

A 'big language' – dimensions of variation in modern Spanish

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1. Some contextualisation

Courses in the linguistics of Spanish, and no doubt many other European languages, can be classified into a number of categories, which in fact reflect my own trajectory as a university student and teacher.

(a) The diachronic/philological ('History of Spanish'), dating from a time before synchronic linguistics was quite respectable and the history of the language dovetailed conveniently with literary and historical studies, especially medieval. Such courses were often taught by medievalists and were Ibero-Romance centred. They involved extensive philological textual study. In the case of Spanish, they tended to finish at 1499, and it's interesting to note why that was – because from more or less that point onwards, 'Spanish' has had a unitary identity as the court language of 'Spain'. In historical terms, then, the history of Spanish concerns the promotion of the Romance of Castile to a national language. It suited the 'going back to roots' which was a defining aspect of the Generation of 1898 to which the great Spanish linguist Ramón Menéndez Pidal (1869–1968) may be considered to have belonged, and it later suited the nationalist ethos of the mid 20th century. This was the kind of course I experienced as an undergraduate in the 1960s.

(b) The synchronic/linguistic ('Structure(s) of Spanish'), which can serve a number of purposes:

- introducing students to grammatical categories and constructions, which just happens to be done through the medium of Spanish,
- contrastive analysis of target and native languages. Such courses are most obviously related to language teaching (as such they are sometimes deemed 'useful' and 'practical') or they accompany programmes in theoretical linguistics. Again, they tend to regard Spanish as something of a unitary concept: if language-teaching orientated, there is a prescriptive imperative, in that illustrative examples will tend to be taken from the standard language as taught to foreigners; if linguistically orientated, they will often pursue acceptability judgements from educated native speakers, that special subset of speakers generally reserved for the provision of data to investigating linguists.

Such courses became popular as departments of Linguistics flourished from the 1960s onwards, and as language teaching within language departments became more professionalised and innovatory. These are the kinds of courses that I developed as a young lecturer.

From the early 1990s onwards I began teaching courses involving the title 'Varieties of Spanish' because:

- I felt that variation, the study of which had burgeoned with the explosion in sociolinguistics in the second half of the 20th century, was a dimension which entered in a significant way into neither of the above kinds of programme.
- I wanted either to introduce students of Spanish to, or capitalise on, the kind of linguistic phenomena they were likely to meet outside the confines of formal language teaching, especially through their Year Abroad. On a personal note I cast my mind back to the time as a student when I worked for a Barcelona firm importing car

parts and learned how to write business letters and memos in Spanish, the register of which was at the time completely unfamiliar to me.

- I wanted to engage students in dealing with commonly asked questions about the nature of language, especially standardisation and planning, with which they may well have to engage in their professional lives, and on the subject of which they will always be in conversation with society at large.
- In the study of linguistic varieties the diachronic and the synchronic find a natural symbiosis.

2. What interests modern languages undergraduates?

Some of the questions concerning linguistic variation that I have found students to be interested in on what we might call a curiosity level are:

- The idea that spoken Spanish is not just somehow a function of the standard written language (which is how they originally learn it), but has its own vocabulary (they know that through their prurient delight in learning slang on their year abroad, with which they to shock their teachers) and structures. (Astonishingly, despite increased understanding of this issue, spoken Spanish is rarely explicitly taught in our universities, and perhaps this is a theme linguists in language departments might take up.)
- Arising out of that, they are quite surprised to find that more ‘respectable’ registers of the language, especially the language of journalism, contain linguistic features which are frowned upon by purists — they have grown up to believe that anything that is written down carries an authority.
- They have a healthy curiosity for languages which they have never encountered and perhaps are never likely to (though hopefully they may aspire to, just as I would like some day to hear Chabacano spoken in Zamboanga in the Philippines): I find that Judeo-Spanish and Papiamentu, a creole of the Dutch Antilles, consistently attract enthusiasm.

