

◆ Afterword

David William Foster

The use of language becomes a privileged focal point by conferring upon words the rank of most efficient instrument in the enemy's cultural plan. [Argentine] Vice Admiral Armando Lambruschini, unexpectedly including linguistic study as part of army curriculum, establishes the fact that it is "a military task to attentively follow language trends, certain verbal styles, in order to know what type of compulsions beset the freedom of collective reasoning" (28)¹

In mid-1978, during the height of the so-called Dirty War of repression and extermination in Argentina in the second half of the 1970s, that country hosted the World Soccer Cup. There had been many calls for the investigation of human rights violations in Argentina, Arizona Governor Raúl Castro had been appointed U.S. Ambassador to address Washington's concerns, and many members of the international press corps arrived in Buenos Aires, expecting to discover overt signs of the tyranny. Although in the end they could not report on the sight of blood flowing in the streets or the smell of burning flesh in the air, they could report on one of the dreary linguistic innovations of the government's response to what it perceived as its unreasonable enemies: the city was papered with the slogan "Los argentinos somos derechos y humanos" (We Argentines are straight and human [i.e., straight-forward and humane]).

This little bit of linguistic troping on the phrase *derechos humanos*, which in that year was probably more used in the Spanish language (at least in Argentina) than in the entire history of the language reveals one of the

fundamental difficulties in bringing an internationalist project to bear on a society in which, so it was insisted, the very concept itself was alien to social and juridical discourse. By this I do not mean that Argentine society (or, of course, other Latin American societies) lacked any notion of matters of human rights. Rather, as a consequence of the complex reasons why the international community was paying attention to what was going on in Argentina under the military (or in Chile or in Uruguay or in Brazil), an entire linguistic superstructure was attached, not just to the Spanish language, but to one nationally defined variety of it. It was not a matter of individual words and perhaps not even lexicalized phrases made up of those words, but of fields of semantic meaning reference by those words and phrases made up of them and morphosyntactic boundaries that conditioned their grammatical use.

The disingenuous poetry of the military propagandists could so easily deconstruct the lexicalized phrase *derechos humanos* (that is, the conjunction of the two words was, in linguistic terms, a third word, semi-independent in meaning from its constituent unitary words) into separate lexical items that could, then, be recombined as predicated adjectives appended to the noun of national identity. In the process, the noun *derechos* becomes grammatically recast as an adjective whose meaning is only remotely related to that noun, and the semantics of the adjective *humanos* is shifted from a reference to species to a reference to conduct (which allows, arguably, for understanding two significantly separate, if homophonous, adjectives). That all this could take place and create a powerful call to national unity behind the new phrase in the face of the enemies of the nation is, I would argue, the consequence of the translation into Spanish of a phrase that had not yet become an integral part of the language as a fully incorporated lexical item.

The essays in this volume return at certain important moments of theorizing and analysis to the matter of universal constructs and the messy questions of actual historical realities. At the same time, it is abundantly evident in reviewing these essays that the questions they address are not the consequence of simply tacking on to Latin American historical realities a set of principles formulated elsewhere that might be justifiably and profitably used in examining certain social matters and cultural interpretations. No longer a linguistic superstructure added as a potentially useful supplement to the Spanish language, the sort of approaches, pioneered in large measure by Hernán Vidal's judicious writings, and exemplified in this volume, involve creating a semantic field from within the language and from within the historical bases of its existence as a linguistic system. One major implication of such an approach is to underscore how one cannot be content to survey a national discourse in terms of how it matches or does not match a predetermined inventory of legal issues, but rather it must be a process of working through the national discourse in terms of what it does address and

the complexities of that address. There are many references in these essays to the patterns of exclusion: who and what social formulations are absent, elided, suppressed, eliminated in the process of creating semantic realms, horizons of meaning, and ideological exchanges.

I would like to illustrate this by reference to one significant realm of human rights concerns, the issue, within the overarching category of gender, of sexuality. I will refer both to the purported sexism of the Spanish language and to the troubling distortions brought by the so-called gay movement in its Latin American incarnations.

I am not referring to the well established understanding that Spanish, like most of the world's languages, holds the feminine to be the marked (i.e., nondefault) category of gender, whether viewed in terms of allegedly natural biological classification or essentially arbitrary grammatical classification. That is, male always prevails over female, with the latter being the inclusive common gender, while nouns are grammatically masculine unless they are, with statistical exception, feminine, with new nouns always masculine unless they are derived from already existing feminine nouns. These details are so well established that they are essentially part of even folk knowledge about the Spanish language.

