

Romance linguistics in the brave new world

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Is historical Romance linguistics dying (or already deceased) in North America? My answer—in concert with the contributions to the previous thematic issue of *La Corónica*—is both yes and no. In the sense of comparative multi-Romance scholarship and teaching, this sub-discipline has long been a broad desert with few oases. Already in the early 1970's when I eagerly and innocently searched for graduate programs in “genuine” Romance linguistics—conceived as a comparative *Romanistik*—the fingers of one hand were more than enough to count the available options. Most of these programs, including the one I entered (Alberta) have since disappeared, and those few of us who obtained degrees in Romance linguistics found employment through teaching in and about a single Romance language; in my case, Spanish. In more than thirty years of university teaching I have taught a course in comparative Romance historical linguistics (the course that once turned a young engineering major into an aspiring linguist) exactly once: more than a quarter century ago.

Many factors have contributed to the removal of the historical Romance linguistics button on the great academic juke box. Some are institutional: the breakup of large modern language departments into ever smaller constituents (Spanish and Portuguese, French and Italian, and so on) has made it increasingly difficult to offer comparative courses spanning more than one department. Competition for student credit hours and required core courses as well as the inherent insularity and centrifugal forces of multi-department language offerings discourage pan-Romance pursuits.

The information explosion has also cut into the amount of foundational scholarship that can be included in our linguistics courses, and has pushed the classic works of Romance philology off the browsable library shelves and into compact or off-site storage. Thirty years ago any graduate course in Romance linguistics carried the tacit assumption that students would have already read—or would collaterally read—the standard works of Bourciez, Elcock, Lausberg, Meyer-Lübke, and Posner, as well as language-specific monographs (Pope, Rohlfs, Migliorini, Menéndez-Pidal, Ewert, Entwhistle), Malkiel’s always illuminating torrent of articles, and foundational works in general and historical linguistics (Bloomfield, Saussure, Martinet, Trubetzkoy). Today one can scarcely approach the “state of the art” in contemporary research while still paying tribute to the founders of Romance linguistics, and most course syllabi as well as recent publications, rarely cite authors published before the 1970’s or even later. All of this has, I fear, caused the implicit confusion between works belonging to the history of our Romance disciplines (increasingly regarded as “old and in the way”) and the history of the Romance languages themselves, which have been forced to give way to the “real world” of synchronic, contemporary topics.

Ad hominem skirmishing in linguistics—running parallel to the street protests of the Viet Nam era—also contributed to the perception that historical linguistics is an albatross around the neck of “progressive” research. The scorched-earth rhetoric of the first generation of MIT-inspired formal linguists in the 1960’s laid waste to any research paradigm that was not “generative” and did not offer “explanatory adequacy,” disparaging all “structuralist” approaches and by extension all of historical linguistics and philology. This unfortunate us-versus-them polarization signals no underlying incompatibility of formal generativist and philological/structuralist viewpoints, but it engendered a visceral animosity that persists to this

day. My own experience is illustrative: as an unrepentant formalist (with a B. A. in theoretical mathematics) who fell in love with historical linguistics, I took half my graduate coursework with Romance philologists (including a disciple of Martinet) trained in European structuralism and the other half with general linguists hot on the—then boldly new—generative trail. Each group of professors considered me to be an apostate, I was almost failed on my comprehensive exams, and I went through three iterations of a dissertation committee before finding a *modus vivendi* that would permit me to complete my degree. In retrospect this hybrid training provided an excellent foundation and I am saddened by the memories of these cultural wars, whose legacy of intolerance still resurfaces from time to time in modern academia.

The final blow to historical Romance linguistics is perhaps the most troubling, being the militant ahistoricity affirmed by large segments of our society (e.g. the widespread refusal to acknowledge the latest manifestations of fascism, theocratic persecution and robber-baron business behaviors), and creeping into even the most liberal academic circles. The notion that history is simply political putty that can be molded to suit any occasion has engendered a cynicism and sense of irrelevance that has taken its toll on the teaching not only of historical linguistics but also of anything perceived as belonging to “history,” including the literatures and cultures of other times and places. Nor are we in academia entirely blameless; the rejection of long-revered canons, often in response to the hegemony of sexist and racist policies of the past, cannot be reasonably extrapolated to exclude the historicity of language and those who study it, but the (Romance ling) baby has sometimes gone down the drain together with the (post-modern) bathwater.

But enough of the necrology; the Romance languages have many histories, and while some approaches to historical linguistics may not be current hotspots of institutional recognition,

other promising research paradigms are in full swing. These histories deal in large measure with the Romance languages in the diaspora, with Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Italian as protagonists. Spanish and Portuguese have existed outside of the Iberian Peninsula for almost as long as they have existed within as autonomous languages. The history of Spanish of the Americas taken as a series of colonial innovations is being written country by country (e.g. Alvarez Nazario 1991 for Puerto Rico, Quesada Pacheco 1990 for Costa Rica, García Carillo 1988 for Mexico, Fontanella de Weinberg 1987 for Argentina). A comprehensive history of colonial Latin American Spanish has yet to be written, and stands among the highest priorities in contemporary Romance linguistics. In Brazil there are several ambitious research projects designed to produce a definitive history of Brazilian Portuguese, the history of French in Canada and Louisiana has attracted several researchers, and even the Italian diaspora has been the object of linguistic scrutiny, particularly in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico.

