

(After)Thoughts on the State of Hispanic Linguistics

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In my article “Hispanic linguistics: in a glass house or a glass box?” (*Hispanic Issues On Line* 1) I chose to parse the notion of “the state of Hispanic linguistics within the American university” as referring not to what was happening within linguistics, but rather to the degree of ease with which Hispanic linguistics fits into Spanish programs. I made this choice in full awareness that what was probably being asked of me was to review the many accomplishments of Hispanic linguistics; I felt that the latter were happily self-evident, and that the issue of the place of linguistics within our language departments was worth revisiting. When the volume appeared, I was relieved to see that I was not the only one to have examined the closeness of fit between linguistics and other sectors of our language departments. Carol Klee and Francisco Ocampo can attest to my agonizing over my own decision, since I was raised with the old-fashioned notion that if you can’t say something nice, it’s better to say nothing at all. I still believe in this maxim, so whereas the first part of my article pointed to what seemed to me to be a troubling imbalance between where specialists in Hispanic linguistics are—and are not—in evidence,¹ I will not return to that point, but rather concentrate on what I hope is the real message of the article, building bridges between linguistics and sibling subdisciplines.

I believe that my views can best be illustrated by means of an anecdote. A considerable number of years ago I was being interviewed for a job in a department that was about to take the major plunge of adding a second linguist to its Spanish section. During the interview visit, most colleagues were genuinely cordial and supportive, but in one small-group session a professor of literature—who in subsequent years turned out to be an unrepentant linguistophobe—asked me in what seemed like a needlessly aggressive tone if I could teach a course on linguistic approaches to literature, and if so what materials I would use. Sensing a clearly loaded question, I imagined that this colleague was preemptively objecting to highly theoretical reductionism and the centrifuging out of phonemes and syntactic trees while leaving behind the true beauty of literary texts. This premonition turned out to be prescient, because several years later the same colleague challenged a job applicant who had just delivered a talk on some rather technical aspects of Spanish syntax with “how can you relate this to teaching Spanish 101?” (The applicant wisely chose not to make that absurd application, and equally wisely opted to seek employment elsewhere). In any case I thought back to my own dabblings in literary criticism, and I answered that I would stress the embedding of language in a social and cultural context, including such notions as speech acts, attitudes towards subaltern groups, the use of language to control and manipulate, and the reflection of ethnicity and self-awareness through language. I gave some specific examples and cited some critics (none of whom were card-carrying linguists but all of whom had included language in their approaches). The answer apparently placated my would-be adversary; I got the job, and a few years later the same colleague invited me to present a module on linguistics within the standard “intro to graduate studies” course, inhabited entirely

¹ Since my original article was published, there has been one change in the recognition afforded Hispanic linguists: Penn State—a university where Hispanic linguists have always flourished—has honored me with an endowed professorship. I sincerely hope that similar recognition will be bestowed on our distinguished colleagues in linguistics at other universities.

by students of literature. Once more I gave examples, from my own work and that of other scholars, of the use of literary texts as exemplars of linguistic phenomena, suggested numerous journals and conference proceedings in which the boundaries between philology, linguistics, and literary scholarship were happily permeable, and reiterated that linguistic creativity—the basis for Chomsky’s boldest theorizing—included literature among its noblest manifestations.

Were my answers self-serving and opportunistic, giving in to holders of other beliefs in order to avoid trouble? I didn’t think so at the time and I still don’t. Therefore I would like to launch what I hope will be a fruitful interchange of ideas with a few observations that in my (eternally optimistic) view point toward some natural synergy among scholars of linguistics, literature, and cultural studies.