Rather, by the sexism of the Spanish language I refer to the way in which gender marking is virtually an inevitable category of the language and, even more important, how the categorization of gender is inevitably masculine or feminine. This is so to such an extent that one might easily assume (as the speakers of the language must do so unconsciously) that there are only two universal genders, either masculine or feminine. Some playfulness understandably ensues when one's attention is brought to the fact that other languages may have more than two genders grammatically, and that there is a neutral grammatical gender that includes some nouns whose real-world referents are, say, biologically feminine (e.g., German *Das Weib*), but this little serves to enhance any perception on anyone's part that natural gender could be problematic in its rigid binary disjunction between masculine and feminine. A large bibliography now exists on the question of Queer English, which, among other things, is a branch of linguistic inquiry in the language that attempts to understand the consequences of the m/f binary for the actual universe of meaning the English language refers to, including those affective and poetic attempts to question or go beyond it. We are by now used to the gender-bending work of transsexual speech in which the putative male "speaks in feminine" and vice-versa for the putative female.

But except for the cyber-language utilization of the "at" sign, the *arroba*, in order to avoid sexist use (e.g., "Querid@s amig@s"), there has been little headway in transcending the binary grip of the Spanish language as far as sexual identity is concerned and virtually nothing as regards attempting to signal anything like the sort of gender continuum proposed by

the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. And lest one think this to be only a matter of an internationalist feminist or queer agenda, one need only dip into the whole complex issue of gender continuum in native American cultures, from the North Shore to the Straits of Magellan, only one aspect of which is captured by the overworked concept of the berdache. Indeed, part of the clash between Luso-Hispanic culture and native American cultures involves the fundamental misunderstanding by the former of the gender continuum of the latter, which it often lumped under the serve-all term of “sodomy” and persecuted accordingly. Or, to put it somewhat differently, the presence of a non-binary gender continuum among native American peoples gave the conquerors one more reason to conquer. Thus, when one speaks of “ensuring the rights of indigenous women,” it is important to ask exactly what social subjects are we talking about. Does it include, for example, the *muxes* (*muxe* is derived from the pre-modern pronunciation of the Spanish word *mujer*) of the Zapotecan cultures of Oaxaca, social subjects who can hardly be simply lumped in with the Western concept of gay transvestites.

One of the effects of neoliberalism in a country like Argentina, recently recovering from neofascist military tyranny and anxious to catch up with the newest forms of modernity that had been suppressed by dictatorship, was to pursue questions of sexual identity. Thus, there is the way in which issues of sexuality would be an inevitable part of redemocratization, since both gender and sexuality were part of the agenda of persecution and elimination of the dominant ideology of military rule. Jews, women, and homosexuals were victims who received “special attention” by the apparatus of oppression and death. These were not disjunctive categories for the torturers, but rather interlocking ones, as viewed by the iteration of anti-Semitic theories on the sexual degeneracy of Jews and the feminization of the homosexual body. In this way, the return to constitutional democracy in Argentina would necessarily address to some extent gender issues, the qualifier “some” here referring, for example, to an enhancement of women’s rights, the right to divorce, the recognition of same-sex principles, but not the legalization of abortion.

Of a different order, however, was the sudden visibility of sexuality in, at least, Buenos Aires and other major cities and the imperative to live an openly sexual life. Much of this visibility was directly related to ensuing neoliberalism because it made possible the purchase of the signs of this dimension of democratic life: clothes, clubs, parades, magazines, and experience-enhancing aids—in short, the lifestyle of sexual liberation. Nowhere was this more evident than in the gay world. If earlier stages of prosperity in Argentina had made possible a visibility for sexual liberation, as in the case of the halcyon late fifties and sixties, the Argentine equivalent of the mod go-go scene, it did not display much in the way of the homoerotic, remaining even more intransigently heterosexual (most likely as

the consequence of the sexual ideology of the Latin American left, which abhorred the homosexual) than its First World sources.

The 1980s, however, brought to the Argentine scene—and, at first, to a lesser extent, other Latin American venues—a veritable eruption of the homoerotic: in a word, of the gay. One cannot but unquestionably applaud the emergence of a new panorama of sexuality in the wake of manifold oppressions of the body, with its attendant social consequences, during the period of dictatorship. However, in the rush to recover the status of *toujours moderne*, there was the wholesale import of a new linguistic superstructure, that of contemporary sexuality and, most notably, that of gay sexuality. Argentine Spanish may now have come pretty much to accept the term *queer* as either a synonym for *gay* or, more generally, as a term to cover the deconstruction of compulsory heteronormativity, but there has been far less of an easy accommodation in the Spanish of Argentina or, to judge by the vagaries of Spanish language dictionaries and manuals of good linguistic use, of other nations in which that language predominates. The potential misfits, misunderstandings, and *mépris* were, however, less a matter of the moralistic rejection of what certainly looked alien in the face of what was believed to be the unquestioned legitimacy of the heterosexual matrix, than they were the problem of any suddenly annexed linguistic superstructure: Did they really fit lived human experience?