Also the subject of intense research are the histories of Spanish in contact—throughout the Americas, in Africa, and in Asia. Spanish-indigenous contacts, particularly in the Andean region, have been studied extensively, e.g. by Cerrón-Palomino (2003), and are the subject of ongoing archival explorations (e.g. Mendoza 2000 for Bolivia). There are many new or isolated bilingual communities in the Spanish-speaking world where the study of language-contact phenomena can add a dimension to historical Romance linguistics, by providing a wider palate of features and languages. To cite a prototypical example in Chipilo, near Puebla, Mexico, Spanish has been in contact with a Veneto dialect from Italy for more than 150 years, and a vigorous bilingual interaction continues to this day (MacKay 1984, 1992, 1993, 1995; Meo Zilio 1987; Romani 1992). The Veneto dialect is closer to Spanish than standard Italian; for example first conjugation verbs end *-ar* instead of *-are*, and past participles end in *-á* instead of *-ato/-*

ata, which sounds very much like the colloquial reduction of *ada* to *a* in Spanish (e.g. *nada* > *na*). These similarities have facilitated the interweaving of Spanish and Veneto (from the town of Segusino), for example use of the pronoun *nos* instead of *ci/noi*. Veneto also has influenced local Spanish, for example the neutralization of /r/-/rr/ (*areglao* for *arreglado*), Veneto plurals (*añi* for *años*, *aseitune* for *aceitunas*) and verbal suffixes (*accepten* for *aceptaba*, *establesesti* for *establecidos*). Chipileño Spanish as used by older Veneto-dominant speakers has in situ questions (*¿Esto cuesta cuánto? ¿El vive dónde?*) and double negation (*no lo sé no*), both calques of Veneto constructions. These language contact manifestations can be fitted into a broader pan-Romance context. In situ questions, for example, are found in popular Angolan Portuguese (calques from Kimbundu) and also in vernacular Brazilian Portuguese, where the Congo-Basin linguistic influence is twice-removed but nonetheless tangible. Similar questions are found in Macau creole Portuguese (calques of Cantonese), and were once used in the pidginized Spanish used by (Cantonese-speaking) Chinese laborers taken to Spanish America in the 19th century (Lipski 1998, 1999a). Double negation is found in Angolan and vernacular Brazilian Portuguese, as well as in Afro-Hispanic dialects of the Dominican Republic, the Colombian Chocó and—in the 19th century—Cuba. Some scholars have suggested that a former Afro-Hispanic creole language is the basis for double negation (e.g. Schwegler 1996a, 1999), while others (e.g. Lipski 1996, 1999b) have attributed double negation to contact with previously formed creole languages such as Haitian *kréyòl*.

Spanish-Portuguese contact situations are also receiving considerable attention, from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. The Uruguayan *fronterizo* dialects enjoy the largest bibliography, including the seminal works of Rona (1960, 1965), Hensey (1972, 1982a, 1982b) and Elizaincín (1973, 1976, 1979, 1992; Elizaincín et al. 1987) as well as much contemporary

scholarship (e.g. Carvalho 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b). Within Portugal the Mirandese dialect, itself somewhat of a Spanish-Portuguese hybrid and long ignored since the early work of Vasconcellos (1900-01), is now the object of revived interest (e.g. Quarteu and Frias Conde 2002), as is the Barranqueño dialect, which borders on the Spanish provinces of Badajoz and Huelva and exhibits many of the traits found in Uruguayan *fronterizo* speech (Alvar 1996, Stefanova-Gueorgiev 1987, Viudas Camarsa n.d.).

The study of Romance-derived pidgin and creole languages is a burgeoning area of Romance linguistics (sidestepping the sterile question of whether these creoles are “real” Romance languages). The Society for Pidgin and Creole Linguistics, journals such as *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages*, *The Carrier Pidgin*, *Etudes Créoles*, and numerous monograph series, anthologies, and conferences attest to the vitality of creole studies and their central place in modern linguistics. Not surprisingly, given the status of creoles as “new” languages whose origins can be traced to specific places and times within the past few hundred years, much research has focused on historical aspects of creole formation. Among the major issues are the role of substrata versus linguistic universals, the sociolinguistic and demographic configurations that favor creolization, partial restructuring or semicreolization, and decreolization and the formation of post-creole continua (see the overviews in Holm 1988, 1989). Haitian and Louisiana French Creole enjoy the longest tradition of historical research, followed by Papiamentu and Cape Verdean *crioulo*. Nor is the study of creole languages a branch of post-modern linguistics: the first explorer of nearly all Romance-derived creoles was Hugo Schuchardt, whose pioneering late 19th-century articles appeared in traditional philological journals, including the *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* (e.g. Schuchardt 1979). The last few decades have brought an outpouring of research on even the most obscure Romance-derived

creoles, together with the “discovery” by linguists of previously unnoticed creole languages, whose detailed study provides key evidence in the debates surrounding creolization. These recently identified creoles include Palenquero (an Afro-Colombian language; Bickerton and Escalante 1970, Friedemann and Patiño Rosselli 1983; Schwegler 1996b), Korlai Portuguese (Clements 1996), Angolar, spoken on São Tomé (Maurer 1995), as well as ritualized remnants of earlier Afro-Hispanic language, e.g. the *lumbalú* funeral chants of Palenque de San Basilio (Schwegler 1996b, Lipski 1997), the speech of the *negros congos* of Panama (Lipski 1989), and the presumed use of pidginized or *bozal* language by Afro-Cuban *santería* practitioners while possessed by the spirits of their African-born ancestors (Castellanos 1990).

