Which Spanish(es) to Teach?
John M. Lipski

According to Spain’s government-sponsored Cervantes Institute, there are more than 400 million native or near-native speakers of Spanish in the world, distributed across every continent except Antarctica (Molina).

Spanish is the official language in twenty-one countries, plus Puerto Rico; is the de facto first language for most of Gibraltar; still maintains a small foothold in the Philippines, where it once enjoyed official status; and is known and used regularly by many people in Haiti, Aruba, Curacao, and Belize.

Yet in the country that harbors the world’s fourth largest native Spanish-speaking population (tied for fourth place with Colombia and behind Mexico, Argentina, and Spain), the Spanish language has no official status at all. That country is the United States, with more than 38.7 million native Spanish speakers, nearly ten percent of the world’s Spanish-speaking population, in a Latino population approaching 49 million.

Put another way, there are more native Spanish speakers in the United States than in all of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama), plus Uruguay and Paraguay thrown in for good measure. Despite its lack of official status and the xenophobic tantrums of English-only agitators, Spanish is also the most studied language after English, at all levels of public and private education. It is no longer considered a foreign language in many parts of the country, and the chronology of this attitudinal shift is mirrored in language enrollment patterns (taken from the MLA 2006 language enrollment report [Furman, Goldberg, and Lusin]), which show Spanish enrollments first behind, then tied with French until around 1970, and then by 1990 effectively equal to enrollments of all other modern languages combined. The gap continues to widen. At Penn State, as of fall 2009, Spanish enrollments will be more than three times that of all other languages combined, and Penn State offers a lot of languages. Spanish is the only language other than English that can be studied in every high school in Pennsylvania that offers language programs. This fact has immediate repercussions for college and university language programs.

The geographic and cultural diversity that marks the Spanish-speaking world is reflected in language-internal diversity, in the form of regional and social dialects that affect nearly every aspect of the language. There is little popular awareness of these differences. Fundamental—and often fundamentally misguided—questions are routinely fielded by Spanish language programs, all revolving around the issue of what variety of Spanish to teach. In the language of the street, this preoccupation emerges as, Where is the best Spanish spoken?, and, Do you teach proper Spanish? Sometimes the more nuanced Do you teach Castilian or Spanish? pops up, unwittingly translating into English the terminological debate that is played out between castellano and español in the Spanish-speaking world.
Before delving into this issue in more detail, let us examine the notion of language diversity itself. Objectively, Spanish dialect differences are different from those found in other languages spread over a comparable geographic expanse—for example, English. In the United States, questions about the best English rarely arise in teaching programs (except for the general avoidance of stigmatized nonstandard grammatical constructions), for the simple reason that nearly all teachers of English in the United States speak some variety of American English. It is interesting to speculate on the popular reaction if English teachers from New Zealand, Wales, Sri Lanka, Trinidad, Nigeria, and Singapore were suddenly to populate our classrooms, even those dedicated to teaching English as a second language. Matters are easier for our colleagues teaching most other commonly taught modern languages. There is much diversity in the francophone world, but the hegemony of the French Academy and the educated Parisian norm dictate the teaching of French as a second language throughout the world. German dialectal diversity—arguably greater than what occurs in Spanish or French—is masked by the uniform teaching of High German, and the situation is similar for Italian. Portuguese programs in this country usually settle on the educated varieties spoken in Brazil (in Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo) or in Portugal (Lisbon), depending largely on the projected audience, given the significant transatlantic differences. Teachers of modern Arabic run into the same multidialect issues as Spanish teachers but have the unifying thread of Classical Arabic to guide their path, as well as a very small number of sections to staff in any given location.

So what about Spanish? Spain is home to the prestigious Royal Academy, which publishes an official grammar book and dictionary and periodically issues proclamations regarding regional words officially admitted into the Spanish language (usually after a century or more of life in the wild). All the nations in which Spanish is an official language also have national language academies (except Equatorial Guinea, which is currently creating one), as do Puerto Rico and the Philippines, and there is also a North American Academy of the Spanish language. But even the Spanish Royal Academy does not hold forth the speech of Spain—much less of any region of Spain—as the model to be followed at home or abroad, and the same is true for the other national academies. There are numerous dictionaries of regionalisms, some of which are officially acknowledged in the Spanish academy’s dictionary (Diccionario de la Real Academia Española or DRAE), and one possible method of arriving at a unified language, as yet unexplored, would be to search all available regional dictionaries as well as the purported worldwide Spanish dictionaries (e.g., the DRAE and Larousse) and use only those items that are found only in the worldwide dictionaries and have no regional designations. The resulting filtrate could be called universal Spanish and used to create teaching materials.

