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The Editor's Column

The Trouble with Language Textbooks

by **Daniel Eisenberg**

At Florida State, I regularly teach Spanish 1; it is enjoyable, and more satisfying than unteaching what more advanced students have been taught incorrectly. However, a search for a remedy for the deficiencies of the textbook now being used leaves me with a feeling of frustration. It is easier to criticize the work of others than to undertake such an endeavor and risk criticism, and if I am slighting books with which I am unfamiliar, I apologize in advance; obviously my remarks apply more to some books than others. Yet an unhappy situation exists. Although the number of elementary Spanish textbooks is surprisingly large, they are all more similar than different.

The Spanish language is presented in them as a set of mysterious and unrelated facts which must be memorized. The books ignore the rationale and logic of some of these phenomena: that the first-person singular is the most irregular verbal form because it is used most often; that the conditional tense, though resembling the future in terms of morphological processes, is actually a past tense, for which reason it is followed in a dependent clause by the imperfect subjunctive; that the so-called "personal *a*" distinguishes

object from subject, and is required because word order is more flexible than in English. I would welcome in a Spanish textbook a statement that many nouns (*tierra, puente, etc.*) have the same diphthong in the tonic syllable as do radical-changing verbs, for which reason they resemble roots with which students are familiar.

Another piece of information that I wish would be found in a textbook is that Spanish, like any language, has a distinct personality. One does not just use different phonemes, one must change one's thoughts to accommodate to the different potentials and restrictions of the language: in comparison with English, Spanish is, like the other Romance languages, resistant to lexical innovation, but it is rich in resources for dealing with interpersonal affairs. Similarly, it would be helpful to inform students that elementary Spanish provides the ability to use the language on an elementary level, that, like any language, Spanish has a complexity that is for all practical purposes infinite, and its mastery is a lengthy, even a life-long task.

For some reason, the topic most exhaustively treated in elementary language textbooks is the subjunctive. Beyond that questionable emphasis, the books tacitly oversimplify, and never recommend dictionaries or other sources of "further information." One of the most beautiful and flexible features of the Spanish language, its suffix system, is ignored in every book with which I am familiar. Some books omit second person plurals and the "-se" forms of the imperfect subjunctive. Our current textbook inexplicably omits the reflexive object pronoun "sí." These gaps are not remedied in more advanced textbooks.

A further linguistic simplification of textbooks is the denial of the variety of the Spanish language. In contrast with, say, German, Spanish is the or an official language of 20 countries (the 20th is Equatorial Guinea), and is of course widely spoken in several others, including the United States. There is no central linguistic authority as there is for French or Russian. This presents both a

problem and an opportunity to the creator of language materials, because decisions must unavoidably be made: is it *carro* or *coche*, *piso*, *apartamento*, or *departamento*, or could students perhaps be told—as they are not—that different words are used in different countries? Castilian Spanish is less and less favored, with students given, at most, such literally correct but misleading information as “in some parts of Spain” *c/z* is pronounced /θ/. Yet it is not simply a question of Spanish America versus Spain: “voseo” is mentioned even less frequently. It would be appropriate to tell students something about the Spanish language as spoken in the United States, the use of which is a far more challenging linguistic and social task than speaking Spanish in a foreign country.

What we have, however, are books that present one variety of the language, presumably that of the author(s), with the implied claim that this variety is sufficient for all students’ needs. The variety favored, however, is concealed, and must be deduced from the text. Many older books were limited to Castilian Spanish. One textbook I know seems to have an Argentinian slant; several are oriented to Mexican Spanish, others to Puerto Rican Spanish, and others to Cuban Spanish. I see no problem with such orientations, if done openly. We have textbooks of Brazilian Portuguese and peninsular Portuguese, books teaching Iraqi, Lebanese, Egyptian, and Moroccan (Maghrebi) Arabic, and in foreign countries there are books which teach British English and others for American English. Yet, though such might well be appropriate in certain parts of the United States, and is found in materials created for use outside of colleges and universities, there is no textbook of Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban Spanish, or even American Spanish or peninsular Spanish in general.

