

Wiles of Spanish in Latin America

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Abstract:

The article outline the spread and role of Spanish language across the region of Latin America and changing nature of this spread from the period of colonization till today – the era of globalization. By this approach I will also seek the answer to a question of the influence of Latin American Spanish in neighboring U. S. hemisphere and through it I will conclude by speculating on the future spread and role of Spanish, particularly in the U. S. and in its interaction with English.

Keywords:

Spanish language, Latin America, language spread, US Spanish, language policies, language and national identity

It is estimated that today there are over 400 million speakers of Spanish around the world². The vast majority of these are mother tongue speakers, or highly competent second language users. Europe, the birthplace of Spanish, has currently a very small proportion of the Spanish. This population is spread across the globe, but is concentrated primarily in the Americas. People in nearly all the 20 Latin American countries where Spanish is the official language, as well as a part of the Spanish-speaking community in the U. S., acquire Spanish as their first language. This proportion will be lower in one or two Latin American countries where there is a strong presence of indigenous languages, such as in Paraguay and Bolivia. In these countries, as with much of Latin America and parts of Spain, there are linguistic minority groups who nonetheless will learn Spanish very early in their lives (probably when they go to school) and speak it to a high competence. Categories such as ‘mother tongue’, ‘language’ and even ‘speaking a language’ can contain a wide variation resulting in significant differences in the totals produced. The Summer Institute of Linguists’ *Ethnologue* publication is a generally respected source for linguistic data, where the number of 417 million speakers of Spanish across the world is currently reported³, placing it amongst the most widely spoken languages, after English and Chinese. Significantly, too, with the exception of Spain (as well as Equatorial Guinea and the Philippines where speakers of Spanish are now very reduced), all the principal Spanish-speaking states border on other Spanish-speaking states. This has been important in terms of language spread and in maintaining the presence of the language.

Language policy in Spanish-speaking Latin America deals with challenges to the status of Spanish as the official language, a status inherited from the colonial administration of the New World from the very beginning of its history. These challenges come from several sources: the assertion of the rights of indigenous groups, the ‘danger’ of fragmentation of Spanish into a multitude of local dialects, contact with Portuguese along the southern border of Brazil and the growing prestige of English and influence of the United States. Some of these problems of the languages’ contacts with each other are related to political, some with economical reasons; both are – although only to a limited extent of this article – worth of mentioning and analyzing in wider context of Spanish as the language of many wiles.

In this paper I will focus my interest on highlighting the spread and role of Spanish language across the region of Latin America and I will briefly peek at the problems of

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² Summer Institute of Linguistics. 2002. *Ethnologue* 14th edition. http://www.ethnologue.com/14/show_language.asp?code=SPN, 3.7.2007.

³ SIL 2003, The *Ethnologue* reports a possible 322,200,000 to 358,000,000 first language users. It believes that with second language users included, this would be 417 million, although an exact definition of L1 or L2 speakers is not given. The figures incorporate data reported by the World Almanac.

foothold of this language in its past history and through this sight in the near future. I will discuss the changing nature of this spread from the period of colonization till today – the era of globalization. By this approach I will also seek the answer to a question of the influence of Latin American Spanish in neighboring U. S. hemisphere and through it I will conclude by speculating on the future spread and role of Spanish, particularly in the U. S. and in its interaction with English.

Spanish vs. Indigenous Languages

Initially, the nature of the spread of the Spanish language was influenced by the process of rapid colonization in the region of Latin America. Language played a significant role in the consolidation of Spain's American Empire. In the early phase of colonization, the Catholic Monarchs and later Charles V required all of their new subjects to learn Spanish, just as their predecessors had imposed the learning of Castilian on the conquered Arab territories in order to bind them more closely together in the nation governed by Castile. That is why only Castilian was allowed to be taught in the colonies' schools and the Spanish-speaking elites made little effort to learn the local languages. Not only did Castilian quickly dominate over the thousands of existing indigenous languages as the language of power, of administration and public life, but it was a particularly suitable medium over such enormous geographical distances because of its highly developed literacy. In the earlier period of colonization there was some attempt on the part of the Church to use indigenous languages as the main vehicle of transmitting Christian doctrine, and there were even directives instructing the missionaries and priests to learn and use local native languages but lately even those few Spanish missionaries who had wished to integrate more sympathetically with the indigenous people were banned from using their languages – a policy which was particularly unpopular and initially ignored by the Jesuits, in part leading to their expulsion from Latin America in 1767 [CERRÓN-PALOMINO 1989: 11–35].