José Ignacio Hualde, in his contribution to the *Hispanic Issues On Line* volume, notes that “as scholars who used to study Spanish literature shift their interest to other objects of criticism, their common ground with Spanish linguists becomes harder to see.” This is due at least in part to linguists’ increasing emphasis on experimental paradigms, and to literary critics’ movement away from literary texts themselves and towards more diffuse notions of culture. This widening gap may well exist in some cases, but I believe that such instances represent the extreme points of a continuum, large segments of which can still be spanned through appropriate research paradigms, many of which already exist. It is certainly true that some research in theoretical syntax and phonology stands little chance of making headlines among literary critics, to say nothing of cultural studies advocates; the same is probably the case with laboratory-based research involving jaw position, eye movement, formant transitions, and spectral tilt. Conversely, it is not difficult to identify objects of cultural and literary criticism that cannot in the wildest flight of fantasy be roped into the corral of linguistics. But I would argue there are at least as many approaches to linguistic analysis that have credible implications for cultural studies, and as nearly everyone would admit, many linguistic approaches that involve literary texts.

Consider, for example, the issues of identity, alterity, and the dichotomy SELF-OTHER, concepts well integrated into cultural and literary studies. Many linguistic projects involve these same concepts, at times even drawing on the same manifestations that are cited by students of culture. In addition to the well-known works on language and gender, language and power, and the manipulation of language in politics and other forms of demagoguery, there are linguistic research projects—many involving the same empirical techniques that seem the furthest removed from literary and cultural studies—that touch on more subtle facets of identity. Let me suggest a few examples.

The Dominican Republic and the Dominican diaspora provide a fascinating palate of myths and metaphors in which language and culture are inextricably intertwined. The Dominican national myth of creation asserts that there is no African presence in the Dominican Republic except for Haitians, who as the “other” only serve to dilute and diffuse the “true” Eurocentric Dominican essence. The reality is much different, as witnessed by the fact that Dominican border agents have to use shibboleth words in order to distinguish black Haitian gate-crashers from equally black Dominicans. More to the point, Dominicans claim to be able to detect the Haitian origins of Dominican-born Haitians, even though the latter are native speakers of Spanish and may not even be fully fluent in Haitian Creole. My colleagues Jacqueline Toribio and Barbara Bullock (in press) are putting this assertion to the test, by using matched-guise experiments and spectrographic analyses to determine which elements of Dominican Spanish intonation are responsible for the perceived Haitian-ness of speakers. Similar empirically-based studies have tested the notion that African-Americans can be identified by language alone, even when not

speaking what is commonly known as African-American Vernacular English (e. g. Paboudjian 2002). Laboratory phonetics has also been applied to gay and lesbian speech, as well as to various foreign accents, frequently with the goal of separating stereotypes from empirically verifiable traits.

When Dominicans arrive in the United States, they are faced with baffling and offensive racial classifications, by means of which most Dominicans are seen as African-American. Older Dominicans vehemently resist this label, while many young Dominican-Americans have adopted African-American speech patterns and other cultural traits. Work by Benjamin Bailey (2000, 2002), Jacqueline Toribio (Bullock and Toribio 2006; Toribio 2000, 2003, 2006), Ana Celia Zentella (1981a, 1981b, 1983, 1985, 1997), and others documents the many forms of code-switching and other discourse markers used to mediate the struggle to forge a new identity. I have just finished directing a doctoral dissertation of a student in Sweden on the use of code-switching in the popular music of some young Dominican-American artists, combining technical analyses of language switching and the construction of Latino identity (Ohlson 2007). Committee members include specialists in literature and cultural studies, as well as other linguists.

The experimental study of ethnolinguistic identification in the Spanish-speaking world is in its infancy, but several promising studies point the way to a greater cross-fertilization between linguistics and cultural studies. In the Andean region, where indigenous or mestizo speakers strive to cull out obvious traces of Quechua or Aymara influence in their Spanish, in order to shed the dreaded epithetic of *cholo*, more subtle aspects of rhythm and intonation may still linger. Erin O'Rourke (2004, 2005) has examined intonational contours of Peruvian Spanish from Lima and Cuzco, and her findings suggest that Quechua suprasegmental patterns have left their imprint on highland Andean Spanish.

