

“ÉSTAS QUE FUERON POMPA Y ALEGRÍA”: THE LIFE CYCLE OF ROMANCE LINGUISTICS

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There is something faintly absurd about arguing for the intellectual respectability of a discipline that can lay claim to a pedigree of almost two centuries and a distinguished list of practitioners spanning five continents. Yet contributors to the first Critical Cluster took up the challenge and set forth with vigour serious arguments for the vitality, adaptability and potential of the discipline. Who had claimed the contrary? The Guest Editor had been scrupulous only to pose a hypothetical question.

Reading the responses with the benefit of a conspectus denied to the individual contributors, I am struck by their willingness and determination to answer in intellectual terms a question that has at least as many political and educational dimensions. Whether market forces and governmental philistinism (or at least indifference) have brought Historical Romance Linguistics to its knees in many of our universities is a question that certainly deserves debate, especially if we believe that we can, collectively, do something about it. Only a minority of the contributions confront these issues, and then after establishing intellectual credentials. I shall try to complement the minority.

Debates on the supposed crisis in Romance linguistics and its expected demise are not new. Malkiel diagnosed a period of self-doubt in the period 1900-1930, partly ascribed to an arid *Verschulung* (1972: 856-58); Posner reported an eclipse and crisis of confidence in the 1950s and 1960s (1970: 412-14); and more recently, anguished debates have been taking place in Germany on the future directions and sustainability of Romanistik (see Kramer 2004, responding to discussion

too rich to document here). So who would read the elegant, erudite, but ultimately self-serving disquisitions in the first Cluster? Fellow Romanists no doubt, and hopefully, since *La corónica* has been kind enough to host the debate, a wider audience of Hispanists; but probably not those whose attention should be most urgently engaged. From time to time, it is agreeable –and reassuring– to remind oneself of the manifest advantages of one’s field of study (Estienne would no doubt have said its *précellence*). But we do not need to convince *ourselves* of its virtues. Apparently, we are failing to convince others. Increasing numbers of students, including the most able graduate students, resist its blandishments, in Europe as well as North America. University administrators and auditors scrutinize where students fail to go.

Iris listado de oro, nieve y grana

Golden, multi-faceted, passionate, controversial – Romance linguistics has a glorious past. In terms of research productivity and publications, it is not difficult to show a discipline in good heart and probably still expanding. Contributors to the 2003 Cluster rightly draw attention to the brisk activity of the triennial congresses of the Société de Linguistique Romane, of the annual Linguistic Symposia on Romance Languages, the Linguistisches Kolloquium, the “Going Romance” meetings, and numerous more localized or more specialized groups. Even since their essays were penned, impressive new titles have been published: six tomes of proceedings from the Salamanca congress (Sánchez Miret 2003), manageable collections elsewhere, limited to a single volume only by rigorous sifting and refereeing (Auger, *et al.* 2004; Bok-Bennema, *et al.* 2004; Solin, *et al.* 2003).

Not only has the volume of production continued to swell in established fields, but new fields have also been added and existing ones reshaped in directions that could scarcely have been envisaged by our founding fathers. Taking just one example, “historical semantics”, at least in its purely lexical manifestation, might have figured as a section in the acts of many previous congresses of the Société de Linguistique Romane, but not with the scope and new dynamism manifest at a recent symposium (Lebsanft and Gleßgen 2004), where cognition and pragmatics rub shoulders with traditional historical lexicology.

The health of a discipline can be partly gauged by the vigour and regularity of its journals – the one sphere of activity largely overlooked

in the Critical Cluster. Here, Romance linguistics is eminently well served, having long been distinguished by its “own” periodicals – unlike neighbouring areas of philology and linguistics, notably English and Germanic, that until quite recently made do with generic serials. Four Romance journals are well past their centenaries: *Revue des langues romanes* (1870—), *Romania* (1872—), *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* (1877—) and *Romanische Forschungen* (1883—). Nearly all others claiming a Romance mission have celebrated their fiftieth anniversary of continuous production: *Revue de linguistique romane* (1925—), *Vox romanica* (1936—), *Romance Philology* (1947—), *Romanistisches Jahrbuch* (1947—), *Estudis romànics* (1947 [1949]—), and *Comparative Romance Linguistics Newsletter* (1951—). A reassuring list, and without counting adjacent or more specialized titles, among which also figure venerable centenarians, like *Annalas da la Società Retorumantscha* (1886—). The most recent recruit, *Probus* (1989—), a stripling at only seventeen issues, seems to be solidly established and doing well.

