

# The Discipline of Spanish

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A recent addition to the growing genre of theory-how-to books, *Teaching Contemporary Theory to Undergraduates* (1994) illustrates the difficulties faced by literature teachers who want to expand the use of theory beyond graduate student seminars. In his introduction, William Cain pleads the necessary *mea culpa* when he begins, "Theory has a daunting range of meanings and applications" (3). Cain senses the incongruities that arise from a book that prescribes specific uses for contemporary theory. A book directed at the pedagogical question of how to use theory in the classroom must avoid presenting a purely synchronic view of theory or a view that theory constitutes a stable body knowledge, a more or less uniform product that can be plugged into a course syllabus. The assumptions implicit in many contemporary interpretive approaches push us in different directions.

Rather than finding convenient articulations of theory and course plans, a project more consonant with post-structuralist approaches compels us to turn our critical attention to the field as a whole. An important corollary moves us to consider pedagogical issues and theory as a process that necessarily includes a reassessment of (at least certain) aspects of our discipline with the same critical rigor that we apply to our objects of study. At the same time that we help students learn to participate in the interpretative processes associated with contemporary theory, we must not neglect the imperative to re-examine our field.

In the first chapters of *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* (1997), Nelson makes the point that novel interpretations

of literary texts often take precedence to self-reflective analyses of the very disciplines to which we belong (18-19). Nelson argues that while professors in the Humanities have become adept at radically redefining their objects of study, the humanistic disciplines themselves have remained under-theorized:

[Theorists] do not challenge the territorialization of university intellectual activity or in any way risk undermining the status and core beliefs of their fields. The difference, for theorists, is that this blindness or reluctance often contradicts the intellectual imperatives of the very theories they espouse. (19)

Nelson's criticism may not endear him to some, but his point is well taken concerning contemporary Hispanism. Our own field benefits from Nelson's assumption that any discussion of how to apply theory in the classroom is enriched by self-reflective analysis.

Spanish is a profoundly schizophrenic discipline. In purely quantitative terms, the vast majority of students enrolled in Spanish courses do so in the basic language curriculum. At my own institution, first- and second-year students outnumber Spanish majors by a ratio of twenty three to one, a situation not unique to Wabash College. I mention this not to complain, but rather to underscore the fact that in the profession generally, while most of our teaching resources are dedicated to first- and second-year students, the majority of our professional conversations and concerns revolve around a small minority of advanced students.

At larger universities this discrepancy is muted by a familiar division of

labor: tenured or tenure-track professors teach literature courses and graduate students teach basic language. In departments with large graduate programs it is not uncommon to find senior faculty whose latest experience with the basic language curriculum dates to a time before most of those who currently teach first- and second-semester Spanish were born.

Pierre Bourdieu, in *Homo Academicus* (1984), describes the evolution of this division of academic labor into a two-class system and traces it to changes in the recruitment of new adherents of the discipline (143-47). While the specific context is the French academy, his analysis pertains to discussions of the American academy and of the study of Spanish in particular. Bourdieu describes a polarization between professors and lecturers, a divide analogous to the institutional difference between graduate students and non-tenure-track professors on the one hand and tenured or tenure-track professors on the other (128-51). One of the many conclusions to which Bourdieu alludes involves the unequal distribution of symbolic capital between these two groups, a situation that also describes many of the Spanish departments in which we teach. In the profession today, when many visiting professors, graduate instructors, and itinerant teachers have little hope of occupying the positions being vacated by retiring senior faculty, their capacity to act as agents within the academy at large and within their own departments in particular is necessarily diminished. Paradoxically, non-tenure-track instructors (whether graduate students or temporary professors) are those closest to language teaching and farthest from the kinds of classes that routinely employ contemporary theory. This means that standard discus-

sions of how to use theory in the classroom, useful though they be, are only applicable to a small percentage of the total work being done in most Spanish departments. And if theory is now the coin of the realm, the discourse most closely associated with scholarship that bestows rank and tenure, we must face the fact that the daily work of the majority of Spanish teachers will not provide access to advancement in the profession.

