

Hispanic Linguistics at a Crossroads

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The essays in Martín-Estudillo et al. (2006) and Lipski (2007) raised relevant considerations about the status of Hispanic Linguistics in American universities, and Del Valle's comments (2014) confirmed the ongoing validity of those remarks on Hispanic Linguistics as a research area and as an educational field. These are two sides of the same coin: our research, divulged in conference papers, journal articles, book chapters, and books; and our activities, such as teaching courses, advising students, or directing theses and dissertations. When there is a good fit between the two sides, research and teaching may be closely related. Due to circumstances to be commented on below, however, the synergy between research and teaching is often tenuous. Whereas literature professors at research universities rarely give courses outside their specialization, in the same institutions it is not unusual for the one or two linguists in the Spanish department to teach courses in areas—phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and language variation—unrelated to their research field. In addition, Hispanic linguists are often responsible for activities that, while benefitting from their specialized training, do not constitute linguistics per se, such as training teaching assistants, designing language courses, or directing language programs. Comments on this arrangement appeared in several of the essays mentioned above and need not be revisited here.

Regarding research, the past decade has seen an impressive output in Spanish linguistics. Traditional venues, such as the conventions of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP) and, to a lesser extent, the Modern Language Association (MLA), have featured essays on Spanish linguistics; the Congress on Spanish in the United States, first held in 1980, and the Congress of Spanish in Contact with other Languages (held jointly with the latter since 1991) have continued to be active venues for a growing number of specialists; and the first congress of the recently reactivated Academia Norteamericana de la Lengua Española (ANLE), held in June 2014, featured essays on Spanish in the United States.

The Place of Hispanic Linguistics and Literary/Cultural Studies: Current Debates on Liberal Education

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Essays on Spanish by United States-based linguists have increasingly appeared in professional journals (*Hispania*, *Southwest Journal of Linguistics*, *Boletín de la Academia Norteamericana de la Lengua Española*, *Language Problems & Language Planning*, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *Revista Iberoamericana de Lingüística*, among others) and in the last decade one or more major books on Spanish linguistics have been published every year, to wit: Lipski (2008) analyzes varieties of Spanish in the United States, Bills and Vigil (2008) is a linguistic atlas of Spanish in New Mexico and Colorado, and López Morales (2008) touches on practically every aspect of Spanish in this country, from its arrival in the fifteenth century to the first decade of the twenty-first century; Callahan (2009) studies the alternation of Spanish and English in service encounters and Klee and Lynch (2009) analyze the effects of the contact between Spanish and other languages worldwide; Rivera-Mills and Villa (2010) present twenty-two chapters on aspects of Southwest Spanish and Koike and Rodríguez-Alfano (2010) offer a collection of valuable studies on dialogue; Díaz-Campos (2014) includes thirty-five chapters on phonological and morphosyntactic variation, social variation, Spanish in contact, Spanish in the United States, and language policy and planning and Dumitrescu (2011) analyzes issues of politeness, face management, discourse functions, and strategies; Beaudrie and Fairclough (2012) includes thirteen chapters on the study of Spanish in the United States, De los Heros et al. (2012) presents fifteen chapters on a variety of aspects of pragmatics, and Otheguy and Zentella (2012) study effects of language contact in New York City Spanish; Dumitrescu and Piña-Rosales (2013) present eighteen essays on sociodemography, language acquisition and transmission, bilinguals's Spanish, linguistic ideology and identity, educational policy and pedagogical issues of teaching heritage students, and Del Valle (2015) offers twenty-five studies of political aspects of the history of Spanish; Silva-Corvalán (2014) examines processes of language acquisition among bilinguals, Hualde et al. (2014) is a forty-chapter landmark handbook of Spanish linguistics; and Austin et al. (2015) is a valuable volume on bilingualism topics.

In contrast to such intense research activity, the status of Hispanic Linguistics as an academic field has not changed significantly. A current Web site¹ lists forty-one graduate programs in that area, thirty of them offering the Ph.D. degree, and all of them housed in literature departments. This arrangement underscores the fact that Hispanic Linguistics, lacking an academic *locus* of its own, remains an administrative appendix to departments primarily devoted to something else, a situation unlikely to change in the near future (Lipski, “(After)Thoughts”).