However, it soon became clear that the linguistic diversity of the New World was too great to allow for the immediate implantation of Spanish, and some allowance had to be made for the usage of indigenous languages in teaching and evangelization. In 1570 Phillip II reluctantly authorized a policy of bilingualism in which instruction could be imparted in “the” language of each Viceroyalty: Nahuatl in New Spain and Quechua in Peru, with the consequent extension of these two languages into territories where they were not spoken natively. Even this measure was not enough, however, and in 1596 Phillip II recognized the existent multilingualism: Spanish for administration and access to the elite, and a local indigenous language for evangelization and daily communication in indigenous communities [HAMEL 1994: 243–274]. This policy leads to a separation of colonial society into a minority of Spanish/Creole Spanish-speakers governing an indigenous majority speaking one of many indigenous languages. The separation became so great that it all but halted the Hispanization of rural areas and created local indigenous elites with considerable autonomy from the central administration. A reassertion of central authority commenced in 1770 when Carlos III declared Spanish to be the only language of the Empire and ordered the administrative, judicial and ecclesiastic authorities to extinguish all others. [SÁNCHEZ 2002: 280–305]

Spanish and nation-building process in Latin America

In the same way that Spanish had been the great unifier of a vast Empire during the colonial days, its total integration and permanence in Latin American society was also assured from the period of independence onwards. The presence in Latin America of ruling elite who were made up exclusively of those of European descent – unlike in many other ex-colonial situations – ensured the maintenance of Spanish as the language of power. However, the language's link with national identity is ambiguous and shifting and very different from that found in Spain. To begin with, Spanish was not a unique national language in any of the new independent republics – they *all* used Spanish. Nor was Spanish the original indigenous language of the region. It was, on the contrary, the imposed, imperialist language of the very

enemy that the wars of independence had just defeated. And yet, nonetheless, Spanish did indeed serve a nation-forming role here as it had done previously in Spain, thereby reinforcing its dramatic spread across the world. Within the new and highly constructed independent republics there was an urgent need to create a sense of national identity – a uniqueness that distinguished Ecuadorians from Peruvians, Argentineans from Uruguayans, Mexicans from Guatemalans, etc. Indeed, these were artificial units containing many different ethnic groups, cultures and histories. Most also contained many different linguistic groups. For this reason the role of the Spanish language was seen as a way of unifying these disparate groups under the banner of their new identity – for example Mexican not Maya, Peruvian, not Quechua, and so on. To some extent too, even a particular form of Spanish was emphasized: Mexican Spanish, Argentinean Spanish, etc. Spanish would be taught in schools and used in all forms of written communication, notably in Constitutions, laws and the Church. Furthermore, Spanish was the official and often also the “national” language recognized in the republics’ new constitutions. [DEL VALLE-STHEEMAN 2002: 177-190] In fact, only very recently, in the twentieth century, some of these states began to recognize the existence of other non-Spanish languages as national or even co-official [HAMEL 1994: 289–305].

After Independence, the new nations and their successors maintained the official status of Spanish as a means of strengthening national unity and pursuing modernization through education. This tendency was reinforced at the turn of the century through the 1940’s with notions of Social Darwinism, in which the vigorous hybrid groups of Latin America would eventually overcome the ‘weaker’ indigenous groups [SIGUAN 1992: 95 - 97]. It is only since World War II that this policy has suffered any substantial change.

Only recently have indigenous defenders of indigenous languages found any standing on the national stage. This new tolerance has been said to reflect the neo-liberal reforms required as conditions for loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund since the early 1990’s, with the threat of Communist takeover having receded. There are now a multitude of protective measures that go from bilingual primary education (Honduras), to constitutional protection (Columbia), to the establishment of indigenous languages as co-official with Spanish (Bolivia). [HAMEL 1994: 289–305]

Increasing immigration to Latin America and the strengthening of trends towards democratization lead to the fear among the intellectual elite that the linguistic unity of Latin America would collapse into a cacophony of local variants such as the Latin of the Roman Empire fragmented into the variety of Romance languages [LODARES 2001: 166–198].

The official status of Spanish was also threatened by the growing contact with other European languages: with English throughout Latin America and with Portuguese along the southern border of Brazil. Contact with English arises through migration to the United States for economic or political reasons or stay for business or education. This contact is particularly acute in the case of Puerto Rico, where its administrative dependency on the United States has led to an extensive diffusion of English [GARCÍA, MORÍN & RIVERA 2001: 44–74]. This threat has sparked intellectual debates that echo the Spanish-vs.-indigenous-language debates heard on the mainland: language is an expression of identity, perhaps the fundamental expression of identity, and it should not be given up lightly.

