

The Elephant in the Room: The Hierarchical Division of Spoken and Written “Grammars”

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Introduction

In a special edition of *Hispanic Issues On Line* (HIOL), titled *Debating Hispanic Studies: Reflections on our Disciplines* (2006), a number of scholars (Ocampo, Hualde, Lipski, Dworkin, Núñez-Cedeño, García and Toribio) critically analyzed the current academic status of Hispanic Linguistics in departments of Spanish or Modern Languages, and its potential for scholarly contributions in the future in a changing (or non-changing) institutional landscape. In a subsequent chapter published in a book edited by Klaus Zimmerman (2014) titled *Prácticas y políticas lingüísticas: Nuevas variedades, normas, actitudes y perspectivas*, José del Valle expanded on some of the main themes discussed in the special issue of HIOL. The conclusions reached by Del Valle prompted a new debate on the reconfiguration of the study of Hispanic Linguistics in departments composed of faculty with specializations in literature and cultural studies and faculty whose research focuses on linguistics. This situation is to be contrasted with the one in which linguistics faculty are members of a department focused strictly on the study of general linguistics.¹

In the remainder of this essay, I will assess the significance of the debate generated by Del Valle, and in particular, the value of the conclusions and proposed concrete changes articulated in his chapter (and related claims made by the authors of the special issue of HIOL). In so doing, I will argue that there has been a misguided effort to “bridge the gap” between the scholarly objectives of literature and linguistics faculty through the continued focus on the “written” standard of language use. Along these lines, the perception of a correlation between the analysis of spoken language and unsubstantial “service” work—prevalent in the conceptualization of language teaching among both linguistics and literature faculty—may be the main factor that constrains one of the most viable

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options to bridge the conceptual gap between linguistics and literature faculty.

The Role of Spanish Linguistics in a Department of Spanish

Across the essays published in the special issue of HIOL, there is general consensus on the important role of the study of Spanish Linguistics in departments of Modern Languages in the United States. At the same time, there is also agreement about the existence of institutional constraints on the potential success of the study of Hispanic Linguistics in the context of departments of Modern Languages, in which the study of literature continues to be the one that sets the main agenda for research and scholarship in general. Ocampo (the editor of the special issue of HIOL) identified five general themes emerging from the discussion on the current status of Hispanic Linguistics: (1) “the optimistic vision of Hispanic linguistics as a research field,” (2) “the institutional situation” whereby “Hispanic linguists are often perceived not as researchers but as pedagogues and administrators,” (3) the “current emphasis on empirically-based research,” (4) the education of graduate students, and (5) the need and options “to build bridges between both disciplines [i.e., linguistics and literature]” (95–96).

Among one of the important conclusions shared by the authors of the special issue of HIOL, Ocampo points out that the majority of them “advocate stopping the isolationism” of linguists. He further notes that the solution to this problem, as proposed by several authors is “to begin building bridges with colleagues in Hispanic literatures and cultures” (98). Hualde (2006), for instance, notes that “there is a natural link between research in Spanish linguistics and scholarship in Spanish literature” (104), whereas Lipski (2006) explicitly suggests “that linguists make the building of bridges to the other areas of their departments” (112). On the other hand, the apparent goodwill to build bridges across communities of scholars housed within the same academic unit does not entail that the same authors do not provide a critical assessment of the institutional hurdles that have created the disconnect between literature and linguistic faculty.

One of the prevalent comments among the authors of the special issue of HIOL focuses on the obvious unbalanced distribution of work among literature and linguistics faculty in departments of Spanish. Dworkin (2006) for one, points to the obvious conclusion one can reach by even the most cursory review of the composition of scholarly backgrounds of faculty in most departments of Spanish: “teachers and scholars specializing in linguistics constitute a small minority of its faculty” (115). Providing further detail on the generalization from Dworkin, Lipski lists a number of factors that are useful to understand the status quo of linguistics faculty in Spanish

departments: most doctoral programs in Spanish have twice or three times the number of faculty in literature than in linguistics, no Spanish program in the Ivy League of the northeast nor most of the prestigious universities in the south (Duke, Vanderbilt, Williams and Lee, etc.) have a tenure-track position in linguistics, doctoral programs in linguistics are not envisioned to require more than one or two faculty covering all areas of linguistics (whereas the literature tracks require several positions to cover a variety of periods and areas, etc.), linguistics faculty are more likely to be hired for non-tenure-track positions associated with service roles in the department, etc.