A relevant topic raised by the authors mentioned in the introduction concerns the establishment of links between Hispanic linguistics faculties

and their literature colleagues and students. José del Valle aptly suggests the creation “tal vez por la vía de una asignatura de introducción a la lingüística hispánica, un acercamiento a la lengua española como artefacto cultural y constructo cognitivo. . . . una secuencia de materias que le enseñen al alumno a reflexionar sobre la lengua española, respectivamente, como discurso y como objeto del discurso” (“El lugar” 101) (perhaps by means of an introduction to Hispanic linguistics course that would approach the Spanish language as a cultural artifact and a cognitive construct. . . . a sequence of subjects aiming to teach students to reflect on the Spanish language as both a kind of discourse and an object of discourse). One should bear in mind, however, that students arrive at college—and at graduate school—with limited experience in reflecting upon language and language variation, except perhaps at an elementary and misguided level of “correct vs. incorrect” usage. In spite of the relevance of understanding language as cultural artifact and its cognitive, social, and historical implications, it has been argued (Azevedo, “Literary Linguistics”; Azevedo, “A representação”; Azevedo, “Linguística”) that the perception of how language works requires a basic familiarization—at least a one-semester course—with the essentials of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

Real language is inextricably marked by variation, which needs to be taken into account if we are to make sense of the notion of standard/nonstandard, a social construct that, whether we like it or not, pervades the history of the Spanish language, sometimes as a gradient, and more often than not as a dichotomy.² The point is not whether one should “believe” in the standard, but that students need to realize how language works both internally and as a means of social communication, and how it is perceived by its speakers. Otherwise it is difficult for them to understand the expansion of Spanish, the reasons why certain forms have been preferred over others, and the tensions that arise between regional and social varieties. This is not a purely academic concern, but rather an issue that comes up time and again in the classroom as well as in heritage speakers’ daily life. Faced with students who come from environments where historically legitimate forms, such as *haiga*, *abuja*, *agüela*, *pader*, *háblemos* occur instead of *haya*, *aguja*, *abuela*, *pared*, *hablemos*, instructors need to understand and be able to explain the linguistic processes whereby such doublets have come into existence as well as why some forms have been incorporated in formal language whereas others, though alive in colloquial communication, have not.

Furthermore, a grasp on the workings of dialectal and sociolectal variation is crucial to understand texts using a literary dialect, the written representation of speech marked by regional and/or social features that contrast with the standard variety. Such use of nonstandard language poses interpretive problems regarding cognitive denotations as well as social

connotations (Ives; Page; Nuessel; Azevedo, “Considerations”; Azevedo, “Implicaciones”; Minnick). Since most students who have learned Spanish as a second language are only familiar with its normative variety, texts such as José Hernández’s *Martín Fierro*, René Marqués’s *La carreta*, Valle Inclán’s *Tirano Banderas*, or certain sections of Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s *Tres tristes tigres*, require clarification of details of phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, and dialectal/sociolectal variation. Notions of dialectology and sociolinguistics enrich the analysis of such representations, used as a device to capture regional and/or social connotations, by supporting the view of variation as an integral part of the language. Bringing together information on the diachronic, dialectal, and sociolinguistic aspects of those varieties empowers students to trace the relationship between normative and non-normative forms and thus to visualize the latter as manifestations of a fully respectable cultural diversity, as reflected in works of United States-based authors, such as Roberto G. Fernández’s *La vida es un special \$1.00 .75* or Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s “El pavo.”

By way of illustration, let me summarize my department’s experience in the last decade and a half or so in offering a major option in “Hispanic Languages and Bilingual Issues” with a strong concentration in Spanish linguistics. Besides the usual foundation courses (introduction to Spanish linguistics, phonetics and phonology, morphology and syntax of Spanish), there is a course on issues of multilingualism, focusing on the interaction of language, culture, and society, including language conflict, educational policies and language planning, language socialization and ideologies, bilingual communicative practices, and code-switching. Another course on language and society in the Spanish-speaking world analyzes processes such as the spread of Spanish, contact with other languages, case studies of regional and social variation, and Spanish as a world language. A course in language variation analyzes the representation of dialects in Spanish, Latin American, and United States Spanish literature. Finally, courses on linguistic aspects of style and narrative focus on different types of discourse (such as journalism, scientific writing, fiction, legal writing, or advertising) as manifestations of cognition-based processes that raise questions of syntax, lexicon, diction, dialogue, genre, ideology, and language variation, the study of which highlights style variation and narrative structure as cognitive strategies.

This major option initially involved two faculty members, but after one of them retired in the early 2000s, some courses have been taught by ABDs in Hispanic linguistics and, in the last few years, by a Ph.D.-holding part-time lecturer. Despite staffing limitations, Hispanic Languages and Bilingual Issues turned out to very popular among students, and, in Fall 2014, it accounted for about 33–35 percent of the majors, which made it the second most-enrolled major option (out of six, and right after Option A,

Spanish Language and Literature). Enrollment figures reveal a number of students interested in upper-division courses focusing on something other than literary/cultural studies. The linguistics courses have also regularly attracted students from scientific fields as removed from foreign languages as computer science or integrative biology who, possibly because of their study habits and motivation to reach principled solutions rather than frothy interpretations, systematically excel in them.

