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A Proposal for Teaching Spanish to Heritage Students in the US

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Abstract

This paper presents a proposal for teaching Spanish to Heritage students in the United States, based on a 'bidialectal' instruction. Accordingly, Heritage Spanish speakers adopt the standard dialect, while retaining their vernacular. Thus, the paper makes a linguistic, sociolinguistic, cultural, and pedagogical analysis to show the functional and intellectual advantages attached to this instruction, which includes, among others, learning vocabulary and grammar, practicing spelling/writing and reinforcing bicultural, literary, and pragmatic proficiencies. By adopting this approach, heritage Spanish students will expand and enhance their communicative and professional competence.

Introduction

A number of Spanish language teachers and researchers in the United States have been debating on whether or not to have Heritage Spanish (HS) students exposed to the standard dialect. (See, among others, Carreira 2000; Fairclough 2005; Galindo 1993; García and Othegui 1997; González and Cuestas 2003; Hidalgo 1997; Krashen 1998; Martínez 2002; Mejías and Anderson 1999; Porras 1997; Riegelhaupt and Carrasco 2000; Rodríguez Pino 1997; Valdés 1997; Van Marle 1997; Villa 1996; Zentella 2003). While some argue for a strictly vernacular-based instruction, others, to the contrary, advocate for a shift to the standard variety. Furthermore, a third group believes that instruction should be imparted in both dialects. In support of the latter position, this paper proposes that Heritage Spanish (HS) students maintain the vernacular and add the standard.

Consequently, this paper examines this issue further from linguistic, socio-linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical standpoints, and argues for a bidialectal approach. According to this position, HS speakers [1] get to acquire the standard dialect while retaining their vernacular variety. As such, it is a summative process, not a subtractive one. Because this proposal is not always properly captured, this paper is intended to show how linguistic, cultural, functional, and social factors all correlate with each other to contribute to the unique purpose of making HS bilinguals and monolinguals alike higher-level proficient speakers in the Spanish language.

(Socio)-linguistic meanings of standard

Standard Spanish has been vested for centuries with power and prestige, as the main vehicle of the literary, cultural, and educational traditions of the Hispanic World. In fact, these traditional features are present in a multimodal and pervasive manner not just in educational and professional settings, but also in the advertisement industry, the media,

and other formal linguistic and cultural expressions of daily life. For this reason, among others, Standard Spanish needs to be learned and practiced in the HS classroom. In Spain and Latin America, for instance, it is common practice for speakers of rural, popular, and vernacular varieties of Spanish to adopt the linguistic norm of their national communities, as they become literate, in order to escalate in a competitive world.

That said, it must be pointed out that some nonstandard language varieties may be stigmatized, which is usually the case in the Hispanic World. Nevertheless, this is not necessarily so in reference to the English language community, where speakers of local varieties are not linguistically censored. While there is a Standard English variety, speakers more often than not pay little or no attention to (in)-formal, (non)-educated language features, in daily life interactions. Rather, they seem to pay more attention to what is said, not to how it is said. Thus, substandard varieties of English may be acceptable and they are not (overtly) stigmatized. Therefore, substandard English speakers end up learning the standard at school, with no censorship eventualities.

For the sake of this discussion, a distinction between the terms 'standard' and 'norm' will be made. 'Norm' generally refers to the most commonly accepted linguistic variety within a restricted speech community, and it is not necessarily associated with elite or prescriptive connotations. 'Standard' refers more specifically to the canonic linguistic system of the entire language community (Lamiquiz, 1989, 37). Besides, although 'standard' is frequently associated with educational and prestige values, like in the case of 'urban norm' (i.e., 'norma culta urbana', see, esp., Lope Blanch, 1987: 164), this paper emphasizes the communicatively extensive property of the term 'standard', which should be interpreted roughly as 'neutrality within norms'. In fact, some Hispanic linguists recur to coin expressions such as 'supradialecto estándar' (Demonte 2001), and 'español internacional' (Alba 2001), which help define it accurately. Demonte 2003 further identifies the following criteria for the standard dialect, which are highly relevant to HS instruction: (a) to be widely understood; (b) Spelling, vocabulary, and morpho-phonology

In its strictly communicative import, the term 'neutrality' may be applied to the standard rather than the norm, in the sense of most general and common use in the whole Spanish-speaking community. Norm is more associated with acceptability perception in a more restricted Spanish-speaking community. Thus, all that is norm is acceptable, but not all acceptable is norm. An equivalent equation with respect to standard could go like this: all that is standard is common, but not all common is standard. This equation goes only if 'neutral' (that is, general, common) is not considered synonymous to extremely colloquial or slang, in the 'diastratic' scale, but rather in the sense of non-local frequency of use. Although the term 'norma culta' may include selective formal and informal use, it rules out some colloquial, slang and mixed language varieties.