The non-linguistic topics treated in the books are poorly chosen. How one applies for a job in Spanish is not, in my opinion, a skill that need be taught in Spanish 1. A desirable substitute would be how one sells a product or service. More immediately

useful, at least to students in Florida, would be the way one communicates and advances, in Spanish, an interest in a member of the opposite sex, a topic rarely included. A Berlitz phrasebook, in contrast, will take one from “I would like to see you this evening” through “This [gift] is for you” to “I want to marry you.”

All Spanish textbooks attempt to teach something about Hispanic culture. However, the culture presented is the superficial, picturesque culture of the travel agent. Indians who wear colorful clothing are often featured; Latin-American blacks rarely. Social problems, much less politics, are treated very gingerly or ignored altogether. This does the students a disservice.

Cultural information presented is often inaccurate: for example, that Ponce de León discovered Florida while searching for the fountain of youth, a myth I was astonished to find in a book currently under consideration.¹ Cultural information is also, at times, presented in a heavy-handed and wooden fashion, as in these excerpts, both from Chapter VI of two different elementary

¹ Aside from the fact that early maps reveal that Europeans saw Florida before Ponce visited and named it, early mention of a river (not a fountain) whose water had salutary effects is only found, very cautiously and without association with Ponce, in Pedro Mártir de Anglería, *Decade II*, Book 10. The link to Ponce is much later. “It seems ridiculous that a robust adventurer and explorer like Ponce would have been influenced in the least by such a fable, even if he had heard it” (David True, quoted in Charlton W. Tebeau and Ruby Leach Carson, *Florida: From Indian Trail to Space Age. A History* [Delray Beach, Florida: Southern, 1965], I, 2). The distortion is similar to that inflicted on Colón’s sailors, whose concern that they had not found land despite a long journey is turned in modern myth into fear that they fall off the edge of the flat earth.

textbooks:

El solomillo a la parrilla es la especialidad de la casa. También el bacalao: lo preparamos a la vizcaína. Como plato del día hay paella...

Veo que el candidato Díaz no encuentra soluciones para nosotros, y su programa no resuelve problemas urgentes como el desempleo y la instrucción primaria.

Cultural information also comes, seemingly, right out of government brochures: "La Rinconada [Caracas] is one of the world's most luxurious racetracks, complete with escalators, an air-conditioned box for the president, and a swimming pool for the horses... Several beautiful ocean beaches are less than an hour from Caracas by car via *la autopista Caracas-La Guaira*, one of the most modern highways in the world."

Especially disappointing are the materials produced for use in the language laboratory. The ubiquitous "laboratory manual," created by analogy with the science laboratory manual and highly profitable for publishers because each student must purchase one anew, encourages students to read instead of listen, and write instead of speak, contrary to the purpose of the technology. Laboratory exercises are often poorly coordinated with the textbook, which is perhaps not surprising when they are often produced by different people and even subcontracted to independent preparers. On tapes I have found poor or no control of intonation and phonetics. When one adds the irregular quality of tape reproduction, the deterioration of tapes and equipment through use and misuse, and the general failure, through lack of instruction of teachers as well as students, to use the full potential of the laboratory, the whole point of the expensive facility seems questionable.

None of the above, I believe, is irremediable. What is needed, however, is the recognition that there is a problem, and the willingness to address. Apparently such does not exist; Hispanic studies devotes less of its energies to language instruction than does any other of the major foreign languages.² The probable explanation is simply complacency. Spanish enrollments at most schools—certainly at Florida State—are high. Teachers of other languages have an economic incentive to nurture their programs. When we can not accommodate all the students who want to take Spanish now, why need one do anything differently? Such an attitude is surely short-sighted. If students are offered uninspiring language courses, they will take what they feel they must, and no more. The smartest students will choose other subjects as their majors. The whole field will be perceived as sleepy and dull.

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² A glance at any MLA convention program will reveal a disproportionately low participation by Hispanists in programs dealing with language teaching. What has become known as the “Dartmouth method” of foreign language teaching, though controversial, was developed by John Rassias for French and then German, and is only now being applied to Spanish. The first nationally televised foreign language course will be in French (*New York Times*, May 22, 1984). We are unfortunately bringing up the rear.