

Homeless in Post-Modern Linguistics? (Re/Dis)placing Hispanic Dialectology

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Abstract

Within the context of contemporary Hispanic linguistics, dialectology is often felt to be an anachronism, a notion grounded in the stereotype of the dialectologist as linguistic butterfly-collector. In fact this view is as unrealistic in the 21st century as the concept of a physician administering leeches and “philtres,” and stems from a failure to acknowledge that dialectology has evolved together with the rest of linguistics. Dialectology as currently practiced is best defined as the response to the question of how and why languages vary regionally and socially. As such, dialectology intersects with, but is not superseded by, sociolinguistics; contemporary dialectology includes theoretical advances in syntax, phonology, phonetics, historical linguistics, and variational linguistics.

1. Introduction

My assigned charge, to write about “the place of dialectology,” in modern (synchronic) linguistics appears to carry the implicit assumption that it might be *mis-placed*—or have no place at all. This is, some might argue, not a totally innocent question such as “current trends in dialectology,” but rather like asking about “the place of gas-guzzling automobiles” or, more charitably, “the place of black and white television sets” (why use the old stuff when we have better equipment today?). Dialectology, it seems, does not belong to modern linguistics, but is a throwback to Neogrammarian pre-enlightenment, when African and Native American languages were still being forced into the mold of classical Latin grammar, words like *surd* and *plosive* typified phonetic descriptions, the notion of phoneme was just beginning to emerge, and syntax referred only to a jumble of superficial sentence patterns. Why does a connotation of inevitable obsolescence adhere to the mention of dialectology in the 21st century, when similar feelings do not accrue to “the place of phonology,” “the place of syntax,” or even “the place of optimality theory”? Descriptions and futuristic predictions involving the latter questions are never presumed to include an eventual demise, but rather the suggestion of exciting new research frontiers as part of a normal healthy evolution.

Within the Spanish-speaking world, dialectology has fared a bit better, having a long and noble tradition, and continues to be held in considerable esteem, at least in

the world's Spanish-speaking countries. The earliest publications properly regarded as dialectological followed the traditions begun in the late 19th century in central Europe and form the basis for three quarters of a century of subsequent linguistic research. The focus was nearly exclusively on rural areas and small towns, ideally locations off the beaten track and which had suffered little demographic upheaval. The approach was purely descriptive, based on interviews with the oldest inhabitants, preferably illiterate and with few or no sojourns outside of their birthplace. The usual format was the elicitation of words in isolation, with special emphasis on agricultural practices and implements, as well as traditional beliefs; in short anything felt to be quaint and "typical." Although more than one informant may have supplied data for a particular area, there was no study of variability, except the occasional mention of *polimorfismo*, without indication of what conditioned the choice of variants. The many individual monographs that appeared during the first half of the 20th century—most from Spain but a scattering from Latin America and the southwestern United States—were invariably written by natives or long-time residents of the dialect zones being described, and almost never did the descriptions include comparisons with other regions. Thus it was not uncommon to see patrimonial Spanish words, particularly colloquial or vulgar expressions in wide use throughout the Spanish-speaking world, erroneously classified as exclusive to a single region. The resulting studies are virtual time capsules, representing the speech of a subset of speakers from generations previous to the respective dates of publication. By the standards of the 21st century, these studies are woefully inadequate; data collection was usually haphazard and opportunistic, recordings were not made even after portable recording equipment became widely available, and such field notes as may have once existed are long gone.¹ Comparative analysis was all but nonexistent, there was no mention of variation across sociolects and registers, and most frustratingly, there was no attempt to address the *why* of a particular dialect, in terms of historical evolution, sociodemographic configurations, or linguistic theory. And yet, the totality of these descriptive studies provides a wealth of information on language variation across time, space, and population groups, a treasure-trove of *materia prima* from which important theoretical conclusions can and have been derived. These descriptive archives are comparable to the rich accounts of flora and fauna made by 19th and early 20th century naturalists; a contemporary zoologist who visits the Galapagos Islands will have very different aims than Darwin, but Darwin's groundbreaking descriptions paved the way for modern scientific discovery. And what physician got through medical school without consulting Gray's *Anatomy*, a splendid descriptive tome? Audubon, Humboldt, Kepler, Linnaeus, and Mendeleev are among the many other great taxonomists who have left us in their debt. Sadly, one can visit major research libraries and find dusty volumes of Spanish descriptive dialectology with the pages still uncut; at the same time one encounters in many recent dissertations and conference papers "new" observations that in fact can easily

be identified in monographs published half a century ago and even earlier. Clearly, descriptive dialectology has been swept under the post-modern carpet too hastily. Equally hasty is the conclusion that today's dialectology can be reduced to the same butterfly-collecting drudgery that launched the nascent discipline many generations ago.