While, in essence, 'linguistic norm' refers to a set of rules used unanimously by members of a speech community (be it urban, rural, or popular), 'norma culta' comes to be that used in cities and urban areas of the Hispanic World by literate speakers, and thus it may be considered to be the closest to the standard variety, as here conceived. In this sense, Standard Spanish comes to be the set of linguistic rules ranging over and across urban norms. So, for instance, the pronominal form of address "vos" (you, singular), is the norm in Argentina and some other Latin American communities, but is not the standard form of the Hispanic World; also, the form "vosotros" (you, plural) is the norm in Spain only. Consequently, for the sake of this paper, the expression 'standard Spanish' is meant to refer to the set of most frequent and representative linguistic forms and expressions used in the Hispanic World, with the guidance of the Spanish Language Royal Academy.

Some examples of standard vis-à-vis urban-norm lexical items include 'pavo' (turkey), instead of 'guajolote', 'chompipe', or 'guanaco', which are the preferred norms in México and Central América; 'computador(a)', instead of 'ordenador', which is the norm in Spain;

'platicar' and 'camión' are also the norm in Mexico, instead of the standard 'hablar' and '(auto)bus', respectively. This minimum set of samples of standard lexicon should not be flawed with prestige or elite, but are just frequently used words, which can be understood by a wider community of speakers. Similar considerations hold for other grammar-related canonic aspects such as word order, noun phrase agreement, verb phrase paradigms, semantic-pragmatic and morpho-phonological features.

Pedagogical and functional advantages of Spanish bidialectal education

The above considerations set the scene for a proposal toward the teaching of a more functional and far reaching variety of Spanish, one that allows HS students in US schools and universities to use the Spanish language with ease and effectiveness in spaces beyond their local communities. Bearing in mind the competence relationship between an urban, more formal variety or 'norma culta', and a neutral, pan-Hispanic variety, or Standard Spanish, devoid of demonizing labels, it may be easier for HS students to get to embrace the standard while maintaining and reinforcing their informal local varieties, all through a bidialectal instruction.

Spanish is presently spoken by over four hundred million people spread out in twenty-three countries across the Hispanic World, with about forty-five in the US alone; thus, it is important for HS students to adopt a linguistic variety that allows them to interact, with competence and confidence, beyond their local boundaries. This is why bidialectalism, like bilingualism, is the best solution (See, esp., Carreira 2000; Fairclough 2005; Hidalgo 1997; Porras, 1997).

It is normal and proper that vernacular language is affectively attached to speakers, so no justification is needed for its use. The standard variety, however, needs to be motivated and justified. Although admittedly an abstract and elusive concept, the standard dialect has been historically and socially recognized as pragmatically influential in and out the realm of linguistics, as a language universal, and as a powerful carrier of knowledge, culture, and human traditions. In practical, traditional terms it is perceived as the most prestigious and educated linguistic variety, sometimes unfortunately demonized as purist, prescriptive, elitist, and the like. This paper intends to point out just the positive values of Standard Spanish, in terms of neutrality and commonality of use, that is, the most widely accepted and understood variety in the whole Hispanic World.

In reiteration of the above, Standard Spanish is best thought out of as a 'supra-dialect' ranging over substandard varieties, in terms of communicative and functional outreach, with formal and informal properties selectively emanated from the 'norma culta'. Accordingly, it needs not be at the same level of use by all speakers in the (pan)-Hispanic community. For instance, in the formal reading of the term, it makes more sense for it to be used within a restrictive professional and academic context. Still, informally, the standard may be used whenever linguistic variation interferes with communication. Monolingual English students, for example, generally learn the Spanish standard, and thus they have ample communicative access to the Hispanic community.

