



Hispanic Linguistics in North America: How We Got Here and Where We Go Now

Javier Gutiérrez-Rexach

Hispanic Linguistics as a Discipline

I believe that there is little doubt nowadays that Hispanic Linguistics can and should be considered an autonomous discipline. Nevertheless, if this issue had been raised a few decades ago, it is likely that the answer would have been different. A positive answer to such a question requires considering its two central components. In order to be considered as a genuine discipline, there has to be evidence that Hispanic Linguistics has autonomy as a field of inquiry. Additionally, there has to be evidence of a consistent institutional incarnation; more specifically, this evidence should come from the instantiation of the field as an independent program, track, or course of studies.

Adequately addressing the first component would require considering what Hispanic Linguistics is as a discipline and whether those who practice it recognize themselves as scholars within a relatively unified field of research. Hispanic Linguistics has two souls, as its complex name clearly indicates. On the one hand, it can be considered part of the linguistic enterprise; in other words, it adopts the theoretical and methodological assumptions and practices of the discipline of Linguistics (Hualde; Toribio). On the other hand, it is not just equivalent to Linguistics in general, since its subject of inquiry is restricted to Hispanic languages and their varieties. Some would probably disagree with this characterization in its most strict interpretation. For example, it could be questioned whether there is a common core in all forms of linguistic analysis, given the variety of areas and approaches that can be attested. One could also wonder whether those conducting research connecting Spanish to other Iberian or Romance languages can still be considered Hispanic linguists; for example, it is not clear whether those comparative Romance linguists whose work focuses on the history of Spanish are still Hispanic linguists, Romance linguists with a

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

Hispanic Issues On Line Debates 6 (2016)

particular language focus, or whether establishing such a distinction really matters after all. Nevertheless, I believe that these debates do not affect the assessment of the discipline's viability in a critical fashion. They are mostly peripheral matters of degree and pertain to the proper delimitation and charting of the border territories of the field more than affecting its core nature.

Hispanic Linguistics is deeply rooted in Hispanic Philology, even if these roots are not always recognized. The philological school that flourished in Spain under the auspices of Ramón Menéndez Pidal at the beginning of last century and developed well into the 1950s and 1960s (including scholars such as Rafael Lapesa, Emilio Alarcos, Manuel Alvar, etc.) can be considered a precursor or early stage of Hispanic Linguistics. Its practitioners worked using the linguistic assumptions and views that were predominant in that period, from the comparative/historical method in its earlier stages to the structuralist approaches advocated in the latter period. It is true that the emergence and expansion of generative linguistics in the 1960s and 1970s created a continuity break with such schools, since a majority of its practitioners decided to continue within the path of European structuralism in its latter developments (Hjelmslev's glossematics, Coseriu or Pottier's approaches, etc.). This approach to generative grammar, while mostly indifferent when not overtly hostile, can be seen as a textbook example of Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific change, where paradigms are not replaced in a naturally evolutionary fashion, but as revolutionary breaks involving new actors (Joseph). Generative grammar, on the other hand, did not lend itself to be easily adopted as a theoretical framework. It required training of a technical nature, which was not generally a part of the curriculum in philological and humanities programs, and was not easily available as such in Europe or even in America, where linguistics departments with a generative orientation started to emerge in the 1960s. This training problem was even worse for more formalized frameworks emerging at that time, such as Montague grammar, which eventually became the foundation of contemporary semantics and advocated a very precise account of natural language meaning (using the tools of mathematical logic and model theory).

Lacking a tradition similar to the European one, the situation for linguistic research on Spanish in America during the 1960s and 1970s was characterized by the lack of a systematic institutional housing—specific or autonomous—for those conducting such research within the generative framework. Although a great deal of progress was made in our understanding of Spanish (with the contributions of scholars of the generative school, such as James Harris, Heles Contreras, Margarita Suárez, María Luisa Rivero, etc.), these linguists and others were either in

departments of linguistics or were more or less isolated linguists in language departments.