2. Defining dialectology: Then and now

No long-standing professional discipline continues today with the same beliefs and practices that were in place in earlier times, although the names of the disciplines themselves have remained unchanged. Medicine, at the end of the 19th century, still included among its sanctified practices draining patients of their blood in order to remove offending humours (a task sometimes relegated to dentists and barbers as well). Although the workings of internal organs were known with reasonable precision, the absence of radiography and even more modern imaging techniques made diagnosis a very hit and miss process, and treatments were consequently based on vague suppositions of existing maladies. When pressed for their beliefs, many doctors at the turn of the 20th century did not discount the effects of "frights" suffered by pregnant mothers as the cause of birth defects, and even doctors' accounts of the 1918 influenza pandemic reveal a medical worldview that is quite alien to contemporary thought (e.g. Billings 1997, Kolata 1999). And yet we continue to use the terms "medicine" and "physician" to describe concepts that differ radically from those of a century ago.

Forensic science provides another example: fingerprint identification became an accepted investigative technique around the turn of the 20th century, and DNA testing emerged during the lifetime of probably every reader of this article. Less than a century ago criminal profiling was based on notions of "criminal types," which even included physiological traits such as the shape of the cranium. Today's criminology is grounded in entirely different principles and technology, but in the popular imagination modern detectives are the direct heirs of Sherlock Holmes. Perhaps if Henry Higgins had been less prescriptive and more accurate in his linguistic portrayals, dialectology would enjoy a similarly romantic reputation.

There is no doubt that the intellectual pursuit that came to be known as dialectology started out as a purely taxonomic endeavor—a path also shared by botany, astronomy, geology, chemistry, and physiology, among many other branches of science. The prototypical late-19th/early 20th-century European (and later North American) dialectologist traveled about with a notebook for the purpose of obtaining samples from each and every point on a map in order to provide input to a dialect atlas or other taxonomic artifact. Curiously, while most other scientific disciplines—including linguistics itself—have evolved and improved while keeping the same name, the image of the dialectologist as meandering word-catcher seems to have been trapped in time, for reasons that are not entirely clear. It is probably

not irrelevant that in the massively ad hominem attacks on “traditional” linguistics—especially structuralism—that came from some overly zealous foot soldiers of the 1960’s generative grammar juggernaut, only the terms “syntax,” “phonology,” and “semantics” survived to take on a new life in the brave new world of “modern” linguistics. But rumors of the demise of dialectology have been, ahem, exaggerated. Dialectology long ago ceased to consist solely of linguistic cartography, but its transformation was overlooked in the rush to modernize linguistics. There is no time like the present to set matters straight.

So if modern dialectology is more than the collection and classification of field data, what is it? Quite simply, dialectology—or whatever post-modern term might emerge to replace it—is the collective intersection of a variety of subcomponents of linguistics in search of an answer to a single question: Why and how does language vary regionally and socially? Seen in this fashion, dialectology is not a discrete discipline in itself, but rather a cover term for a particular line of inquiry, on a par with the search for relationships between language and gender—or the causes of global warming.

