# A STRATEGY FOR REINVIGORATING ROMANCE HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Let me begin by assigning blame. Who *is* responsible for the decline in interest in our discipline among American students? What constellation of sinister forces has conspired to erase many of our courses from course catalogs, discourage students from taking the few that we have left, and convert our faculty lines to cultural studies as soon as we retire?

In the immortal words of Walt Kelly: "We have met the enemy and he is us." I believe that the current unfashionableness of Romance historical linguistics in American higher education is due largely to our failure, as practitioners of this discipline, to make it palatable to our students.

In his contribution to the original collection of essays on this theme, Joel Rini (2003: 92) also placed the blame on our shoulders, as shown by the following quotation:

> I would like to know why we continue to allow our colleagues in literature to convert professorial lines previously occupied by Romance linguists into lines for specialists of, for example, post-modernist literature.... Or when there are budget cuts to be made, why it is always that Romance linguistics is cut before literature?

Joel is certainly justified in being upset about this state of affairs, but I would submit that the problem is not so much that we have failed to fight to retain these lines, courses and programs, or that other groups within our departments have unfairly taken the lines away, but that we

*La corónica* 34.1 (Fall, 2005): 220-28

have failed to give ourselves the arguments we need in order to make a forceful, convincing case for retaining them.

What sort of arguments would these be? First and foremost, they would be statistics showing strong student demand for our courses and our specialties. We need to be able to point to throngs of students clamoring to get into our classes on the history of Spanish or French, and to large numbers of quality applicants who want to study these subjects at our universities. We need students to be petitioning our chairs to bring back the historical linguistics courses that have been abolished or abandoned. Second, our case would be strengthened by evidence of our discipline's vitality at the scholarly level, in the form of (a) proposals for special sessions on historical linguistics at established conferences, (b) dedicated symposia at universities across the country, (c) the continued existence of journals exclusively dedicated to our discipline, nurtured by a steady stream of high quality research articles to publish, and the frequent and spontaneous appearance of new journals, (d) large grants and prestigious fellowships being awarded for research in the discipline, and in general (e) evidence of a lively and vital intellectual exchange serving to renew the discipline and inspire new approaches every few years.

Not so long ago comparative Romance linguistics was required of all Ph.D. students in French and Spanish at my university (Florida), whether they intended to write about Romance lenition, Rabelais, or the novels of Julio Cortázar. When this requirement was eliminated a few years ago, I admit that I did not mount a vigorous defense of the status quo. I have already outlined the reason for my inaction. To continue the military metaphor: I was lacking ammunition. In place of the needed throngs of students clamoring for more, I was faced with students who had begun to ask their advisors why they were being required to study comparative Romance linguistics when they thought they had more pressing needs. Romance literary scholars now feel that the foundation of their discipline is literary theory, not philology, and many if not most students of linguistics feel that the combination of a thorough knowledge of a modern language and a theoretical approach is sufficient to enable them to do scientifically worthwhile research. Finally, I could not cite strong evidence of my discipline's vitality as a research area, because the fact is that most of the discipline's vitality these days is in Europe.

I strongly believe that Romance historical linguistics is inherently as interesting and useful as any of the other subjects that are taught in our departments, including poetry, pragmatic linguistics, cultural

studies, or the *Bildungsroman*. The problem is that Romance historical linguistics has been allowed to acquire the reputation of being an arcane, outmoded, boring, and largely impenetrable discipline, the basic tenets of which can be understood only by students who already know Latin, several Romance languages, and German. Admittedly, this constellation of characteristics is attractive to a certain, highly eccentric kind of student. This explains most of us, I suppose. It is also interesting to the small group of classically trained foreign students who, for one reason or another, end up in our programs. However, the great majority of American students are not seeking a field that can be described as arcane, outmoded, boring, and impenetrable.

Faced with this reputation, we have two possible courses of action. Either we can revel in our discipline's esoteric status, and enjoy a feeling of superiority over the pseudo-scholars who surround us until the day we retire and these same pseudo-scholars immediately convert our faculty line to post-modern literature, or we can analyze the problem and, in the interest of creating a future for our discipline, devise a plan of action designed to reverse the trend away from historical studies. This is the task that I have assigned myself in this paper.

Let us begin the analysis by considering the set of students from which any future American Romance linguists must necessarily be drawn. Conceived in the broadest context, this is the set of all American students of Romance languages, which according to the most recent MLA survey (2002), was 1.019 million in 4-year institutions. Of course most students limit their exposure to foreign languages to a year or two, so we are actually targeting the subset of students who reach high levels of proficiency in a Romance language. According to the *Digest of Educational Statistics*, published by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), U. S. Dept of Education, table 288 (http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d03/tables/dt288.asp), 7,243 bachelors degrees in Spanish were conferred in 2002, alongside 2,396 in French. No numbers were available for Italian and Portuguese, although the total for foreign languages is listed as 13,172, so we can assume that the total number of degrees conferred in Romance languages is more than 10,000. The total of graduating majors is only a subset of the number of majors, and I would also include minors (which at my university outnumber majors) in the final total, which I would estimate to be near 40,000. Given the 1,148 masters degrees conferred in Spanish and French in 2002, we can probably assume a total population at the M.A. level of about 3000. This means that we have a self-renewing population of some 43,000 university students who might be persuaded

to study the histories of the Romance languages. This is not a small number.