During the 1980s and 1990s, two processes began to coalesce and made the emergence of Hispanic Linguistics possible as an institutional reality. On the one hand, a good number of departments of Spanish, Spanish and Portuguese, or Hispanic Studies emerged, in some instances on their own, in others as these units branched out from larger Modern Languages or Romance Languages departments. On the other hand, Hispanic Linguistics tracks or programs developed within language departments at the undergraduate and graduate levels. These two processes were obviously interrelated and were the result of a variety of factors. An important external cause was the increased enrollment in courses with Hispanic content across the curriculum (both for those with a language-centered orientation and for the culturally-oriented ones) and the improved job prospects for graduates. This changing scenario led to an increased awareness by departments and higher administrators of the importance of having not only autonomous Spanish departments, but also Hispanic Linguistics tracks, in order to target such a demand. Linguists were now needed not only to take care of grammar instruction at different levels, as was the case in the past, but also to train future faculty members in Spanish language research and to develop such research, which began to be viewed as a worthy pursuit on its own, independently of applied issues related to its learning and acquisition.

The outcome of this gradual process, as increasingly realized in the last two decades, is the change in the composition of many Spanish departments, at least in Research I public universities. The previous *status quo* for such units, where a majority of tenure-track faculty members worked on literature and culture topics whereas one or at most two ‘token’ faculty members, sometimes not tenured, either worked on linguistic matters and/or coordinated the language program, should not be (and mostly is not) perceived as a viable model anymore. Hispanic Linguistics thus commonly finds its institutional incarnation as a section, program, or track with sufficient autonomy within Spanish departments at top institutions, and tenure-track faculty members with such specialization comprise a fourth to a half of a department’s total.

The Research Field

The institutional academic growth described in the previous section has been paralleled by an increased visibility of Hispanic Linguistics as a field with its own established research outlets (conferences, journals, book series, etc.). During the 1980s and 1990s, students and scholars conducting research on theoretical Spanish linguistics had few options to present their work before

an audience with similar interests. General professional conferences, such as the MLA, the LSA annual meetings, or linguistic conferences (WCCFL, NELS, WECOL, to name a few), rarely featured sessions dedicated to Spanish and, especially in those of the latter type, acceptance or not of an essay was more a function of its relevance *vis-à-vis* a certain theoretical problem, rather than solving or addressing a specific issue of Spanish grammar. The Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages (LSRL) was a notable exception given its Romance focus, consolidated tradition, and rigorous and highly competitive peer review process and acceptance rates. At the end of the 1990s, the creation and consolidation of the Hispanic Linguistics Symposium (HLS) was a welcome innovation reflecting that the field was reaching a critical mass of practitioners. HLS originated as a regional Midwest conference (organized by José del Valle in 1997 at Miami University), then as a national conference by invitation (organized in 1998 at The Ohio State University by Javier Gutiérrez-Rexach and Fernando Martínez-Gil), and finally as a peer-reviewed conference with open submission beginning with the 1999 installment (at Georgetown University). The LSRL has also continued its successful trajectory with an increasing quota of essays devoted to Hispanic Linguistics issues. Finally, specific area and subject conferences have started to emerge in recent years, providing even more evidence of the dynamism of the field: Laboratory Approaches to Spanish Phonology, Conference on the Acquisition of Spanish and Portuguese, Workshop on Spanish Sociolinguistics, etc. Most of these conferences also offered the possibility of submitting essays for publication in a selected proceedings volume, something that guaranteed the durability of such events and the widespread diffusion of research results in the community. Cascadilla Press, the publishing house for several of these events, released these volumes not only in print, but also gave free online access to individual essays. It seems thus accurate to claim that current research in the field is widely available and reaches the research community in a relatively quick fashion.

In the journal and monograph front, there has also been considerable progress in the last decade. After the disappearance of the pioneering journal *Hispanic Linguistics*, the Romance-languages periodical *Probus* was the only outlet for Hispanic/Romance Linguistics, although other linguistics journals such as *Lingua*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, among others, were also particularly receptive to research on Spanish. The beginning of the new millennium, and especially the most recent years, has brought about a considerable expansion of the landscape for authors looking for periodical venues within the field. New journals with a Spanish linguistics focus have emerged, most prominently *Studies in Hispanic and Lusophone Linguistics* (initially published at the University of Minnesota by its chief editor, Timothy Face, and appearing with De Gruyter starting with the 2015 issues)