So where is the problem, real or imagined? Well, just to be provocative, look at the guest list for the Critical Cluster: fourteen eminent practitioners, whose expertise no-one could query, overwhelmingly middle-aged white men in mid-to-late career. For an authoritative assessment, and for rallying the flagging faithful, it is a good list. For enthusing a new generation of Romanists, less so. Where is the diversity and renewal? Where are the women, the ethnic minorities and (with due apologies to the younger scholars named), the really young bright stars?

Lástima vana

The decline, if such it is, is relative not absolute. Publications abound in Romance linguistics, as attested by expanding periodicals and the brimming pages of the *Comparative Romance Linguistics Newsletter* and the bibliographic supplements to *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*. The annual critical survey of Romance Linguistics that I have compiled for many years for *The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies* bears clear witness to diversification and renewal; despite the strict quotas that have to be observed by the host journal, it has expanded from some 1,500 words in 1973 (when Romance Linguistics was finally disentangled from General Linguistics) to a peak of over 7,000 words in 2000. But these are all measures internal to our discipline. Taking as a rough guide the numbers of pages filled by Romance languages

in the international *Linguistic Bibliography*, it is evident that they have increased steadily over the years after the recovery from World War II to the present, but that they have been filled less quickly than the pages devoted to English and to many other sub-fields of linguistics, sometimes markedly so.

Worse, Romance contributions are not having the impact that we might hope. Take, for instance, morphology. In what we might consider one of the quintessential Romance domains, a new, six-volume reference compendium containing 78 articles (Katamba 2004), has not a single one with the word “Romance” in the title nor yet the name of any modern Romance language. There is one article on Latin, another drawing on Latin data, and a reprint of an essay by the noted Romanist Knud Togeby, but theoretical in orientation and not including Romance examples. Does nothing by Malkiel merit inclusion? No lead form, no morphological determinant of phonological change, no phonaestheme, no irreversible binomials? Of course, we may blame the editor, and the publisher’s referees, for their collective amnesia. As Romanists, we may fret, even feel insulted that our discipline seems to carry so little weight.

Nor is it the first or only time that something similar has happened. An earlier publication in the same series (Kreidler 2001), devoted six volumes to critical concepts in phonology, another area one might regard as among the quintessential domains of Romance, at least in its diachronic and diatopic manifestations. This time, with 104 seminal articles, most being reprints but a few new articles too, no item claims Romance or Latin as its source of information. There is one contribution each on French liaison and Catalan diphthongization, and a further one by Martinet that is reproduced (unusually) in French, but –like Togeby’s in the morphology collection– is not primarily concerned with Romance data. On a less epic scale, a still substantial set of readings in recent phonological theory and practice (McCarthy 2004), reprints 33 studies, among which Romance is even less well represented, in a short section on French adjectival suppletion in an article by Joan Mascaró on external allomorphy.

Even in typology, Romance data no longer seem to play the prominent role that they did in the heady 1970s, moderating strong claims about linguistic consistency and the coherence and inevitability of typological shifts. True, the publications of the Eurotyp project have important sections on Romance, though perhaps less substantial than one might expect for a language family of the importance of Romance (see, for instance, the treatment of word order in Siewierska

1998). A more recent reference work (Haspelmath, *et al.* 2001) shifts the focus to Germanic languages in Europe and a wider array further afield, again marginalizing Romance.

If such gaps are wounding, might we console ourselves with the thought that Romance analyses are so universal and persuasive that they have become banal and do not need repetition? No. If that were the reason, there would be far more footnotes and asides on Romance within the favoured articles. Romance has either been overlooked as a source of rich data and insight, or Romance contributions have been consciously sidelined. And what might be the reasons? Perhaps because those Romance contributions are perceived to be theoretically outmoded. Perhaps –more prosaically but fatally– because they are often written in a Romance language and cannot be allowed to predominate in expensive reference works that must achieve maximum library sales. So does advantage beggar itself in a naughty world.

Escarmiento de la vida humana

The United Kingdom offers an instructive case study of the woes of unfashionable disciplines. After a period of retrenchment in the early 1980s, motivated by ideological and financial considerations, British Universities have been in a state of almost continuous expansion. Driven with varying degrees of fervour by governments of both left and right persuasions, this expansion has been variously justified as a means of ensuring fair access to higher education, of achieving a fifty percent participation rate among young people, of promoting growth and international competitiveness, of leading global knowledge transfer. The ride has been bumpy, with brakes jabbed whenever education-led expenditure threatened to spiral out of control. Even so, cumulatively, over a quarter century, the complexion of higher education has been transformed.

