

Lines of Flight in Hispanic Linguistics

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It is only fair to begin this brief think piece by thanking the editors of *Hispanic Issues On Line* for having found my 2014 essay worthy of attention and critique. It is also crucial to praise them for their continued encouragement of linguists to engage in a reflexive process, that is, for having invited us to critically look at what we do as linguists in the context of the material and ideological conditions of our professional life. Were it not for stimulating promptings such as these, I believe we would hardly ever face our demons and limitations, our enemies within and without. Perhaps due to the higher value of the “hard” sciences (i.e. their salaries are, quite often, higher than ours) and the dominance of the formal procedures they establish for scientific communication, we seem to have trusted that compliance with those solid and rigorous requirements—and our subsequent acceptance as scientists—would suffice to secure our position and exempt us from any robust exercise in self-criticism. And yet, it is clear enough that all academic disciplines benefit from a sustained debate about not just their progress, but also their social standing and that few are safe in the growingly uncertain remapping of disciplines that is transforming institutions of higher education.

Even a cursory look at any history of linguistics reveals, of course, a heterogeneous discipline that matches the complexity of language, our object of study. However, if one looks at the profile of linguistics departments, one soon realizes the hegemonic status of linguistic theories that favor strict formalization and quantification. Our nineteenth-century predecessors—enthralled by the explanatory power of formal comparison and inspired by the conventions of the natural sciences—engaged in a determined and creative quest for the isolation of language from human will, thus, as Joseph argues, rendering it treatable by means of scientific protocols. Ferdinand de Saussure further pursued this goal by conceptually constructing language as a structure and system of relations; and later research programs (such as generativism or mathematical linguistics)

brought this line of thinking to its ultimate consequences. And yet, whatever may be the degree of success that formalism has enjoyed, language has proved to be too sticky with cultural associations; too close to the realms of literature and philosophy; too involved in social differentiation and political process. Consequently, as linguistics became a disciplined discipline (with its own academic units within universities, specialized journals, conferences, and professional associations), the dominance of formalism within linguistics departments proceeded under constant challenges from scholars who favored the observation and analysis of linguistic phenomena inextricably embedded in history and the social world. I want to underline the fact that the challenges I invoke are not simply theoretical debates on what language is, what constitutes legitimate data for linguistic analysis, or the level of adequacy with which different theories provide felicitous explanations. The challenges I am referring to, more often than not, materialize in significant struggles (I'm even tempted to write "fights") over faculty lines, student fellowships, and research funds. The resources are limited and it is the competing rationales (i.e. power struggles) behind their distribution that must be scrutinized.

The matter gets further complicated when we narrow the discussion down to the realm of Hispanic linguistics. Once we place the tensions internal to the development of this field inside Hispanism or Latin Americanism—that is, inside the academic units that, to a great extent, organize it—the competition for resources becomes, if not fiercer (battles within linguistics have proven to be fierce enough), certainly more multiplex: struggles over the relative value of different theories of language (formal, social, political) are complicated by an additional frontline in which it is the profile, relevance, and worth of language study itself—vis-à-vis cultural and literary studies—that is at stake. In fact, I would dare claim that the latter has been the toughest challenge faced by Hispanic linguistics: scholars working in this academic field—constituted around an object labelled “Spanish language”—have struggled to firmly establish their status as they have witnessed a progressive reduction of their discipline’s value and prestige within Spanish departments, a parallel isolation of language study in the so-called “lower-level,” and a confusing (and confused) blending of different forms of linguistic research whereby the label “language” is clumsily and indiscriminately used to signal specialists in language acquisition, experts in syntax or historical linguistics, sociolinguists, and language pedagogues.

This perception—this feeling of being relegated to the status of second-class citizens—was clearly visible in the contributions made by linguists to a special volume of *Hispanic Issues On Line* published in 2006 under the title *Debating Hispanic Studies: Reflections on Our Disciplines*. Those essays were written by prominent scholars in Hispanic linguistics (including

Francisco Ocampo, José Ignacio Hualde, Jacqueline Toribio, Rafael Núñez Cedeño, Steven Dworkin, and John Lipski) and dealt specifically with the state of the discipline in the American university. In his introduction to the Hispanic linguistics section of the special issue, Ocampo summarized the main topics that underpinned the cluster: on the celebratory side, they all praised the high quality of the work produced by scholars in Hispanic linguistics and emphasized the importance of empirical research; on a more programmatic side (and in response to their discontents), they noted the need to properly train graduate students, warned about the general perception of linguists as language teachers and language program administrators, and insisted on the desirability of building bridges that favor communication with colleagues in the cultural and literary tracks of the department.