The opposite tactic has been deliberately employed in some language revitalization efforts—for example, in the regional language Aragonese (e.g., Zentro de Profesors) and in the Afro-Colombian creole language Palenquero (Simarra Obeso, Reyes, and Pérez Tejedor; Simarra Reyes and Triviño Doval), where pedagogical materials embody the search for words that are the least similar to their Spanish counterparts in order to sharpen the distinctions between Spanish and its siblings (or, for creole languages, its stepchildren).
Which Spanish(es) to Teach?

John M. Lipski

Why hasn’t this eminently sensible idea for establishing a unified language been put into practice for Spanish before now? Even assuming that the task could be accomplished—which is doubtful, given the many inaccuracies that plague most regional dictionaries—the outcome would be a woefully incomplete language, having no representation at all for many fundamental concepts. Such a universal Spanish could easily deal with basic human and animal anatomy, but you could not use it to express such unfortunate but all too common conditions as being bucktoothed, bow-legged, cross-eyed, knock-kneed, pimple-faced, slack-jawed, pigeon-toed, and one-armed, to say nothing of such desirable attributes as beautiful, lovable, or sexy. You might find the same word for apple even in climates where apples do not grow, but green peppers, corn on the cob, bananas, and black coffee would have no common ground. Whether walking on foot, driving a car, or traveling by bus, a speaker of universal Spanish would find no vehicles of expression (with apologies for the pun), and perhaps only airplane travel might yield a universally recognized word (but one shunned by older speakers, who still recall the first aeroplanos). And taking a car to a gas station would be hampered by the unavailability of universal words for gasoline, tires, mufflers, steering wheel, hubcaps, and the gas station itself. The classroom teacher would have to use nonverbal communication to refer to blackboard, chalk, wastebasket, paper clip, and ballpoint pen (although books, pencils, and desks would provide safe havens). Homeowners would be similarly tongue-tied regarding light switches, electrical plugs and sockets, lightbulbs, refrigerators, toilets, bathtubs and faucets, clothes hangers, sidewalks, and backyards (thankfully, doors and windows would still be available as universal words, as would the house itself). A speaker of universal Spanish could not answer the telephone with anything other than a grunt and would have trouble expressing acquiescence or acknowledging thanks.

To further complicate matters, the same words may have radically different meanings from one Spanish-speaking region to another. We are faced with Old World–New World transformations: pinecones become pineapples; nautical terms run aground (e.g., belaying ropes turn into shoelaces); and regional taboos make words for such common things as bread rolls, papayas, seashells, insects, birds, dogs, young cows, and other assorted flora and fauna the source of giggles and gasps when used in unfamiliar territory, and taking a bus or stepping on the sidewalk can sound like perversions when overheard by dialect-challenged listeners. In Spanish, the word china can refer to a young girl, a pebble on the beach, and an orange (in different countries, of course) as well as china and things Chinese; another word, hasta, can make reference to opening time, or closing time, depending on the country in which it is said (see Lope Blanch), not a trivial matter for international business travelers.

In matters of pronunciation, matters are a little easier but not without pitfalls. Some varieties of Spanish pronounce no final consonants in natural speech, making the transition from written to spoken word rather like French (and for the same historical reasons, but a thousand years later). Other varieties swallow up unstressed vowels to the point of disappearance. There are also some sound substitutions, although these rarely affect meaning, and the Spanish trill is often not trilled at all but voiced as a buzz, whistle, or rasp. The main phonetically related problems experienced by Spanish speakers from distinct regions have to do with speed of delivery.
Which Spanish(es) to Teach?

John M. Lipski

and intonational melody, all highly variable across dialects. These differences, when added to unfamiliar or confusing vocabulary, can challenge the unwary listener.