A graduate seminar, which fulfills the linguistics requirement, introduces applications of linguistic analysis to literary texts, focusing *inter alia* on techniques of close reading, discourse analysis, the structure of narrative, dialogue, direct, indirect, and free indirect style, and representations of orality.³ Depending on student interest, specialized seminars have focused specifically on literary dialect, or on linguistic issues of literary translation, covering relevant aspects of morphology and syntax, lexical matters, register, style, semantic issues, such as denotation and connotation, regional variation topics, such as dialects and their representation, sociolinguistic variables, and taboo language. Over the years, literature students' response to this course has ranged from polite listlessness to enough enthusiasm to add a linguistic component to their graduate program, sometimes directly influencing their dissertation.

Clearly, it is possible for a department to offer courses and even a major in Hispanic Linguistics with only one faculty member and some teaching staff assistance. However, it needs at least two or more tenure-track faculty to make long-term plans for developing and adjusting its Hispanic Linguistics program to changing circumstances, such as innovations in the field, students' interests, or the kinds of jobs available to its graduates. Paradoxically, however, the very existence of Hispanic Linguistics programs depends on the vote of a majority of literature/cultural studies faculty who can, at any point, decide not to replace a retiring linguist or to dispense with the linguistics program altogether, as in the case of Ivy League universities (Lipski, "Hispanic Linguistics" 109; Del Valle, "El lugar" 99).

Another concern has to do with the negative views held by administrators who question the role, or even the presence, of linguists in literature departments. It may take years to redress the damage wreaked by a linguistophobe dean by simply not authorizing a new hire when it is most needed; on occasion, it may not be redressed at all, if other hiring priorities emerge after that obstacle has been lifted.

Finally, there is the vexing circumstance that many of the jobs available to Hispanic linguists holding a Ph.D. and specializing in second language acquisition are defined as non-tenure-track positions, such as lectureships. Such an intrinsically unstable arrangement reinforces the erroneous view, prevalent in certain quarters, that second language acquisition is not a serious research field. The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy: hired as

lecturers teaching more courses per term than regular faculty, second-language acquisition specialists often lack the time, encouragement and institutional support to carry out research, and thus unwittingly justify being labeled as non-research teaching staff. Such a skewed view fosters two-tier departments where professional linguists with many years' experience end up having their academic advancement—contract renewal, salary increases, promotions—voted on by literature/cultural studies colleagues lacking comparable experience and know-how. This circumstance encourages promising candidates to gravitate to other fields so as to avoid having to settle for a less than full-fledged position after several years of graduate work.

Its scholarly productivity as a research field notwithstanding, there is something perplexing about the status of Hispanic Linguistics—the recurring need to justify its existence, an ongoing tension vis-à-vis its literature/cultural studies counterpart, its undefined relationship with linguistics departments, the uncertainty about its future—that may ultimately prevent it from reaching its potential. Such an outcome would be all the more regrettable in view of the position of Spanish as the second most-spoken language in the United States. This situation raises crucial questions about its role in American society, whether it should be considered a foreign language at all, its relationship with English, and, ultimately, its maintenance (Alonso; Beaudrie and Fairclough; Lipski, “Rethinking”; Marcos-Marín, *Los retos*; Marcos-Marín, “Para la reconstrucción”; Marcos-Marín, “Confluencia”); the role of code-switching in oral communication and as a stylistic device in popular culture on radio and television as well as in literary fiction (Callahan, *Spanish/English*); and the myriad of educational questions concerning heritage speakers (Garcia; Potowski; Silva-Corvalán; Valdés; Valdés et al., *Preparing Teachers*; Valdés et al., “Maintaining Spanish”; and many others). At a time when the humanities are seriously questioned, inside and outside academia, these are issues that Spanish departments need to address—as a civic duty and to justify their relevance to society.

Notes

1. <<http://www.spanishacademic.com/spanish-graduate-programs/spanish-linguistics.aspx>> Accessed on August 15, 2015.
2. See Fernández Juncal and Amorós Negre (2014).
3. Among the abundant bibliography about linguistics and literature one might mention Chapman (1973), Fabb (1997), Minnick (2004), Nuessel (2000), Simpson (1997), Toolan (2001), Traugott and Pratt (1980), and the essays in the journal *Language and Literature*.

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