

Thoughts on the Workshop **“Crossing the boundaries: Culture, linguistics and Literature”**

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In this brief report, I will attempt to summarize what I learned at the Workshop. This report is based on the presentations by the panelists and the comments from the audience, as well as on conversations with participants during breaks, which, in my view, were also an integral part of the event.

The workshop had two main topics. Regarding the topic discussed during the morning session, the place of linguistics within the Spanish department, I was pleased to see that all literary/cultural scholars who expressed an opinion, were in favor of including linguistic analysis as an essential area of knowledge for students of Spanish and Latin American literature and culture. John Lipski made the sensible point that, although if one focuses on extreme cases it would appear that literature and literature/culture are quite different disciplines (e.g. should a doctoral student in experimental phonetics be advised to take statistics or “The construction of gender in the Caribbean”?, and vice versa, does a student focusing on the construction of gender in the Caribbean need to know about experimental phonetics?), this does not mean that there is no common thread. As Lipski argued, we should recognize the existence of a continuum of interests within Spanish studies, ranging from purely linguistic to non-linguistic (e.g. photography). Several participants agreed that the strongest bridge is found in the area sometimes labeled “critical discourse analysis”, which focuses on the expression of ideology through language use.

In addition, many agreed with Lipski that students of Spanish-language literature may benefit from a good understanding of variationist sociolinguistics (i.e. how language variation in the Spanish-speaking world correlates with regional, ethnic, gender, educational level and other social variables). At the same time, sociolinguists and other linguists need to be aware that placing speakers in social boxes is a gross simplification of reality. Reality is often much more nuanced. This point was forcefully made at the Workshop by David William Foster, with regard to queer studies. For instance, if you are interested in scientifically studying how sexual orientation is expressed through language, does it make sense to classify speakers as either “straight” or “gay/lesbian” based on a questionnaire where participants are asked to mark one of two boxes? *Mutatis mutandis*, that would apply to other social groupings that (for practical purposes) linguists often treat as discrete social categories.

A course in the History of the Spanish language was mentioned by some as a *sine qua non* for students of Medieval and Early Modern Spanish literature.

Furthermore, it was pointed out that most of our students at large universities with large graduate programs are going to end up employed at smaller institutions, where they will be expected to teach courses outside of their area of specialization, including advanced grammar courses.

The point was also made that literary translation should be included in the curriculum in some way. With the complete abandonment of the traditional “grammar

and translation” methodology of language teaching, perhaps we ended up throwing out the baby along with the bath water, as pointed out by Foster. Translation to and from the target language can be a very useful tool for the understanding of literary and nonliterary texts and of how language is used in those texts to express social identities.

All of this argues for having a strong linguistics component in departments that include the study of Spanish literature and culture. It appears that at small universities and liberal art colleges, where until recently all advanced instruction in the Spanish major was on literature, Spanish linguistics offerings are being added, often with great success.

Graduate programs need to be flexible. It needs to be recognized that much of their coursework taken by doctoral students in Spanish Linguistics will be outside of the Spanish department. The best training for some students of Spanish linguistics, depending on their specific area of specialization, may include coursework in general linguistics, speech and hearing science, psychology, statistics, computer science or even electrical engineering. I will return to this topic regarding Cultural Studies as well.

The afternoon topic was the challenge posed by cultural studies. The general opinion, expressed by Nick Spadaccini, David William Foster, and others, promoted the integration of literary and cultural studies. That is, cultural studies should not be incorporated in the Spanish department at the expense of literary studies. In terms of instruction this involves teaching literature together with other types of cultural production in the same class. For instance, a class on a specific topic in contemporary Latin American literature and culture may include the study of literary and nonliterary texts, film, photography and architecture. It was agreed that “cultural studies” is an ill-defined term, but that probably it should remain ill defined, since it may include all and any aspect of human culture (although it tends to focus on issues of ideology and identity). As we saw for linguistics, a consequence for the training of students is that graduate programs need to be very flexible, ideally encouraging study in other departments. Depending on the area of culture that a given student of, say, Latin American culture, is interested in investigating, she or he would need to take rigorous coursework in departments of, for instance, history, art history, economics, anthropology and/or sociology.

Something else that is at present ill defined is the purview of a Dept. of Spanish and Portuguese. This topic was tangentially mentioned several times, but no one attempted a resolution or synthesis. One traditional definition of the object of study of such university departments is language based: the study of the Spanish and Portuguese languages and of textual production in those languages. Another traditional definition is geographical: Spanish and Portuguese-speaking Latin America (excluding Dutch-speaking Surinam and other alloglot areas) and the Iberian Peninsula. These two definitions are roughly equivalent, but not quite. Under the first definition (but not under the second), the work of Filipino writer and plastic artist José Rizal, for instance, would be included. Under the second definition, but not under the first, cultural production in Quechua, Guaraní, Catalan or Basque is included. This lack of precise definition is most acutely felt, for US institutions, in relation to US Latino/a Studies. The linguistic definition of the object of study makes Spanish-language US literature an obvious part of what we study in the Spanish Department. However, under the geographical definition, things are different. But the greatest challenge is presented by the fact that contemporary US Latino/a writing is mostly in English. This fact may force a redefinition of what

Spanish (and Portuguese) Departments are or should be about, to the extent that it is collectively felt that US Latino/a language, literature and culture should be part of what one does in these Departments. From what I wrote above it should be clear that I think that it does not much matter whether Latino/a Studies is housed in the Spanish Department, in the English Department or in its own Department. What is important is to have flexible programs where departmental boundaries are only virtual ones.

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