3. The individual properties of Spanish

Extending students’ knowledge of Spanish and fanning such enthusiasms might justify providing a course on Varieties of Spanish in itself; but my principal motivation as a Hispanic linguist now for such a course is that through it one can actually say something about the individuality of Spanish as a ‘big’ language, and raise intellectually challenging questions as to what constitutes a ‘language’ and ‘Spanish’ in particular. It also encourages comparisons with other ‘big’ languages, especially English, Portuguese and French. (There is a danger that the linguistics of a particular language can be rather hermetic, another theme we might take up in discussion.) By a ‘big’ language I of course mean a diasporic language, a language carried over large distances by its speakers in the course of their imperial expansion and its dissemination to those on whom their rule was imposed. The dimensions of Spanish are well known to Hispanists, who until relatively recently had had to use such ammunition to persuade English-speaking publics of the importance and usefulness of Spanish (younger colleagues may not appreciate that in the 1970s the very survival of Spanish as a university subject was believed to be hanging in the balance, though French and German were at that time reasonably strong), but despite the greater popularity of Spanish today, such statistics still come as news to many, and so I’ll give a very brief account.

Estimates of the number of native Spanish speakers in the world vary and are probably unreliable, but it is generally acknowledged that Spanish has now slightly overtaken English in this dimension. However, to calculate the number of Spanish native speakers, adding up the populations of the 21 countries where Spanish is the sole or main official language, which comes out at around 350m, will not do, since in some areas there is a high degree of bilingualism, which is sometimes asymmetric in favour of the other language

one thinks particularly of such locations as the Andean area, where Quechua and Aymara are particularly strongly maintained, and Paraguay, where Guaraní has longstanding prestige; the situation of Spanish in the US, arguably the fourth or fifth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world, is especially difficult to establish. On the other hand, Spanish has far fewer second and non-native speakers than English.

Another little-acknowledged fact is that Spanish is an officially pluricentric language, by which I mean that its standardising body, the Real Academia Española, on behalf of and in concert with the other 21 Academies worldwide, explicitly says so, admitting as standard the educated norm of any Spanish-speaking area. Yet at the same time, the declared aim of these bodies is to maintain a high degree of linguistic unity in the face of actual variation at the level of informal spoken language, where different varieties may be more or less mutually unintelligible.

[...] la norma del español no tiene un eje único, el de su realización española, sino que su carácter es policéntrico. Se consideran, pues, plenamente legítimos los diferentes usos de las regiones lingüísticas, con la única condición de que estén generalizados entre los hablantes cultos de su área y no supongan una ruptura del sistema en su conjunto, esto es, que ponga en peligro su unidad.

(<http://www.rae.es/rae%5CNoticias.nsf/Portada4?ReadForm&menu=>, accessed 2 June 2011)

‘The Spanish norm does not have a single axis, that of its Spanish realization, but is polycentric in nature. The various kinds of usage in the linguistic regions are therefore considered fully legitimate, with the sole condition that such usages are general amongst the educated speakers of their area and do not lead to a break-up of the system as a whole, that is to say, endanger the unity of the language.’

The historical background to this situation is also interesting. Following emancipation of the Central and South American republics in the early 19th century, Spanish might well have followed the territorial fragmentation of the Empire which ensued, and indeed, people began to speak of such concepts as *argentino* and *venezolano* (note that the term *español* is still subject to resistance outside central Spain and *castellano* tends to be used instead – the name of the language is another issue which might be pursued in relation to the individuality of Spanish). What probably stemmed this fragmentary process was the influence of the Venezuelan statesman and scholar Andrés Bello (1781–1865), who in 1847 published a grammar of Castilian for the use of Americans which began a tradition of normative language teaching in American Spanish-speaking countries. In this volume, Bello argued that the European standard should in general be followed, precisely to prevent the same sort of process overtaking the Spanish-speaking world as had overtaken the Latin-speaking world after the fall of the Roman Empire, which he saw, crucially, as being detrimental to the former unity of the now fragmented Spanish-speaking republics. In more recent times, the Real Academia Española, founded in 1713 in imitation of the Académie Française but nowadays so very much unlike it, has worked hard to justify its hegemonic position as arch-regulator, paying ever more attention to variation in America in its elaboration of a pluricentric norm. Its latest publication, the first two volumes of a compendious Grammar, an anonymous work collectively authored by top descriptive linguists from all the national Academies, is destined to be the fullest account of morphological and syntactic variation in Spanish ever produced.