The African diaspora produced within Latin America not only acknowledged creole languages such as Palenquero and Papiamentu, but also a tangle of conflicting and emotionally charged notions about what it means to “speak black” in Spanish. Although with the exception of some very isolated Afro-Hispanic speech communities—often associated with former maroon communities—there does not exist an ethnically distinct “black Spanish” in Latin America comparable to vernacular African-American English in the United States, popular wisdom suggests otherwise: that black speakers can be identified by speech alone. This viewpoint is amply illustrated in hundreds of literary texts and popular songs, including some produced by Afro-American writers such as Nicolás Guillén, Nicomedes Santa Cruz, Manuel Zapata Olivella, Nelson Estupiñán Bass, and others. In these cases, what is depicted as “black” Spanish is simply vernacular, uneducated, rural speech, which might well be used by speakers of similar social extraction but a different racial profile, and sometimes which are used by all speakers in moments of colloquial abandon (Lipski 1999). But could there still be elements of speech—particularly pronunciation—that correlate with an African past? Nearly all African languages that came into contact with Spanish during the more than 400 years of the African slave trade have lexical tones, which means that each syllable has a predetermined tone that cannot be altered, since to do so would potentially create a different word. Spanish and the other Romance languages use tone to mark word stress, and to distinguish among assertions, questions, exclamations, and the like. Many observers of the vernacular speech of predominantly Afro-Hispanic communities have commented on intonational patterns that do not typify the Spanish of other regions. My own research on the Spanish of Equatorial Guinea, the only sub-Saharan African nation where Spanish is spoken, in contact with lexical tone languages, has demonstrated

that Guinean Spanish attempts to assign lexical tones in the same fashion as the indigenous languages, thereby creating intonational patterns that differ significantly from the Spanish dialects of other countries (Lipski 1985). Could the same process have occurred in Afro-Latin America some centuries ago? Research by Hualde and Schwegler (2007) on the intonation of the Afro-Colombian creole language Palenquero—which carries over into the colloquial Spanish of the same community—reveals a pattern of pitch accents which hint at earlier language contacts involving the accommodation of African lexical tones to the Spanish pitch-accent system. I have made spectrographic analyses of the speech of several other Afro-Hispanic communities, in Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico, Venezuela, Panama, and Peru, and have detected some similar but more attenuated patterns, that may provide a subtle empirical grounding for popular notions about “black” speech (Lipski 2007).

The study of ethnolinguistic variation has immediate consequences both for cultural studies and for social activism. Within Latin America, many traditionally marginalized black groups have adopted the term *afrodescendientes* and have formed numerous activist organizations, that are increasingly including issues of language in their profiles. Not only are these groups taking pride in earlier folkloric manifestations of Afro-Hispanic language, including songs and ritual language, but they are showing an increasing interest in contemporary speech patterns, which have traditionally been criticized and satirized. Linguistics forms a key component of this assertion of ethnic legitimacy, and the struggle to obtain the basic human rights that have long been denied to citizens of African descent throughout Latin America. Three years ago I was invited to present a one-week seminar on Afro-Hispanic ethnolinguistics in Peru, co-sponsored by San Marcos University and CEDET, the largest Afro-Peruvian NGO, and I am currently working with an Afro-Hispanic organization in Bolivia in an effort to demonstrate that the traditional partially-creolized Spanish still used in their isolated and very marginalized communities is in fact a respectable language that qualifies for inclusion in the list of the country’s linguistic minorities. In Panama I am working with the *congos*, descendents of maroon slaves who continue to speak a partially creolized Spanish in their ceremonies, in order to demonstrate the affinities between *congo* speech and Afro-Hispanic language of other countries and time periods (Lipski 1989, 1997, forthcoming). Some of these conclusions have already been published in the popular press and are producing a call for the re-evaluation of an ethnic community long felt to be quaint and picturesque but devoid of true cultural significance. And my one publication in a journal dedicated exclusively to cultural studies deals with the Spanish of Equatorial Guinea, a nation saddled with the colonial legacy that equates Guinean Spanish with broken learners’ speech (Lipski 2004). In a 2006 event co-sponsored by the Spanish cultural center in Malabo and the government of Equatorial Guinea, and most of whose participants dealt with literature and cultural studies, I argued that the emergent Guinean dialect of Spanish is not a collection of errors and malapropisms but the legitimate product of the nativization of Spanish in central Africa (Lipski 2006).