The overall argument developed by this group of linguists was grounded in two ideas. First, specialists in Hispanic Linguistics are, above all, linguists. “Hispanic” simply points at the fact that they happen to choose Spanish and Spanish speakers as their source of data. Second, the disciplinary distance that hampers collaboration with specialists in Hispanic and Latin American literatures and cultures must be bridged through the cultivation of areas such as critical discourse analysis or the interface between language and identity (John Lipski provided the most detailed and promising list).

It was bridge building as a structuring trope for the future development of Hispanic linguistics (used by Ocampo as well as Hualde and Lipski) that caught my attention. While suggesting an open and collaborative move with which I unquestionably agreed, the disciplinary cartography that this move—this bridge building—took for granted significantly differed from my own views of the field and its position in relation to, on the one hand, the tensions inherent to linguistics and, on the other, those inherent to the study of Hispanic and Latin American cultures and literatures.

I admit, however, that within their view of the field and the logic of their argument, the bridge building strategy makes sense. If, as a linguist, your goal is to contribute to the development of a general theory of language—regardless of the specific theoretical framework with which you work—and “Spanish” is nothing but raw data, it makes sense that you would position yourself within the disciplinary boundaries of linguistics. José Ignacio Hualde stated it quite clearly: “Spanish linguists are linguists with specialized knowledge on the facts of the Spanish language. Given this, it is not really possible to speak of developments in Spanish linguistics as if it were somehow a separate field with its own dynamics, theories and methodologies” (102). And so did Jacqueline Toribio: “Consider the now commonplace occurrence wherein the questions that guide the researcher in Hispanic Linguistics (*interpreted as the study of linguistics as applied to Spanish and its speakers*) are shared with those of the generative linguist”

(133, emphasis added). Therefore, if the underlying premise is that Hispanic Linguistics and Hispanic and Latin American Cultural and Literary Studies belong to different disciplinary realms and yet are forced to co-exist inside the same academic unit, it makes sense to think of “building bridges” in order to persuade our colleagues—who are more often than not the decision makers when it comes to curriculum and research lines—to accept language study not only as a worthy intellectual pursuit, but as one somehow connected with their professional interests and academic mission.

While this vision is reasonable and—to a significant extent—reflects the current correlation between intellectual practices and academic units fairly, the problem associated with the weak status of Hispanic Linguistics within Spanish departments still remains. Following the argument above, the logical response would be to have linguistics departments host those specialists in Hispanic Linguistics who, from a disciplinary perspective, align themselves with linguistics and devote Hispanic linguistics lines located in Spanish departments to areas such as critical discourse analysis, the interface between language and identity, etc. In such an arrangement, bridge building would link linguistics departments and Spanish departments; it would not be internal to the latter.

The fact is that the colleagues who contributed to the 2006 special issue of *Hispanic Issues On Line* did not even come close to suggesting this pathway. Instead, they fell into what I consider to be a fundamentally contradictory structure of thinking: first, they acknowledge their impossible situation in Spanish departments; second, they close ranks and reassert their professional location within linguistics; and third, they appeal as potential saviors—as bridge builders—to areas of research such as discourse analysis or language and identity. But this is a non-solution in as much as it fails to acknowledge the deep wedge that separates linguists of the formalist persuasion—those who have pushed human will to the margins of the realm of language—from those who place the socially embedded speaker and the act of speaking (or the writer and the act of writing) at the very center of their pursuit. It also fails to acknowledge the fact that hegemonic discourses and practices within linguistics have systematically pushed areas, such as discourse analysis and language and identity, away from the core of the discipline. Finally, it fails to acknowledge a fundamental distinction between two related yet different objects of analysis: language and the Spanish language.

As indicated, I have a different view of the problem, and, on the basis of this view, I suggest following a different pathway for the future. Historically, in spite of having developed within Spanish departments, Hispanic linguistics evolved as an outpost of linguistics disconnected from the developments in the study of Hispanic and Latin American literatures and cultures. Instead, formalist morpho-syntactic and phonological theories

as well as historical grammar have dominated the curriculum (a careful look at two prominent textbooks introducing Hispanic linguistics—Hualde et al. and Azevedo—is revealing in this regard). Language acquisition was allowed to enter, but, as enrollment increased—especially in elementary- and intermediate-level courses—scholars in this field came to be overburdened with administrative responsibilities and became associated with purely pedagogical, as opposed to scholarly, undertakings. For specialists in these dominant fields (historical grammar, phonology, semantics, and syntax), Spanish was often nothing more than a source of data and a language whose growing popularity among United States college students allowed Spanish departments to prosper and the “language” component to remain strong without much incentive to engage in critical self-reflection. In the meantime, the areas of Hispanic Linguistics that focused on cultural, political, or social theories of language and, crucially, those that focused on “Spanish” as a cultural, political, and social phenomenon, were either excluded or relegated to a peripheral position and prevented from occupying a prominent space in the curriculum. In other words, the areas of Hispanic Linguistics that could have productively partnered with colleagues in cultural and literary studies did not have enough presence to jointly engage in the ongoing discussions on the future of Hispanism, Latin Americanism, and Spanish departments.