20th Century: stronger Spanish – better way

One of the indicators of the status of a language is whether it has been recognized in the legal system, in constitutions, etc. both at national and international level. As we have seen, 21 countries recognized Spanish as their official or national language, and Spanish is an official language in many international bodies, such as the United Nations and its offshoots (e.g. UNESCO), as well as the European Union. How far this official status leads to actual use rather than a mere tokenistic presence is perhaps a more moot point. Likewise, it is important to ask how politically significant the various Spanish-speaking states are in the global pecking order. Many of the Latin American republics are still relatively poor and underdeveloped, with notably high levels of illiteracy. Closely related to this is the economic clout and importance of the users of Spanish, which again varies from the relatively significant economy of Spain, to the expanding markets of, say, Chile, Mexico and some of the Mercosur countries, to the very poor and weak economies of countries like Bolivia or Nicaragua. However, in terms of

economic power we should increasingly consider the role of Spanish speakers in the U. S., and we will return to this further on [MAR-MOLINERO 2000:13–17].

Another major factor in the popularity of Spanish was the creation of the South American Common Market (Mercosur) and the cultural and economic opportunities that it provided for many Latin Americans. The Treaty of Asuncion, signed in 1991 by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, was created to promote free trade within the region and confirmed its own continent as the main front in countries' foreign policies [HAMEL 2003: 111–143]. Quotation that speaks a lot: “The priority in Brazil’s foreign policy is South America”⁴.

In the twentieth century, urbanization, industrialization and technological advances have led to the rapid decrease or even death of indigenous languages in Latin America, and the consolidation of Spanish in all the independent republics. Education systems and more access to literacy generally have also helped promote the learning and use of Spanish, to the detriment of the indigenous languages which until recently have scarcely been taught and many of which do not have a tradition of literacy. [MORALES& TORRES 1992: 87–153]

Spanish Language and Latinos in the U. S.

Not only has internal migration from rural areas to large Latin American cities been a significant feature, but so has been the immigration out of Spanish-speaking Latin America to the United States, producing an ever-growing Spanish-speaking population there. It might be argued that the U. S. Hispanic/Latino population of the twentieth century is to the development and history of the Spanish language what the Spanish colonizers were in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or the Castilian *reconquistadores* in the ninth and tenth century in terms of its key impact [SILVA-CORVALAN 2000: 65–117]. This U. S. community has none of the dominating features of the earlier Spanish colonization phenomenon. Instead, Hispanic communities have been characterized by marginalization and discrimination. It is significant that, despite this, Spanish has maintained a firm footing in the U. S. ever since in the twentieth century large groups of Spanish-speakers started immigrating there, both legally and illegally. We should also note that this immigration in fact was not the first to bring Spanish-speakers to the United States; a small community of Spanish-speakers had existed in parts of the Southwest when these territories were Mexican-governed.

Spanish as an “economic commodity”

The number of the so-called Latinos in the United States is estimated to around 35 million (U.S. Bureau of Census 2000) [THERRIEN & RAMIREZ 2000:50–239] although this is a much-contested census and the quantity of illegal immigrants makes this a slippery figure to judge [VILLA 2000].⁵ These are not all mother tongue speakers of Spanish, nor necessarily Spanish speakers at all, as the inter-generational transmission of Spanish in the States has been weak. [BILLS, GARLAND 2002: 45–59] As a marginalized and stigmatized group the Latinos have tended to move towards the dominant culture and language, notwithstanding the earlier comment that contact with their former homelands and cultures is stronger than with previous immigrant groups. Nonetheless the sheer size of the community has led U. S. companies and entrepreneurs to see them as a potentially important market. [CARREIRA 2002:37-54; VILLA 2000:144-150] Villa has calculated the buying power of this group and shown how significant this economic weight is in comparison with other parts of the Spanish-speaking world. His ranking shows that all nine major Latino-populated U. S. states have greater US\$ buying power than the most significant economic Spanish-speaking nations. [Ibid, p. 150-154] It also shows how the recent market increase in Spanish-language radio and

⁴ Speech of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in EL PAÍS, February 24th 2003. www.elpais.es, 4. 8. 2007

⁵ An attempt to extrapolate from this figure an estimate of how many people actually speak some Spanish, which he believes to be around 33.3 million (including undocumented workers and Puerto Ricans who are all U.S. citizens). See, also Gómez (2001) for an analysis of the 2000 census.

television broadcast and print outlets (with their advertising possibilities) in the U.S., along with the growing recognition of the professional usefulness of some bilingual competence to strengthen businesses, have all made the use of Spanish economically and commercially attractive and potentially lucrative. This lesson has not been lost on business and commercial interests in Spain and other major Spanish-speaking countries that are beginning to see the potential of their language as a marketable and economically rewarding commodity. It is important, however, to stress that not all commentators share this relative optimism in assessing the current use of Spanish in the United States. In particular, other studies have shown a notable intergenerational loss of Spanish amongst Latino communities.⁶

Although the differences amongst the U. S. Latinos are almost as great as their similarities, comprising those of Mexican, Puerto Rican and Cuban origins principally, the targeting by non-Latinos with the use of Spanish has necessarily drawn the community together, and, in return, this gives them more political and economic power. In linguistic terms it both strengthens the use of Spanish and simultaneously homogenizes it with forms that are not necessarily specific to any of the internal identities of the different Latino groups.