So how do Spanish speakers from different countries manage to communicate? The answer is, surprisingly well. First of all, despite my list of oddities, the number of common denominators is high, especially for the sort of conversations likely to be held among first-time acquaintances from different countries, where slang, colloquial, and highly regional items are usually kept to a minimum. Also, most Spanish speakers have an extensive passive vocabulary that allows for recognition of items from other dialects that they may not actively use. Familiarity with the interlocutor or with other dialects due to travel, internationally syndicated soap operas, and literature, further enhances mutual intelligibility of Spanish dialects. Many of the most regionalized terms are colloquial, and speakers can usually muster dictionary words when pressed for more decorous discourse. That the grammar works the same for all Spanish varieties (except for some subtleties in verb tense usage and word order in questions) helps ensure effective cross-dialect communication.

Principal Issues to Be Addressed

This rather lengthy preamble is meant to set the stage for a discussion, in the face of the panoply of options, of the teaching and learning of Spanish in the United States. In particular, I address several questions that might be of interest to department chairs, especially those who are not linguists trained in Spanish language variation. They are:

- What sort(s) of Spanish should constitute the backbone of the basic elementary and intermediate language programs?
- What, if any, sort of linguistic enforcement should take place in multisection language programs?
- What is (or should be) the effect of Spanish language variation on the choice of study-abroad programs?
- How should matters of regional and social variation in Spanish be addressed throughout the Spanish curriculum?
- What are the implications for faculty hiring, teacher training, and graduate placement?
- What is the place of heritage language speakers of Spanish in the scheme of teaching and training?

What Spanish to Teach?

In one of the apocryphal anecdotes attributed to Abraham Lincoln, the gangly politician was asked how long a man’s legs should be. “Just long enough to reach the ground” was the reply. Similarly, to the question “What variety of Spanish should we teach?,” the answer could be “Just one that gets the meaning across.” And if no perfect variety exists, how much understanding is actually needed to create a pedagogically sound program?
In the early years of Spanish textbook production, epitomized by the venerable *El camino real* high school series (Jarrett) but actually stretching back to the late nineteenth century, the answer was simple: Spanish equaled Castilian, and Castilian meant not the language of shepherders and small farmers (still the majority population of Castile at the time) but rather the language of literature and oratory. Students were taught gallant introductions that would do credit to any antebellum southern finishing school, as well as verbal forms and vocabulary items found only in central and northern Spain. That most Spaniards would be hard pressed to muster such language, to say nothing of natives of the far more populous ex-colonies, was merely assumed to represent one of the many challenges to proper Spanish. That the textbooks contained words and expressions that could be understood anywhere in the Spanish-speaking world was only because the subject matter tended to the sublime and poetic rather than to the mundane but useful. One might learn to introduce oneself as “your humble servant” but have no idea of how to say “mop the floor,” “wash the dishes,” “change the diaper,” “mow the lawn,” or any of the other actions a servant might perform. A student might learn to (verbally) kiss the hand of a distinguished guest but be unable to explain how to get the grease off one’s hands after changing a flat tire.

It is only when Spanish morphed from an exotic foreign language useful only for reading literature and visiting European museums to a living language to be heard and used in American life that Spanish textbooks took notice of language variation, if only to create even minimally realistic readings and dialogues. The advent of communicative approaches to Spanish teaching in the 1980s as well as input-based processing models resulted in the greater use of authentic materials and thereby of linguistic variants likely to be found in life outside the academic biosphere. By necessity this use entailed the introduction of some regional language besides canonical patterns found throughout the Spanish-speaking world. A few textbooks have employed a unifying thread of dialogues based on fictitious characters from a single country, in addition to diverse readings and explanations. The countries of choice are, not surprisingly, Spain, Mexico, and in a few instances Colombia and Peru.

Noticeably absent from all Spanish textbooks is the use of the second-person singular pronoun *vos* and the accompanying verb forms instead of *tú*, although *vos* is used nearly exclusively in Argentina; Uruguay; Paraguay; all Central American countries except Panama; in much of Chile; and in some major cities of Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela (Páez Urdaneta; Lipski). Speakers who use *vos* make up around a third of the world’s Spanish speakers. On the other hand, those who use the traditional second-person plural pronoun *vosotros* are confined to Spain (except the Canary Islands) and represent less than a tenth of the world’s Spanish speakers. Yet *vosotros* and its accompanying verb forms appear in every Spanish textbook, although not always as forms to be actively learned, and *vos*, if it appears at all, makes the scene only in notes about local color. It is certainly desirable for students to recognize pronouns and verb forms found in traditional literature and music, much as American students run across *thou* and *ye*, but not at the expense of language varieties that today’s students stand a good chance of encountering outside the classroom.