As I have mentioned elsewhere, the origin of the current division of labor, a situation not unique to Spanish, has its roots in the complex intersection of demographics, funding, and ideology (Rogers 289-93). Discussions of the "state of the profession" now routinely describe unprofessional, even unethical labor practices, graduate student unionization, and the job market. While much has been written about the causes of the current state of affairs, relatively less has been said about the effect of a teaching underclass on students and programs. The current imbalance in our profession asks an undergraduate student in Spanish to occupy two radically distinct subject positions *vis à vis* their object of study as he or she moves from first-year student to senior.

In Freudian terms, the upper echelons of Spanish study are libidinally structured around a fairly stable object of desire. Successful students internalize discursive stances that resonate with contemporary, post-structuralist criticism and are encouraged to emulate the theoretical preoccupations of their professors. The literary text, now redefined to include non-canonical genres and writers previously excluded from study, remains at the center of critical focus. And while the profession continues to debate these new definitions, upper-level Spanish courses in-

variably ask students to practice literary criticism of some form or another.

Basic language courses in Spanish operate under a different set of assumptions. From our contemporary point of reference, it would be unusual, even sounds absurd, to ask first-semester Spanish students to be literary critics. The profound dichotomy between beginning and advanced courses makes it difficult to imagine a professor tasked with teaching Spanish 100 who wonders about how much theory to include in the course. After all, does Foucault come before or after the subjunctive? First- and second year-Spanish students of earlier decades, however, encountered a more unified notion of the discipline. One way to measure this change is to examine the subject positions earlier students were encouraged to occupy. First-year Spanish textbooks from the early years of this century provide a unique insight, especially when placed alongside the current crop.

The kind of student that one can infer from M. M. Ramsey's *Textbook of Modern Spanish* (1897) approached the study of the language as an intellectual discipline. Ramsey sets the tone by introducing his book with a short essay describing the political, social, and linguistic history of the Iberian Peninsula. This erudite prologue contains difficult references to classical history, assumes a familiarity with Latin texts by Seneca, Lucan, and Martial, and presupposes a rudimentary understanding of the evolution of Indo-European languages.

Ramsey is intellectually intimidating as he comprehensively describes the Spanish language. At almost 700 pages, his is the longest textbook on my bookshelf by a factor of 2. The book contains 1477 separate divisions (or lessons) that

discuss progressively more difficult elements of grammar, syntax and morphology. Perhaps noticing that such an exhaustive treatment might alarm beginners, Ramsey generously informs students that more difficult language structures such as the objective forms of personal pronouns “are deferred to the first chapter of Part III; while the complexities of their enclitic use and duplicate objective forms are [thankfully] withheld until Chapter XXVII” (vi). The author defends his reliance on long exercises after each division as being “among the most important agencies in education and ought never to be evaded” (vii). He assures his readers, however, that he has “endeavored to avoid tedious and puerile iteration” (vii).

The introduction to Ramsey’s *Textbook of Modern Spanish* imagines a student who is male, fairly well versed in classical studies, exceptionally motivated, and more importantly, one who pursues an encyclopedic understanding of Spanish. Ramsey’s book prepares students to read a variety of texts in Spanish. Contemporary pedagogues would be appalled at the complete absence of communicative activities, among other things. But Ramsey is, in organization and content, true to a single-minded purpose. The text-book is intended, not as preparation for travelers, tourists, or businessmen, but as a thorough grounding in the language for those whose intellectual interests will take them next to Spanish literary, philosophical, and historical texts.