4. Widening students’ knowledge

In my experience, students, especially those with an English-speaking background, while they are of course likely to be very familiar with the concept of variation because English like Spanish is a diasporic language, have never really given much attention to such issues of language planning. They don’t read the small print in the dictionaries and grammars they use as reference works. They want clearcut answers to questions about linguistic usage

because most of their experience with regard to learning a foreign language has been tacitly prescriptive. So:

- They don't look critically at the division between 'Castilian' and 'Latin American' Spanish that is very frequently made in language courses and reference materials for foreign learners (many features of 'Latin American' Spanish are in fact also found somewhere in the Spanish of Spain).
- They haven't always asked fundamental questions about the difference between a 'language' and a 'dialect', or perhaps more specifically in the Spanish context, what might be meant by such frequently employed terms as 'Andalusian Spanish' or 'Argentine Spanish'.
- An amazing number are just plain ignorant about the historical relationships involved in the language map of Spain and have not thought about the difference between what I often refer to as the 'primary' dialectalisation of Latin, which produced the 'old' dialects of the north of the Peninsula, some of which became the basis of modern official languages, the best known of which are Catalan and Galician, and the 'secondary' dialectalisation which produced regional varieties of Castilian (Spanish).

I find that in fact these are precisely the questions I'm often asked about socially when I confess to my professional business being the Spanish language. When students find out about languages like Judeo-Spanish and Papiamentu, there is then the question as to whether these are in any sense 'Spanish' and, in the case of creoles, what such a term as 'Spanish(-based) creole' might mean.

This, then, is some of the background to the construction of the course.

5. Academic context and delimitation of the course

Academic support for such undergraduate study is now quite well catered for, which was certainly not the case when I started university teaching many years ago. Not only have the last 20 to 30 years seen sociolinguistic research on the Spanish-speaking world, especially in the Americas, flourish, but intriguing languages on the 'fringes' of Spanish such as creoles and hybrids have been well documented, and such studies are often of general theoretical importance — Bickerton & Escalante's 1970 study of Palenquero or Muysken's 1997 study of *media lengua*. A number of accessible introductory textbooks have also been published, e.g. Mar-Molinero 1997, Pountain 2003, Stewart 1999. Indeed, there is not time in a semester-long course to cover all the material I might wish, and I cannot deal in a very detailed way with geographical variation in Latin America, with Spanish hybrids, Spanish in a situation of language death, with Spanish as a second language, or with the interesting issues of code-switching and integrated borrowing in US Spanish. (I have also taught such a course as a double module lasting the whole year: there is no difficulty in finding material to fill this space, though I am not sure that illumination of the general questions concerning Spanish as a 'big' language is correspondingly enhanced — all that happens is that the dimensions of that 'bigness' are more thoroughly explored.)

6. Description of the course

Background: Taught as a final year module over 1 semester (11 2-hour slots).