or the more specialized *Spanish in Context*. Georgetown University Press had a long-standing tradition of publishing Hispanic Linguistics titles, a trend initiated by the highly successful pioneering volume *Current Studies in Spanish Linguistics* (1991), and has developed the book series, *Georgetown Studies in Spanish Linguistics*. Other publishers, such as De Gruyter or John Benjamins, have usually been very receptive to book projects on Hispanic Linguistics topics (for example, in John Benjamins's *Linguistics Today*, *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*, or the *Pragmatics and Beyond* series), but they have recently moved even further by developing new specific series in Hispanic Linguistics (such as John Benjamins's *Issues in Hispanic and Lusophone Linguistics*). Other publishers are also joining the fray. The Ohio State University Press has recently launched *Theoretical Developments in Hispanic Linguistics*, and Routledge Publishing (a member of the Taylor & Francis Group) will launch *Routledge Spanish Language and Linguistics Introductions* and *Routledge Focus* soon. Wiley-Blackwell is intensifying its publication program with a series of introductory textbooks in Spanish.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that one of the most significant measures of the vitality and maturity of a research field is the publication of handbooks, specific surveys or broad-spectrum compilations. The above-mentioned pioneering volume, *Current Studies in Spanish Linguistics* (Campos and Martínez-Gil), has been followed by numerous monographs and multi-authored books pertaining to several different areas of Hispanic Linguistics. The highly influential *Handbook of Hispanic Linguistics*, published by Wiley in its prestigious Blackwell Handbooks in Linguistics series (Hualde, Olarrea and O'Rourke), offered a comprehensive view of the state of the art of the discipline, especially in its theoretical dimensions. A similar function was fulfilled by the more recent *Routledge Handbook of Hispanic Applied Linguistics* (Lacorte) for the applied components. The forthcoming *Enciclopedia de lingüística hispánica* (Gutiérrez-Rexach) aims at offering an introductory reference view for students and scholars of Spanish, both in its grammatical, theoretical, and applied components, including its evolutionary and social aspects.

The Future: Prospects and Challenges

Even if we are witnessing sufficient evidence of a thriving field right now, there are several aspects that may well represent either challenges for further development or opportunities for consolidation and expansion in new directions. In what follows, I will briefly characterize the four issues that I consider most significant in this respect. The first two pertain to the articulation of Hispanic Linguistics on its own and the last two to its

integration in departments of Spanish (or Spanish and Portuguese, Romance languages, or modern/foreign language departments in general).

1. The Balance Between Theoretical and Applied Concerns:

The relationship between Theoretical and Applied Linguistics has usually been contentious, controversial, unfruitful, and, at times, poorly understood. The scenario for linguistics, in general, is quite varied. Some institutions have independent Theoretical and Applied Linguistics departments (such as UCLA until 2014), whereas, in others, the situation is more mixed, with Applied Linguists sometimes holding joint appointments at other departments or centers (Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology). The scenario in Spanish-language departments is also different in that some institutions have a predominance of linguists with applied concerns and other departments have a more theoretical orientation overall. The natural development of certain Hispanic Linguistics programs has paralleled that of Linguistics departments in some instances. The predominant trend at first was to cover the core theoretical areas (syntax, phonology, history of the Spanish language, etc.) with later hires branching into territories of a more applied nature. Nevertheless, there are numerous instances of programmatic development in the opposite direction, namely when a department's linguists's areas of expertise are initially of an applied nature in general for obvious reasons (first or second language acquisition/learning and pedagogy) and over time either more applied linguists or others with theoretical expertise (phonology, syntax, etc.) are brought into the mix.

Still the question arises as to which principle should guide departmental growth and development. For example, it is not clear which areas of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics should be the focus of such expansion: all, in general, or just those that seem to be more pertinent to current practices in the field. For example, it is obvious that those areas related to social issues or acquisition/learning aspects should be well represented in any Hispanic Linguistics program. On the other hand, areas such as computational linguistics or Spanish language processing are poorly represented, if represented at all, in a majority of current Hispanic Linguistics programs. A potential explanation and even rationale for this scenario is that areas, such as those just mentioned and similar ones, either require extensive training or facilities (labs) commonly not available for language departments, so it is best to refrain from pursuing them as potential enhancements of a Hispanic Linguistics program.

