Dialect Studies and Dialects of Spanish in Colombia

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Linguistics in Latin America

Philology, the non-structural study of languages together with their literatures, flourished in the nineteenth-century Europe, but is almost extinct in the twentieth-century United States. It has spread to Latin America where it still is cultivated, to a large extent, in its nineteenth-century form, and has produced outstanding philological works on occasion. In addition, Latin American philology is to be understood as having a scope that includes, beside linguistics, also ethnography, cultural history, studies of literature, and criticism of literary texts. The literary and cultural studies are concerned with local subjects of their one country, preferably of modern times, as are the works that we can consider linguistic. They deal with the contemporary language (only Brazil has more emphasis on historical linguistic studies) and they are of the traditional European descriptive philological approach, with few structuralist exceptions.

Each country has an official Academy of Language and a Ministry of Education that uniformly directs all schools. As a result, there is an abundance of prescriptive works on language. Many of the good linguists and philologists who worked or are working in Spanish America, came there from other parts of the world: Germany, Austria, Denmark, Italy, Sweden, Spain, United States, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, or they were trained in a country outside of Latin America. If we also mention here the lack of research facilities, such as libraries and the poverty of library collections, we have a picture of the situation of linguistic studies in Latin America. And we must not forget the lack of communication between linguists, whose work is mutually referred to only in laudatory terms, with no constructive criticism.

Linguistics in Colombia

Colombia is in an analogous situation, with one important difference, however: her long-standing tradition of more-than-average interest in language. The Colombian Academy of Language is the oldest in America, having been founded in 1780. A hundred years ago, a Colombian, Rufino José Cuervo, re-edited and enlarged by 160 pages the first descriptive grammar of a European language, the Venezuelan Andrés Bello’s 1847 American Spanish grammar. Such interest in the language is not reserved to the educated Colombians alone, but common people share it as well. Even shoemakers are said to discuss points of grammar with their customers. The natives of the capital city of Bogotá are especially convinced that their speech is the most correct Spanish.

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that there is in America. We cannot summarily disclaim this if we consider their castellano from a broader, comparative-typological point of view, as we shall see later.

Newspapers

Colombian newspaper columns and brief notices on language show three aspects in their discussions: one reflects the preoccupation of the common man with his language, the other is the purist standpoint of the Academy and the third is dealing with Anglicisms. Examples of the first would be: the explanation of the difference in the meaning of reclamación and reclamo with suggestions for their use in certain contexts, when they are appropriate, and who should use them: memorando over memorandum; an argument offered for the preference of the different pronunciations or spellings of the words nailón, nilón and nylon are noted, but no preference is declared; as a grammatical point, the correct use of the verb haber in impersonal constructions is presented.

This leads us to the second aspect of newspaper columns, which concerns language correctness. According to columnists, neologisms can be tolerated only if introduced by established literary authors. Dialect forms, even if we can classify them as native Americanisms, are condemned as "unclean" speech: such as el radio, el criaturu or el mosco.

The third aspect of newspaper columns concerns expressions used by many unsuspecting people, but which are branded as Anglicisms and condemned by those knowledgeable of English. Thus, evidencia is to be substituted by prueba, and activo should replace the word agresivo. For the word sofisticado, a variety of expressions are suggested as purer Spanish, for instance refinado, which, however, calls to mind another English word.

Academy of Language

The guardian of the purity of language is the Colombian Academy of Language which never makes liberalizing decisions on its own, but rather, as in all the Spanish American countries, strictly adheres to the dictum of the Royal Spanish Academy of Language of Madrid, either directly, or indirectly through participation in congresses of the Academies. The Royal Academy has as its motto that it "purifies, stabilizes and gives lustre" to the Spanish language. It does so for other Spanish-speaking countries as well, even though they have been independent for 160 years. It is curious to see how eagerly the individual Academies accept such decrees which may be considered as the last vestiges of Spanish colonialism. One reason they declare for such acceptance is the desire to "close the cracks" between Spanish Spanish and American Spanish. However, some of the acknowledged rulings do not "close the cracks," but rather make concessions to America by accepting widespread American vocabulary or pronunciation features into the common fold by incorporating the lexical differences into the Dictionary of the Royal Academy or by elevating some dialect pronunciations to the status of a second standard.
A second standard was established by the acceptance of the yeísmo, which the Fourth Congress of Academies in Buenos Aires in 1964 declared legitimate. This fact was happily heralded in the newspapers of Colombia, although in that country the yeísmo (lack of the alveopalatal lateral) occurs only in the black coastal regions and in a small central region. Nevertheless, the persons who reported that momentous decision concerning all Spanish America were extremely glad that their compatriotes from the central province of Antioquia were no longer committing a "mortal sin" by pronouncing "beya viya" instead of the Bogotan "bella villa."

