

◆ Introduction

Two Metatheories and the Relation Between Hispanic Linguistics and Literary/Cultural Studies in the American University

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In 2006, six authors presented a critical assessment of the field of Hispanic Linguistics within the United States university as a part of the first volume published in the *Hispanic Issues On Line* series, *Debating Hispanic Studies: Reflections on Our Disciplines*, edited by Luis Martín-Estudillo, Francisco Ocampo, and Nicholas Spadaccini. Later, in 2014, the subject was reexamined by José del Valle in the thought-provoking essay, “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 U.S.). Upon reading Del Valle’s article, *Hispanic Issues* editor-in-chief Nicholas Spadaccini felt that current circumstances in our departments and disciplines compelled us to revisit the issue once more. Thus, a decade after its publication, I wrote to the authors of the aforementioned volume as well as Del Valle and other scholars, asking them to write a think-piece on “The Place of Hispanic Linguistics within the Departments of Languages and Literatures in the American University,” inviting them to use as a point of reference *Debating Hispanic Studies* as well as Del Valle’s essay on the matter. This effort resulted in seven essays that address the issue from a variety of viewpoints and with different opinions. In this Introduction, I will first comment on the common areas that appear in the essays; then, I will hypothesize that one source of the tensions between the disciplines arises from the existence of two competing metatheories in Linguistics.

The first general topic that emerges in this present volume is the viability of Hispanic Linguistics as an academic field within Language departments. Javier Gutiérrez-Rexach, Timothy L. Face, and Milton M. Azevedo mention the impressive output in Hispanic Linguistics research as well as its quality, which results in an increased visibility of the discipline, with its own established research outlets. Additional factors that contribute

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to this result are the increased enrollment in courses with Hispanic content across the curriculum, improved job prospects for graduates in Spanish, and the fact that Spanish is the second most-spoken language in the United States.

Furthermore, the essays of Gutiérrez-Rexach and Del Valle consider the development of Hispanic Linguistics as a discipline. The former presents a detailed description of the process, which he views as deeply rooted in Hispanic Philology. The latter connects the history of Hispanic Linguistics with the evolution experienced by General Linguistics, explaining it from the viewpoint of an ideology of hegemony.

Connected to the development of Hispanic Linguistics is the issue of the relationship between this discipline and General Linguistics. While the question is mentioned throughout the essays, there is no attempt to posit an answer, which points to the difficulty of the subject. Azevedo brings up the undefined relationship between Hispanic Linguistics, as practiced in Language departments, and General Linguistics within Linguistics departments. Máximo Rafael Salaberry comments on the differences between the situation of Hispanic linguists working alongside specialists in Literature and Cultural Studies, and that of linguists employed in Linguistics departments, who focus exclusively on General Linguistics. For his part, Del Valle states that language, in general, and the Spanish language, in particular, are two related yet different objects of analysis. Face points out that Hispanic Linguistics crosses the boundary between General Linguistics and Spanish Studies.

A related topic deals with the balance between theoretical and applied concerns. Gutiérrez-Rexach's essay provides an encompassing view of the question describing different departmental configurations vis-à-vis both subfields. He also addresses the issue of the status of computational linguistics, Spanish language processing, translation and interpretation, forensic linguistics, and Spanish for the professions. Azevedo and Salaberry, for their part, focus on Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Azevedo qualifies as erroneous the view that SLA is not a serious research field, while Salaberry objects to the perceived non-relevance of the teaching of Spanish.

A theme that attracts the attention of many of the authors is work differences between faculty in Hispanic Linguistics and those in Literature and Cultural Studies. Azevedo observes that Literature faculty rarely teach outside their specialization, whereas Hispanic linguists customarily teach courses outside their area of research and are responsible for duties that do not constitute linguistics per se, such as training Teaching Assistants. Salaberry and Del Valle both comment on the low prestige of Hispanic Linguistics and their practitioners within Spanish departments.