Given the apparent low status and representation of linguistics faculty in most departments of Spanish, it is important to identify, on the one hand, the scholarly objective of departments of Spanish, and, on the other hand, the role that linguists play in those departments. Dworkin provides a succinct description of the objective pursued by a typical department of Spanish: “Such departments view as their main intellectual mission the teaching of and research into literature, literary theory and cultural studies” (115). Against this background, as described by various authors (and Del Valle in his own piece as well), in general, linguistics faculty are called upon to perform many different roles spanning the range from academic to administrative tasks: as a philologist in charge of teaching the history of the language, as an assessment specialist to manage placement tests and various proficiency tests, as a language specialist responsible for teaching the “language courses,” or teaching methodology courses to graduate students, as a supervisor and manager of teaching assistants, etc.² Lipski concludes that linguists tend to perform a support role in departments of language with the unfortunate perception that “. . . the intellectual accomplishments of linguists [is regarded] as subordinate to their role in optimizing the input to literature courses” (111).

Ironically, the possible solution to the disconnect between the research/teaching agendas of linguistics and literature faculty may be found precisely on the reconceptualization of the learning and teaching of language (especially the beginning stages of language development). That is, the claim that the tasks associated with the teaching of (typically first and second year) language courses are to be regarded as a type of service activity is only true insofar as such tasks have been conceptualized and implemented in current academic practice. The latter relies on a two-tiered system whereby learners need to first develop basic language abilities (first tier) to be ready to use language for academic goals (second tier). Within this framework, beginning language courses are akin to remedial courses because they are designed to bring learners up to a minimum level of competence in the language. Once such minimum level of competence in the language is achieved, students are expected to be ready to engage in an

academically substantive analysis of Spanish. I will return to this topic and provide a more detailed analysis of this claim once I discuss the negative consequences brought about by the current conceptualization of language teaching following up the analysis of the proposal from Del Valle.

Del Valle's Call for a New Focus on the Linguistic Study of Spanish

Del Valle's chapter titled "El lugar de las lenguas en las Lenguas Modernas: hacia una nueva cartografía de la lingüística hispánica en EEUU" (The Place of Languages in Modern Languages: Toward a New Map of Hispanic Linguistics in the US) expands on the analysis of some of the main themes identified by the special issue of HIOL. Two of the five themes identified by Ocampo as the most salient in the special issue of HIOL are most significant for the analysis of Del Valle: the institutional status of linguists in departments of Spanish (theme 2 above) and the consequent need for linguistics faculty to find objectives in common with literature faculty (theme 5 above) in order to remedy the current institutional situation. After considering some of the claims advanced by the authors of the special issue of HIOL, Del Valle concludes that we need to consider a new (bolder) configuration of the study of Hispanic linguistics, whereby the analysis of language is not restricted to the curriculum that mirrors the one from departments of General Linguistics. In so doing, Del Valle challenges the status quo definitions of language, linguistics, and, especially, the meaning of the study of language in a department of Spanish or Modern Languages.

Del Valle's position builds upon a theoretical proposal about recontextualization, vaguely proposed by Ocampo: "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" (99, emphasis added), as well as the call to *reinvent* our institutional arrangement expressed by Núñez-Cedeño (125). Del Valle develops this idea of institutional recontextualization/reinvention into a theoretical proposal with concrete steps to follow, calling for a reform of the institutional organization of the traditional "layout" of the department of Spanish (or Modern Languages for that matter).

Del Valle identifies the main problem faced by the traditional department of Spanish in the form of an apparent rhetorical question: "Is there anything in particular that characterizes Hispanic Linguistics with reference to General Linguistics, apart from the fact that the former uses Spanish data for its empirical analysis?" (83).^{3 4} The answer provided by most authors of the special issue of HIOL can be summarized by the position of Hualde: "Spanish linguists are linguists with specialized knowledge on

the facts of the Spanish language” (102). Contrariwise, Del Valle argues that this is problematic, because we are subordinating the study of Spanish to the study of linguistics in general. Thus, one should question the necessity of doing the same type of work in two different academic units. There must be some principled reason, Del Valle argues, for the inclusion of faculty focused on the study of Spanish language data in a department of Spanish. The problem is, Del Valle asserts, that “Hispanic Linguistics, as implemented in the modern languages, has converged toward formal linguistic theories, at the same time that it has not considered its relationship with new literary/cultural/textual models” (97). Therefore, “there will be few opportunities to develop a concept of language that will be consonant with the cultural and literary practices that constitute the main object of study of departments of modern languages ...” (87).⁵ As a consequence, Del Valle argues for the abandonment of the language research methodologies that fall toward the formal end of the spectrum of possibilities.

