The Genius of Spanish

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1.1 Genius of language / genio de la lengua / génie de la langue: current interest

📖 Henri Meschonnic 2000

Sous la direction d'Henri Meschonnic

Et le génie des langues ?
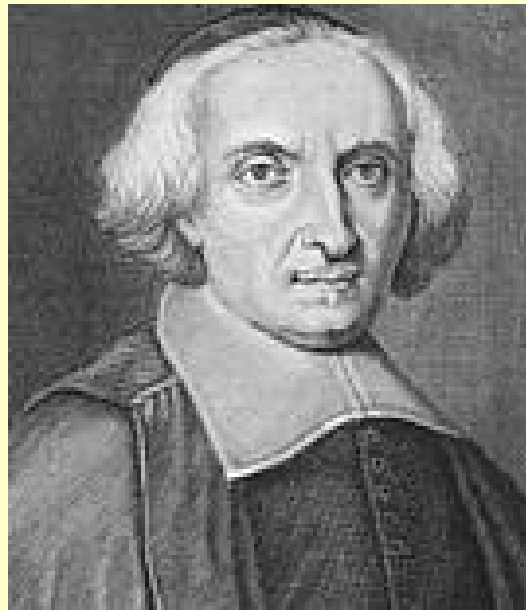
Essais et savoirs

1.1 Genius of language / genio de la lengua / génie de la langue: current interest

📖 Álex Grijelmo 2004
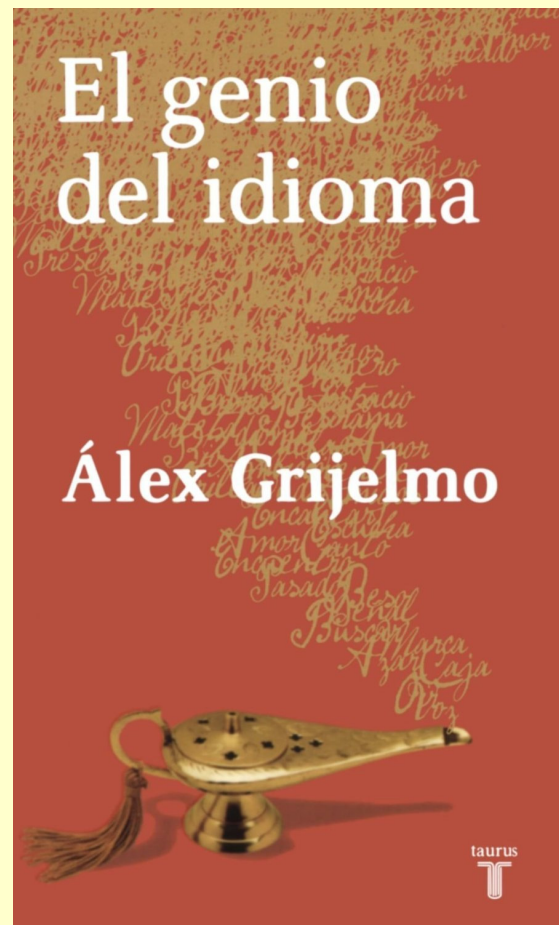
1.2 Genius of language / genio de la lengua / génie de la langue: brief history

📖 Amable de Bourzeys's (1606–1672), *Discours sur le dessein de l'Académie et sur le différent génie des langues* (1635): every language has its own particular characteristics. Bourzeys distinguishes rules (*reigles*), properties (*proprietéz*) and tastes (*goustz*).

1.2 Genius of language / genio de la lengua / génie de la langue: brief history

📖 Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), *L'Émile*: 'La raison seule est commune, l'esprit en chaque langue a sa forme particulière'.
[Reason is common, the spirit in each language has its own particular form]

1.2 Genius of language / genio de la lengua / génie de la langue: brief history

📖 Joachim Du Bellay (1522–1560), *La deffense et illustration de la langue françoyse* (1549): ...je ne croirai jamais qu'on puisse bien apprendre tout cela des traducteurs, parce qu'il est impossible de le rendre avec la même grâce dont l'auteur en a usé: d'autant que chaque langue a je ne sais quoi propre seulement à elle, dont si vous efforcez exprimer le naïf dans une autre langue, observant la loi de traduire, qui est n'espacer point hors des limites de l'auteur, votre diction sera contrainte, froide et de mauvaise grâce.'