Not long ago, the Colombian Academy of Language handled a local problem, conducting extensive discussion on a suitable pure-Spanish replacement of the word pizza. Not only was no agreement reached on the subject, but the dish continues to be happily consumed under its original name, as are hot dogs, hamburgers and Pepsi (pronounced "peksi").

Instituto Caro y Cuervo

Two entities in Colombia are occupied with the scientific study of language: one is the philological-linguistic Instituto Caro y Cuervo, dealing with the Spanish as it is spoken in Colombia; the other is the American Summer Institute of Linguistics, whose missionary-linguistic activities are focused on the Amerindian speech of the jungle tribes. The Summer Institute's work in Colombia, initiated in 1962, is more structurally oriented than the linguistic research done by the Instituto Caro y Cuervo. As the work of the SIL linguists lies not in the field of Spanish, we shall now turn to the activities of the Instituto Caro y Cuervo.

Founded in 1942, the Instituto Caro y Cuervo has among its five research departments two which are devoted to linguistic studies of Spanish: Lexicography and Dialectology. The Department of Lexicography limits its activities to the re-editing and continuation of a grammatical dictionary of Spanish, begun in 1886 by Rufino José Cuervo, which has presently reached the letter E (Diccionario de construcción y régimen de la lengua castellana). The Department of Dialectology, in addition to its other projects, is also involved in the teaching of linguistic courses offered by the Instituto's Seminario Andrés Bello. Some of the courses have been taught by visiting professors, mainly recipients of Fulbright Awards from the United States. The courses are at the Master of Arts level and represent the highest linguistic education obtainable in Colombia. Since there are no doctoral studies of any kind in the country, those desiring them depend on foreign scholarships.

Because of its research and publishing activities, the Instituto Caro y Cuervo is in the fore of Spanish dialect studies in Latin America, since the desintegration of the initial research group of Buenos Aires' Instituto de Filología when its director, the Spaniard Amado Alonso, left for the United States in 1946. Although the efforts of the Instituto Caro y Cuervo are oriented toward studies of Colombian
Spanish and Colombian literature and culture, it has achieved remarkable results among Latin American dialectologists.

The main linguistic enterprise of the Instituto is its Atlas Lingüístico-Etnográfico de Colombia. The planning of the Atlas began in 1952 and the first field work was done in 1958. Its models were the ethnographically oriented European linguistic atlases, such as the Italian atlas of Karl Jaberg and Jakob Jud (Sprach- und Sachatlas Italiens und der Südschweiz) and the Rumanian atlases of Sever Pop, along with Hans Kurath's Linguistic Atlas of New England. In the questionnaire of the Atlas, lexical items predominate over phonetic and grammatical ones, and questions on folk poetry and other folklore are included, as well as on occupations, time division, proper names and gestures. So far, over a half of the 250 localities planned for the Atlas have been investigated.

No parts of the Atlas proper have been published yet, but survey and regional monographs, articles and reports on field work in different provinces or localities have appeared either as volumes of the Publications series of the Instituto (by the director of the Atlas, Luis Flórez), or in the Instituto's journal Thesaurus and newsletter Noticias Culturales. All of these are written in a popularly comprehensible linguistic form with no structural or typological aspirations.

In addition to the work on the Atlas, the Instituto recently adopted a related project. In 1972, it agreed to participate in the project of the Inter-American Program of Linguistics and Language Teaching, initiated at the Program's Symposium held at Indiana University in Bloomington in 1964. The project asked for a coordinated study of the educated speech of large Spanish-speaking cities. The Instituto formed a group of persons who are gathering the working corpus: 400 hours of recording a minimum of 800 informants from the capital city of Bogotá, and transcribing the recordings in phonetic notation, all of which is necessary for a subsequent linguistic analysis.