It is not entirely clear what Del Valle describes as “formal linguistic theories,” and consequently, what needs to be abandoned. In fact, the reference to the narrow focus of (possibly decontextualized) syntactic theories, phonological theories and other “general” linguistics topics is not necessarily warranted given that the scholarly work on Spanish linguistics has been based on a broad range of contextualized uses of Spanish. For instance, as Dworkin points out, in his essay, “[t]he overwhelming majority of dissertations written in the area of Spanish linguistics deals with issues in applied linguistics/pedagogy and second language acquisition. Next in number are studies in sociolinguistics” (116). It appears that, at least within the dimension of sociolinguistic and sociocultural criteria, the study of Spanish linguistics can be regarded as amenable to the (potential) analysis of social and cultural phenomena directly associated with language use. Similarly, Toribio (2006) points out that the research themes being pursued by current scholars in Hispanic Linguistics match the interests of the society at large, “consonant with questions posed by parents and policymakers” (136). This connection with societal concerns helps faculty in Spanish linguistics stay focused on developing a sociolinguistically- and socioculturally-informed research agenda.

On the other hand, Del Valle’s point is well taken if the emphasis of his argument is to be placed on the fact that few linguistics studies explicitly integrate the “cultural and literary” practices that are the main objective of departments of Spanish. Along those lines, Del Valle states that the objective to be attained through a new institutional structure of departments of Spanish must find points in common with the scholarly pursuits of other faculty in the department working on the same topic (albeit from a different research perspective) and without breaking the necessary connection with the field of General Linguistics. For this purpose, Del Valle argues, the theoretical

construct most likely to lead us to this ambitious objective is inherently defined by “interactional practices with social meanings that are contested, defined and codified in relation to the historical context of its production and interpretation” (98).⁶ Del Valle contends that the specific scholarly objective to be pursued by linguistic and literary scholars alike appears to be expressed most succinctly by Moraña (2005) by making reference to the “. . . volatile, porous, temporary experience of *the social*, where *otherness*, heterogeneity, and diversity are the conspicuous protagonists of cultural exchanges and epistemological explorations” (xvii).

Del Valle’s concrete proposal for institutional change is divided into two distinct action items focused on hiring and curricular issues respectively. The first important required institutional change is to redefine the areas of research of Spanish linguistics through the process of hiring specialists on areas that are less focused on, “. . . phonology, syntax, history of the language and the acquisition of Spanish (areas that are already covered in linguistics departments and that we can access by sharing resources from them), and more positions focused on discourse analysis, linguistic and intellectual history, linguistics of immigration and language policies (that can be shared with scholars dedicated to the study of culture and literature)” (Del Valle 100).⁷ The second part of Del Valle’s proposal is curricular in nature, calling for a specific series of courses that would be more aligned with the scholarly interests of colleagues in literary and cultural studies: “Fewer courses on synchronic or diachronic syntax, and phonetics (important subjects, to be sure; but ones that are already offered by a department of General Linguistics) and more courses on discourse analysis and language policies (topics that are aligned with cultural and literary studies in departments of Spanish)” (101).⁸ Del Valle’s claim is likely to generate a healthy debate on the merits of the (apparently radically new) academic structure of Spanish departments in the United States that he proposes. Lest we consider Del Valle’s proposal farfetched, however, I note that other writers have offered solutions along similar lines, albeit addressing the literature faculty so that they build bridges from their endpoint as well. Schechtman and Koster (2008), for instance, argue for an expansion of the work to be carried out by graduate students (primarily in literature), “to demonstrate not only an advanced communicative competence in the target language, but also an ability to teach language critically and reflexively. One means to achieve this meta-awareness is through *coursework in second language acquisition, language education, applied linguistics, and critical discourse analysis*” (311, emphasis added). Furthermore, once we break down Del Valle’s proposal into its core principles, we can see how some recent trends already reflect key aspects of his argument (and awareness about the concerns he brings to the discussion). For instance, the decline in enrollments in the humanities in general (highlighted by Del Valle in his

chapter) has led many faculty to “package” traditional linguistics courses into more appealing course offerings that can generate higher enrollments. As an example, the inherent topics of a traditional course on the history of Spanish may be presented as part of a course focused on the analysis of varieties of Spanish (how they developed) in order to gather data to decide if it is possible to arrive to a homogeneous variety of Spanish. Several of the socially- and politically-contextualized topics proposed by Del Valle could be embedded into such a course (e.g., language planning, identity, immigration, etc.).