As far as HS students in the United States is concerned, Standard Spanish is highly recommended for linguistic, socio-cultural and professional interaction and commitment, in a global perspective. Particularly favored are students who receive scholarly education beyond the elementary level, who can most surely benefit from a bidialectal education, in order for them to be able to escalate in political, socio-economic, intellectual, and professional fields, beyond local community boundaries. Despite the fact that both standard and substandard (vernacular) Spanish varieties can, as stated above, equally perform primary communicative functions, they differ from each other in their specific purpose functions. HS varieties in the US, for instance, are frequently used in familiar, colloquial interactions within the local community. In turn, Standard Spanish has a larger range of acceptability and communicative power as it is used in the written and oral

media, the academia, the professions, etc., nationally and internationally. In other words, standard and substandard varieties of Spanish differ in their distinctive functions and registers of use. And this is precisely why a bidialectal instruction is in order. So, in short, HS students should learn the standard variety while keeping the vernacular, with a parallel proficiency in both, if it is pursued through the K-12 and college curriculum. With this in mind, the present proposal, in reiteration, constitutes a summative, not a subtractive process. [2]

Worth mentioning, too, is the fact that US Spanish is geographically and (socio)-linguistically diverse (e.g., Mexican-American, Puerto Rican-American, Cuban-American, etc.). To cite just a few examples of this standard/substandard distinction, as related to Heritage Spanish, let us consider the Mexican-American (Heritage) Spanish (MAHS) variety in its bilingual/contact situation. Because of its double condition of vernacular variety and contact minority language, MAHS is affected by various intra-linguistic and inter-linguistic phenomena. Intra-linguistic phenomena include archaisms ('asina', 'haiga'), colloquialisms ('nomás', 'horita'), and the like. Inter-linguistic phenomena include borrowing/calquing ('union', 'taxes', 'aplicar', 'cuitiar', 'ordenar'), code-switching ('me dio five dollars'), language mixing (e.g., Spanglish: 'vacunar la carpeta'), and the like. Both sets of phenomena generate communicative conflicts, not to mention derogation and social stigma, in certain interactional environments

A proper bidialectal instruction will warrant competence and self-esteem in linguistic, cultural, and professional practices. By adding the standard variety, MAHS students, for example, will become more akin to their Mexican ancestry and more aware of their bilingual and bicultural values.

To be sure, bidialectalism, as a pedagogical practice, has been attested all over the Hispanic world. To cite just one example, in an Argentinean rural school located at Humahuaca Creek, Tilcara, bidialectal education was implemented for biliteracy and identity reaffirmation purposes. The authors of this bidialectal project concluded. These phenomena affect that, "(F)or identity and communicative purposes, the child has the right to reaffirm him/herself in that regional variety and the local norms of use, but s/he also has the right to acquire the national standard dialect and its written norms; otherwise, we would be discriminating him/her as well" (González and Cuestas 2003,1).

Also, an increasing number of elementary, intermediate and, especially, higher education schools in the US are now offering Heritage Spanish curriculum programs, in addition to Spanish as a foreign language, in order to accommodate Heritage students (see, e.g., Beaudrie 2012). However, there is still no agreement as to what Spanish variety to use in the classroom. Some teachers prefer the vernacular for interaction and instruction purposes, probably seeking to avoid communicative and affective conflicts, while others recur to the standard, especially for writing practice. Very few schools with Spanish language programs, even at the College level, provide for a bidialectal education. This fact hinders Heritage students' integration to the Hispanic community worldwide.

Further linguistic and cultural advantages: biliteracy

With a bidialectal education, heritage Spanish students will become appropriately biliterate (i.e., competent in formal and informal reading/writing practices in English and Spanish), and, thus, genuinely bicultural. What this means is that Heritage students are unconsciously and inevitably exposed not just to two linguistic systems, but two cultural systems as well. Consequently, the dominant language (English) gives rise to linguistic and cultural dominance and, like Ana Celia Zentella puts it, "(T)he power of the dominant discourses is oppressive and destructive" (Zentella 2003, 54). Obviously, these discourses may be both inter- and intra-linguistic. With a bidialectal instruction, students are able to acquire the most widely valued linguistic and cultural properties of the Hispanic World idiosyncrasies, including national literatures, art, folklore, economy,

advertisement, entertainment, daily life and habits, geography, tourism, etc. Reading and writing in the standard dialect not only endows vernacular speakers with the best of their ancestors' heritage, but also keep them away from prejudice caused by stigma and debasement.

Like functional bilingual speakers, bidialectal speakers also benefit from learning standard Spanish grammar and vocabulary. That is, besides their vernacular competence, heritage students add standard language structures for them to use in various contexts and register situations. In a professional meeting, addressing an audience, an interview, or delivering a paper at a conference, for example, native vernacular Spanish speakers need to use standard Spanish linguistic rules and particular lexical items that are not present in their vernacular mental lexicon. This implies grammar adjustments, vocabulary building, pragmatic, stylistic, and spelling conventions, etc.