3. Has sociolinguistics effectively replaced dialectology?

It has been suggested—explicitly by the editor of this journal in his invitation to contribute the present article, and implicitly in many informal discussions—the contemporary sociolinguistics *is* in fact the new dialectology, and therefore that dialectology as a separate subdiscipline of linguistics is redundant and passé. In view of the definition offered in the preceding section, the equation SOCIOLINGUISTICS = DIALECTOLOGY must be rejected. There is a considerable and inevitable intersection between the two domains, but they do not completely overlap. Taking dialectology in the broad sense of the study of regional and social variation in language, nearly all the vanguard research in sociolinguistics—virtually all subsequent empirically-oriented sociolinguistic inquiry—has contributed potential answers to dialectology’s Big Question. Labov’s (1963) groundbreaking study of Martha’s Vineyard provides a brilliant dialectologic vignette, mapping not only the social strata but even the geographical variation on a small island. Labov’s (1972, 1982) studies of language variation in New York City provide further exemplars, as does Wolfram’s (1969) analysis of English in Detroit, and the torrent of research studies that followed. But these same studies contain much that is not properly dialectological, including the inverse of the principal dialectological question, namely how to account for variable behavior in people based on language usage. At the same time, a full dialectological inquiry involves aspects of language that cannot be accounted for by sociolinguistic models, although sociolinguistics may provide clues as to why particular variants ultimately triumph; these aspects include language-internal phonological and syntactic

processes, merger and convergence during language contact, innovation, and lexical diffusion.

4. Dialectology as embedded in contemporary Hispanic linguistics

In recent years, many contributions to Hispanic dialectology have emerged from theoretical linguistics. In some instances researchers specifically set out to characterize the unique features of a particular dialect or to account for systematic variation among dialects; in other instances insights into the nature of certain dialects came as dividends added to research paradigms designed with other purposes. A glance at any of the many journals that publish articles in theoretical Romance linguistics, as well as the conference proceedings of the Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages, the Hispanic Linguistics Symposium, and similar professional events clearly demonstrates that the study of regional and social language variation is alive and well, albeit seldom referred to explicitly as dialectology. I have noted this pattern previously (Lipski 1989, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2005), and the assertion continues to be valid. A few highlights should suffice to demonstrate the healthy symbiotic relations between dialectology and linguistic theory. To avoid a bewildering bibliographical avalanche, only the past decade or so will be skimmed, but the trend continues as far back as one cares to look. To make matters even easier, only some salient contributions in phonetics, phonology, and syntax will be mentioned, since hopefully no one doubts that the many excellent contributions in the areas of language contact, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, historical linguistics, and the like have implications for dialectology. Only a few works will be mentioned in each category, chosen rather randomly based on my own research interests; inclusions and omissions do not imply value judgments, since the point to be made is that these works typify the considerable high quality research being done in Spanish theoretical linguistics.

In the realm of phonetics and phonology one of the most significant advances within the past decade has been the empirical analysis of intonational patterns, within and across dialect zones. Once the realm of anecdotal comments and ad hoc descriptions, Spanish intonational phonology now enjoys a solid reputation, thanks to the contributions of numerous phonologists and phoneticians, aided in their pursuits by the increasing accessibility of analytical technology. It has been definitively established, for example, that in the majority of Spanish dialects the high tone on pretonic stressed syllables occurs either towards the end of that syllable or at the beginning of the immediately following syllable (e.g. Face 2001, Prieto, van Santen & Hirschberg 1995, Sosa 1999). In some dialects, including those influenced by contact with Quechua and Aymara (O’Rourke 2004) as well as the Spanish of Buenos Aires (Colantoni & Gurlekian 2004, Kaisse 2001), early high peak alignment of pre-final tonic syllables is more usual. Another feature that varies systematically among dialects is the intonational pattern of yes-no questions; not

only is the “standard” final rising tone not typical of many Latin American dialects, but additional subtleties are found among varieties (e.g. Beckman, Díaz-Campos, McGory & Morgan 2002, Face 2004, Sosa 1999, Willis 2003a, 2003b, 2007). The intonational phonology of contrastive focus represents another breakthrough that demonstrates clear differences among regional dialects as well as among styles and registers within a given region (Face 2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b).

Optimality theory, feature geometry, and moraic theory, and other contemporary paradigms of phonological research have been applied to numerous facets of Spanish cross-dialectal phonological variation, including stop-fricative alternation in voiced obstruents, the realization of rhotics, aspiration of word-final and word-initial /s/, velarization of word-final /n/, vocalization of syllable-final consonants, among other achievements (e.g. Bradley 1999, 2004, 2005, 2006, Gerfen 2002, Holt 2002, Hualde 1991, Lipski 1993, 1997, 1999, Morris 2000, Piñeros 2001, 2002, 2005, Widdison 1995, Wiltshire 2002, among many others). These studies have been carried out on what was the cutting edge of linguistic theory at the time, and this continues to be the case at the present and into the foreseeable future.