“Spanglish” Language

The form of Spanish spoken in the United States, significantly influenced as it inevitably is by English, is the subject of raging disputes and disagreements. The argument between those who view it as ‘*Spanglish*’ versus those who believe U. S. Spanish is simply evolving its own characteristics as in any other Spanish-speaking community outside Spain over time, is not a new one, echoing, as it does, debates long heard in Spain and Latin America since the independence of the Latin American colonies. [DEL VALLE & STHEEMAN 2002:77–130] It raises the important and controversial discussion over language standards – what these might be, and who decides them. With “standard” (that is, educated, middle class) varieties of Spanish normally reflecting the elite norm found in the capitals of the various Spanish-speaking nations, it is significant that U. S. Spanish does not have a national “capital”⁷. On the one hand, to some, then, there cannot be an acceptable standard form of U. S. Spanish and instead other national standards (such as Mexican, Venezuelan, Argentinean or Spanish) should be offered for purposes of literacy and education. The real, vital language spoken all around by U. S. Latinos is ignored and stigmatized as rural or inadequate, evidence of its speakers’ undereducated origins or their linguistic incompetence in learning either Spanish or English. On the other hand, others seek to recognize the appropriateness of U. S. Spanish as the legitimate form of the language living and developing in the U. S. Spanish-speaking communities [POUNTAIN 1999: 12, 33–43]. When both groups agree on the need to expand this Spanish repertoire beyond the registers of the oral language of home and street, they disagree on the form the more formal and written registers should take.

The struggle over what is U. S. Spanish and who should decide this is important insofar as it represents a crucial marker of U. S. Latinos’ identity. With the diverse ethnic backgrounds present amongst U. S. Latinos, language remains one of the most obvious symbols of Latino identity. Attempts to ensure its survival as a normal mother tongue for many, and significant second language for others, center around the resistance to the English-only campaigns which have sought to make English the one and only official language in the United States through constitutional amendments [GRADDOL 1997: 76–78] (so far successful only at state level), and, above all, by discrediting its use in the education system.

The fate of inter-generational transmission of Spanish amongst its speech communities in the United States is clearly important, but the continuing high levels of immigration from Spanish-speaking countries mean that the presence of Spanish in the United States continues to rise and to fuel interest as an important consumer market. Moreover, it is its current high profile presence in the United States rather than its transmission to the second and third generation immigrants, which has attracted attention across the globe, and in particular in other parts of the developed world. Its prominence and market size are perceived as important

⁶ García, Morín & Rivera 2001; García 2003; and Zentella 2002.

⁷ This is particularly highlighted by the recent production by the Instituto Cervantes and the Spanish language Academies of the so-called ‘unified’ Spanish language course. Zamora (2003), p. 23–89.

in global economy and linguistic politics. Determining what exactly this form of Spanish will be is increasingly being decided on a global and not only U. S. stage. [BILLS 2002.]

Conclusion

The debate over standard language and Spanish in the United States is another example of the extra-linguistic issues that typically influence and mark out language behavior and development. Standard language has been promoted and protected and regulated by national governments (for example, through their education systems and such organizations as language academies). This is clearly evident in the Spanish-speaking world. Where this national government direction is absent and the link with national identity ambiguous, as in the case of U. S. Spanish speakers, the debate over standard forms of Spanish has been caught up in the still persisting constraints of mapping the world by the nation-state paradigm. It is, however, a characteristic of contemporary society that global, rather than national politics are determining identity, and it is an important change in the twenty-first century that language is no longer necessarily only linked to a well-defined national group or groups.

It is inevitable that the further down the road towards the role of a global language Spanish proceeds, the further away from its original local and national roots it will be drawn, and that potentially a new and hybrid form of international Spanish will start to develop, similar to the international English that many English mother tongue speakers now find an alien. Nonetheless, as throughout the diversified history of the Spanish language, it will be precisely its grandiosity at surviving the potential of total fragmentation that will demonstrate the capacity of Spanish to be an actor on a global stage.

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