

◆ 2

Hispanic Linguistics: In a Glass House or a Glass Box?

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My charge in preparing this essay is to comment on “the current state of Hispanic linguistics within the American university.” Any linguist knows that this phrase can be parsed in several ways. My first take is: *[[[the current state of [Hispanic linguistics]] within the American university]*. Parsing out *[Hispanic linguistics]*, surely this term requires neither definition nor extended comment. The intersection of linguistics and Spanish and its sibling languages has always been a fruitful zone of intellectual foment, and top linguistic theoreticians working primarily with other languages have incorporated essential insights from Spanish into their models. Turning then to *[[the current state of [Hispanic linguistics]]*, from the perspective of scholarship the state couldn’t be better. Linguists dealing with Spanish—mostly residing in Spanish departments and programs—have always been on the leading edge of linguistic theory and practice, and the upward trajectory continues unabated. Top linguistics journals are filled with the contributions of these linguists, important new journals have emerged to absorb the outpouring of high quality scholarship (e.g. *Spanish in Context*, *Revista Internacional de Lingüística Iberoamericana*), conferences on Hispanic linguistics have evolved from occasional venues into major biannual and annual events, and the once small cohort of productive scholars has been enormously expanded by cadres of brilliant young graduates who are

moving the discipline forward at superluminary speed. The contributions of Hispanic linguistics span the gamut from the most theoretical abstractions to studies grounded in living speech communities and the needs and abilities of language learners. There is, in consequence, little need to offer anything other than the most salutatory vision for the future.

There is another important parsing of my charge: [*the state of [[Hispanic linguistics] within the American university]*]. Taking [*[[Hispanic linguistics] within the American university]*] to refer to the articulation of Hispanic linguistics programs within broader departmental and university contexts, the answers are more complex, and assessing [*the state of*] is consequently more challenging. Responding to this challenge is crucial to the wellbeing of our profession, and I will therefore offer some thoughts on the issue of linguistics within Spanish departments and programs, and by extension, within American universities.

Hispanic linguistics is a growth industry in American universities. For over a decade in the average academic hiring cycle there are at least as many tenure-track jobs requiring a Ph. D. in Hispanic linguistics as bona fide candidates. This ratio is by far the best in any of the modern languages, English included, and certainly outstrips the job prospects for any field of Hispanic literature. Once found only in language departments at the largest research universities, specialists in Hispanic linguistics can now be found in small colleges and regional universities previously populated only by literature graduates *cum* language teachers. Even non-academic jobs (e.g. in publishing, law enforcement, information technology) for Ph. D.s in Spanish linguistics outshine the meager alternatives for those specializing in literature. For those inclined to walk on the wild side, linguists also win out handily over literary critics in government spookshops with three-letter acronyms. Can this growth and expansion be anything other than wonderful in our corner of academia where underemployed Ph. D.s lurk spectrally to haunt even the most enthusiastic job seekers? While steering clear of pessimism (looking for the cloud obscuring every silver lining) I offer the reminder that not all growth leads to desirable consequences (to wit urban sprawl, Internet spam, and red tide, just to name a few) and that the surface of an expanding bubble is from a geophysical standpoint not a good place to lay a stable foundation.

In our stagnant economy the government rebuts charges of cynical indifference by pointing to the creation of thousands of new jobs. With few exceptions these jobs are found only in the lowest echelons of the service industry, and many “new” jobs are occupied by workers who

once enjoyed careers more promising than bagging groceries or stocking merchandise in a sprawl mart. Could the plethora of new jobs in Spanish linguistics be the academic equivalent of flipping burgers? Thankfully, the equity inherent in the tenure-track system will preclude the worst scenarios, but a look at where linguists specializing in Spanish are NOT being hired provides food for serious thought. Consider the following facts, valid as of the first days of 2006; no specific universities or departments need be named, but the data are publicly available.