Nevertheless, this rationale is problematic for the consistent development of research on areas such as computer-assisted language learning, etc., which seem clearly relevant to the mission of a language

department. Additionally, there are other areas that are currently underrepresented at most United States institutions and to which the “farming out” rationale cannot be applied in a clear fashion. These areas seem to be well represented in Modern Language/Hispanic departments in Europe, so their less than optimal implantation in North American institutions begs for an explanation. I am referring to subject areas such as translation and interpretation, Spanish for the professions (not only business Spanish, but also Spanish and the health or medical sciences, etc.), forensic linguistics in all its dimensions, language and the media, etc. Expanding and developing these areas could potentially enable a reassessment of the mission of a Hispanic Linguistics program, moving from the focus on training the Hispanic linguists of the future to a more integrative and ambitious position, where Spanish language and linguistics expertise is viewed as central not only to language instructors, but also to many other professionals, such as lawyers, doctors, journalists, etc.

There are also territories that seem to be in need of a more systematic dialogue between the applied and the theoretical components: Are the approaches underlying theoretical and applied research exclusive or complementary?; How can they enrich and supplement each other?; What would be the role of the newly emerging experimental approaches in several areas of linguistics, which seem to bridge the gap between theoretical and “applied” concerns and methodologies? These are all questions that need to be addressed not only in the context of a Spanish or foreign language unit, but might require looking laterally to standard practices in other fields where this dichotomy also arises.

2. Reflecting the Change of Our Field and/or of the Field of Linguistics: The natural evolution of the linguistic sciences is guided by changes of paradigm in different linguistic disciplines, such as the transition from the generative derivational model to Optimality Theory in phonology; the change from the Principles and Parameters framework to Minimalism in syntax; or the incorporation of dynamic frameworks in semantics. Linguistics departments normally try to adapt to these paradigm changes in order to keep their competitive edge at the forefront of linguistic research by hiring new specialists who have significantly contributed to the emergence of such models. Nevertheless, it is worth posing the question of whether Hispanic Linguistics programs should follow the same strategy. In other words, it seems appropriate to debate whether it is necessary or even worthwhile for a language department to keep up with developments at the forefront of each and every field of linguistic research. A negative answer to this

question receives support from the fact that institutions with established departments of Linguistics can rely on such departments in order to guarantee that foreign-language students get the most updated expertise in theoretical fields and focus on developments that are more genuinely related to Hispanic topics (language and ideology, etc.). This is the position recently advocated by Del Valle (2014). Nevertheless, at many institutions there is no Linguistics department with sufficient strength to cover all these needs, so it is not always possible to rely on external resources to supplement internal priorities. Even if such were the case, the focus and interests of researchers working at Linguistics departments are not always aligned with those of potential students coming from language departments.

The alternative answer would be that it would make sense for Hispanic Linguistics programs to keep abreast of such developments, even if this means concentrating efforts in one or more fields. This would naturally lead to more specialized departments, since it is obvious that it is impossible to be all things for every possible area and trend. There is no clear solution to this conundrum, although the latter option is not necessarily undesirable. In a competitive open marketplace, where students can choose which institution to apply to or attend as a function of their interests, it makes perfect sense to develop programmatic strengths and look for unique externally-identifiable profiles, which will become attractive to potential students at the graduate and undergraduate levels.

3. The “Silo” Effect or How to Combine “Apples and Oranges”: Contemporary Linguistics is a science and Hispanic Linguistics, if it strives to be faithful to its linguistic core, has to align itself with the tools, methods and theories that characterize scientific research. What this assumption means is that linguistic research on the Spanish language has to be guided (and deemed successful or not) depending on scientific criteria such as corroboration, formulation of hypothesis based on falsifiability criteria, predictability with respect to a model or paradigm, accurate and sound experimental design, correspondence between theory and data, etc. On the other hand, research carried out by faculty members in the literature and culture areas of language departments is not scientific in the narrow sense just described (and it does not have to be so). It is mostly hermeneutic in nature. Its goal is to interpret and study texts of a very diverse nature (literary, audiovisual, performed, etc.) and place them in a variety of contexts (cultural, social, ethnic, etc.). The different origin and goals of current linguistic and cultural research endeavors creates, at times, a “silo” effect, depending on which Hispanic Linguistics programs and Hispanic literatures/

cultures programs coexist under a single administrative unit, but have little in common except for the usual collegial interaction (departmental administration and meetings, common norms for exams and other procedures, etc.).