Schedule of topics:

1. Introduction. What do we mean by 'the Spanish language'? Variety and 'correctness'.
2. Register in modern Spanish: (1) Spoken and written language
3. The same continued: (2) 'Slang' and cryptolects
4. The same continued: (3) Journalism

5. The same continued: (4) More specialised registers
6. Dialects: (1) The dialect map of the Iberian Peninsula
7. The same continued: (2) Andalusia and the Canaries
8. The same continued: (3) Latin America
9. Judeo-Spanish
10. Spanish creoles

Rationale: Not until the final year, with experience of the Year Abroad, have most students really had first-hand experience of non-standard variation in Spanish, even if language courses may have called attention to certain standard diatopic variational features such as third-person pronoun usage (*lóismo/leísmo*) or the absence of the polite/formal distinction in the second person plural in Latin America. It's also not until then that they usually have enough security in the standard language to be able to have a feeling for what is non-standard or unusual.

Local requirements: There is an advantage at QM if this class is also suitable for Spanish Erasmus students. In fact, the presence of native speakers in the class can be used to good advantage; though of course native speakers usually come with strong prescriptive assumptions, and I often have to spend some time on this in the first session. Calling on native speakers' linguistic knowledge (or lack of it) has provided some memorable moments: for example, a Colombian student was perfectly able to understand the language of Bogotá street children which was totally opaque to the rest of the class. It can also bring rather dry data to life: students from Granada once obligingly demonstrated that they did make a distinction of vowel opening that is not made in standard Spanish (and of course not described in any pedagogical textbook of Spanish), convincing the English-speaking students that the data which is rather abstractly presented in the textbooks was real.

The class is mixed as far as background in linguistics is concerned: although I specify a language prerequisite (second year Spanish language having been passed — which is in fact obligatory for all non-native speakers), I do not specify a linguistics prerequisite, since there is not an easily specifiable gradated Spanish linguistics course due to the modular nature of our degree programmes. I have not found this a particular problem; use of phonetic symbols, which is inevitable in describing phonetic variation, might be expected to be a problem, but in fact the repertoire of phonetic symbols needed to describe most standard Spanish varieties is not large and study of finer variation needs more unusual symbols which would have to be explained in any case; furthermore, the Spanish-speaking world has traditionally not made use of the IPA, so to read detailed Spanish-language studies students would have to unlearn the IPA to a certain extent if they had already picked it up.

Method: The course is delivered in a series of 11 two-hour sessions, a pattern imposed by the College. There is a significant element of input from myself in the form of expository lectures, supported by quite detailed handouts (I prefer handouts to Powerpoint presentations, since they are easier for students to make supplementary notes on and to take away; however, for several years now I have projected the handouts during the classes, which makes commentary on examples easier; I have also improvised an interactive whiteboard (we do not have these as standard equipment) using an ordinary whiteboard — useful for annotating texts and maps. I use Powerpoint sparingly and as a presentational aid — it is very useful for displaying text alongside sound files, for instance. Most of the material I use, however, is written, since this is more easily manageable.

All class materials are rolled out to students on a Blackboard site (this is currently the College's VLE). The reference reading list is supplemented by links to online resources, including my own glossary of linguistic terms (<http://webpace.qmul.ac.uk/cjpountain/linggloss.htm>), guide to phonetic symbols (http://webpace.qmul.ac.uk/cjpountain/reduced_ipa_chart.pdf) and anthology of texts illustrating Spanish varieties (restricted to QM for copyright reasons), some of which are annotated, and some of which have specimen commentaries available on the VLE.

Exposition alternates with discussion of texts, which students prepare week by week.

The language of tuition is English for exposition and either English or Spanish for discussion. Students are expected to read academic books and articles in both English and Spanish.

Assessment: 1 coursework commentary, 1 2-hour exam consisting of 2 essay-type questions chosen from a list of 10 corresponding to each weekly topic.

7. Satisfactions and aspirations

In conclusion, I enjoy exciting students' curiosity through this course and making them aware, if they were not already, of the great variety of modern Spanish, which takes them way beyond the language of pedagogical textbooks and the journalistic and literary registers which they are likely to encounter in their language classes. But I also aspire to give students an appreciation of some of the issues involved in language standardisation and planning which they will almost inevitably meet in their professional lives.

References

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