Syntactic theory has also embodied many insights into Spanish that can only be considered as contributions to dialectology. Double negation and double affirmation in Dominican Spanish (*no tengo no, yo quiero sí*) have added to studies of the expanded phrase structure of the left periphery (Gutiérrez-Rexach 2001, Toribio 2000, 2001, 2002). Clitic placement and clitic doubling (e.g. Andean Spanish phrases such as *cerrámelo la puerta*) have provided a fertile territory for syntactic exploration, as have infinitives with preposed subjects (*antes de yo venir acá*), “pseudo-clefts” (*tenemos es que salir ahora*), and non-inverted questions (*¿cómo tú te llamas?*) (Bosque 1999, Camacho 2006, Ordóñez 1998, Ordóñez & Treviño 1999, Ortega Santos 2002, Salanova 2004, Suñer 2003, Torrego 1998, and many others). In all instances syntactic structures that are highly regionalized have been integrated into a broader theory of syntax, often enriching syntactic theory in the course of the inquiry.

This brief fly-by suffices to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the study of Spanish language variation intersects naturally with a broad cross-section of theoretical and experimental linguistics; dialectology benefits from the collective expertise of numerous scholars, while sociolinguistic and ethnolinguistic studies that are more narrowly dialectological continue to provide stimuli for additional theoretical and experimental inquiries. The symbiosis is complete and productive, embodying the spirit of today’s dialectology—and tomorrow’s as well.

5. What’s in a name?

At Penn State I teach a graduate seminar still listed on the books as “Spanish dialectology”; I explain to the students that the course is really about the study of

variation, but I have not felt compelled to petition for a name change. I also teach undergraduate and graduate courses called “sociolinguistics,” which are nothing like the dialectology course, although language variation certainly forms a central axis. Perhaps dialectology needs a new name, to give it new respectability. The terms “variational linguistics” and “variation studies” are most commonly associated with quantitative sociolinguistics à la Labov, Sankoff et al., and as displayed in the pages of journals such as *Language Variation and Change*. Many but not all such studies qualify as some sort of dialectology, and so replacing “dialectology” with “study of variation” probably will not do. I have developed an undergraduate course entitled “Spanish as a world language” which is for all practical purposes a first taste of dialectology for the uninitiated. I deliberately left all “ologies” out of the title, choosing instead to emphasize the content. There are probably other contenders for a slickly retreaded dialectology, but ultimately I see no need to replace a term that has neither outlived its usefulness nor provided any reason for embarrassment. If “medicine” can survive its many avatars at least since the days of Aristotle, and if “astronomy” can span the historical gap between Ptolemy and Stephen Hawking and still be respectable, then a relative newcomer like “dialectology” can surely stick around a little longer without apologies.

Just as forensics cannot be reduced to the mere collection of bits of evidence—a necessary but far from sufficient step in any investigation—so can dialectology not be reduced to piles of field notebooks and maps crisscrossed by isoglosses. Astronomical observatories continue to search for new celestial objects and expand the map of the known universe, entomologists still discover and classify (and are often bitten by) new bugs on intrepid expeditions; field data collection is still needed in Hispanic linguistics. The vast majority of the world’s Spanish-speaking communities have not been adequately described, and even those for which comprehensive descriptions exist continue to evolve, and require constant descriptive updating. But data collection and classification are not to be confused with dialectology, any more than semantics can be reduced to inquiring about the meaning of words, or phonetics can be construed as solely making spectrograms. It is inherent in the nature of the research data that the average dialectologist will conduct more field work than, say, the average theoretical syntactician, much as the average psycholinguist will spend more time in the laboratory. Once the respective data have been collected—irrespective of the nature of the data or the means of collection—dialectologists devote their efforts to addressing theoretical research questions, in their dual roles as phoneticians, psycholinguists, sociolinguists, syntacticians, and so forth. Dialectology viewed as the science of language variation is as much a part of 21st century linguistics as it was in centuries past, since the search for answers regarding variation in the broadest sense remains fundamental to the study of language.

Notes

1 David Heap has successfully retrieved and edited many of the field notebooks from the seminal *Atlas Lingüístico de la Península Ibérica (ALPI)* and has made them available to researchers throughout the world (Heap 2003).

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