[I will never believe that one can learn all that from translators, because it is impossible to render it with the same elegance as the author has used: the more so because each language has I do not know what particular only to itself, and if you try to express it straightforwardly in another language, observing the law of translation, which is not to go beyond the limits of the author, your discourse will be constrained, cold and inelegant.]

1.3 Genius of language / genio de la lengua / génie de la langue: brief history
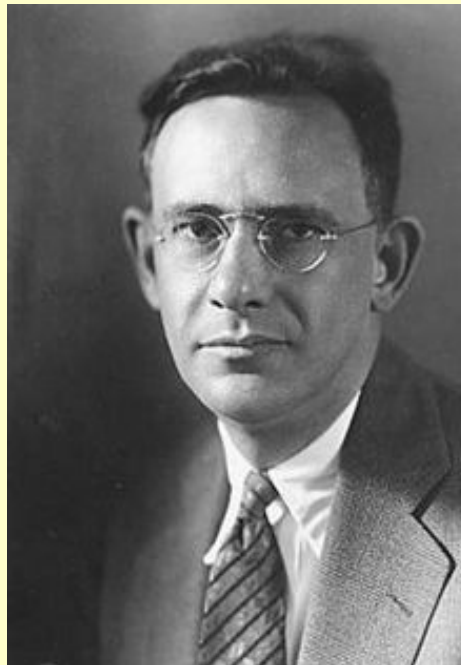
Genius of language / génie de la langue / Sprachgeist

📖 Voltaire (1694-1778), *Encyclopédie* (1757): 'On appelle génie d'une langue son aptitude à dire de la manière la plus courte et la plus harmonieuse ce que les autres langages expriment moins heureusement.'
[We call the genius of a language its ability to say in the shortest and most harmonious way things that other languages express less successfully.]
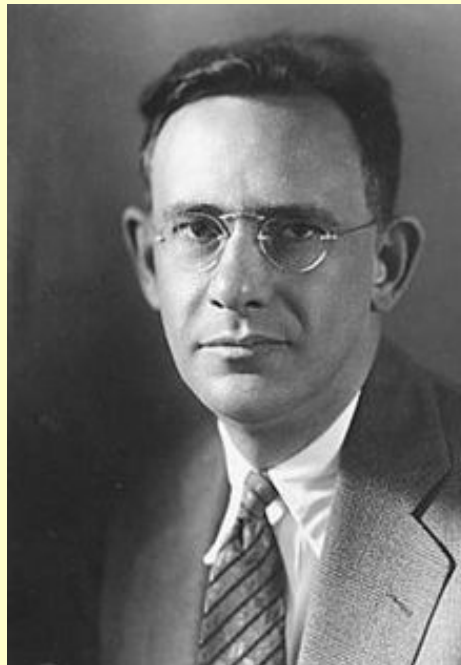
1.2 Genius of language / genio de la lengua / génie de la langue: brief history

📖 Edward Sapir (1884–1939), *Language* (1921): 'This type or plan or structural 'genius' of the language is something much more fundamental, much more pervasive, than any single feature of it that we can mention, nor can we gain an adequate idea of its nature by a mere recital of the sundry facts that make up the grammar of a language.'

1.2 Genius of language / genio de la lengua / génie de la langue: brief history

📖 Edward Sapir (1884–1939), *Language* (1921): 'All languages evince a curious instinct for the development of one or more particular grammatical processes at the expense of others, tending always to lose sight of any explicit functional value that the process may have had in the first instance, delighting, it would seem, in the sheer play of its means of expression.'

1.3 Genius of language / genio de la lengua / génie de la langue: some preliminary examples

✏️Progressive constructions:

Sp. *estar cantando* (and cf. *andar cantando, ir cantando, venir cantando, seguir cantando, llevar cantando, acabar cantando*)
It. *stare cantando*
Pg. *estar a cantar (EP) / estar cantando (BP)*
Fr. *(être en train de chanter)*

Le Monde, 22.11.08 (6,000 words): *être en train de* + infinitive (1)
El País, 22.11.08 (6,000 words): *estar + -ndo* (4), *seguir + -ndo* (6), *ir + -ndo* (2), *acabar + -ndo* (1), *llevar + -ndo* (1).