Published a decade later, the ninth edition of the corporately prepared textbook *Gramática de la lengua castellana por la Real Academia Española* (1906) provides a glimpse into the remote past of grammar instruction. While *Gramática* served as a textbook for native speakers of

the language, its philosophical approach shares much in common with Ramsey. *Gramática de la lengua castellana* is stubbornly classical in outlook. The book was, of course, never intended as a foreign language textbook, but rather as a guide to preserve and standardize written Spanish for Spanish speakers. The anonymous authors present the study of grammar as an integral element of the classical *trivium* and further divide the discipline into four categories: analogy, syntax, prosody, and orthography (vi). *Gramática de la lengua castellana* takes for granted the idea that study of the language is a worthy scholarly pursuit. The implicit justification for spending the time and intellectual effort to understand Spanish grammar emerges from the text itself. This justification resides in a nearly seamless union of literary text and grammar.

References to canonical poetry and prose serve as examples for the majority of grammar topics treated in the textbook. The section examining the subject of diphthongs and triphthongs, for example, incorporates a particularly rich selection. The author includes parts of Calderón’s *El mágico prodigioso*, Cervantes’s *Viaje del Parnaso*, Rodrigo Caro’s *Canción a las ruinas de Itálica*, Juan Rulfo’s *Carta a su hijo*, Alarcón’s *La crueldad por el honor*, Lope de Vega’s *La Dorotea*, and Fr. Luis de León’s *Oda*, 1 (327-28). By way of contrast, *Así es* (1996), a contemporary first-year text that also examines diphthongs, provides lists of words without context, literally *sin* text. Studying Spanish with *Gramática de la lengua castellana* simultaneously provides an education in *Siglo de Oro* literature as well as syntax, orthography and grammar. Although *Así es* is directed to non-native speakers, the fact remains that, for all its pedagogical failures,

*Gramática de la lengua castellana* treats the study of Spanish as an integral element of textual analysis.

In 1917 the Academia Real Española published a new, reformed edition of the venerable *Gramática de la lengua castellana*, the first major revision since 1857. The note to the new, reformed edition indicated, however, that the basic structure of the book had remained intact with its classical divisions: analogy, syntax, prosody, and orthography (vi). In fact, the preliminary note gives evidence to the tension and resistance that major changes to the grammar apparently evoked. The anonymous author confesses that: "Aun obedeciendo a razonables y justas exigencias, no podía ni debía realizarse de una vez y por completo la reforma que proyectaba la Academia" (v). The compromised text did not change structurally, but the anonymous author enthusiastically tells, "lo que sí ha variado fundamentalmente, radicalmente podríamos decir, es... el método y plan de exposición" (vi).

The old introduction found in the ninth edition follows the preliminary note and, at a casual glance, the only apparent change to the new and reformed edition appears to be the preliminary note itself. Closer examination reveals subtle alterations. The section that examines diphthongs uses the same literary selections to make its point, but now highlights the diphthongs themselves in bold print to make them easier to distinguish. In other sections of the book, verb charts have been included or rearranged and some additional lists of vocabulary have been included. For the most part, however, the *Gramática* retains its stubborn insistence on including sections of canonical literary texts to illustrate grammatical points.

Again, the new and reformed ver-

sion of *Gramática de la lengua castellana* offers a startlingly unified subject position to students; students of Spanish grammar are, by definition, students of Spanish literature. In the ethos of *Gramática*, grammatical competence enables more careful analysis and exegesis of standard literary texts. While the nationalistic goals of such a project are transparently obvious, the fact remains that students who used *Gramática* encountered a relatively stable, unified object. The implicit project of the text is an elite intellectual enterprise that needed no specific justification. Although the humanistic and admittedly nationalistic preoccupations of the text assume a broadly synchronic view of Spanish language and literature, the text positions students to use grammar as a tool to read competently intellectually challenging texts.