Standard Spanish and its sociolinguistic functions

Two additional points are in order here in regards with the functional use of standard Spanish by Heritage speakers, both of which contribute to justify a bidialectal instruction for HS students in the United States. One is related with "diaglossia" (in Auer's terms). In fact, Heritage Spanish speakers can choose the appropriate register variety according to their target context or needs, a job interview or a family reunion, for instance [3]. That is, as Heritage students become bidialectally proficient; choices of use of either dialect become more consistent, natural, and functionally oriented.

The other point is related with the communicative, cultural, and technological challenges of the so-called 'digital era'. At a time when online communication is taking over all walks of life, a widely accepted and potentially universal (not to mention prestigious) dialect is highly recommended. According to current sociolinguistic research, four dimensions of communicative interaction are required for the average Heritage speaker to function properly in society. First, the "diatopic" dimension ensures communication beyond local borders; secondly, the "diastratic" dimension allows Heritage speakers to move across socio-stylistic varieties (formal, informal, casual, academic, etc.); the "diaphasic" dimension provides the speaker with an adequate selection of registers to interact in different communicative situations; and, finally, the "diamesic" dimension endows the speaker with a choice to use the language orally or in writing, with equivalent proficiency and sound biliterate abilities in two dialects and two languages as well (See, for example, Silva-Corvalán; Enrique Arias, 2001).

Standard Spanish and linguistic variation awareness

Likewise, research in dialect awareness shows that Heritage students can and should be exposed to language and dialect variation from their early school years. In a recent paper, G. Martínez claims that teaching dialect awareness to students "allows them to detach emotion and prejudice from the perception of dialects and to look at them as self contained systems of human communication"(Martinez, 2003, 7). In other words, in his view dialects are systems, not subsystems, an approach that helps understand the importance of linguistic varieties (See also Siegel 1999).

In a similar venue, Carreira points out that, "The derisive attitudes about U.S. Spanish that prevail in this country, as well as abroad, represent a particularly serious obstacle to the goal of enhancing students' linguistic self-esteem", and she further adds that "Therein lies one of the most significant challenges facing Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) instruction—getting students and teachers to recognize the instrumental value of the standard variety, without accepting its inherent linguistic superiority over U.S. Spanish" (Carreira, 2000, 5). Clearly, this observation speaks by itself.

Conclusion

This paper showed that heritage and standard Spanish are two equally valid linguistic dialects in that they both satisfy basic communicative and social needs. It also showed that they differ from each other in their purpose-specific functions, in terms of pragmatic and sociolinguistic oppositions such as formal vs. informal use and local vs. global scope. The concept 'standard' has been here reconsidered as to refer to a neutral linguistic variety ranging over urban norms, using a wider communicative potential, with no stigmatic effects. More importantly, this paper argued for a bidialectal instruction for Heritage Spanish students, which adds standard (structural) forms to their native linguistic and cultural competence. As a result, it is shown, a bidialectal education will help Heritage Spanish students to become more genuinely bicultural and biliterate speakers, duly prepared for an increasing socially and professionally demanding world in globalization.

Finally, this paper acknowledges the fact that linguistic prescriptivism and prejudice may be psychologically and pedagogically detrimental for HS speakers. For this reason the alleged negative connotation of the standard dialect as a prescriptive and elitist dialect has been removed or underscored in this paper, and other more useful and stigma-free values of it have been emphasized instead. For example, the standard variety is more functional and comprehensive in that it serves routine social interactions as well as academic and professional purposes. In sum, it is more communicatively efficient, in terms of frequency of use, social functionality, and preservation of linguistic and cultural traditions. In this era of globalization, such values are of most significant importance.

Endnotes

- [1]. Valdés (2000, 1) explains that the term "heritage speaker" refers to "a student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language"
- [2]. Fairclough, following Escure 1997, asserts that acquisition of a second dialect, like the acquisition of a second language, are additive not subtractive processes that constitutes a diachronic phenomenon "because it deals with a sequential addition from a language to another" (Ibid, 3).
- [3] "Diglossia" is the choice of language (or dialect) determined by context; an example is Paraguay
- [4] This is a revised version of a paper previously published in *Academic Exchange Quarterly* (2008, pp. 87-93)

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