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978-1-107-00573-0 - A Political History of Spanish: The Making of a Language

Edited by José del Valle

Excerpt

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Part I

Theoretical underpinnings

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1 Language, politics and history: an introductory essay

José del Valle

“Language is too important historically to leave to the linguists”

Peter Burke (1987: 17)

“It is our ambition to add to the history of language and languages a dimension of human agency, political intervention, power and authority, and so make that history a bit more political”

Jan Blommaert (1999: 5)

Historical grammar and the scientificization of language studies

The origins of a good number of scholarly articulations of language and history can be traced back along the path that led from comparative and historical studies to historical grammar and, from there, to the schools of modern linguistics that developed from Saussure’s *Cours* (1916). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the debate over the origin of language provided the appropriate intellectual framework for the development of a specialized discourse on language that would eventually result in the crystallization of an autonomous discipline. This debate was fueled by the Enlightenment’s interest in the nature of society and the human mind (Salmon 1995), and the quest for the common source of most European and Near East languages – which had been encouraged by the “discovery” of Sanskrit in the context of British colonialism (MacMahon 1995). A statement made in 1786 by Sir William Jones (1746–1794), judge of the Supreme Court in Calcutta, is often – somewhat inaccurately (Jankowsky 1995) – credited with inaugurating comparative and historical linguistics:

The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed that no philologist could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists. (Jones qtd. in Lehmann 1967: 189)

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Jones's statement and the conditions of its production condense a series of lines of thinking and evoke a set of circumstances that deeply influenced how language had come to be viewed at the time. The aforementioned debate on the origins of language had resulted in discussions of how speech is linked to mental activity, and how both are linked to the environment. The doctrine developed in Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744–1803) award-winning essay *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (*Treatise on the Origin of Language*) (1772) was behind affirmations of the existence of an inalienable link between language and culture; a notion that, further elaborated by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), would gain special traction in the context of post-Napoleonic nationalism. Jones's interest and expertise in Sanskrit was directly related to his position as a colonial officer of the British Empire and, therefore, to his responsibility to develop technologies of knowledge that would assist in "understanding" the colonized subject: "[w]hen, in 1765, the East India Company obtained the administrative rights to Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, knowledge of India's culture became a colonial necessity" (Rocher 1995: 189).

Paradoxically, Jones's statement also foreshadowed a development that in due course would channel linguistic research in a direction that radically severed language from culture. By suggesting that research focus on "the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar" he subscribed to a line of thinking that prioritized the formal dimension of language in plotting linguistic comparison and evolution (Collinge 1995: 197). It was the trend that would be dominant throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as language scholars equated progress with scientificization, and mapping the forms of grammar offered the most suitable strategy to replicate the categories and methods of science. John E. Joseph has described the process as

the gradual realignment of the study of language away from moral science, philosophy, aesthetics, rhetoric, and philology, and in the direction of the natural sciences – first botany, biology, chemistry, and comparative anatomy; then geology; and finally physics, by way of mathematics. With this has come a steady elimination of human *will* from the object of study, the necessary condition for any "science" in the modern sense. (Joseph 1995: 221)

Still within the comparative and historical paradigm, August Schleicher (1821–1868), with the *Junggrammatiker* (or Neogrammarians), played a central role in the process when he formulated a clarifying analogy that compared languages and natural organisms. The latter exhibited predictable behavior and contained within themselves the seeds of their own evolution; and these properties, Schleicher suggested, were applicable to languages, which were thus (rhetorically) rendered suitable for scientific observation. The Neogrammarians moved away from their predecessor's organic analogy but continued to focus nonetheless on linguistic forms, declaring the absolute regularity of their

evolution through sound laws (*Lautgesetze*): “every sound change, inasmuch as it occurs mechanically, takes place according to laws that admit no exception” (Osthoff and Brugmann qtd. in Lehmann 1967: 204). The central metaphor controlling the field switched from organic to mechanical, but the operations of language in the process of evolution continued to be located outside the purview of human agency.¹

The dominance of comparative and historical studies and the progressive scientificization of linguistic research through a radical focus on the formal system of language resulted in historical grammar, a discipline that aimed at describing the linguistic processes and identifying the successive stages through which a particular language had evolved from its immediate ancestor into its present shape. The ideal was that the knowledge produced by multiple investigations on specific sections of a language’s grammar – vowels, consonants, pronouns, verbs, relative clauses, etc. – at different points in time would be collected and organized into a particular type of text that would display a description of the language of origin’s grammar, followed by the chronologically arranged sound laws that had generated the present state of the language. In the Spanish tradition,² this was exactly what Ramón Menéndez Pidal (1869–1968) did in 1904: He brought together his research on the evolution of Spanish and the notes he had developed for his course on the comparative grammar of Latin and Spanish at the University of Madrid. The result was his *Manual elemental de gramática histórica de la lengua española* (1904).³