1.3 Genius of language / genio de la lengua / génie de la langue: some preliminary examples

🖉 'Becoming' in Spanish (cf. French *devenir*, English *become*):

With a noun: *convertirse en*

With a noun or adjective: *volverse* (neutral), *hacerse* (a natural or expected development), *llegar a ser* (implies achievement), *venir a ser* (implies casualness)

With an adjective denoting a non-inherent state: *ponerse*

2. Capitalization

The historical process by which a linguistic feature which already exists in a language comes to be substantially exploited for wider purposes, sometimes simply making overt distinctions which were previously covert, but sometimes apparently creating new expressive possibilities.

2.1 An example: the reflexive

Original function?

🖉 Reflexive pronoun has a literal meaning; functions as direct or indirect object:

>
> *Juan se lava*
> Juan 3-REFL washes-3sg
> 'Juan washes himself'
>
> *Juan se dijo que no volvería*
> Juan 3-REFL said-3sg that NEG would-return-3sg
> 'Juan said to himself that he would not return'

2.1 An example: the reflexive

Direct object Stage 1

🖉 Conventionalised or figurative meaning as a direct object:

> *Juan se vio en el espejo*
> Juan 3-REFL saw-3sg in the mirror
> 'Juan saw himself in the mirror'
> AND
> *Juan se vio en dificultades*
> Juan 3-REFL saw-3sg in difficulties
> 'Juan was in difficulties'
>
> BUT
> *Juan se levantó*
> Juan 3-REFL raised-3sg
> 'Juan got up'
>
> *Juan se hizo famoso*
> Juan 3-REFL made-3sg
> 'Juan became famous' NOT 'Juan made himself famous'

2.1 An example: the reflexive

Direct object Stage 2

✎ With a subject which is not the semantic agent (the 'reflexive passive'):

> *Estos problemas no se pueden plantear de este modo*
> These problems NEG 3-REFL can-3pl pose in this way
> 'These problems cannot be posed in this way'

Direct object Stage 2a (☆)

✎ With an agentive phrase (*por* + noun):

> *Lo que ahora se plantea <u>por el Gobierno</u> es lo que UGT ha exigido desde un principio* (www.ugt.es/Revista_Union/numero205/p8-9.pdf)
> 'What is now being proposed by the Government is what the UGT has demanded from the start'

2.1 An example: the reflexive

Direct object Stage 3

🖉 How the reflexive gets to be an indefinite subject:

El problema se solucionó
The problem 3-REFL solved-3sg
'The problem was solved / got solved'

Se solucionó el problema
3-REFL solved-3sg the problem
'Someone solved-3sg the problem'

Fr.   **S'est résolu le problème*
         3-REFL Perf-3sg solved the problem

Fr.   *On a résolu le problème*
         INDEF Perf-3sg solved the problem
         'Someone solved the problem'

2.1 An example: the reflexive

Direct object Stage 3a

✐ The reflexive as indefinite subject of transitive verbs:

> *Se despreciaba al dictador*
> 3-REFL despised-3sg OBJ-the dictator
> 'People despised the dictator / The dictator was despised'
>
> ☹*Se ve las montañas*
> 3-REFL see-3sg the mountains
> 'You can see the mountains'

2.1 An example: the reflexive

Direct object Stage 3b

✏️ The reflexive as indefinite subject of intransitive verbs:

> *Aquí se vive bien*
> Here 3-REFL lives well
> 'People live well here'

2.1 An example: the reflexive

Indirect object Stage 1

🖊 The reflexive has a broadly benefactive function with a transitive verb:

>
> *Juan se lava la cara*
> Juan 3-REFL washes the face
> 'Juan washes his face'
>
> *Juan se tomó las pastillas*
> Juan 3-REFL took the tablets
> 'Juan took his tablets'

2.1 An example: the reflexive

Indirect object Stage 2

🖉 The reflexive has a 'nuance' function (se *de matización*) with a transitive verb:

> *Juan no sabe el número*
> 'Juan doesn't know the number'
> *Juan se sabe todos los números en inglé*s
> 'Juan knows all the numbers in English'

2.1 An example: the reflexive

Indirect object Stage 3

🖉 The reflexive has a 'nuance' function (se *de matización*) with an intransitive verb:

> *Salió de la reunión*
> 'He/she left the meeting'
> *Se salió de la reunión*
> 'He/she (deliberately) walked out of the meeting'

2.1 An example: the reflexive

'Nuance' reflexives

> *Olvidó el pasaporte*
> 'He/she forgot the passport'
> *Se olvidó de mi cumple*
> 'He/she forgot (about) my birthday'
> *Se olvidó del pasaporte*
> 'He/she forgot about the passport'