To be sure, Argentina had always had, as an inevitable component of human sexuality, evidence of what the late nineteenth century came to call homosexuality, and an equally inevitable component of the development of modernity in Buenos Aires (at least) was a record of what came to be called the homosexual life style. We have at our disposal several accounts of this record. But gay culture was something else again, beginning with its visibility and what many perceived to be its aggressive demands for legitimation: there was a certain dimension of the venerable Queer Nation stance to it, and one could hear the old-timers lament that same-sex life was more interesting when it was in the closet and the province of a tight-knit family of persons “in the know.” Such romantic attitudes aside, there is no question that whatever had been naturalized in Argentine (and, again, other Latin American) societies as homosexuality, with somewhat of a precise vocabulary and a sub-linguistic system those who cared knew how to use (such as the aforementioned “speaking in feminine”) was markedly different from gay sexuality, whose very visibility made even those who didn’t care in a way complicitous with its particular speak. This was even more so when it appeared that the “real” way to be gay was to reconstruct in Spanish and its social reality the New York or London or Paris scenes. Such commodifications created a wholly new axis: if to be homosexual meant being willing to play the game, being gay meant being able to pay, and often pay quite a bit, to play the game. As the commodifications of gay sexuality proliferated, so too did the linguistic superstructure required to account for

it. Whereas before everyone thought s/he knew what simple *maricón* meant, there was a semantic leap involved in decoding a phrase such as *Soy puto y me quiero* because it involved adjustments in the semantic fields not everyone was willing to accept or able to make (especially since it involved rejecting implicitly the long-held assumption that *putos* were merely male-male prostitutes).

The demise of the neoliberal bubble may have brought an end to the more egregious forms of commodification of so-called alternative sexualities, but it left as linguistic residue that is only now beginning to be fully incorporated into the language, as witnessed by the matter of the word “queer” I mentioned above. What this means for the tenor of the essays in this volume is that, as in the case of other human rights, we are beginning to see a distinct realm of Latin American queer studies in which what is understood by queer—that is, what specifically is involved in terms of the historical realities of a society—is constructed on the basis of the lived human experience of that culture and not merely in terms of canvassing the laws and codes of a society to see if they are in sync with a particular international standard. This research has been perhaps advanced more in the case of the cultures of the Caribbean or in U.S.-Mexican border studies, but there is much to be researched for all Latin American societies.

It is, for example, for this reason that what we in the U.S. call gay marriage is not really a legal or public policy conundrum in most of Latin America, where marriage is first and foremost a question of civil unions. Some involved may choose to have these unions sanctioned by a religious doctrine, however civil unions are not in conflict with so-called traditional marriage as U.S. religio-centric society views it to be, where churches have assumed the function of the civil registry. Concomitantly, civil unions, which are paramount, cannot be construed as somehow second best in the rituals of the social confirmation of sentimental and sexual bonds. In short, the semantic domains are conjugated in different ways. This does not mean that churches cannot mount an effective campaign against civil unions. It just means that they must do so in terms of juridical practices over which they do not have any recognized control or participation in, as they do in the U.S.

The essays in this volume deal only in very tangential ways with linguistic systems and with that category of human rights related specifically to sexuality. However, these are areas that will merit investigation as Latin American cultural studies invests in greater measures in the imperative of recognizing the centrality of human rights to the texts that we investigate and the centrality of the humanities to the understanding of human rights. Language is often reputed to be a defining tool of the human species, and linguistic systems are often put forth as the model for the understanding of the universe and experiences in relation to humans. Language study as I have shown it in only a few brief ways in this commentary will necessarily

be central to the contributions of humanities to the principled analysis of human rights.

Notes

1. Andrés Avellaneda, "The Process of Censorship and Censorship of the Proceso: Argentina 1976-1983." *The Redemocratization of Argentine Culture, 1983 and Beyond; An International Research Symposium*. Ed. David William Foster. Tempe: Arizona State University, Center for Latin American Studies, 1989. 23–47.

Foster, David William. "Afterword." *Human Rights and Latin American Cultural Studies*. Ed. Ana Forcinito and Fernando Ordóñez. *Hispanic Issues On Line* 4.1 (2009): 260–266.

http://spanport.cla.umn.edu/publications/HispanicIssues/pdfs/FOSTER_HR.pdf