The idealist challenge: redefining the relationship between language and human will

The 1904 *Manual* was one in a series of publications that made Ramón Menéndez Pidal Spain’s leading scholar in matters of language and philology. It is crucial to note, however, that Menéndez Pidal’s reputation was built

¹ Saussure would in fact formulate the theory of language that would radically establish the autonomy of linguistics by isolating language from usage (*langue versus parole*), context (internal *versus* external linguistics) and history (synchrony *versus* diachrony). However, having rendered language an object of scientific investigation, he insisted on the importance of examining its entanglement with cultural and political phenomena. See Crowley 1992 for a pertinent distinction between diachrony and history in Saussure.

² The Spanish tradition goes, of course, well beyond Menéndez Pidal. Suffice it to remember Menéndez Pidal’s disciples (e.g. Amado Alonso, Américo Castro, Rafael Lapesa) at Madrid’s *Centro de Estudios Históricos* and its Latin American ramifications (partially discussed here in Toscano y García’s chapter). See Catalán Menéndez-Pidal for a discussion of the Madrid School’s theory of language.

³ For a theoretical and ideological critique of historical linguistics see Milroy 1992. For an ideological analysis of Menéndez Pidal’s early-career foray into historical grammar see Del Valle 1997.

through a broadly based project that included the study of the country's language, literature and history.⁴ In fact, his incursion into historical grammar and therefore into the autonomous field of linguistics surprised some of his contemporaries and even triggered a critical and revealing reaction from one of Spain's most prestigious intellectual figures: diplomat and writer Juan Valera (1824–1905). In a 1905 article entitled “Gramática histórica,” Valera reviewed Menéndez Pidal's book (as well as two others of much less consequence by José Alemany and Salvador Padilla) and charged against the discipline:

The doubts that I have modestly expressed . . . go against historical grammar if by such we mean not just the history of language but the philosophy of said history; not just the observed fact but also the cause, the reason, the law by virtue of which the fact is realized or must be realized unless the law is broken . . . My doubts have to do with the laws to which words are subjected in the process of change. What about them is natural or universal? What about them is arbitrary? What is positive or in force only in a limited region? What is still current and what is already old or has been abolished since who knows when? (Valera 1905: 1180–1)

Valera was not concerned with historical grammar as long as it was taken to be a purely descriptive endeavor, that is, a record of the changes that had led from the language of origin (e.g. Latin) to the language being historicized (e.g. Spanish). His main concern, however, was with the theory of language that, associated with historical grammar, identified the essence of the object in its purely formal properties and explained its operations with utter independence from human will.

I will not deny the existence of certain phonetic laws. But maybe, within those laws, without abolishing them or breaking them, the instinctive whim of different peoples – or maybe, sometimes, even just one – produces entirely different sounds or combinations of sounds from the same root . . . At first sight, for the layman – in whose number I modestly count myself – there is no such thing as a phonetic law. In the transformation of words there is nothing but constant usage, which is grounded in instinctive whim. (Valera 1905: 1179)

While instinctive whim (*capricho instintivo*) and the reasoning behind it were no match for the thoroughly elaborated notion of sound law, Valera made an extraordinarily lucid and powerful point: scientificity in language study had come at the tremendous cost of surgically removing it from speakers, from the act of speaking and therefore from the contextual conditions of language's existence.

⁴ The breadth of Menéndez Pidal's pursuits is discussed in, for example, Pérez Villanueva 1991 and Pérez Pascual 1998, two mostly hagiographic but detailed and informative biographies, and Portolés 1986, an insightful account of the development of linguistic and philological studies in twentieth-century Spain.