In fact, even an introductory course to Spanish Linguistics focused on the analysis of the so-called traditional topics (i.e., synchronic and diachronic syntax, phonetics, etc.) can become a vehicle to describe, analyze, interpret and discuss the subjects that Del Valle argues should become more prevalent in a Spanish linguistics curriculum.⁹ For instance, the popular textbook *Introducción a la lingüística hispánica* (Hualde et al.) arguably presents the type of coverage of linguistics topics that Del Valle would describe as limited in scope (e.g., the titles of the chapters in this textbook, almost encyclopedic in coverage, provide us with the first sign that there are compromises to be made). It is, nevertheless, within the range of appropriate lesson planning that any professor can structure the discussion of the textbook contents in a way that would satisfy Del Valle’s conditions to invent and recontextualize the study of Spanish linguistics. Take, for instance, the analysis of grammatical gender presented on pages 137–143 in the 2010 edition of this textbook. One of the activities presented by the authors asks students to analyze the perspective of the Real Academia Española (RAE) with reference to the selection of grammatical gender in cases when there could be a mismatch between grammatical and biological gender (e.g., María es un **juez** muy **justo** / María es **una juez** muy **justa** / María es **una jueza** muy **justa**). As presented in the textbook this activity is underdeveloped with regards to the analysis of the sociolinguistic and sociocultural aspects of the question. This does not mean, however, that the activity could not be expanded to properly weigh in on both intralinguistic and extralinguistic factors that can help us determine the outcome of the analysis. Providing the students with a summary of the argument from the RAE, highlighting the principles adduced by the RAE to substantiate their point,¹⁰ bringing additional examples and alternative viewpoints, pointing to the need to focus on both the social and linguistic aspects of the topic, etc., one can engage students with the type of analysis that can create bridges to other scholarly areas of study of Spanish (i.e., the literature/culture area of studies).

It is difficult to find fault with Del Valle’s proposal insofar as what he is asking us to add to the study of Hispanic Linguistics (e.g., the analysis of social goals that underlie Spanish language use, the complex cultural

consequences of implementing Spanish-English bilingual education, etc.). A possible gap in his argument would be what he leaves out of the scope of his list of proposed institutional changes. In effect, not unlike the authors of the special issue of HIOL, Del Valle compartmentalizes the teaching of language from the scholarship on language. This position is explicitly articulated in the position adopted by Del Valle (and echoed by other authors) about the (non)relevance of the teaching of Spanish: a valuable, but not central, component of what he describes as the main target of a reconceptualization of the research objective of Spanish linguistics.¹¹ The fallacy here is to assume that the objective he pursues is to be associated with specific levels of instruction. Inasmuch as the study of Spanish linguistics can benefit from the inclusion of a more explicit focus on, for instance, sociolinguistic determinants of language use and discourse analysis in advanced courses, it is theoretically inconsistent not to extend the same expanded definition of language to the analysis of language use at the level of the basic Spanish courses. This lopsided approach (symptomatic of the language-content divide) is yet to be addressed by most departments of Spanish. More importantly, in my view, this inconsistent application of a contextualized view of language (restricted to one end of the spectrum of language courses) stands to be a significant gap in any institutional model for the integration of academic objectives of literature and linguistics faculty.

The Language-Content Divide

The correlation of the level of instruction with the analysis of spoken language (beginning courses) versus written language (advanced courses) is not new, as explicitly described by Maxim (2009): “communicative language teaching and its focus on oral expression at the lower levels vs. literary and cultural studies and its focus on written expression at the upper levels” (124). This dichotomous approach to the study and learning of language use is not accidental. Before the advent of the audiolingual method, the communicative approach and task-based instruction—among many of the approaches to language instruction focused on oral interaction—the written language (most often represented by examples of national literatures) was one of the main reasons one would study a foreign language (Richards and Rodgers). Gradually, however, over the last seventy years, the teaching of second languages has achieved independent status from the ancillary role it used to have for the reading of the great literatures (Barnwell; Kramsch, “From Language Proficiency”; MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages). Among the modern languages, especially European ones, Spanish is the archetypal case of such historical development of language

teaching in the United States.