So has its funding. For more than half of the twentieth century, up to and including the expansion of the 1960s, support from central government had accounted for well over ninety percent of recurrent costs. In the second wave of expansion, government support lagged far behind actual costs, so the difference had to be made up from other sources, not least from the student “customer”, whose financial contributions must now counterbalance the shrinking unit of resource. Today, students (or their parents) pay both their maintenance costs and an increasing portion of their tuition fees. Though this has been

true for many years in the United States, and introduced more recently in Australia, the concept was foreign to Britain, at least at undergraduate level, before the present century. Moreover, it was adopted without the extensive endowments and elaborate provision of bursaries and student instructorships that, in the States, mitigate the effects on deserving candidates from unprivileged backgrounds. In the last year, just prior to further “liberalization” of the fees regime, a regulatory commission has been established in an attempt to replicate some of this provision. It is headed by a distinguished Romanist.

One might have predicted that these changes would have the effect of favouring relatively inexpensive subjects like languages. (Linguists, of course, have long railed against the assumption that they are cheap, just because they are powerless; but this is not the moment to forego a potential advantage.) Early indications tend in the opposite direction. The psychology appears to be: if I must get seriously into debt to acquire a necessary qualification, then it must be one that will open the door to a lucrative profession. Languages are not perceived to do so, and cerebral subjects like linguistics and philosophy are seen as a significant risk. Both kinds of subject are retreating into the large, long-established Universities which tend to attract students from more affluent backgrounds. They are vanishing from the newer, more market-adaptable institutions that have a hard-won reputation for helping their alumni directly into paid employment.

In the specific case of Romance linguistics, there is a further twist. Major changes to the school curriculum, perhaps benign in intent but malign in effect, have resulted in a precipitate decline in language learning, a chronic shortage of language teachers, and the inability of most state schools to offer instruction in more than one foreign language. French, still the first foreign language in the UK, is facing steep decline, as the international usefulness of French is increasingly questioned. There is anecdotal but credible evidence of schools actively discouraging pupils from attempting higher-level German, because German is perceived as a “hard” subject and too likely to imperil the school’s standing in national league tables weighted in favour of success in public examinations. The same false reasoning can promote Spanish as an “easy” subject. While, as a Hispanist, I might welcome the modest increase in student numbers that this brings, I would prefer it to be for more veridical reasons. The cumulative effects are clear. If all goes well, in a few years’ time there may be more school leavers with an elementary knowledge of a foreign language (but the shortage of qualified teachers does not augur well for this benign outcome). There

will certainly be far fewer school leavers qualified to study languages at University, and most of them will have experience of only one foreign language. To be sure, those who are keen may still take advantage of accelerated *ab initio* language courses to make up the deficit; but in a utilitarian and instrumental world, this is an additional risk. Safer to combine Spanish with accountancy or marketing. And safer still to restrict the language to a subsidiary component of the degree, saving the not inconsequential costs of a year abroad. Romanists will readily agree that the study of Romance linguistics is not enhanced by competence limited to a single Romance language, and badly hobbled by the absence of Latin.

¡Tanto se emprende...!

What is special about Romance linguistics is its comparative dimension. Its synchronic breadth, its historical perspective, and a well documented proto-language, are all pearls of rare worth; but they are not unique. Sanskrit and Ancient Chinese, to name but two, are well documented and attest much greater time-depths than Latin. English and its Germanic congeners probably have greater synchronic spread and diversity; as may, quite possibly, the Arabic and Bantu families. But no other language family has the diachronic breadth of Romance, with its unrivalled intermediate synchronic attestations. They might not be enough for Romanists, and we might become very frustrated with records that run out in mid-reconstruction, but they are far fuller, and permit much greater triangulation, than any others.

They allow us to test theories, sometimes to destruction. We alluded in the previous section to the testing of the Greenberg-Vennemann model in typology, leading to the conclusions that analytical drift is not absolutely consistent or irreversible (as attested by the creation of a suffixal future paradigm and suffixal adverbial morphology when Romance as a whole was moving towards pre-verbal grammatical marking), and that typological concepts must be better defined in order to avoid over-general and untestable claims (such as those involving object position, when the status of clitics was poorly understood).

The testing of glottochronology is a *novela ejemplar* that bears re-reading. The quest for the Holy Grail of a secure method of dating for language split led a group of talented linguists of the 1950s and 1960s to an ingenious adaptation of radiocarbon dating based on the retention and slower replacement of a supposedly stable “core”

vocabulary. The standard retention rate was to act as the constant required by the formula, the analogue for the standard rate of decay for C[arbon]₁₄, though unlike C₁₄ its empirical value could only be determined on language families with long documented histories where the answer was already known. Retention rates per millennium were postulated between 75% and 85% – a margin of error that is no match for a chemical constant and, when applied to an exponential graph, compromises accuracy quite unacceptably beyond the centre of the curve, representing a narrow range of perhaps half a millennium. But rigorous application to the Romance languages, one of the very families from which the “constant” retention rate had been extrapolated, led to embarrassing results, offering separation dates for the major varieties that were far too recent to be credible (see Rea 1973). Despite sophisticated attempts by devotees to improve the statistical formulae and weight the retention rate even within the core lexicon, the bases of the theory were destroyed.