A subtopic of the previous theme is a situation that Gutiérrez-Rexach has fittingly named the “silo effect.” This metaphor describes the organization of the faculty within Language departments into two categories, with the result that, “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.)” (17–18). The awareness of this sorting is certainly in the mind of some of the contributors, as revealed by their observations: Azevedo mentions the presence of an ongoing tension of Hispanic Linguistics with Literature and Cultural Studies; Salaberry observes the dearth of linguistics studies that explicitly integrate cultural and literary practices; and Face mentions the current lack of common interests between faculty in Hispanic Linguistics and their colleagues in Literary or Cultural Studies as well as the existence in some institutions of an “us versus them” mentality that subsists even now. Consequently, all collaborators discuss the academic integration of Hispanic Linguistics, Literature, and Cultural Studies within Language departments. The essays either describe the problem and/or advocate for a general action to achieve this integration.

Gutiérrez-Rexach posits that a cause of this “silo effect” is that the approach that Hispanic Linguistics takes towards its field of study differs from the one taken by Literature and Cultural Studies. Considering the implicit linguistic core—phonology and syntax—he states that the method of research of Hispanic Linguistics has to align itself with the methods that characterize scientific research, such as corroboration, formulation of hypothesis, sound experimental design, etc. Instead, research carried out in the disciplines of Literature and Cultural studies is mostly hermeneutic. Despite these differences, he views this state of affairs “more as an opportunity than as a burden” (18), arguing that cultural analyses can enrich the linguistic field, and that modern linguistics can enhance the exploration of cultural products. Face also observes the difference between the predominantly critical methodologies of literary and cultural studies and the empirical ones of linguistics. While he also ascertains that linguistics shares characteristics with various types of sciences, he points out, however, that, despite these differences, linguistics shares a common foundation with literary and cultural studies in that, “the scientific study of language is the study of something very human” (74).

Azevedo mentions a procedure by which the disciplines could collaborate. He states that linguistics can help students analyzing literary texts to clarify details of phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon as well as understanding the dialectal and sociolectal variation present in them.

According to Del Valle, there is plenty of excellent research in Hispanic Linguistics that is culturally, politically, and socially relevant. These are the

areas that can shape a common ground with literary and cultural studies. The problem, as stated by Del Valle, is that historical and institutional practices, which bind Hispanic Linguistics to formal Linguistics, have inhibited the development of these fields within Spanish departments.

In regards to the causes of that disconnection, Salaberry focuses his diagnosis on the status that the modes of spoken and written communication occupy within Language departments. He states that the latter has always received a preferred rank, and advances that the main factor that limits the possibility of connecting the research agendas of linguistics and literature faculty is the perception of a correlation between the analysis of spoken language and service work, predominant in the conceptualization of language teaching by faculty. This bias is also noticed by Germán Labrador Méndez with respect to the teaching of foreign languages in the United States where, “the reflection on language is conditioned by an eminently pragmatic process directed toward its acquisition, which allows literature and culture courses to be conceived as an alterity to language classes” (58).

Labrador Méndez argues from the outset that the future of Linguistics within Language departments is tied to the future of Hispanic Studies. He assesses the issue not from the perspective of Hispanic Linguistics, as did the previous authors, but from the point of view of Cultural Studies. He proposes an alternative vision for Cultural Studies, considering that language is social and that cultural processes are discursive and intersubjective.

Face makes the case that scholars in Hispanic Linguistics and Literature and Cultural Studies must have a comprehensive vision of the matter and recognize the presence of elements in common. He identifies Cultural Studies as an area where a common encounter could be established. Face advocates for scholars of Cultural Studies to consider the field in broader terms in order that this vision include all aspects of human culture, including Linguistics. In doing so, he coincides in general terms with Labrador Méndez, who judges the field of Cultural Studies as heterogeneous. Face states that, “linguistics is a broad field with different perspective and different approaches, some of which appear to have minimal resemblance to each other” (79).

David R. Castillo and William Egginton, without being as specific as the previous contributors, share this quest for new connections when they manifest themselves in favor of “the freedom to see the limits of what we take to be true in order to discover and disseminate new truths” (97).