Remember, these are American students. Unlike their European counterparts, they tend not to have a broad classical education. They may never have traveled outside the United States. They do not know much about world geography or world history. They may know little about linguistics.

But they may also be very bright and talented, with excellent analytical skills and a prodigious capacity to learn facts. They may approach the task of learning about foreign languages with quite a bit of confidence. In short, they may be excellent candidates to be our eventual replacements.

What have we done in the past to alienate these students? In my view, our single biggest mistake has been the failure to provide real introductory courses to the various aspects of our discipline. In other words, for various reasons, all understandable but in the end self-defeating, we have failed to find a way to make our discipline project the image of being both interesting and manageable, in other words, of being both fascinating to learn and susceptible of being learned by an American university student of normal intelligence and talent.

I take as my primary example the introductory books that are currently available for the teaching of the history of the Spanish language.[1] A first group, maximally unsuited for our students both for the difficulty of their prose and the breadth of knowledge they assume, are those that were produced in Spain for Spanish students, including the fourteenth edition (1973) of Ramón Menéndez Pidal's *Manual de gramática histórica española*, the ninth edition (1983) of Rafael Lapesa's *Historia de la lengua española*, María Teresa Echenique Elizondo and María José Martínez Alcalde's *Diacronía y gramática histórica de la lengua española* (2000), and the new collective volume *Historia de la lengua española* coordinated by Rafael Cano Aguilar (2004). A second group comprises two complete historical grammars written by Anglo-American authors with the intention of providing a maximum of professional-grade, cutting-edge information on the topic, in other words, of producing reference works. These are Paul Lloyd's *From Latin*

[1] John R. Burt, *From phonology to philology: an outline of descriptive and historical Spanish linguistics*; Antonio Alatorre, *Los 1001 años de la lengua española*; Rafael Cano Aguilar, *El español a través de los tiempos*. I may not be aware of some minor additions to this field and some texts are out of print.

*to Spanish* (1987) and the second edition of Ralph Penny's *A History of the Spanish Language* (2002).

This leaves only two volumes that were apparently written with American undergraduate university students in mind: Thomas A. Lathrop's *The Evolution of Spanish: An Introductory Historical Grammar* (third edition, 1996) and Melvyn C. Resnick's *Introducción a la historia de la lengua española* (1981). Of these, the former is merely an abridged historical grammar, consisting almost exclusively of page after page of sound changes and paradigms of one sort or another. Resnick alone seems to have an idea of whom he is addressing, as he covers both external history and linguistic theory in a superficial way, and limits to a certain extent the technical material to be mastered by the student. Unfortunately, the presentation is eccentric in inexplicable ways (e.g., the sound changes are not presented in any logical order) and the typescript is unattractive and hard to read. Anyone who uses this book nowadays runs the risk of giving students the (accurate) impression that no one has cared enough about this discipline for a long time to upgrade the materials used to introduce it.

We are all aware of the stigma that is associated with writing textbooks, and disdain for this sort of activity is particularly strong among Romance linguists, who pride themselves on the depth of their scholarship. Here I am thinking primarily of the scholarly line founded in the United States by Yakov Malkiel, who somehow managed to transfer the traditions of turn-of-the-century European philological scholarship to the American West Coast. In retrospect we can now see just how anomalous this transplantation really was. Following Malkiel's example, beginning in the mid-1940s and continuing up to the present day, American scholars have been cranking out world-class scholarship of a kind that was invented in nineteenth-century Germany and which still today finds its leading exponents in German-speaking domains. Obviously, Malkiel never wrote an introductory textbook, and I am unable to name a single one of his students who has undertaken this task. In other words, we have completely ignored the question of creating a new generation of American scholars, perhaps on the assumption that historical linguists of a less lofty rank would take care of the matter.

What is needed is a set of introductory textbooks targeted at the level of upper-division undergraduates and beginning graduate students, designed to provide exactly that: introductions to the various aspects of our discipline. We need to design these books in such a way that they whet students' appetites to learn more about historical linguistics, without

trying to overwhelm them with our erudition. In order to achieve this goal, these introductory textbooks will need to incorporate several concrete strategies: First, they need to be comparatively self-contained. They cannot assume a large amount of linguistic, geographical, or historical knowledge on the part of the intended audience. Anything that is important in these areas must be included in the text, at a point that will enable students to apply this knowledge to the relevant portion of material. Before describing specific changes in a Romance language, it will be necessary to explain the causes and mechanism of linguistic change. Before showing the decay of nominal declensions in Romance, the author will have to show exactly what they were and how they worked in Latin. Second, the authors of these texts will have to resist the temptation to present too much material. Rather than include all the major language families on earth, the few that students are most likely to know about should be chosen. Instead of showing the effects of 50 or 100 sound changes, with complete coverage of exceptions, a selection can be made of the most important 25 or so, with an addendum on the question of exceptions. Rather than cover every single verb tense and every case of analogical change, it will be preferable to choose the two or three tenses whose evolution is linguistically most interesting and enlightening. Third, it will be necessary to keep the linguistic level of the audience in mind. Whether writing in English or in the language whose history is being portrayed, writers should avoid complex rhetorical structures and pretentious or overly technical vocabulary.