What was learned? Primarily, of course, that lexical replacement is not an analogue of carbon decay. Next, that languages with long documented histories may be qualitatively influenced by the literate nature of their community of speakers (who may borrow from their past, value their traditional registers, tolerate diglossia), which casts doubt on their suitability as models for the development of non-literate languages. More subtly, that core vocabulary is not immune from semantic change, that matching etyma do not guarantee mutual comprehensibility, and that community perceptions of language split often lag far behind the first linguistic symptoms. And, most interestingly, that Romanists, even with the wealth of documentation at their disposal, cannot agree on the dating or localization of splits, or indeed on the validity of the question. Meanwhile, the historical claims of glottochronology have faded from view, but the standard Swadesh vocabulary lists, despite early reservations about their cognitive and semantic universality, have become a standard tool of the trade in measuring synchronic relatedness.

Despertando al albor de la mañana

Academic disciplines have life cycles. Romance linguistics has had a glorious past and continues to have a very respectable present. The volume of activity continues to be reassuring, and solid progress is being made, not devoid of innovation, though this may be evolutionary

and localized and so may miss the linguistic headlines. But will there be a bright new dawn?

Intellectually, Romance linguistics seems to have lost its buzz factor. Possibly, in some respects, the discipline has been too successful. One can create an impression that everything worthwhile has already been said even while knowing perfectly well that it has not. Imagine potential graduate students contemplating the richly documented multi-volume etymological dictionaries in which Romanists have been so diligent, and where scholars of the stature of Kurt Baldinger and Raymond Arveiller can spend a lifetime publishing “Addenda au *FEW*”. Imagine them contemplating surveys like the *Lexikon der romanistischen Linguistik* (Holtus, *et al.* 1988-2005), shoe-horned with obvious difficulty into a dozen mighty tomes, and already provoking sequels (Ernst, *et al.* 2003; and the projected *Cambridge History of the Romance Languages*). Worse, imagine them confronted by the towering figure of a Malkiel, sternly saying that without an excellent first degree and mastery of at least five languages they cannot even embark on a PhD program. Is it surprising that aspirants who have been less well prepared by our education systems but are subject to even greater pressure to succeed, think that they are more likely to make an impact in a branch of linguistics less weighted down by tradition and previous achievements?

The first Cluster rightly drew attention to falling recruitment, to an impending retirement crisis, and to the redesignation of faculty posts vacated by eminent Romanists. These are not intellectual factors but political. Ultimately, a political threat must either be accepted or countered by a political response. For whatever reason, Romanists as a group have not been good at the political response (though a number have certainly risen to high academic and administrative office, from which they have scrupulously not favoured their subject). In days long before Universities would have used the language of marketing, Meyer-Lübke was able to persuade German Länder to endow new Chairs and enhance their provision in Romanistik, in what can now only be called a “supply-led” expansion. It was successful, and attracted new students. It would be more difficult now, but not impossible: neither economics nor management theory is immutable.

If, in response to my earlier provocative remark, you wish to know where in Romance linguistics to find the women, the ethnic minorities and the young researchers, look no further than the contents lists of the Linguistic Symposia, look in *Probus*, in occasional thematic collections (like Godard 2003). You will find them, but, as Dieter Wanner rightly notes, they are not doing classic (historical) Romance

linguistics. They are mostly working on synchronic and theoretical issues, with, at most, the time-depth required to address some issues of synchronic variation. They are not exactly –and certainly not all–generativists, but they have been washed over by Chomsky’s revolution.

In my view, Romance linguistics is going through a period of consolidation. It is neither becalmed nor surfing breakers. In mainstream linguistics, it has become somewhat marginalized, though not forgotten; mined for its wealth of information on individual languages, but overlooked in its comparative dimension and potential. It may not be the glorious heyday, but it is a stable state capable of persisting for at least another generation. More importantly, there is a base from which it could easily regenerate, given a shift in political and educational thinking.

To end on a personal note, I have recently been researching the life and works of the British Romanist W. D. Elcock, whose 1960 magnum opus I updated many years ago. I have been struck by the fragility of the field in Elcock’s time (fewer than a dozen Romance specialists throughout the UK) and the tiny numbers of undergraduates at Westfield College where he held the Foundation Chair. Yet, in the 1960s, the subject blossomed. The present shrinkage looks worrying in the context of that blossoming, not in the context of the earlier *botón*. The difference is the spirit of adventure and the optimism. And they too are cyclic. Of the present doldrums we may say, with apologies to Calderón, “que pasados los siglos, horas fueron”.

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