



◆ **The State of Hispanic Linguistics in the American University: Some Trends**

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As scholars and faculty members, we are constantly aware of our immediate academic reality but, in many cases, we tend to lose sight of the broader circumstances that surround our intellectual activities. Consequently, we might have a very clear understanding of the situation of our individual discipline within our own departments and universities, and, at the same time, be uninformed about the general context in which our work is taking place.

In an attempt to discover certain general tendencies within the field of Hispanic linguistics, colleagues with diverse theoretical orientations were asked to write brief think pieces on the state of our discipline in the U.S. academy. A review of their articles show a consistency of topics and a series of common beliefs which I shall try to identify and discuss while keeping in mind the case of my home Department.

Five recurrent topics appear in the brief essays that follow. One of them is the optimistic vision of Hispanic linguistics as a research field. A second one is the institutional situation of Hispanic linguistics within Spanish and Portuguese departments where Hispanic linguists are often perceived not as researchers but as pedagogues and administrators. Another topic is the history and evolution of Hispanic linguistics and the idea that current emphasis on empirically-based research is the field's most important recent development. Scholars see the necessity to take

into account the presence of wide-ranging variation within Spanish and go beyond traditional quantitative studies. A fourth topic is the education of graduate students in Hispanic linguistics, for which collaboration between fields is encouraged. Finally, a number of authors are concerned about the present lack of relationship between linguistics and literature and suggest ways to build bridges between both disciplines.

There is a general consensus that Hispanic linguistics as a research field is experiencing steady growth (Dworkin, Hualde, Lipski, Núñez-Cedeño, Toribio); that scholarship encompasses all sub-disciplines and theoretical orientations (Dworkin, Lipski); that scholars in Hispanic linguistics are on the cutting edge of linguistics (Lipski); that there has been a surge in specialized scholarly meetings and publications dealing with Hispanic linguistics; and, that in linguistics meetings and major publications that do not focus exclusively on Spanish, work on this language is well represented (Hualde, Lipski, Toribio). Dworkin notices the existence of fast-developing areas (such as Spanish in the U.S.), as well as slow-developing ones (historical linguistics, linguistic historiography). As Lipski states, “There is . . . little need to offer anything other than the most salutatory vision for the future.”

The current situation of Hispanic linguistics within Spanish departments is a topic that draws the attention of the majority of the collaborators. Dworkin, Lipski, and Núñez-Cedeño comment on the relative number of linguists vs. specialists in literature, and concur that the former constitute a small minority of the departments’ faculty. Dworkin observes that Hispanic linguistics is not a major focus in Spanish departments, and agrees with Lipski that departments consider literary studies their main mission. Lipski also dismisses any kind of “us versus them” paranoia, arguing that “in most programs linguists and literature specialists enjoy mutual respect and conviviality.”

A relevant question that one might ask is how Spanish linguists see themselves and how they are perceived by others. Hualde and Lipski define Spanish linguists firstly as linguists, and secondly as focusing their research on Spanish through various sub-disciplines, without establishing hierarchies among them. Despite the wealth of research activities within the field, there is the sense that within the American university Hispanic linguists are seen more as pedagogues and administrators than as researchers (Lipski and Núñez-Cedeño). There is also the widespread view among outside administrators that the mission of language departments is language teaching, as may be inferred from many of the academic positions advertised for Hispanic linguists (Dworkin, Lipski, and Núñez-Cedeño). Because of this climate, Hispanic linguists are often offered non-tenure track or other service-oriented

positions (Lipski), which often relegates them to second-class status (Núñez-Cedeño).

On the topic of the history and evolution of Hispanic linguistics, Hualde and Dworkin point to the intimate connection between Hispanic linguistics and General linguistics: what happens in the former is a reflection of the general trends existing in the latter. Within this frame of reference, Dworkin, Hualde, Núñez-Cedeño, and Toribio address the development that linguistics has experienced during the last several decades. Núñez-Cedeño refers to the evolution of linguistics from the 1970s to the present time, while Dworkin notes the gradual ascendancy of synchronic approaches over diachronic ones. For his part, Hualde highlights the current emphasis on empirically-based research as the most important recent development.

On the question of empirical research, Garcia speaks of the necessity of paying more attention to what the data is telling us, of keeping an open mind, and of refraining from pursuing a priori encompassing generalizations. Thus, she presents us with the issue of divergence: variation in Spanish is more wide-ranging than what one is prepared to accept. Toribio refers to another aspect of the issue of divergence: the idealized monolingual normative Spanish speaker is not exclusive. Contemporary research shows that speakers of regional dialects, of contact varieties, of Spanish as a second language, or heritage language speakers (Núñez-Cedeño), should also be included. Furthermore, Toribio observes the extension of the field of study to encompass language processing, disordered speech, and language regression, pointing to a modification of disciplinary lines. With respect to areas of research that look promising in the future, Dworkin detects the potential of discourse analysis, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, grammaticalization, and typology for presenting new insights on diachronic studies.

Hualde and Toribio take up the subject of the education of graduate students in Hispanic linguistics and agree on the need of a solid and general background in linguistics in order to be successful in the job market. Hualde points to the futility of trying to cover all areas of linguistics within Spanish departments and, instead, advocates the need for flexible graduate programs and for collaboration between fields. At a programmatic level, Dworkin and Hualde notice the separation between Spanish linguistics and Spanish literature studies, as students tend not to take courses in both areas.