Finally, a common theme present among most of the authors is the uncertain fate of the Humanities. Azevedo asserts that this challenge appears outside, but also within, academe. Gutiérrez-Rexach, Del Valle, Labrador Méndez, and Castillo and Egginton all attribute this state of things to the decrease in state funding. Castillo and Egginton, Gutiérrez-Rexach and Labrador Méndez note that this defunding occurs concurrently with a focus

on the market as the regulator of academic activity, with the consequence that majors in technical fields are more marketable than majors in the humanities. Labrador Méndez detects the connection between this trend and the increase in college debt, which turns students toward areas with expectations of greater economic returns in order to defray the costs of a college degree. Castillo and Egginton argue that this defunding, with the consequence of students paying most of the costs, generates the identification of learners as clients, which puts the humanistic core of the college experience in danger.

The tension between Hispanic Linguistics and Literary and Cultural Studies, as discussed in some of the essays in this volume is, to a certain degree, unavoidable. These are distinct disciplines with different objectives and singular methods of inquiry. However, as the authors of this volume express, there is the possibility of a degree of cooperation. My hypothesis is that the most important factor that obstructs this collaboration resides in a metatheory that has dominated the field of Linguistics during most of the twentieth century. This conception has undergone a process of naturalization and has consequently been considered the only option available.

According to Harris, Linguistics has suffered two changes of paradigm—one in the early decades of the nineteenth century and the other at the beginning of the twentieth century. The first of these changes involved a break with the philological studies of the eighteenth century, engaged in the commentary and interpretation of ancient texts. With the rediscovery of Sanskrit, linguists in Europe began the comparative analysis of Indo-European languages, postulating rules for their diachronic evolution. As a consequence, by the end of the nineteenth century, the focus of the discipline was the history of language. The second change was the outcome of the influential work of Ferdinand de Saussure and the Geneva School. Its result was that Linguistics turned away from the diachronic emphasis and focused on the study of a postulated system (*langue*) supposedly underlying language manifestations (*parole*). This system was conceived synchronically: centering only on its present state, in isolation of its evolution and its relationship with other systems. This view was further elaborated by linguists during most of the twentieth century and resulted in a metatheory that Linell has conceptualized as *monologism*.

Monologism envisions meaning from the viewpoint of the processing and transferring of information encoded in language. In this position, cognition and communication are separate activities. The speaker first thinks of a concept, then encodes it in language and sends it to the receiver who decodes the language and forms a similar concept in his or her mind. Thus, cognition precedes communication, and the latter is solely a matter of transfer of meaning. This process of transferring concepts from mind to mind by linguistic means has been named *telementation* by Harris. Its goal is

to achieve shared and mutual understanding. In order to attain this goal, participants in the communicative exchange must interpret their utterances in precisely the same manner. The only way in which this can be accomplished is if language is a fixed code with unchanged relations between its components (a system) and stable meanings. Within this metatheory, the object of Linguistics is an idealized system. To make language a scientific object of study, linguistic knowledge must exist independently of the will or agency of the individual. This has the effect of excluding from linguistics the moral, political, and cultural aspects of language (Taylor; Linell). One challenge to this conception of language as a system is that it cannot handle any kind of variation. For this reason, Saussure eliminated historical variation by means of the strict division between diachronic and synchronic studies. Social variation was later explicitly removed by the Chomskyan postulation of a completely homogeneous speech community.

These assumptions, adopted with varying degrees of systematicity, constitute the ideology that pervaded mainstream twentieth century Linguistics. This line of thought has produced a segregationalist discipline: “the fundamental error in contemporary linguistics is still the fundamental error of Saussure’s original thesis. It involves a crude process of abstraction by which certain phenomena are segregated from the continuum of human communication, and these segregated phenomena are, then, set up for academic purposes as constituting the *linguistic* part of communication” (Harris 3).

It should be clear now that the adoption of this metatheory has prevented mainstream Linguistics to find common ground with literary and cultural studies. A discipline whose field of study is an abstract system in isolation from its diachronic development, its speakers, its variation, and its complex cultural context, has nothing to offer to, or be enriched by, literary and cultural studies. “Monologism ... has been unwilling to ‘contaminate’ ideas and cognitions with evaluation and emotions. Monologism wishes to cleanse thinking ... from emotions, cultural influences and moral dimensions” (Linell 22).