The simple answer to the complex debate over which variety of Spanish to teach is that some Spanish is better than none at all and that no Spanish likely to be vetted
Which Spanish(es) to Teach?

John M. Lipski

by editors and publishers will do a disservice to students who actually attempt to use it in a natural setting. To be avoided are not specific language varieties but rather implicit or explicit value judgments that denigrate dialects and their speakers in a futile attempt to deny the results of natural language evolution.

Enforcement?

All multisection courses in any subject area require coordination and discipline, if for no other reason than to ensure that students achieve a uniform set of goals irrespective of their individual sections and that the workload be shared evenly among instructors. But in language pedagogy courses, the notion of a dialect police conjures up Orwellian scenarios, replete with hidden microphones, informers, and reeducation for transgressors. So should language coordinators and program directors adopt a stance of laissez parler? Might not this policy unleash the curse of Babel on students who deserve a maximally efficient and cohesive education? In short, my answers are yes and no, respectively—subject of course to the caveats of common sense.

At one point in my life as a department head I was faced with a demand from higher administrators to increase dramatically the number of elementary Spanish sections virtually overnight. When I mentioned that in our small college town surrounded by beautiful but unpopulated rolling farmland it might be difficult to recruit that many adequate teachers in any time frame, much less on short notice, I was told that there were numerous Spanish speakers in the area, hence my problem could be easily solved. Since we had already tapped our pool of captive spouses (at least those with any relevant training) and international graduate students in other departments, I surmised that the primary referents were Latino construction and agricultural workers, who indeed could be found “in the area.” At this point, hearing a loud noise outside an administrator’s window, I pointed to several physical plant workers busy with leaf blowers and lawnmowers, almost invisible (but not inaudible) in a huge cloud of dust. “They speak English,” I said. “Should we recruit them as instructors for the English department on the basis only of that criterion?” Naturally no teaching offers were extended to the groundskeepers, and I was given a little more breathing room in my search for new Spanish instructors.

In a normal language department, teachers are either graduate students with at least one college degree already in hand, instructors with pedagogical training or advanced degrees, or permanent faculty members, usually with a terminal degree. In other words, they are professionals. As such, we expect them to speak like professionals in the performance of their duties—meaning, among other things, that they use no offensive language, that they have reasonably precise diction, and that their overall style of delivery is appropriate to their audience. We expect them to speak the way that professionals do in whatever speech community they come from, regardless of what the objective linguistic correlates may be. We should not expect them to adopt a regional accent not their own or to avoid naturally occurring grammatical constructions and vocabulary items in favor of some super-Spanish chimera. All good instructors should and do explain to their students any differences between their own speech and the patterns presented in the teaching materials. Unless the program
Which Spanish(es)
to Teach?

John M. Lipski

explicitly directs otherwise, they do not hold students responsible for learning the instructors’ dialectal idiosyncrasies. Most students, even those held captive by language requirements, enjoy glimpses of real language as a supplement to the prepackaged meals found in textbooks. Even those students who would rather not be challenged still deserve exposure to something approaching real-life communication.

I recently learned of a coordinator of a large multisection Spanish program (and the holder of a PhD in linguistics) who forbade instructors from the Southern cone to address their students with the familiar pronoun vos (the de facto standard for millions of South and Central Americans) instead of tú. This same coordinator uncritically accepted a textbook that presents a hodgepodge of vocabulary items from around the world that would never be found together in a single Spanish dialect, and he berated other instructors in a regional dialect that claims far fewer speakers than those who use vos. Do we need this kind of dialect police?