R. L. Predmore's more recent *Topical Spanish Review Grammar* (1956) resembles Ramsey's book and *Gramática de la lengua castellana* in its attempt to provide a total picture of the language, but with more economy. Predmore includes as much grammar as a *Textbook of Modern Spanish*, but rather than spread these topics across 1400 plus sections, he condenses the material into a few comprehensive charts. Predmore's text straddles the divide between early grammars and their modern predecessors by attempting a comprehensive, chart-intensive view of the language while eliminating the distraction of literary texts.

The first chapter, titled "The Verb: Regular Verbs: Simple Tenses" begins with a single chart, extraordinarily dense by contemporary pedagogical standards, that lists three verbs through conjugations in all eight simple tenses. Predmore's instruction to the student mirrors the text's or-



ganizational austerity: "Study the forms and meanings given below. Memorize the meanings, and learn the simple tenses of these verbs" (3). Predmore simply accepts as a given that students' motivation and intellectual curiosity is sufficient.

Contemporary Spanish textbooks take a different approach. Introductions to the newest generation of textbooks use directly persuasive language to capture student interest and tend to appeal to less academically motivated desires. Where earlier texts engaged students implicitly as performers of an elite, humanistic, intellectual activity that led to direct engagement with literary texts, newer Spanish grammars engage students at a more pragmatic level.

Nicolas Shumway's first-year text, *Español en Español*, begins with the following representative comments:

Fluency in other languages opens doors to limitless experiences the monolingual will never know. Indeed, few experiences match the thrill of forming new friendships that several months earlier would have been impossible because of linguistic barriers. People fluent in several languages all tell the same story: if they had remained monolingual, their lives would be considerably impoverished. Of the languages available to you as a student, none offers greater possibilities than Spanish.... Moreover, it is rapidly becoming the second language of the United States. If you are contemplating a career in health care, government service, business, law, or any other field where communicating with other people is important, knowing Spanish can be a great asset. (v)

The introduction to *Español en Español* offers students a radically different sub-

jectivity than did its predecessors. Shumway's introduction to the student offers an explicit justification for the study of Spanish that oscillates between two discursive foci.

First, *Español en Español* offers a culturally rather than intellectually elite position toward which beginning students may strive. Rather than humanistic, intellectual, or national elitism, *Español en Español* offers to lift students above the monotony of monolingualism and further links said monolingualism to an indeterminate sense of alienation. Where the monolingual lacks access to a diverse culture, the bilingual overcomes "linguistic barriers" and forms new friendships. Those fluent in many languages benefit from even greater access to possible companionship.

The second axis that secures students' identity in *Español en Español* might be called, in Bourdieuan terms, the accumulation of symbolic capital. In the case of Spanish students, this capital takes the form of a specific linguistic skill that can be exchanged for real capital in the market. Students who use *Español en Español* increase their marketability in the inevitable search for employment after college. The capacity to speak Spanish becomes an important "building block" for students' future careers and financial prospects.

I do not mean to suggest that Spanish departments should return to decades or even century-old textbooks, but I would conclude with a few modest proposals. While Spanish departments today must navigate the new world of the university as professional school (where students tend to choose courses that will, in their minds, lead to lucrative job offers), we neglect the basic curriculum at our

own peril. Professors should teach regularly at all levels of the discipline and the private fiefdoms of senior faculty who hold tightly to their senior seminars should be open to junior faculty as well. A more egalitarian distribution of labor not only allows newer faculty the opportunity to develop courses consonant with their research programs, it will broaden conversations about the basic language curriculum.

A corollary to this proposal is to broaden tenure reviews to include the consideration of textbooks as positive contributions to the discipline. As it now stands in most departments, textbook writing is viewed as activity only slightly more worthy in tenure considerations than serving on the campus building safety committee. This would perhaps encourage the production of textbooks with a stronger critical focus.

In the best of all possible worlds, we would begin to develop students' critical skills in first semester Spanish, adding more challenging texts every year, and culminating in their senior seminars. In that best of all possible Spanish departments, an attention to theory would in-

form, not just individual course syllabi, but the entirety of the Spanish curriculum.

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