To be sure, the language-content divide has been openly denounced and rejected. In fact, to develop his argument about the relevance of literary-cultural objectives as inherently viable for linguistic analysis, Del Valle makes specific reference to two recent documents published by the Modern Language Association (MLA) that were intended to change current scholarly practices associated with the analysis of language: the 2007 Foreign Languages Report and the 2009 Report to the Teagle Foundation. I will argue that the main oversight in the proposal advanced by Del Valle is actually an extension of the main shortcoming of both MLA Reports, but especially, the 2009 document: the hierarchical view of written communication as the appropriate mode through which substantive academic work can be accomplished. Whereas the 2007 MLA Report focuses on the curricular work to be done for the language major (indirectly tipping the balance towards the written standard of language), the 2009 MLA Report explicitly dismisses the value of spoken interactions as valuable data to engage in the type of humanistic endeavor charged to language departments.

The 2007 MLA report proposes “replacing the two-tiered language-literature structure with a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole . . .” (3). This is an essential principle that underlies Del Valle’s proposal, and one with which I fully agree. Overall, the intended goal of the 2007 MLA Report is on target with regards to its attempt to introduce a more comprehensive and expansive view of language and culture. The MLA report, however, has been criticized for being long on generic recommendations and short on the specifics of how to implement those recommendations (e.g., Bernhardt; Byrnes; Schechtman and Koster). Furthermore, the MLA Report does not define the concept of translingual and transcultural competence other than stating that it “places value on the ability to operate between languages” (3). Finally, descriptions of how to implement the goals of transcultural communication have not yet provided the level of specificity needed to achieve those goals through oral interaction.

Subsequent publications (e.g., Kramersch “Theorizing”; Young; Wong and Waring) have addressed some of these problems of under specification of the theoretical constructs of translingual/transcultural competence. Kramersch (2010), for instance, proposed that the goal of translingual/transcultural competence is “to train educated multilingual speakers who do not strive to become like monolingual speakers but rather who can draw profit from shuttling from one to the other of their languages” (17). On the other hand, one of the remaining challenges of the recommendations of the 2007 MLA Report is the lack of enough detail about the actual implementation of the theoretical concept, in particular in

the realm of oral interactions. Kramersch, for instance, uses the example from an intermediate level German class to show how the instructor “seemed to have missed an opportunity to tie the teaching of language and the teaching of culture in more meaningful ways” (26). As described by Kramersch, the activities implemented in the German class she reviewed were based primarily on the discussion of a written excerpt from a well-known German writer. In her critique, Kramersch raised some valid questions about the approach followed by the instructor, pointing out, *inter alia*, that:

6. The communicative approach used here focused on grammatical and lexical accuracy, oral fluency, and pragmatic appropriateness *but not on the exploration of foreign worldviews and understanding of history.*
7. It considered communication as the transmission and exchange of information, *not as the negotiation of norms of interpretation.* (27, emphasis added)

To address these problems, Kramersch posits a number of changes that would have allowed the reading activity described above to be imbued with the type of translingual and transcultural analysis advocated by the MLA Report.¹² Notwithstanding the relevance and value of Kramersch’s suggestion, however, the teaching events selected for detailed analysis focused strictly on a written (literary) text used by students in an intermediate level German class. Other studies intended to make the case for the valuable use of interlingual and intercultural analyses also use written data, especially literary pieces (e.g., Kramersch, in *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, uses poetry as a case study) as opposed to using examples portraying spoken language interactional competence, especially during beginning stages of language development.¹³

The 2009 MLA Report to the Teagle Foundation with an equal focus on the learning of English and second languages, targets the development of reading and writing abilities, while downplaying the relevance of oral interactional competence. The following quote is indicative of the tendency to reify the notion that the learning of a second language (during beginning stages of acquisition mostly focused on the spoken language) do not (and implicitly, cannot) lead to the development of transcultural and translingual competencies: “Speaking a second language does not necessarily make one a sophisticated citizen of our contemporary world” (7). The Report goes to a great length to make the argument above, overreaching while making unwarranted assumptions about (a) second language teaching methodologies through an apparent implicit, unspecified definition of “communicative language teaching,” and (b) the potential of second language learning to lead to a substantive academic experience: “The pedagogical emphasis in recent decades on language for communication seems sometimes to entail the