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Valera, of course, was not writing in a vacuum. At the time of his critique of historical grammar and close to the core of mainstream linguistics, the voices of dialectologists – which paradoxically had been encouraged by the Neogrammarians – were being heard as they questioned the systematicity of sound laws and even the very existence of well-delineated language frontiers. The observation of language in context – of speakers speaking – was revealing, as Valera's instincts suggested, important flaws in the dominant theory of language evolution. There was also an alternative climate of opinion among certain scholars of language that took an anti-positivistic stand and affirmed the existence of an essential link between language and human will. Suffice it to recall the publication of Benedetto Croce's *L'estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale* (*Aesthetics as the science of expression and general linguistics*) in 1902, which placed human will at the center of language studies and rejected the model of the natural sciences, and Karl Vossler's *Positivismus und Idealismus in der Sprachwissenschaft* (*Positivism and idealism in the language sciences*) in 1904, in which – in a tradition that connected him to Croce and could be traced back to Wilhelm von Humboldt among others – language was defined as an expression of the human spirit and its history classified as a branch of the history of culture. Although Vossler continued to focus on the formal transformation of language, the forms themselves were no longer an end but a methodological strategy through which to reach the psychological make-up and aesthetic inclination of individuals and collectivities. Change originates as individual creation, as the product of intuition, and spreads throughout the community.⁵

In spite of Menéndez Pidal's initial success with historical grammar, he must have shared Valera's concerns with that discipline's possible implications. In fact, the bulk of his linguistic work – as well as that of most of his disciples in the Madrid School of Spanish Philology – developed along lines that, despite some discrepancies, were drawn on the grounds of linguistic idealism.⁶ When Menéndez Pidal published the first edition of his masterpiece *Orígenes del español: estado lingüístico de la Península Ibérica hasta el siglo XI* in 1926, he had not abandoned the rigorous study of linguistic documents and the linguistic forms they revealed, but he had redefined the relationship between language and history. Language had now become a sociolinguistically complex structure and its historicity had morphed from a sequential disposition along a chronological empty grid into a dynamic relationship with the context of production. He did

⁵ For an overview of the development of dialectology and its challenge to historical linguistics see Chambers and Trudgill 1980 (13–36). For the development of the Italian Neolinguistic School's challenge see Albrecht 1995. For a thorough review of the state of Romance linguistics at the beginning of the century see Jordan and Orr 1970.

⁶ For the penetration of idealism in the Madrid School see Catalán Menéndez-Pidal 1955 and Portolés 1986. Portolés is less inclined to add Menéndez Pidal to the list of idealist linguists.

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identify three distinct periods on the basis of the type of language displayed by the selected documents from León, Castile and Aragon: a first period between 900 and 1030, in which he could discern a strong tendency to romanize writing; a second, between 1030 and 1170, in which a Latinizing thrust seems to have taken over writing habits; and a third phase, from 1170 onwards, in which the romanizing tendency returned for good. However, his greatest and more lasting contribution was not in his description of specific linguistic changes – which would later be corrected by others working with new data and perspectives – nor in his (from our present perspective ridiculous) view of Castilian’s inherently superior features.⁷ His profound contribution was his commitment to render the study of language truly relevant to history:

We must try to examine the history of these dark centuries in relation to this linguistic evolution. We must try to do it by penetrating, to the extent possible, the spirit of that remote past life; by inspiring ourselves in the aesthetic intention of those speakers, whether they were under the influence of educated or vulgar tendencies, archaizing or neological ones, emphatic or careless about speech. (Menéndez Pidal 1950: ix)

The idealist theory of language in which *Orígenes* was based led Menéndez Pidal to examine scribal practices in a context of socially significant linguistic variation and to link linguistic processes to the realm of the Law, “Reconquest” politics, and identity-building:

Castile, upon its emancipation from the tradition of the Visigoth court followed by León and upon its subsequent departure from Spain’s common norm, emerges as an exceptional and innovating people. Let us remember this characteristic that will explain the essence of the Castilian dialect. And let us add a most interesting coincidence: Castile – which, known for its customary law, opposes the written law dominant in the rest of Spain – is the region that provides the Peninsula with the main literary language. (Menéndez Pidal 1950: 475)

The specifics of Menéndez Pidal’s views on the origins of Spanish have been contested on the basis of philological evidence and developments in language change theory (e.g. Penny 2000), and the nationalist ideological underpinnings of his linguistic work have been highlighted (e.g. Del Valle 2002a). However, the fact remains that he lucidly embraced a perspective that, first, recognizes the operations of linguistic variation within a complex system of socially grounded norms and that, second, searches for the origins of Spanish in the interface between language and politics during the Middle Ages: in the struggles among

⁷ For example, when describing the variation that led to *ou* > *o* and *ei* > *e* in Castile, he states: “By soon discarding the *ou*, *ei* forms, Castile displays a more accurate acoustic taste, choosing quite early and with resolve the most euphonic forms” (Menéndez Pidal 1950: 486).

the various Iberian kingdoms and in the sociopolitical roots and ramifications of scribal decisions.⁸