One could view this scenario as a sign of normalcy and consider it a desirable, and even optimal, equilibrium between complete opposites. A more detailed look reveals that this situation is normally idiosyncratic to language departments, most likely a byproduct of the fact that these units have the research focus on a language in all its diverse manifestations (linguistic, creative, etc.) in common, but little else. Other units with a narrower focus within the humanities and social sciences seem to be more cohesive in nature (history or philosophy departments in the humanities, sociology/criminology departments in the social sciences, etc.). Nevertheless, certain administrative units with an apparent unified focus have also developed structured divisions at many institutions: developmental vs. clinical psychology, pure vs. applied mathematics, etc.

Going beyond the debate of whether this division between scientific and hermeneutic approaches is consubstantial or not to the nature of language departments, one could see the incorporation of these different traditions more as an opportunity than as a burden. It is obvious that contributions from social, political, ideological, anthropological, and cultural analyses can and should enrich linguists's perspectives on language and provide new tools for the understanding of linguistic variation and use. Recent developments in sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistics seem to point in this direction. On the reverse side of the coin, modern linguistics can and should contribute to the analysis of cultural products. For example, recent developments in the area of cognitive narratology and related trends are advocating a break from the anti-science bias of old analyses based on deconstructive approaches and a move to adopting the theories developed in recent cognitive and psychological sciences, including contemporary linguistics (Aldama). Whether such moves in both directions are ultimately successful or not remains uncertain, but their success could pave the way for a more meaningful integration of linguistic and cultural perspectives and the development of potential programmatic enrichment directions.

4. **The Uncertain Fate of the Humanities:**
The economic crisis that began at the end of the last decade, the subsequent depression, and the "soft" recovery that followed has been particularly devastating for departments in the Humanities, in general. The long-standing decrease in state funding, plus a perception that

majors in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) are more marketable and offer better job prospects than those in the Humanities, has led to a pronounced decrease in student enrollments at all levels. Universities are also realigning their resources to focus on STEM fields, consolidating units in the Humanities, and not allocating new lines to Humanities departments after faculty retirements (Lewin). This scenario could appear to be fertile ground for negative assessments about our future or even for prophecies of doom following “the end of the Humanities.” It is true that a lack of resources and a realignment of the current ones will curtail the expansion of language departments to some extent. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the outcome has to be negative. This scenario will probably force language departments to make better use of their resources, foster new collaborations (internal and external), and rethink the field in a way in which administrative resources are maximized.

Some of the issues raised in the previous points could actually be very relevant to this debate. Hispanic Linguistics, as an interdisciplinary endeavor, can serve as a model of collaborations with other units (not only with linguistics and other language departments), and also be of relevance in the training of future professionals in several areas. Summarizing, I believe that, despite the current state of affairs, there are ample reasons to be moderately optimistic about what the future holds for us.

Works Cited

- Aldama, Frederick. *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2011. Print.
- Campos, Héctor and Fernando Martínez-Gil, eds. *Current Studies in Spanish Linguistics*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991. Print.
- Del Valle, José. “El lugar de las lenguas en las *Lenguas Modernas*: hacia una nueva cartografía de la Lingüística Hispánica en EEUU.” *Prácticas y Políticas Lingüísticas*. Ed. Klaus Zimmerman. Madrid: Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2014. 82–104.
- Gutiérrez-Rexach, Javier. *Enciclopedia de lingüística hispánica*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Hualde, José. “Hispanic Linguistics in the USA.” *Debating Hispanic Studies. Reflections on our Disciplines. Hispanic Issues On Line* 1 (2006): 115–120.
- Hualde, José I., Antxon Olarrea and Erin O'Rourke, eds. *The Handbook of Hispanic Linguistics*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
- Joseph, John E. “The Structure of Linguistic Revolutions.” *Historiographia Linguistica*. 22 (1995): 379–399.
- Lacorte, Manel. *Routledge Handbook of Hispanic Applied Linguistics*. London: Routledge, 2014.

Lewin, Tamar. "As Interest Fades in the Humanities, Colleges Worry." *The New York Times*, 13 Oct. 2103.

Toribio, Almeida J. "The revitalization of Hispanic Linguistics." *Debating Hispanic Studies. Reflections on our Disciplines. Hispanic Issues Online* 1 (2006): 133–136.

Gutiérrez-Rexach, Javier. "Hispanic Linguistics in North America: How We Got Here and Where We Go Now." *The Place of Hispanic Linguistics and Literary/Cultural Studies: Current Debates on Liberal Education*. Ed. Francisco Ocampo and Heather Mawhiney. *Hispanic Issues On Line Debates* 6 (2016): 10–20. Web.