Five hundred years of contact with more than twenty million sub-Saharan Africans, arriving in the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America as slaves, has left indelible imprints on Spanish and Portuguese. But because history is written by the conquerors, not the conquered, the true depth of Afro-Iberian language and culture is emerging slowly and with difficulty. Alvarez Nazario (1974) and Granda (1978) are inspirational beacons; Ortiz López (1998) offers some startling contemporary manifestations as part of a historical reconstruction, and Lipski (2004) is the latest attempt to supply one of the largest missing pieces of the historical Romance puzzle.

The final frontier of historical Romance linguistics deals with “contemporary history,” a seeming oxymoron that, as I learned from a like-named high school class, refers to current events. By studying current manifestations of Romance languages in their social settings we can not only observe (linguistic) history in the making, but also, by using the age-grading techniques familiar to sociolinguists, detect incipient or completed changes too recent to register on the radar screens of historical linguistics. In many instances, little-known contemporary configurations, especially those involving language contacts, demographic shifts and relations of

cultural and political hegemony, can shed light on linguistic events of centuries past, whose reconstruction is hampered by inadequate and ambiguous documentation and, of course, by the lack of audio or video recordings. Thus it is, for example, that the pidginized Spanish spoken by Haitian quasi-slaves on Dominican sugar plantations (*bateyes*) in many ways replicates the pidgin-to-creole progression of Spanish in 18th and 19th century Caribbean slave barracks (Ortiz López 1999a, 1999b, 2001), while vernacular almost first-language Portuguese of the *musseques* (working-class neighborhoods) of Angola comes close to reproducing the linguistic configurations of 19th century Brazil (Endruschatt 1990, Lipski 1995). Spanish-Arabic contacts in North Africa (including the hotly disputed Western Sahara) provide a sounding board for theories of Hispano-Arabic linguistic mixing from 712-1492, albeit with vastly different sociolinguistic relations (Casado-Fresnillo 1995; Tarkki 1995). The revitalization of regional languages in Spain (Asturian, Galician, Basque, and even Aragonese) is bringing these languages back into contact with prestigious registers in urban settings, and is re-creating the dialect mixing and leveling that occurred in the Iberian Peninsula, then Latin America, in previous centuries. Recent Italian immigration to Argentina, by no means as quantitatively overwhelming as in the past, but bringing regional Italian languages into contact with working-class varieties of Spanish, will provide data for the reconstruction of earlier Italo-Argentine language, which in the popular view is reduced to the literary parodies known as *cocoliche* (Rossell 1970, Meo Zilio 1955, 1956, 1989).

Beyond the pale of Spanish- and Portuguese-related issues, French is also a major player in the contemporary history of Romance. The study of *le français hors de France*, particularly in Africa and the Pacific, has brought forth configurations both innovative and archaic, all useful in calibrating earlier stages in the history of French and its many regional and social varieties (e.g.

the studies in Guillerrou 1975 and Valdman 1979). The study of vestigial Italian and Italian-based pidgins in northwest Africa, still in its infancy (e.g. Hull 1985, Marcos 1976), also promises to add a new dimension to the debate over earlier pan-Mediterranean trade pidgins known as *lingua franca* or *sabir* (see the overviews in Lang 1992, 2000).

The enumeration of historical Romance research paradigms could be extended almost indefinitely, but the main point should be clear by now. Historical Romance linguistics is still a thriving discipline, with a majority of the current research effort directed at previously unasked questions and unexplored areas. It is still possible to teach, and to undertake and publish research in Romance linguistics, albeit under different rubrics and to different audiences than in times past. In this sense, Romance linguistics is following the same path as other continually expanding frontiers of knowledge. No university still maintains a “natural philosophy” department, and even more recent disciplinary pigeonholes such as “biology” and “mathematics” are giving way to divisions and denominations more suited to the pedagogical and investigative needs of the day. Comparative/historical Romance linguistics is not endangered, any more than biology, chemistry, astronomy, and mathematics. Refreshingly historical and comparative research is thriving in creole studies, dialectology, sociolinguistics, formal syntax and phonology, and other cross-sections that were scarcely even conceivable when the classical foundations of Romance philology were laid. This is not to suggest that the question posed by Dworkin and others should never have been posed. To the contrary, by bringing forth from the shadows latent doubts and misgivings we can openly confront them with the facts of life. In the case of Romance linguistics, the life is a good one indeed.

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