willingness to accept approximations of pronunciation, grammar, and syntax, so long as the intended idea is more or less conveyed. This notion of efficiency may be adequate for nonacademic language teaching programs” (8). The 2009 Report implicitly assumes that beginning language courses use an outdated “behavioral” definition of communication (e.g., Bachman and Savignon; Firth and Wagner “On Discourse”; Firth and Wagner “Second/Foreign Language Learning”; He and Young; Johnson; Kormos; Kramersch “From Language Proficiency”; Kramersch “Theorizing”). More importantly, the 2009 Report does not take into account the fact that recent approaches to second language teaching have shifted their attention to the interactional dynamics of communication, especially in the spoken mode (e.g., Barraja-Rohan; Betz and Huth; He and Young; Huth “Pragmatics Revisited”; Huth “Can Talk Be Inconsequential?”; Wong and Waring), thus failing to identify the potential academic benefits of the analysis of interactional abilities in the spoken language domain.

A One-Way Approach to Solving the Language-Content Divide

The increased awareness and discussions about the disadvantages of a disjointed definition of language prompted by the two-tiered system has not led to effective solutions. In effect, one incomplete solution to bridge the gap left open by the two-tiered system has been a one-directional approach by which the content of the literature courses—with its concomitant emphasis on written language standards—is transplanted to beginning language courses. On this point, some observers have criticized the apparent lack of substance in courses focused on the development of oral language abilities prevalent in beginning language courses. Levine et al. conclude that “when instruction focuses primarily on oral self-expression rather than on the full complexity of language and culture, intellectual scope is lost” (244).¹⁴ Given the nature of the problem, Schechtman and Koster (2008), *inter alia*, propose to “. . . reintroduce what has seemingly been absent from the communicative language classroom: the text as an aesthetic, cultural, and linguistic object” (311). Even more strongly, Levine et al. (2008) contend that “in terms of course content the two-tiered system began to dissolve at least a decade ago” (242), while emphasizing how much the beginning language courses have started to incorporate the analysis of literature and other texts. Their analysis of survey data collected by the MLA leads Levine et al. to conclude, for instance, that “for introductory language courses at United States institutions, 68.5% place more emphasis on culture than literature, while 30.2% indicate equal or more emphasis on literature” (242).

On the other hand, Maxim (2009) notes that “[t]he fact that departments report that they are including more literature at the lower level . . . provides

no indication that departments are attending in any systematic way to the long-term development of how students understand and use language” (126). Highlighting the consequences of this one-directional approach, Bernhardt (2010) rightfully criticizes the 2007 MLA Report pointing out that, “While the Report calls for the literature faculty having ‘a hand in teaching language courses and in shaping and overseeing the content and teaching approaches used throughout the curriculum, from the first year forward’ (7), it provides no recommendation in the converse—the language teaching specialists having a hand in shaping the upper-level curriculum” (2).

The absence of a similar one-directional approach in the opposite direction (i.e., bring more analysis of oral data, and the corresponding “spoken grammars” into the curriculum of upper level courses) makes noticeable the double standard behind the one-way proposal described above. The implied assumption behind the one-directional approach is that the focus on the analysis of the spoken language in beginning language courses has to be supplemented with an explicit focus on literacy in written or written-like modes of communication (cf. the educated native speaker). Although, in principle, this assumption sounds reasonable (to the extent that learners may benefit from a multimodal pedagogical approach), the immediate problem instructors face is how to add even more coverage to first- and second-year course syllabi that are overly optimistic in terms of breadth of knowledge. More importantly, the awareness about the complexity inherent in the analysis and learning of language in the spoken domain can be more effectively focused on the development of the competence to manage the interactional dynamics of oral language (e.g., Barraja-Rohan; Betz and Huth; He and Youn; Huth “Negotiating”; Huth “Pragmatics Revisited”; Huth “Can Talk Be Inconsequential?”; Wong and Waring), and not necessarily on the use of the standards of the written language as a proxy for substantive language use.