Shrink-wrapping instructors in a single set of prescriptive norms only hinders their effectiveness and further removes students from the possibility of acquiring useful communicative skills. A typical scenario for high school and university students of Spanish is for them to successively study with teachers who use different regional varieties of Spanish; sometimes teachers could be changed every semester. This practice does not cause students to acquire Spanish the way that Dr. Frankenstein’s monster acquired life, given the aforementioned professional speech expected of instructors and the fact that most dialect differences go unnoticed by students who are still struggling to master the fundamentals of a second language. No one reasonably expects students to achieve an approximation to a specific variety of Spanish after only a few semesters of study (with a total seat time amounting to just a week or two in the life of a native Spanish speaker). Ideally, we hope that our students reduce grammatical, lexical, and phonetic errors to a minimum, and the relatively few who do manage this feat function splendidly in the Spanish-speaking world, with no tangible boost (or collateral damage) from the sort of linguistic input they received.

Study Abroad

Study-abroad programs, particularly those lasting more than a month or two, can produce dramatic improvement in students’ language skills: students achieve greater authenticity as well as overall fluency and grammatical accuracy. For many years, Spanish study-abroad programs were concentrated in a few areas of Spain and Mexico, and there was little consideration of the regional or social varieties of Spanish being imparted. With the expansion of foreign study programs to include nearly every region of Spain and numerous Latin American countries, and with the gradual expansion beyond culture- and literature-based programs to include an emphasis on international business and community development, the time has come to examine how language varieties may affect the choice of study-abroad programs and sites.

Madrid and Salamanca (the site of one of the oldest and most prestigious universities) were the sites of choice in Spain for United States–based study-abroad programs and continue to host thousands of students each year. The variety of Spanish spoken in both cities, and most exclusively in Salamanca, is quintessential Castilian, the
Which Spanish(es) to Teach?

John M. Lipski

sort that forms the stereotype for Spaniard throughout the rest of the world. Despite the status of these cities as cultural and historical icons, few Spanish speakers seek to imitate this dialect, either in Spain or abroad. The distinction between the phoneme /s/, written with the letter s, and /θ/, written with the letters ce, ci, and z, is found nowhere in Latin America and also disappears in southwestern Spain and the Canary Islands. Few American students who have studied in Castile adopt this pronunciation, and even fewer manage to distinguish the phonemes consistently and correctly. The same holds for the apicoalveolar pronunciation of /s/ (also not found in Latin America except idiosyncratically) and for the guttural or uvular pronunciation of the posterior fricative, referred to as jota and written as ge, gi, or j. Students are much more likely to pick up lexical items typical of Spain, such as vale for “OK,” coche for “automobile,” ordenador for “computer,” and Spanish good-time items such as tapas “bar snacks,” caña “a glass of draft beer,” fino “a glass of sherry,” and ligue “steady boyfriend or girlfriend.”

Now rivaling Castile for study-abroad programs is Seville, the prototypical Andalusian city (in southwestern Spain), which receives the largest single contingent of Penn State students. The speech of Seville and other Andalusian cities with study-abroad programs, such as Granada, Córdoba, and Málaga, is characterized by the massive elimination of syllable- and word-final consonants, especially /s/, /l/, /r/, and /d/; the weakening of /d/ between vowels; a weak aspiration instead of the strong jota; and a rapid-fire articulation reminiscent of Cuban and Dominican Spanish (not surprising, given the historical ties between Andalusia and the Caribbean). Andalusian Spanish has historically been discriminated against and is the butt of jokes and literary stereotypes, but its speakers assert themselves proudly and make increasingly fewer concessions to Castilian dialects. Andalusian accents can now be heard on national radio and television—another sign of post-Franco equal opportunity. American students who attend study-abroad programs in Seville rarely pick up more than a smattering of Andalusian pronunciation, although nearly all come back with a few choice phrases (easy to obtain emblazoned on T-shirts and bumper stickers). They sometimes complain at first about difficulties experienced in making the mental transition from written letters to the rapid and often slurred pronunciation encountered outside the classroom, but there is no evidence to suggest that these participants finish their programs with any disadvantage vis-à-vis their counterparts in dialect regions with greater sound-writing correspondence.

Nowadays nearly every major city in Spain hosts at least some foreign study programs, including Barcelona, where Catalan is as likely to be heard on the streets as Spanish; Galicia, where Spanish competes with the post-Franco revival of Galician; the increasingly bilingual Basque Country; and boom towns like Valencia, Alicante, Valladolid, and Cáceres, all with their regional linguistic peculiarities. Students emerge from quality programs in these cities with value added for having acquired some authentic regional items, but all learn essentially the same Spanish.

