their footsteps of researching or writing on linguistic-literary criticism, although Zahareas recruited some linguistically inclined students who emigrated with him to Minnesota. But the interplay of the various forms of linguistic ideas in NYU's department had its beneficial effects, for three graduates, namely, Ana Celia Zentella, Karen van Hoof, and I would go on to pursue higher degrees in what came to represent the three branches dominating current Hispanic linguistics in U.S. academia: theoretical and descriptive linguistics, containing the core phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and sociolinguistics, applied linguistics (also known or mistaken by some as Second Language Acquisition), and bilingualism. These three disciplines and attending subspecialties have had their

impact in the foreign language departments but their effects and strength must be weighed differently relative to their own developments and the perceptions they generate.

During the early seventies through the mid-eighties, phonology had enjoyed pre-eminence among the various Hispanic linguistic specialties. This may be closely tied to attention it has received from traditional philological works, whose focus was mostly phonological in nature. Hispanic phonology was the beneficiary of the venerable and distinguished tradition spurred by the like of Yakov Malkiel, Rafael Lapesa, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, Amado Alonso, Alonso Zamora Vicente, Vicente García de Diego, among others. It was, in a sense, in tune with what was happening in general linguistics, which also was impacted by the influential scholars we are familiar with of historical and comparative linguistics. The thread of continuity initiated by philology kept alive phonology's ascendancy, seeing, for instance the emergence of the James W. Harris 1969's *Spanish Phonology*, a trend-setting monograph (actually, his MIT doctoral dissertation turned book), informed by the monumental Chomsky and Halle's *The Sound Pattern of English* (1968) or a mixture of the latter with Labovian sociolinguistics. Those were days of glory for Hispanic phonology that attracted and graduated many students, likewise producing scholars whose lectures would fill rooms to capacity.

The field of Hispanic phonology continues or will continue redefining itself as various modalities of theoretical persuasions have come into existence, such as autosegmental, geometry feature theory, or the most recent Optimality theory. But its primacy has been effectively challenged by syntax, which began displacing it at the beginning of the eighties but more definitely so during the mid-eighties, as the discipline of choice by new graduate candidates. It is not accident that this displacement was occurring when Chomsky's government and binding theory (1982) was awakening a renewed interest in formal grammar, as generative semantics was being kicked out of existence (Newmeyer 1986). No longer seen central to Hispanic linguistics and saddled with a dwindling cadre of practitioners, has Hispanic phonology acquired two distinctive roles. On the one hand, it serves as a foundational discipline; that is, like syntax, morphology, and semantics, (Hispanic) phonology is a core subject for preparing well-rounded and informed doctoral candidates. On the other hand, in and of itself Hispanic phonology functions mostly as a feeding tube to other disciplines, such as sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, but it is hardly working today in an autonomous, primary capacity.

This shifting paradigm within theoretical and descriptive Hispanic linguistics is supported by the fact that most publications received by linguistic journals, such as *Probus* and *Hispanic Linguistics*, or the papers presented at *Hispanic Linguistics Symposia*, are on or about syntax. The thrust of formal, autonomous syntax is being also tempered by the growing influence of Spanish sociolinguistics and Second language acquisition. There seems to be a dramatic increase of candidates to departments that field a strong presence of Hispanic sociolinguists or SLA specialists, who often opt for combining either one with several of the traditional core disciplines. The presence of the newly created journal *Spanish Language in Context* is a clear testament to the vitality of Hispanic sociolinguistics and pragmatics.

The changing modalities of emphasis in the discipline do not translate into specialty-driven employability. Instead, the market is defined not on whether a person has specialized in syntax, phonology, morphology or their specialties, but on the perceived assumption that those individuals holding a doctorate in general Hispanic linguistics are in fact applied linguists. A meaningful question to ask is who defines the market and what criteria are used in that definition. This is a transcendental inquiry because its response would determine whether the future offers possibility of growth, contraction or even disappearance. It so happens that the bulk of Spanish departments or programs are dominated by colleagues in Hispanic literatures, who rarely have had training in or understand the field of (Hispanic) linguistics, and who are often called upon to hire linguists and tenure them eventually.

In the absence of linguists in a department, usually decisions made to employ him or her are based on the assumption that a linguist, by definition, works on language. Therefore, he or she must be capable of handling language coordination, providing a philosophy to language teaching, and creating or implementing teaching methodologies. Although this assumption is false, it is not entirely incorrect. Because of their formal and sometimes logical training, linguists often succeeds in these assigned tasks.

Consequently, half of the announcements posted for jobs in linguistics would ask for Applied Linguists, with the above definition in mind. By implication, Second Language Acquisition suffers from the same misunderstanding. Departments with linguists among their ranks or linguistically sophisticated colleagues in literature would advertise positions for 'real' linguists to teach grammar or composition courses, but, again, those same individuals are also expected to take on the duty of language coordination. Aside from being perceived oftentimes as second class citizens because of their lack of scholarly publications in

mainstream literary journals, the irony of it all is that departments continue hiring specialists in Hispanic linguistics, thereby contributing to the sustainability of Ph.D.-granting departments.

Growth in Hispanic linguistics, however, cannot be predicated on cyclicity because a one-to-one substitution in a department can hardly contribute to its expansion. The healthy development of the profession may respond to an increasing student population, both of non-Heritage and Heritage language speakers. The needs of the first group would reinforce current perceptions of linguists as individuals whose main responsibility is to coordinate language sections. This is quite more telling if the specialists comes endorsed by SLA label, for they are unmistakably anointed with that capacity. The second group, on the other hand, brings to Universities linguistic requirements and dialectal and cultural fine-attunement that cannot be dealt with by traditional grammar and teaching methods, or taught by run-of-the-mill traditional linguistic approaches. These two cohorts would most likely propagate because of their mutually dependent relationship: as Latinos grow in population, their influence will be greater in universities. Likewise, as the non-bilingual population increases, it sees and understands the necessity for at least acquainting itself with what many call the second language of the United States. The simple law of supply and demand takes hold, which applies to these populations as well as to the Hispanic linguistic profession.

The challenge we face, therefore, is to transform the state of being a profession of service to one in which Hispanic linguistics is an interlocutor with itself and other like-minded scholars. We might even have to learn how to reinvent ourselves in relation to our colleagues in literature by bringing to bear how linguistic analysis interacts with the creative use of language. Or perhaps we should attempt to insert ourselves into a broader range of disciplines, a practical and wise move, indeed, that may signal to others we are on the verge of coming out of a cocooned discipline to one in which we are fully capable of speaking with others. The future of the profession will hold. It will even increase in membership, as hinted above. Still, a genuine expansion in which Hispanic linguistics is allowed its own space of scholarship either through building its own department or inaugurating new programs, remains an unassailable mirage in most universities or at best a goal difficult to achieve. That this is so is underscored by the recent fate of some Hispanic linguistic programs, which now find themselves diffused under the blanket of multi-language departments, with little hope of becoming its own agent of change.



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