- Despite the significantly better job prospects for Ph. D. graduates in Hispanic linguistics as opposed to literature and cultural studies, nearly all Spanish departments with doctoral programs have 2-3 times more faculty in the latter areas than in linguistics. Lack of “coverage” of a particular time period or genre is universally considered a compelling reason for new or replacement hires in literature, but in many top Spanish departments in which a laudable “coverage” exists across the literature tracks, linguists are required to teach courses widely removed from their specialization and research interests in order to give graduate students an adequately broad training.
- A doctoral program in Hispanic linguistics—covering all major areas of linguistic thought—can be sustained with as few as two linguists; this would be unthinkable in a doctoral program in literature, where 3-4 times this number of faculty is deemed essential, each teaching within a single specialization.
- There is not even a single tenure-track linguist in a Spanish program at any Ivy League university (some of these universities have distinguished linguistics departments, but no linguistics is taught within Spanish departments). This disparity extends to nearly all of the Kudzu League (kudzu being the almost-ivy of the South), not to mention the Midwest, the prairies, the mountains, etc.; only a handful of top West Coast universities (all publicly funded) employ tenure-track linguists in Spanish departments.
- Some of these same venerable or wannabe climbing-vine Spanish departments employ linguists in non tenure-track positions as “language specialists,” language coordinators, and other service-oriented positions.
- Several top public and private universities—among them some of the aforementioned hallowed halls—have seen recent retirements of distinguished philologists/historical linguists.

None has been replaced by a linguist of any area of specialization.

- In the entire country there is not a single linguist in a Spanish department or program at a major research university who holds an endowed or distinguished professorial chair. As nearly as I can determine this may actually be true for ALL colleges and universities in the U. S. To be fair, a couple of distinguished linguists formerly associated with Spanish departments have achieved endowed chair status, but in departments far removed from Spanish.

What does this all mean? Is there cause for an “us versus them” paranoia among linguists in Spanish departments? Happily in most cases the answer is negative. A few Spanish departments over the years have seen fault lines open along the literature-linguistics division, fueled by the intolerant jibes of a couple of loudmouths (to be found, alas, on both sides of the aisle), but in most programs linguists and literature specialists enjoy mutual respect and conviviality. Linguists have frequently served as directors of graduate studies and chairs in Spanish departments numerically dominated by literature scholars (the present writer has served in both capacities)—an obvious vote of confidence from non-linguists—and the best course offerings as introductions to graduate studies include both literature and linguistics. It may be that time will smooth over any apparent inequities, as the number of linguists grows nationwide and the colleagues advance in rank and accomplishments. However as an unrepentant agitator I believe that an active reexamination of the attitudes toward—and the contributions of—linguists and linguistics within Spanish departments will increase the chances for a favorable outcome. Linguistics is not a protected category in our AA/EOP offices, so if anything is amiss it is up to us plain folks to do something about it. As a disavowal of any personal agenda, I somewhat hesitatingly point to my own amateurish but well-intentioned incursions into literary criticism as a demonstration that linguistics will never displace the special love that even a renegade engineer can hold for literature. To those who might be offended by my remarks I can only implore “if the shoe doesn’t fit, *please* don’t wear it.”

Contemporary society has witnessed battles against racism, sexism, and other forms of organized intolerance, but even in those instances where victory has been declared there remain frustratingly intangible blasts (or whimpers) from the past. The distribution of linguists in Spanish departments across the academic spectrum is strikingly similar to profiles of institutional glass ceilings and is therefore

worth a second look, even though no smoking gun will be placed into evidence. Linguistics within the Spanish profession would seem not to be bumping up against a glass ceiling but rather expanding inside a glass box. This being the case, any stones I throw will come from inside our glass house, which should keep me on my best behavior.