On the other hand, the second part of the twentieth century has seen the slow developments of different trends that Linell has combined into a coherent metatheory, which he has named *dialogism*, from the Greek roots *δια* ‘through’ and *λόγος* ‘word,’ ‘discourse,’ ‘thought,’ ‘theory,’ that is, “meaning-making activities that are *mediated in and through language*”¹ (Linell 4).

In dialogism, language, cognition, and context are interdependent. Communication is more than the transmission of a code from speaker to hearer. This activity certainly takes place, but is only a part of the process. Moreover, understanding is not a mechanical decoding of a message delivered by its sender. Meaning is not simply transmitted, but cooperatively

created by speakers and audience during an interaction within a context: “speakers cannot by themselves determine all aspects of interpretation of their own utterances. In dialogist jargon: utterances and interpretations are ‘coauthored’” (Linell 40). Thinking and talking are not two independent processes that happen in succession: “[R]ather than treating cognition as prior to, and separable from, interaction, it is [to be] treated as something that is managed in, constituted in, and constructed in interaction (Potter 35 qtd. in Linell 14).

Regarding the participants in language exchanges, human beings are not autonomous individuals. They interrelate with each other and with the context. Dialogism proposes that there are not invariable languages that form a coherent system, with words and expressions that have fixed meanings. Instead, words have relatively open meaning potentials. Furthermore, the process of creating meaning goes beyond the communicative interaction. In order to understand a message, hearers must have recourse to their culture, what Linell calls their *traditions*. The mental activity of accessing the traditions is termed *double dialogicality*, which “makes us see an act or utterance both in its singularity and in its wide sociocultural and historical belongingness” (Linell 53).

The metatheory outlined above can be considered compatible with literary and cultural studies. The object of study is not an abstract system previous to language use. Communication and sense making are achieved during the interaction where social and cultural factors are brought into action. Also, human beings are considered in relation to each other and their social context. Human volition and agentivity are taken into consideration. Thus, speakers’ linguistic behavior is not simply the product of a set of rules, but the result of contextual, cultural, social, and ideological factors that are brought during the process of negotiating meaning. Throughout the interactive communication, the participants access the traditions by the process of double dialogicality. In this manner, culture and ideology are necessarily brought into language.

The previous considerations lead us to affirm that, from the starting point of Hispanic Linguistics, the search for a common ground with Literature and Cultural Studies must proceed through a dialogical approach. Therefore, it is not surprising that some features of dialogism are already present in the articles of the contributors. Their quest for a common ground with literature and culture has led some authors towards the road of dialogism. In direct reference to it, Salaberry mentions the noteworthy progress made by “linguistic studies that have considered the complex interactional features of spoken language” (50). Del Valle addresses the issue of the isolation of language from human will by a linguistics inspired by the conventions of the natural sciences. In addition, he affirms that language is too permeated by cultural, social, and political associations to be

explained by formalist (i.e. monologist) theories. He also states that the mainstream formalist development of Hispanic Linguistics has made it impossible for the field to contribute to current discussions that address the issue of Hispanism as an ideology. Labrador Méndez describes a process of meaning-making that could be ascribed to double dialogicality: “It is the discursive coexistence of a text with other linguistic and informative flows that bestows it with meaning socially and historically” (67). Moreover, the field of glotopolitics, to which Labrador Méndez also subscribes, displays a dialogical orientation.²

The essays present in this volume offer different perspectives and aspects of the issue, not necessarily compatible, but that thoroughly reflect the complex status of the relationship between Hispanic Linguistics and Literary and Cultural Studies within Language departments. They suggest the importance of rethinking some of the dogmatisms of the past, with the consequence of making Hispanic Linguistics even more central to a humanistic, liberal education. For it can provide the appropriate analytic tools for those areas of Cultural Studies that resist the forces of a market economy that increasingly turns students and their studies into commodities, as it is through language that ideologies are transmitted, maintained, and naturalized.

Notes

1. Italics in the original.
2. Cf. Narvaja de Arnoux and Del Valle (2010).

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