And there have indeed been lively discussions. In my previous essay on this topic (Del Valle), I used as a reference Mabel Moraña’s provocative and illuminating volume *Ideologies of Hispanism*, in which the various contributors (a fine list of prominent scholars in cultural and literary studies) offer both an analysis of Hispanism as an ideology and suggest “lines of flight” (to use Román de la Campa’s words) through which to rethink our objects of study and reconfigure our disciplines. They ultimately propose a move away from an ideology linked to Spanish imperialism and nationalism and from a disciplinary practice that reifies culture through the prefiguration of stable objects, such as national literatures and languages. Instead, they put forth a new paradigm that favors “a more volatile, porous, temporary experience of *the social*, where *otherness*, heterogeneity, and diversity are the conspicuous protagonists of cultural exchanges and epistemological explorations” (Moraña xvii). As we can see, instead of static conceptions of culture, Moraña and her collaborators embrace a reticular understanding of the cultural field and of the various practices—whether linguistic, literary, or otherwise—that constitute it.

A crucial aspect of this proposal—one crucial for the purposes of the present argument—is the fact that it places language at the very center of this intellectual project of disciplinary renewal:

[T]he Spanish language has constituted, both in Spain and in Spanish America, a distinct space for symbolic struggle, for the construction of collective memories and subjectivities, and for the perpetuation of a cultural and economic linkage between the old metropolis and the former colonies. . . . The use of language both as a pragmatic and a symbolic device of domination—as well as a key element of cultural resistance—is one of the most important issues studied in this book.
 (Moraña x-xi)

It is hard to find a stronger endorsement of Hispanic linguistics and its value to the “current” (Moraña was writing ten years ago) discussions within Hispanic and Latin American cultural and literary studies. The problem is—in my reading of the scenario—that the development of Hispanic Linguistics that I described above—as a feeble outpost of formal linguistics—made it practically impossible for the field to fruitfully contribute to projects such as the one outlined by Moraña et al.

Therefore, it is high time for a profound reconceptualization of Hispanic Linguistics and I will dare propose some criteria on the basis of which to reconstitute our object of study. First, we should acknowledge the complexity of the word “Hispanic” and embrace it only as a term that problematically points at sub-national, national, and trans-national cultural fields that have been historically constituted and that continue to be re-configured in the present. Second, we should acknowledge the many and heterogeneous sociolinguistic configurations found across these cultural and political spaces and focus on the cultural, political and social relevance of such linguistic complexity. And third, we should focus on Spanish not as a reified system (as if it were an object, out there, with a natural autonomous existence), but as a malleable cultural artifact and an ever-evolving product of historical conditions. It is not hard to see that linguists trained in social dialectology, discourse analysis, historical linguistics, language acquisition or language policy do in fact engage in research that follows the lines of thinking just outlined.

In fact, John Lipski, in a lucid and illuminating essay, drew a neat map of the areas of sociolinguistics that are clearly connected with cultural studies (including multiple references to studies in which the connection is manifest). The problem of Hispanic Linguistics, however, is not the absence of culturally, politically, and socially relevant research. There is plenty of it and a lot of it is truly excellent. The problem is that historical and current institutional practices and arrangements have made it almost impossible for these areas to develop within Spanish departments. The way out of this dead-end street runs through curricular renovations that place sociolinguistics at the center (leaving, whenever possible, the basic training in syntax, phonology, etc., to linguistics departments or interdepartmental

linguistics programs) and hiring practices that favor scholars whose work is engaged with the discussions that shape Hispanic and Latin American cultural and literary studies.

To conclude, I would like to acknowledge that these musings on the past, present, and future status of Hispanic Linguistics must be placed within a broader context defined by the current political economy of our universities and the rise of interdisciplinarity. Firstly, while intellectual confrontation and disciplinary self-reflection are healthy and necessary, we must not forget that seemingly never-ending budgetary cuts continue to not only strain our ability to do our job, but, more perversely, to pit us against each other in a savage confrontation in which intellectual and political arguments are displaced by raw instincts of professional survival. Secondly, while inter- and trans-disciplinary practices are to be recognized as essential to intellectual movement and innovation, we must take precautions to resist new institutional arrangements that, while using the promotion of interdisciplinarity as an alibi, serve the sole purpose of “reducing costs.” In sum, no matter how intensely we engage in critiques of our profession and in spirited debates with each other, we must ensure that our discussions strengthen rather than weaken and support rather than undermine the humanities and the social sciences, the university as a central producer of knowledge, and education as an inalienable right for all.

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