The Elephant in the Room

There are two definitions of language that loom large in the midst of all discussions in most departments of Spanish (and Modern Languages), each one primarily defined by (and correlated to) mode of communication: written and spoken language. The preferred status given to norms prevalent in written data (written grammars) when contrasted with oral data (spoken grammars) represents a conceptual misunderstanding, especially among faculty focused on the scholarly analysis of literature and culture. Carter and McCarthy (2001), *inter alia*, argue for an expansion of the definition of language to include a more encompassing perspective: “spoken language, and spoken grammar highlights the textual and interpersonal aspects of

messages because of its face-to-face nature” (71). O’Keeffe, McCarthy and Carter (2007), bring up the notion of listenership (interaction is seen as a two-way speaker-hearer process that takes into account the active role of listeners) and describe prevalent interactional features of spoken language that are rarely addressed in most L2 textbooks (e.g., small talk, conversational routines, hedging, vague language, creative language, etc.). Similarly, Norton Peirce (1995) made it clear that the transactional meaning of language use is not the most important (and probably not the most prevalent either) among second language learners: “*when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world*” (18, emphasis added).

Despite the significant progress made in linguistics studies that have looked at the complex interactional features of spoken language (e.g., Johnson; Linell; Sacks et al.; Schegloff), we continue to have difficulties to bring such a comprehensive perspective on language use and language learning to the second language curriculum (especially the beginning courses).¹⁵ In the special issue of HIOL, García (2006) summarized the significance of teaching materials used in beginning language courses that continue to privilege the written standard of language. García wondered what would be needed for departments of Spanish to imbue their basic language courses with a more meaningful approach to language learning. Almost tongue-in-cheek, Garcia wondered: “Perhaps what is needed is a textbook that discusses how to conduct life in Spanish rather than merely how to speak it” (130). Of note here is the parallelism of García’s comment about speaking the language with the position advanced by the 2009 Teagle Report. That is, García makes the point that speaking a second language requires a sophisticated analysis of the complex interplay of the various factors that define language interactional dynamics, thus her distinction with the notion of “conducting life in Spanish,” (i.e., using Spanish). Different members of departments of Spanish will interpret the statement from García in different ways—according to their own views—with regards to the identification of scholarship opportunities in the mundane process of “speaking/using the language.”

There is also a practical (and powerful) argument to make in favor of envisioning the curriculum of the first two years of second language learning as a meaningful scholarly enterprise. Most students of Spanish are not interested in pursuing a major in a second language (mostly in Spanish). In my own institution, that group of students accounts for about 80–90 percent of all students registered in first- and second-year language courses. In an effort to make sense of this trend, Bousquet (2008) points out that “students desire a broader range of content and outcomes for their foreign language study,” and notes that at his institution majors in foreign languages are

dwindling “while enrollment in area studies programs and completion of area studies certificates have grown” (305). Depriving the basic language courses from the academic depth they could—and should—have may be myopic. Bousquet concludes that “[t]hese trends, which I would argue are typical of most major universities, show that students are voting with their feet” (305). Ignoring “the elephant in the room” (the definition of language prompted by the oral mode of communication), while failing to pay attention to its potential academic value, can only exacerbate the “crisis in the humanities” that Del Valle echoes in his chapter.¹⁶

Conclusion

Lipski (2006) describes “a sentiment—prevalent among administrators...—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” (111). As much as Lipski may be right in terms of the (probably disapproving) perspective of administrators as to the academic worth of teaching language, we should be wary of letting non-experts define the constructs of language and teaching for us in ways that are not in keeping with the perspective of the experts on the matter. It is up to the faculty in a language department to define what language teaching means and the potential contributions of the scholarship on the various aspects of language use, especially with regards to the spoken mode. Carter and McCarthy (2001) consider it to be a great injustice if our profession chose to ignore the reality of a more complex definition of language when both spoken and written standards are taken into account: “it would be a severe injustice if we, as a profession, ... closed our eyes to what we can know about how real speakers use [language] in everyday life in order to help our learners become better global communicators” (71). It is not by accident that the focus on, primarily, interactional dynamic processes prevalent in spoken language may be best implemented in the archetypal beginning language course.

The 2007 MLA Report was a first step toward a re-definition of language in an effort to find a common point of reference across levels of instruction. The various discussions prompted by that report, as well as other ideas presented in special issues of relevant journals (HIOL) and subsequent proposals presented in edited books (Del Valle) are helping us refocus our efforts to reinvent the traditional language department. The type of work necessary to build bridges between faculty focused on the spoken or written definitions of language will likely prove to be more difficult than the work required by the programmatic reorganization proposed by Del Valle and the authors of the special issue of HIOL. Nevertheless, it is time that faculty (both in the areas of linguistics and literature/culture) assess the potential

scholarly and programmatic potential of one of the most visible tasks that is the responsibility of language departments. Hualde, for one, points out that one common task that binds linguistics and literature faculty is the preparation of future teachers in the form of “the teaching methodology course that [graduate students] are required to take in order to teach in our basic Spanish language program. That is the remaining link” (105). This statement is significant to the extent that the focus of the basic language program continues to be on the development of interactional abilities (including translanguaging and transcultural competence) in the spoken mode of communication. In the end, Hualde leaves no ambiguity as to the possible interpretation of his claim: “If Spanish Departments still make sense as academic units, the rationale is to be found in the undergraduate program. At the end, we are all involved in teaching Spanish” (105).