I have mentioned these ideas, including my own participation in some research projects, not to be self-serving but as a demonstration of the increasingly wide scope of contemporary linguistics, including data-oriented and experimental studies. I myself am an unrepentant linguistic formalist, coming from an engineering background and with an undergraduate degree in theoretical mathematics, and yet I have had some of my most satisfying encounters at meetings and symposia where linguists are in a minority and where topics of history, literature, culture, and sociology are the operative parameters. I don’t mean to suggest that intersection with literary or cultural studies should be a litmus test for linguists, nor that colleagues in literature

and culture necessarily include an analysis of language in their endeavors; this would be an absurd attempt to circumvent the freedom to explore that we all cherish. What I am suggesting is that linguists and non-linguists alike reflect on the full range of implications of their research, and actively seek out dialogue with colleagues working in collateral disciplines. I firmly believe that this will reveal the need for building far fewer bridges across our sub-disciplines, not because bridges are not necessary, but because many of them are already in place and are only waiting to be traversed.

Afterthoughts based on the panel discussions

My dialogue partners in the symposium raised a number of thought-provoking issues, both as regards the nature of Hispanic linguistics programs and in discussing cultural issues that impinge on language and linguistics. Some Spanish linguistics graduate programs do not facilitate or even allow students to take at least a course or two in literature. Whereas effective graduate programs by necessity must be tightly focused and can leave little room for frivolity, I do not believe that such exclusionary requirements point in the right direction. My own experience with Spanish graduate programs—M. A. and Ph. D.—has been that students of one discipline take at least one course in the “other,” which provides a healthy perspective on the discipline as a whole, particularly since many of our graduates take first jobs essentially as generalists.

Much of the discussion on cultural studies involved issues of power, control, hegemony, and the construction of identity. Overlaps with linguistics are many and varied, and require no stretch of the imagination or of disciplinary boundaries in order to produce useful collaborations. I mentioned as an example recent work by Venezuelan linguists (Chumaceiro 2003, Madriz 2000, Reyes-Rodríguez 2007) on the discourse of Hugo Chávez, including his use of the adjective *bolivariano* (now added to the country’s official name) in much the same way as the “Catholic” kings Fernando and Isabel of Spain once used the term *católico*.

Matters of languages and cultures in contact also represent an intersection between linguistics and cultural studies. Spanish-Portuguese contacts along the Uruguayan-Brazilian border have given rise to hybrid speech forms among Uruguayans known to linguists as *fronterizo* or more properly *dialectos portugueses del Uruguay*, and by the speakers themselves as *portuñol*. This dialect has traditionally been stigmatized by other Uruguayans and shunned by educators and purists, but recently there is been an upsurge in regional pride and *portuñol* has become a vehicle for serious literary expression and a marker of positive self-identity (Behares and Díaz 2003, Behares et al. 2004). Similarly, in Montevideo the hybrid Italo-Spanish speech of Italian immigrants arriving in the mid 20th century has been the object of serious study, putting the lie to many of the crude stereotypes coming from literary *cocoliche* parodies half a century earlier (Ascencio 2003; Barrios 1996, 1999, 2003, 2005; Barrios and Mazzolini 1994; Barrios et al. 1994; Orlando 2003). Colantoni and Gurlekian (2004) have traced the typical “circumflex” intonation patterns of Buenos Aires/Montevideo to the influx of Italian immigration beginning towards the end of the 19th century, using both experimental phonetic techniques and socio-historical methodology.

These are some of the nearly endless list of collaborations and intersections between linguistics and cultural studies. Those (increasingly few) colleagues who question the compatibility of these research and teaching areas are encouraged to take a closer look.

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