Language, society and history

In many respects, Menéndez Pidal can be included (with the likes of, for example, Antoine Meillet and Hugo Schuchardt) among the precursors of sociolinguistics in general and historical sociolinguistics in particular,⁹ which produced a new articulation of language and history through the mediation of social categories. Sociolinguistics – whose modern crystallization is best represented by the initial work of William Labov (1972) and Peter Trudgill (1974) – identified variation as a central phenomenon in language and rescued actual linguistic practices – the locus of variation – from the peripherality to which Saussure had pushed it (see note 1). The new discipline also found a crucial correlation between social categories such as age, gender, education or situation and the systematicity of variation, a development that brought context to bear on linguistic research. From this point on, having defined language as variable and variation as systematic, sociolinguists engaged in the accurate description of orderly heterogeneity through empirical and quantitative methods.

This new paradigm had a double implication in terms of how language and history are related. First, if a language is no longer conceived of as a highly focused and stable grammar but as a complex diasystemic structure, earlier stages in the history of that language must also be conceived as complex diasystemic structures, and research into those stages must proceed accordingly. This is precisely historical sociolinguistics' intent: In the absence of actual speech, historical sociolinguists must devise ways to treat the archival material so that it will lend itself to the reconstruction of the language's particular configuration of orderly heterogeneity at any time and to the field's signature quantitative approach.¹⁰ There is yet a second dimension of sociolinguistics that deeply

⁸ Efforts to bring together what at the time was known as internal and external history and thus move away from the dry “dehumanizing” effect of historical grammar are best represented by Rafael Lapesa's classic *Historia de la lengua española*, first published in 1942 (Lapesa 1980). In spite of its value, this genre – which continues to be practiced to this date (e.g. Pharies 2007, a textbook, or the outstanding and truly impressive *Historia de la lengua española* (2004) coordinated by Rafael Cano) – offers limited attempts to theorize the connection between that which is identified as internal – linguistic form – and external – a series of events that define a narrative of Spain's and Spanish America's history and that only loosely connect with linguistic practices – and essentially remains within traditional paradigms.

⁹ For treatments of this genealogy see, for example, Lloyd 1970 and Gimeno Menéndez 1995.

¹⁰ The pioneering work in historical sociolinguistics is Romaine 1982. A good example of how Spanish has been approached from this perspective is Gimeno Menéndez 1995. More recently,

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affected the interface between language and history. In an inspired theoretical move, synchrony and diachrony were merged into one. Variation was the essence of language and, while it was obvious that not all cases resulted in change, it became evident that all instances of change did originate in the type of variation whose meticulous representation was being designed by sociolinguistics through methods that combined formal grammar, logical-mathematical language (statistics) and elementary sociology. A sociolinguistic description of a language offered not just correlations between forms of grammar and social factors but the snapshot of a system that contained the seeds of its potential transformation. Thanks to this theoretical and methodological leap, it was now possible to see language in motion and to think of the historicity of language not only as evolution along different positions in a chronological empty grid, but as a dynamic relationship with context.

Developments in sociolinguistics led Peter Burke to see a gap between linguistics, sociology and history: a barely explored space that could and should be productively gauged and charted by a social history of language (1987). In his view, sociolinguistics had made four major historically relevant points: “1. Different social groups use different varieties of language. 2. The same people employ different varieties of language in different situations. 3. Language reflects the society (or culture) in which it is spoken. 4. Language shapes the society in which it is spoken” (1987: 3–4). Points 1 through 3 are indeed consistent with the general development of sociolinguistics and historical sociolinguistics: inasmuch as variation correlates to social categories and situational factors, an individual’s usage – the choice of certain variants over others – may provide us with information on her or his social position as well as on the social structure of the situation in which the utterance or the text was produced. Following these principles, specific research projects (on, say, the use of *vos* and *tú* in eighteenth-century Castile or the use of *s* and *x* as social markers in sixteenth-century León) would produce results that would be located in a “big picture” representing the history of language X. Language X is diachronically laid out along a chronological grid and, for different points along the timeline, its structure is described *in accordance with sociolinguistic principles*, that is, with attention to how linguistic forms relate to social and contextual factors and to how socially grounded variation is the key to the dynamics of change.

However, Burke’s proposal of a social history of language reaches beyond the scope of historical sociolinguistics. He demonstrates an interest not just

Conde Silvestre (2007) reviewed the field through case studies from English and Spanish. Ralph Penny’s 2000 *Variation and Change in Spanish* must be included as a major contribution to the historical sociolinguistics of Spanish even though his take – following Trudgill’s studies of dialect contact, Giles’ theories of accommodation and Milroy’s views of change through social networks – displays a more relaxed attitude towards quantification.