Notes

1. I will use the terms Spanish Linguistics and Hispanic Linguistics interchangeably reflecting its variable use among the authors referenced in the publications mentioned above.
2. In large departments, several linguists could share these various roles, sometime leading to a secondary two-tiered system, whereby the faculty with a specialty in second language acquisition may take over all or most of the “service” roles of the “language specialist.”
3. All translations are my own except where otherwise noted.
4. Source quote: “¿Hay algo que singularice a la *lingüística hispánica* frente a la *lingüística* aparte del hecho de utilizar el español como base empírica?” (Del Valle 83).
5. Source quote: “El problema reside en que, en la medida en que la aplicación del método científico al estudio del lenguaje priorice teorías centradas en su dimensión formal, se darán pocas oportunidades de que surja una concepción del lenguaje afín a las prácticas literarias y culturales que se han convertido en objeto central de los departamentos de lenguas modernas ...” (Del Valle 87).
6. Source quote: “prácticas de interacción con significados sociales disputados que se definen y descodifican siempre en relación con el contexto histórico material de su producción y recepción” (Del Valle 98).
7. Source quote: “...menos plazas de fonología, sintaxis, gramática histórica y adquisición del español (áreas a las que se puede muy bien acceder tendiendo puentes con los departamentos de lingüística) y más de análisis del discurso, historia lingüística e intelectual, lingüística e inmigración y políticas del lenguaje (instaladas en áreas compartidas con los investigadores de la cultura y la comunicación literaria)” (Del Valle 100).
8. Source quote: “Menos materias de gramática—diacrónica o sincrónica—y fonética (áreas importantes, sin duda, pero a las que se llega en colaboración con los departamentos de lingüística) y más análisis del discurso y políticas del lenguaje (prácticas vecinas de los estudios literarios y culturales que se realizan en nuestros departamentos).”

9. See Arteaga & Llorente (2009) for some ideas.
10. The RAE's categorical argument that masculine gender is the default option given reasons of an adduced "law of communicative economy" (*ley lingüística de la economía expresiva*) can be openly debated on the grounds that such principle is selectively applied in favor of the status quo. Such discussion may produce significant pedagogical benefits as students are able to link apparently "fixed" (prescriptive) rules and the rationales proposed to substantiate them.
11. Source quote: "encasillada como *enseñanza del español como lengua extranjera*, que, si bien es actividad profesional y objeto de investigación tan valioso como el que más, no agota ni mucho menos la potencial contribución de la lingüística hispánica a la misión de los departamentos de *lenguas modernas*." (Del Valle 83)
12. Among those changes, Kramersch describes the following: present words and phrases as conceptual metaphors rather than lexical labels, narrate the events from the perspective of another person such as witnesses of the bombing, use the instructors' own personal subjective opinion of the events, etc.
13. As discussed below, there are several studies that outline the pedagogical procedures to analyze spoken data in sufficient detail to provide adequate guidance for the implementation of the intended goal of the 2007 MLA Report.
14. Ultimately, Levine et al. focus their attention on the advanced level courses, noting that "Communicative language teaching has provided a vital starting point for departments to reflect on the relation of form and meaning in second language instruction, but we now need an expansion of these constructs to advanced levels of language learning" (247). The problem with this claim is that the "communicative" approach to teaching adopted by most programs has focused mostly on behavioral objectives that are not aligned with the view of interactional competence (Kramersch 1986).
15. Interestingly, second language teachers have been aware of the substantive contrast to be made between transactional and interactional goals of language use given some important teaching methodology textbooks (e.g., Richards).
16. For reasons of space, I will not address the role played by language centers currently used in many universities to house the first two years of second language instruction. Schechtman and Koster (2008) note the advantage of such arrangements given the current bifurcation of interests between language and literature faculty: "Campus-wide or cross-campus 'language centers,' promoted by the MLA report and already in place at several institutions, are logical sites to help assist departments in such self-reflexive studies of their own goals and practices" (311).

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