Colombia and Dialects

Colombia, in the equatorial northern extreme of South America, presents geographical, environmental and Spanish linguistic varieties which exceed those of other Latin American countries. With a population of over 26 million, it is three times the size of California. It has all kinds of climate and each of them is even all year round: the cold, temperate and hot depend on the altitude of a place, and dry deserts or humid jungles on their geographical location. In the western half of the country, three cordilleras branch out from the south, leveling to the Atlantic lowlands. Most densely populated are areas of the Central and Eastern Cordilleras and a central section of the Atlantic coast. The eastern half of Colombia is flat and almost devoid of population, and gradually goes from prairies to the Amazon jungle.

Some dialect features may coincide with a geographical area, but at other times they do not. Therefore, Colombian monographic descriptions of individual regions are inadequate. Also, they cover practically
a whole grammar of the dialect, or merely list indiscriminately all the divergencies from the literary European or American standards. Rather, the monographs should select individual dialectal traits in view of the importance of their functioning within the system and whether they change the system, and should classify the system modifications into structural types. Such structural types of dialects should then be compared with others and placed in definite categories of the same language, disregarding national or regional divisions. In the case of Spanish, such a procedure would clearly concentrate on the phonological features. Morphosyntactic distinctive features are very few and are either general to all American Spanish (lack of the vosotros person) or are scattered among dialects and regions with no regular pattern of distribution (the vosgo). In most cases, lexical differences merely identify the Amerindian background of the region.

Using only those phonological traits that can serve for a structurally meaningful and clear-cut differentiation and identification of Colombian Spanish dialects, we may distinguish certain dialect types. We will mention them here in a very abbreviated form, with their individual and comparative characteristics, with their geographical location, and in their socio-historical context. Before we begin, we have to mention that, opposed to the European standard, American Spanish does not have the contrast between the dental and interdental fricative phonemes, which are fused into one: casa (house) and cena (hunt) are homophonous words. Then, through simple exclusions of dialectal traits in binary considerations of phonological units, we arrive at the definition of the standard on one hand, and on the other, at relevant structural characterizations of non-standard dialects. (See Table.)

**Coasts**

In the hierarchy of dialect differences in Colombia, the first place is occupied by the distribution factor of the phoneme /s/. Both the Atlantic and Pacific coastal areas are thus separated from the rest, since in their type of Spanish the phoneme /s/ does not occur at the end of syllables. We have a too limited space here to be able to present a detailed description of how the whole system of phonology is affected by that, and how the understanding of this dialect type by speakers of other dialects is seriously impaired. People from Bogotá who go for a vacation to the beaches of the Atlantic coast of Colombia confess that they cannot readily follow what the natives say.

The understanding among the natives of this dialect, however, is perfect as they compensate for the loss of the markers by expanding their phonological system in alternate directions, which is common in various other Romance languages. The speakers of this dialect cannot rely on syntactic or the remaining morphological signs, since these do not cover all the cases where it is necessary to distinguish the number, the person, or other grammatical or lexical categories. To supply the meaning in such cases without additional phonological recourses, the speakers would need to resort to guesswork, based on
the context, logic of the speaker, common sense and other such vague non-linguistic aids. Since language is a system of linguistic signs and even requires redundancy to be more precise and unequivocal, a guessing game would present serious difficulties for its functioning.

Therefore, the speakers of the Caribbean type of dialect use, in their expanded phonology, a system of eight vowel phonemes (tense i, e, a, o, u and lax ə, ɐ, ɔ) which, in word-final syllables, differentiate the meaning of words. They also use a system of consonants where their length distinguishes one word from another (18 short and 18 long consonant phonemes, which are identical except for the difference in length), and that were created in order to furnish other markers of meaning substituting for the s, lost in syllable-final positions before a consonant. This is not unusual in languages (some have much more complex phonology), and Italian is the closest genetically related example of such functioning. Persons who are not prepared to listen for this finer differentiation are confused, and try to find an alternate explanation for the obvious ease with which the natives communicate. The natives of the Caribbean dialect type have no trouble understanding the different meanings, for example, of these words: /gátɔ/ "gato" -- /gàtɔ/ "gatos" -- /gátɔ:/ "gasto" -- /gátɔː/ "gastos".

This speech type occupies areas easily accessible from the sea by way of Atlantic ports, which conducted business in colonial times with the Caribbean islands and, ultimately, with Andalusia in Spain. Both of those areas use the same type of dialect. The population of the coastal region is black, representing the former African slaves of Spanish colonies, who were centered mainly in the Caribbean region. As opposed to Caribbean islands, there are no creole languages in Colombia (languages with an origin and structure similar to Jamaican, Haitian, or Curacao creoles.)