2.1 An example: the reflexive

Some general observations

The processes of change involved are familiar from other areas of language change:
> metaphor
> reanalysis
> analogy

They are made possible because pragmatically there is little risk of ambiguity

Most of these developments have occurred by the time Spanish (Castilian) is established as a written language, so we cannot actually trace the evolution which we assume to have taken place

But there is obvious continuity between Latin and Spanish

2.2 Another example: *lo*

The neuter

In Latin neuter was a category of nouns and adjectives:

> *filius bonus* (masculine) '(the) good son'
> *ancilla bona* (feminine) '(the) good maidservant
> *vinum bonum* (neuter) '(the) good wine'

In Spanish neuter is not a category of nouns or adjectives:

> *el hijo bueno* (masculine) 'the good son'
> *la criada buena* (feminine) 'the good maidservant'

but what is often referred to as the neuter is distinguished for demonstratives and the definite article + adjective:

> *este* (masculine)   *el bueno* (masculine) 'the good one'
> *esta* (feminine)   *la buena* (feminine) 'the good one'
> *esto* ('neuter')   *lo bueno* ('neuter') 'the good aspect'

2.2 Another example: *lo*

Stage 1

Absolute

> *todo lo referido a los ordenadores*
> all DEF-neut refer-pp to the computers
> 'everything about computers'

Partitive

> *lo interesante de este problema*
> DEF-neut interesting of this problem
> 'the interesting thing about this problem'

> *desde lo alto de la montaña*
> from DEF-neut high of the mountain
> 'from the top (high part) of the mountain'

2.2 Another example: *lo*

Stage 1a

Some contrasts between *el* + noun and *lo* + noun:

     el futuro '(specific) future; future tense' */ lo futuro* 'vaguer future, anything that is future'
     el temporal 'storm' / *lo temporal* 'things that are temporary'
     el cercado 'fence' / *lo cercado* 'what has been enclosed'
     el tejido 'tissue' / *lo tejido* 'things that have been woven'

2.2 Another example: *lo*

Stage 2

'Qualificative'

> *Se dio cuenta de lo estúpido de tu pregunta*
> 3-REFL gave account of DEF-neut stupid-**masc.** your question
> 'He/she realized the stupidity of your question'
> →
> 'He/she realized the degree of stupidity of your question (how stupid your question was)'

> *Me sorprendió lo estúpida que era tu pregunta*
> 1-OBJ surpised DEF-neut stupid-**fem.** that was your question
> 'It surprised me how stupid your question was'

The qualificative use parallels a use of the definite article:

> *Es increíble las deudas que tiene*
> be-3sg incredible DEF debts that have-3sg
> 'It´s incredible the debts / how large are the debts that he has'

2.2 Another example: *lo*

Stage 2a

'Qualificative' use with adverbs and nouns

> *Ya veréis lo bien que lo pasamos*
> now see-FUT-2pl DEF-neut well that it pass-1pl
> 'You'll see what a good time we'll have'

> *Todos elogian lo gran actor que es*
> all praise-3pl DEF-neut great actor that be-3sg
> 'Everyone praises what a great actor he is'

> *Me sorprende lo en su punto que está la sopa*
> 1-OBJ surprise-3sg DEF-neut in its point that is the soup
> 'It surprises me the soup is so ready'

2.2 Another example: *lo*

Stage 3

Exclamations

> *¡(Con) lo tonta que es!*
> (With) DEF-neut stupid-fem. that she-is
> 'How stupid she is!'
>
> *¡Lo fuertes que eran!*
> DEF-neut strong-pl that they-were
> 'How strong they were!'

2.2 Another example: *lo*

Some general observations

Not really a continuation of Latin. The 'neuter' article *lo* perhaps developed because of the parallel between the article and the demonstratives and was maintained because of a marked phonetic difference from the masculine article *el*.

Its qualificative use was also the result of parallelism with the definite article.

But in this usage *lo* came to have an adverbial function (equivalent to the now old-fashioned *cuán*) and so came to have an exclamative function and to combine with other parts of speech besides adjectives.

The chronology of some of these changes can be observed: the first attestations of qualificative usage are from the 16th century, and the exclamative usage is not attested until the 19th century.

Such usage is not paralleled in any other standard Romance language, although several Romance languages distinguish a neuter demonstrative (e.g. Pg. *este / isto*, It. *questo / ciò*)

3 Conclusion

Perhaps the 'genius' of language is not so undefinable after all?