In Latin America, most Spanish study programs for United States students take place in Mexico, because of proximity and historical ties to the United States. Except for programs in Yucatan, the study-abroad sites are immersed in some version of the all-powerful Mexico City accent, which has largely overrun the regional dialects in
Which Spanish(es) to Teach?

John M. Lipski

Mexico. Since Mexican Spanish tacitly forms the backdrop for all things considered Spanish in much of the United States, the possibility that students might acquire a Mexican form of speech has never raised concerns. Another popular venue is Costa Rica, attractive more for its natural beauty, lack of major political and social upheavals, and excellent infrastructure than for its rather idiosyncratic Spanish dialects. Other Latin American countries routinely hosting United States–based Spanish study programs are Ecuador (quito), also the home of a unique (Andean) brand of Spanish, historically influenced by contact with Quechua, and occasionally Chile and Argentina. Puerto Rico is home to a few programs, as is the Dominican Republic, although Dominican Spanish is often the butt of criticism both by speakers of other Spanish varieties and by Dominicans themselves.

Since few participants in Spanish study-abroad programs acquire a reasonable facility in any Spanish dialect, except for some key words and phrases, the question of an appropriate base variety is moot. Only students who spend a year or more immersed in an intense language-learning environment—which includes no opportunities of speaking English with hosts or compatriots and intense personal interactions with native Spanish speakers outside the classroom—might possibly achieve a credible regional variety of Spanish. If they do, all but the most logocentrically assertive teachers back home will be delighted with the accomplishment.

Even native Spanish speakers who harbor deep-seated prejudices against particular varieties of Spanish would much prefer to communicate with a gringo who fluently speaks such a variety than to an interlocutor with significant interference from English. At worst, a student who has mastered a Spanish dialect felt to be quaint might be a source of amusement, but the student will also be admired for being what many Spanish speakers in other countries regard as impossible—namely, an American speaking a language other than English. In the final analysis, the choice of a study-abroad program should be based not on the local variety of Spanish but on the overall effectiveness of the program in producing any authentic Spanish dialect.

Spanish Variation in the Curriculum

An increasing number of undergraduate Spanish programs contain courses that introduce Spanish linguistics, and such courses provide an ideal point of departure for discussion of language variation. Courses in Spanish phonetics, provided they come early enough in the curriculum to provide a platform for subsequent study, are also appropriate venues for presenting variation as a natural part of language and for systematically exposing students to diverse forms of the language. The most recent textbooks in linguistics have data on regional and social variation, an encouraging sign; advanced courses in sociolinguistics, on Spanish in the United States, and even in advanced grammar provide a forum for questions of language loyalty, attitudes toward specific dialects, and prescriptive versus descriptive approaches to teaching and learning Spanish. Still to be tapped are the many introduction-to-literature courses as well as more advanced offerings, in which texts illustrative of language variation past and present may provide material for discussion. Literature teachers are not expected to give a linguistic analysis (although most have studied the history of the
Which Spanish(es) to Teach?

John M. Lipski

Spanish language), but to the extent that instructors feel that awareness of language varieties will benefit their students, they could invite a colleague in linguistics as a supplement to the literary study.

Hiring, Training, Placement

Many of the same considerations discussed in the context of study-abroad programs obtain in the hiring, training, and placement of language teachers. In the selection of instructors, pedagogical materials, and training programs, there is no defensible reason for favoring or avoiding any regional variety of Spanish, provided that appropriate professional registers are employed. This criterion of professionalism fits any native Spanish speaker trained in a Spanish-speaking country as well as second-language speakers of Spanish with adequate linguistic skills and educational background. More important than an instructor’s variety of Spanish is the willingness to accept and respond to other forms of Spanish in an informed and nonjudgmental fashion. Anecdotes about the incompatibility of Spanish dialects (e.g., a teacher from Spain faced with Mexican Spanish, a teacher from Argentina dealing with Dominican students) can usually be traced back to individual acts of intolerance that do not extend to entire speech communities. As any world traveler can attest, educated speakers of Spanish easily communicate with one another regardless of individual dialect differences, and no dialects stand out as either privileged or disadvantaged regarding intelligibility.