I believe that at some deep pan-institutional level the feeling persists that the primary role of linguistics is to describe “foreign” languages and to assist struggling language learners. And such tasks are by definition both foundational and preliminary to the “traditional” mission of teaching an appreciation for literature. It is surely no accident that most of the recently created first-ever Spanish linguistics positions are aimed at second-language acquisition and often involve coordinating a basic language program. Extending this syllogism to its (perhaps) logical conclusion, since providing foundational language skills has routinely been relegated to teaching assistants, adjunct faculty, and other denizens of the non-research biosphere, it is but a small step off the straight and narrow to regard the intellectual accomplishments of linguists as subordinate to their role in optimizing the input to literature courses. Do non-linguist colleagues ever take that step? In practice: almost never. Every year I do a great number of tenure and promotion reviews for candidates in Hispanic linguistics at other universities, and the overwhelming majority of these cases have successful outcomes with strong votes of confidence from colleagues in literature. And yet [...] and yet [...] Just at the same deep-down-inside level at which many feel that anything short of classical music (or in my case, classic rock and roll) is not “really” music, a disembodied institutional *zeitgeist* haunts us with the notion that anything short of imparting an appreciation for literature is not “really” the mission of a Spanish department. I submit that this can occur even in the absence of overt and conscious discrimination, just as women and minority group members can whack their heads on a glass ceiling without ever coming face to face with a bigot. To this can be added a sentiment—prevalent among administrators and community-based mudwallopers—that effective LANGUAGE teaching is the only useful measure of worth in a department that probably has (or has had) the word *language* in its name. Both literary critics and linguists not specializing in classroom-based SLA are tarred with this brush, but when push comes to shove no one fails to notice that we imbibe literature beginning with our earliest bedtime stories. When, on the other hand, do we encounter our first linguistics “story”? Last-in-first-out as the info-tech folks would say.

Can this situation be altered? Perhaps not. I readily confess that I will never appreciate the “music” that one hears (or, more accurately,

feels) thumping out of car stereos several blocks away, so I stand on no moral high ground from which to exorcise entrenched demons. As a journeyman linguist (since 1973) who has always enjoyed a very fruitful relationship with my colleagues in literature and cultural studies, I nonetheless recommend that linguists make the building of bridges to the other areas of their departments an essential life-sustaining activity. Our counterparts in other fields of inquiry will happily traverse these bridges and build still more of their own. Linguistics may well be a science, but climbing into treehouses marked “for scientists only” and pulling up the ladder after ourselves merely sidesteps the inescapable fact that linguistics deals with human creative behavior every bit as much as literary and cultural studies. No neural network model, artificial intelligence algorithm, optimality theory ranking, or parameter-setting/feature checking minimalism will ever replicate human linguistic production in its entirety, and linguists must stand in awe before the spark of creative genius every bit as much as those whose *raison d’être* is the study of literature and philosophy. All major breakthroughs in linguistics have been made by intellectuals who felt this awesome force, and reflected it in their writings. Just as our colleagues in literature can and do present their research to audiences with little prior training, linguists must not remain so trapped in technical details that they cannot make their product accessible to one and all. The trail has already been blazed: Leonard Bernstein did this for classical music; Henry Ford did it for automobiles; Ronald Reagan did it for Republicans. Einstein, Hawking, and Chomsky are splendid exemplars of the ability of the very best scholars to reach non-specialists. I have seen world-class mathematicians present the essential findings of algebraic topology, differential geometry, Abelian groups, and analytic number theory to math-challenged knuckleheads, using examples and explanations that, while not telling the whole truth, tell nothing but the truth, and impart the fascination that leads us into the intellectual endeavor. So, too, can we unravel the mysteries of faithfulness constraints, Spec-Head agreement, input processing, autosegmental spreading, and VARBRUL coefficients without imposing a doctorate in linguistics as a cover charge. There are even more pressing pragmatic reasons for doing so. In the downsizing world of our neo-corporate universities, and in the public arena where state legislators and taxpayer watchdogs attack academic freedom from astride the stalking horse of “accountability,” those who cannot explain the basic goals and accomplishments of their research to non-specialists will be slated for extinction. As stated by the ultimate black holes of cross-cultural communication—the Borg—“resistance is futile.” Through freshman seminars, capstone courses, general public lectures,



participation in conferences not confined to linguistic topics, newspaper interviews, and conversations over coffee (and over the back fence), linguists can disperse if not entirely dissipate the ill-deserved image of steel-wielding technocrats out of place in the humanities, who desecrate the songs of the muses by shattering them into so many phonemes and syntactic trees. They can also bring to a much wider audience the many triumphs of linguistics not only in enhancing language teaching but also in more fully integrating us into the diverse multicultural society that is both our present and our future. In short, it is my fond hope that to the trophy collection of linguistics be added a full symbiotic immersion in the vocation shared by all Hispanists, dwelling together without glass walls or glass ceilings.

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