The relationship between linguistics and literature is a topic that grabs the attention of several contributors. Hualde conjectures that the cause for the lack of intellectual interaction between scholars of both

fields resides in the turning away from the previous common ground of text-based analysis. On the one hand, followers of the Chomskyan tradition dismissed the text-based work of earlier philologists; on the other, literary critics disregarded “the study of literature per se, in favor of the study of ‘culture’, where culture can be any societal institution or practice that strikes the scholar’s fancy” (Hualde).

While I agree with this assessment, I would point out that the seeds of the present situation date further back in time. The origins of the divergence lie in two traditions: one European, the other American. In the European philological tradition, the study of language was associated with the study of literature. For this reason, both disciplines were housed within the same unit. Moreover, most scholars did not feel the need to further explore the linguistic categories utilized, since the ones postulated for classical languages more or less adapted themselves to the study of modern Indo-European languages. Broadly speaking, interpretation of texts was central, not the study of categories and structure. In the American tradition, on the other hand, linguistics comes not from philology, but mainly from anthropology and the study of North American native languages. As a consequence, in most cases, the object of study did not have a written literary tradition, therefore no classic philological interpretation of texts was needed. Researchers of North American native languages were faced with linguistic facts that resisted Indo-European categories. Consequently, the discovery of grammar and structure was privileged. Language departments in the U.S., which focus on European languages and mostly follow the European model, were the locus of the gradual split between linguistics and literature. This division was in part the result of a linguistic theory centered on structure, which utilized decontextualized data.

Considering the present state of affairs of Hispanic linguistics within Spanish departments, it is highly remarkable that Dworkin, Hualde, Lipski, and Núñez-Cedeño advocate stopping the isolationism of this component. Along these lines, they propose to begin building bridges with colleagues in Hispanic literatures and cultures. The utilization of the same *bridge-building* metaphor by both Hualde and Lipski to refer to this issue is very significant. Moreover, Toribio makes a related point when she states that “Hispanic linguistics is necessarily multidisciplinary.” Garcia, on her part, indirectly advocates bridge-building when she states the need of going beyond technical, traditional quantitative studies, by accessing the realm of culture, the realm of human activities, in order to really explain language use. Núñez-Cedeño argues that the task faced by Hispanic linguistics is “to transform the state of being a profession of service,” doing so by reinventing itself in

relation to literature, “by bringing to bear how linguistic analysis interacts with the creative use of language,” and thus, to insert itself “into a broader range of disciplines.” Dworkin argues for the need “not to lose sight of the social and cultural background against which the language developed,” while Hualde asserts that “Spanish linguistics should be firmly rooted within Spanish studies,” and that “there is a natural link between research in Spanish linguistics and scholarship in Spanish literature.” He refers to Roman Jakobson, Amado Alonso, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, and Tomás Navarro Tomás as examples of scholars in whose work “the fields of linguistics and literary criticism [were] inextricably linked”. Moreover, Hualde ventures “the prediction that in a few years linguistics and literature will start to converge again within Spanish Departments.” It is notable to observe that all the contributors agree on the need of going beyond the traditional limits of the discipline: linguistics is experiencing the crumbling of disciplinary boundaries. In this sense, the novel interdisciplinary conference on *Languages and Genes*, hosted by the University of California, Santa Barbara, on 8-10 September 2006, represents another piece of evidence.

After recent theoretical and empirical advances, linguistics is now ready to relate technical aspects of language to more humane facets. For to continue focusing exclusively on technical features might not allow us to progress beyond certain stages, and might even consolidate the isolation of our discipline. In my opinion, Hispanic linguistics will be enriched by a recontextualization in the broad sense: by nurturing itself from other disciplines, including literary and cultural studies. The understanding of linguistic structure by itself is important, but it is not enough. As I see it, the future of Hispanic linguistics lies in the interchange of linguistic structure and meaning at all levels.

It is vital to start building these kinds of connections because language capability is an essential feature in the definition of a human being. Consider the (real or apocryphal) anecdote of Cardinal Melchor de Polignac who, upon witnessing the human-like gestures of a monkey in the court of Louis XIV, declared, “Speak, and I baptize you.” As language is an activity that permeates all human endeavors, we see an urgent need for interdisciplinarity and bridge-building.

To conclude, in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese Studies at the University of Minnesota, my home department, we must credit graduate students with taking the initiative by engaging in interdisciplinary studies and projects that involve intradepartmental as well as interdepartmental collaboration. Although course requirements have been eliminated in an effort to streamline the graduate program, some Hispanic linguistics students take courses in literature, and some



Hispanic literature students take courses in linguistics, mainly pragmatics and language variation.¹ Recently, we had the case of a literature student who took a directed research course with a linguistics faculty to investigate how Euskera metaphors are translated into Spanish in *Obabakoak*.² We have also the case of a Hispanic linguistics student's dissertation that presents a prototypic characterization of irony, based on a corpus of informal conversations. The student's plans involve future research on the relationship between irony and intonation. Other student projects include: the role of fight metaphors present in the pacifist political discourse of Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the discursive construction of gender in Internet exchanges, and the function of metaphors in the language of advertisement. These studies involve the collaboration of faculty of different departments, as well as specialists in Hispanic linguistics, literature, and culture. Thus, it is pleasing to realize that graduate students, our successors, have already started the process of *bridge-building* by themselves.

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URL: <http://spanport.cla.umn.edu/publications/HispanicIssues/hispanic-issues-online/hispanic%20issues%20online-1.htm/ocampo.pdf>

¹ Students specializing in medieval literature are required to take history of the language, and the presence of Hispanic linguists in their committees is not uncommon.

² Bernardo Atxaga, the author of this book of short stories, writes in Euskera and translates himself his literary production into Spanish.