Heritage Language Speakers

In addition to the millions of fluent native speakers of Spanish in the United States, approximately half of whom were born elsewhere, Spanish has the largest number of heritage language speakers, both in absolute terms and as a proportion to the total number of speakers. Some heritage speakers result from immigration over the past few generations, while others represent a Hispanic presence that goes back to the sixteenth century (e.g., in New Mexico). They were ignored in language teaching programs until the late 1970s, when materials and courses for native and heritage language speakers emerged in ever-increasing numbers. Many heritage language speakers of Spanish share with their counterparts speaking other languages (with the possible exception of Chinese and Korean) little or no literacy or formal training in the language, and rural or working-class home language varieties are often stigmatized and avoided by more educated speakers.

On the other hand, Spanish heritage language speakers differ from, say, speakers of Pennsylvania German, Louisiana French, or the many regional Italo-Romance languages inaccurately lumped together as Italian. They are already speaking an essentially standard language—once noncanonical vocabulary items and occasional grammatical quirks are factored out. Fluent heritage language speakers—meaning those fully in command of Spanish grammar and pronunciation and not semifluent, passive bilinguals sometimes referred to as native listeners—need only round out their lexical storehouse and acquire the professional knowledge of any educated
Which Spanish(es) to Teach?

John M. Lipski

person; they do not face the task of learning an essentially new language. This fact is often overlooked in training programs that focus on nonstandard or rustic features, painting heritage speakers into a corner, rather than on the enormous common core shared by Spanish speakers throughout the world.

Trained heritage language speakers of Spanish are the obvious instructors of choice for teaching programs that target students of the same background, since such teachers not only share the intimacy of the home language but also serve as role models of success for traditionally underrepresented and underprivileged groups. But we must be careful not to ghettoize instructors from a heritage language background into ethnic-only courses and programs, since to do so is to perpetuate the harmful and empirically unsustainable prejudice against homegrown Spanish. A glance at our profession reveals distinguished faculty members and superb instructors and graduate students who come from heritage language backgrounds and who are fully competitive with the best candidates that the rest of the Spanish-speaking world has to offer. As Spanish continues to move ever further from being a foreign language in United States schools, heritage language speakers turned teacher provide a bridge for fully contextualizing Spanish as a language of the United States.

Spanish is here to stay in the United States, and the demand for Spanish-language classes and -language teachers will only continue to grow. The natural selection process for teachers and teaching materials has proved more effective than deliberate intervention for more than a century, and given the high standards and training requirements for our language programs at all levels, no further remedies are needed. At the same time, we should be careful to avoid repeating earlier missteps, and we should combat the ever-present barrage of criticism against the use of Spanish in the United States.

Notes

1. Other estimates, such as those by Ethnologue (www.ethnologue.com) and UNESCO (www.unesco.org) also give totals around the 400 million figure. Since Argentina unilaterally claims a large swath of Antarctica and maintains small but permanent bases there (as does Chile), one could arguably stretch the boundaries of the Spanish-speaking world past the Antarctic Circle.

2. How is this figure calculated? The 2000 census reported 35.3 million Latinos (classified as Hispanic) in the United States (out of a total population of 281.4 million), of which 28.1 million or 79.6% reported using Spanish at home (with no indication of level of proficiency). Of those 28.1 million, 47.5% were born in the United States. The latest official population estimate for the Latino population is from mid-2008: some 46.9 million Latinos out of a total United States population of 304 million; this figure represents a 32.9% increase in the Latino population from 2000. The United States population grew 8.0% during the same interval, so the reported Latino population is increasing at four times that rate. At the time of the writing of this article, the estimated population of the United States is 306.8 million, a 0.9% increase from 2009. Extrapolating a 3.6% increase in the Hispanic population from mid-2008 to July 2009 gives an estimated total Latino population of 48.6 million. If one assumes the same ratio of reported Spanish language usage as found in 2000, there are 38.7 million Spanish speakers. The real numbers are probably considerably higher, because of the well-known underreporting of minority groups and because the increase in the Latino population from outside the United States is larger than the increase in the native-born group. All this census information is available at www.census.gov.

3. Alvar provides data on language variation in Spain; Lipski, in Latin America.

4. For example, see Valdés and Teschner; Quintanilla and Silman; De la Portilla and Varela.
Which Spanish(es) to Teach?
John M. Lipski

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