The more remote Pacific coast of Colombia, at the edge of the western jungles, is also inhabited by the blacks, descendants of slaves who escaped from the Atlantic ports by way of the Atrato and San Juan rivers. In the jungles themselves, there live a few Amazonian-type Indians who do not speak any Spanish, as in the eastern Amazon jungles.

**Antioquia and Caldas**

The second binary exclusion reveals another dialect type in the northern reaches of the Central Cordillera, in the area of Antioquia and Caldas where the people say "beya viya," as we already mentioned earlier. They share this yeismo with the coasts, but they did not lose the syllable-final s. Their towns are centers of industry, especially textile, and the inhabitants are said to have a Catalan background. In Spanish Catalonia, the textile industry also excels. In addition, Antioquia has a relatively large percentage of Basque surnames, and the Basque country is the second most industrialized part of Spain. Both of these are bilingual regions, and the Spanish in such regions usually shows the seseo, the yeismo or both, thus lacking one or two phonemes of the Castilian Spanish.
Assibilation of \( r \)

The third binary separation concerns a type of dialect which, as if by osmosis from the Ecuadorian Sierra, spreads through the mountains of the southern Colombian province of Narino. It continues in the eastern Cordilleras as far as the capital city of Bogotá, with its three million inhabitants, and in its hinterland, the mountainous province of Boyacá. Not all the people in those parts use this dialect that assimilates and palatalizes the \( rs \), when they appear as multiple vibrants or in a non-contrastive position. But many do pronounce the \( rs \) that way, and even the highly educated pride themselves in pronouncing what they consider the sign of a true Colombian. For example: /saldrá en kaño/. In the partially bilingual Sierra of Ecuador everybody speaks like that.

Ecuador and Southern Colombia are regions of the Quechua language which, in some dialects, assimilates the \( rs \) in the same way. Although most of the Colombians are mestizos, only 1% of the inhabitants are speakers of Indian languages. The most known Indian-language speaking groups live in the far north in or near La Guajira, and a remnant of the Quechuas, named Guambianos, form agricultural communities in the south near Ecuador.

Valle and Cauca

A fertile valley in the south-central part of Colombia, between the Central and the Western Cordilleras, harbors a minor fourth dialect type. This type pronounces a nasal in word-final position as bilabial (for example, limón), where the inland Colombian dialects pronounce an alveolar (limón) and the coastal, a velar (limó). This valley is a region of two Colombian provinces, both with quite aristocratic attitudes. The one more to the south and inland, Cauca, is proud of its colonial capital, Popayán, which was the home of many presidents of Colombia, and where the Holy Week processions rival those of Spain. To the north of it lies the province of Valle, more open to the sea and, therefore, with an admixture of mulatto blood. Its capital, the lively and elegant tropical city of Cali, never forgets that it is the home of the most beautiful women in Colombia, several times winners of the title of Miss Universe.

Standard

In this paper, we have tried to employ the simplest linguistic way to characterize the dialect types of Colombia. The definite dialect types also happen to coincide with Colombian natural regions, types of population and different aspects of history. After this description of the Colombian dialects, a good question remains: Who speaks the standard? The Colombian-recognized standard, that is, not the continental one. The Colombian standard is located mostly along the southern portion of the Central Cordillera and along the southern two thirds of the Eastern Cordillera. An uneven percentage of the population of those regions speaks it. As all American Spanish does, it has the seseo, which is its only divergence from the Standard
European Spanish: the pronunciation of ciento (hundred) is the same as that of siento (I feel). It is a dialect that pronounces the final ss, the alveopalatal ñs, the non-assibilated vibrant rs (even though some educated people make a special point of pronouncing the assibilated ones), and, finally, one that says neither amén nor amén, but rather amén.
TABLE: STANDARD AND DIALECTAL SPANISH OF COLOMBIA

Colombian

standard: \[-s \quad \check{r} \quad \check{r} \quad -n\].

(all four features characterize the standard: South and Eastern Cordillera, but not all speakers)

dialects: loss of \(-s\) (coast)

\(\text{yerismo}\) (Antioquia, Caldas, and coasts)

assibilaction of \(\hat{r}\) (South and Eastern Cordillera, but not all speakers)

\(-\eta\) (coasts)


------. "Sobre algunas formas de pronunciar muchos colombianos el español." Thesaurus: Boletín del Instituto Caro y Cuervo, XXIII (1978), 197-246.