About a year ago I decided to take up this gauntlet, and I began writing a textbook for beginning students of the history of the Spanish language at the same time I was teaching the course. This strategy had the disadvantage of requiring many long hours on weekends in order to stay ahead of my students, but the advantage of providing a strong motivation for keeping my productivity level high. I did need an additional six months after the end of the course to finish the nine chapters I eventually decided to include.

The title of the book that has taken shape out of these efforts, *Breve historia de la lengua española*, is calculated to give students confidence that they will be able to assimilate the material it includes. The book is self-contained, rather unambitious in terms of the amount of technical linguistic information conveyed, and written in the kind of clear, straightforward style that only a native speaker of English can produce.

Let me briefly characterize the book's content. After an introduction, in which I explain what it means to study the history of a language and

why it is worthwhile, I take up the issue of linguistic change in the first chapter, on the reasoning that, since the whole book is designed to describe change, students should understand as much as possible about it as a phenomenon. The chapter deals with such concepts as the inexorability of change, changes in progress, change as reflected in written texts, the categories of change, and the causes and mechanisms of change, presented from a Labovian perspective. In Chapter 2, I acknowledge the fact that the Spanish language did not arise spontaneously. I discuss the concept of language families, then mention a few of the world's major families, delve a bit more deeply into the Indo-European family (but not too deeply, as I cite only the seven most recognizable branches), then provide a genealogy of Spanish, including the various proto-stages that must have intervened between spoken Latin and medieval Castilian. Chapter 3 portrays the external history of the Iberian Peninsula from the period before the arrival of the Romans, and addresses such key events as the Romanization of the Peninsula, the various non-Romance invasions, and particularly the reconquest of the Peninsula and the ascendance of Castilian. Since the technical chapters of the book (Chapters 5-8) concern themselves with linguistic evolution from Latin, I dedicate Chapter 4 to a description of the principal phonological, morphological, and syntactic parameters of this language, together with a characterization of its external history and the periods of its development.

Chapters 5 and 6 address the material that normally forms the bulk of historical grammars: the phonological, morphological, and syntactic developments that took place between Latin and medieval Spanish. Special care is taken not to overwhelm students. The phonological changes discussed number only 23, and there are ample illustrations of derivations, as Romance roots are taken step-by-step through these stages. Complex changes such as metaphony through the influence of yod are mentioned only in passing. Likewise, descriptions of changes in noun and verb morphology, as well as syntax, are kept manageable. Chapter 6 ends with an appendix on lexical archaisms in Alfonsine Castilian, so that by the end of this chapter students should be able to read and linguistically explain most of the archaic features of thirteenth-century Castilian prose.

In Chapter 7, I briefly present the most important changes that usher in the modern period, including an additional seven phonological changes, the development of the pronouns of address, and the loss of the future subjunctive. Chapter 8 presents the basic history of the Spanish vocabulary, including a presentation on the various paths by

which words have been integrated into the vocabulary, a section on etymology, and a portrayal of the various stages of development that the lexicon of Spanish has undergone. Finally, since the events that occurred after the Castilianization of Spain are also part of the history of the language, I present a chapter on Spanish dialectology in Chapter 9, with extended presentations on Andalusian, Canary Island Spanish, and American Spanish. This chapter ends with a detailed examination of four distinctive American dialects: Rioplatense, Andean, Caribbean, and Mexican Spanish.

Among the features that I have built into the text in order to make it more student-friendly are numerous and detailed analyses of texts (e.g., of a Latin text, an Alfonsine text, various dialectal texts), and, at the end of each chapter, a set of probing and interesting questions designed to help students understand what sorts of information are most important.

I hope to be able to publish *Breve historia* with the University of Chicago Press, which has expressed interest in publishing both Spanish- and English-language versions of the text. The Spanish-language version is now complete, though I plan to continue to refine it over the next several months by using it as a pilot text in my History of the Spanish Language course during the Spring semester of 2005.

Where to go from here? I would hope that, if my arguments have been potent enough to convince some of you of my take on our problem and my strategy to remedy it, you will undertake similar works for the various Romance languages that fascinate you most deeply. I believe that good, introductory textbooks can be written on a number of topics within each language, providing a basis for interesting courses which may attract the students we need. I can imagine, for example, expanding my chapter on the history of the Spanish lexicon into a complete book, with chapters on the various aspects of borrowing, word-formation, and semantic evolution. Additional possibilities: a similarly structured book on the Romance languages in general; introductions to Old Spanish, Old French, etc.; a history of American Spanish, including Spanish in the U.S.; Spanish lexicography; a history of the discipline. I can see myself undertaking some, but certainly not all of these projects, and I submit them to you for your consideration, and trust that you will be able to conceive of many more. Perhaps this is a battle that we can win.

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