

HISTORICAL ROMANCE LINGUISTICS: PAST, PRESENT AND POTENTIAL

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Examination of the current status or future viability of disciplines (or perhaps better, subdisciplines) is a recurrent feature of the academic landscape, linked, at least partially, to the vagaries of academic (and other) fashion. One recent occurrence has focused on Historical Romance Linguistics, a collaborative and ultimately optimistic scrutiny in this journal ably coordinated by Steven Dworkin that drew a number of insightful responses from a baker's dozen of scholars in both Europe and North America (2003, 31.2: 7-125). These surveys were then themselves thoughtfully reviewed Martin Maiden (2004), and it is no doubt presumptuous to think that dramatic new insights will emerge here. Nonetheless, "fools rush in..." Before that venture, however, one caveat is in order: my remarks will bear primarily if not exclusively on the North American situation and more specifically on Canada and the United States, the context I know best. This is obviously not to say that the discipline is not international in scope, nor that other, particularly European, scholars find themselves divorced from the North American milieu (or vice versa). But in the issues I intend to address, I believe that there are sufficient differences between the Old and New Worlds to justify a more focused examination.¹ One need

¹ Parallel examinations could profitably focus as well on comparative Germanic and Slavic linguistics, both of which appear to raise similar questions and which appear less robust in North America than their Romance cousins. I am indebted to my colleagues Robert Murray, an accomplished Germanist, and Olga Mladnova, a scholar of comparative Slavic, for discussing these matters with me. I am indebted to Olga Mladnova in particular for discussions which have illuminated several of the matters I consider here with parallel Slavic examples and for broadening my appreciation of the issues.

simply refer, for example, to the length of time the discipline (and universities) have been established in Europe or to the differing intellectual traditions (particularly one linked to if not rooted in more classically-oriented instructional content) to see that differences might exist despite the globalisation of knowledge and intellectual activity. European scholars, moreover, may find themselves geographically and culturally closer to the full range of the languages in question than their North American counterparts, who can count on access to major communities of French and Spanish speakers but lesser direct contact with the other Romance languages.²

As the *La corónica* discussion so far has made eminently clear, historical and comparative Romance *scholarship* in North America is in a healthy and productive state (even if the comparative component appears to have waned more or less recently). To demonstrate this one need only cite, in addition to the weighty list of contributors to the *La corónica* discussion, such names as Thomas Cravens, José Ignacio Hualde, Jürgen Klausenburger, Yves-Charles Morin or Mario Saltarelli.³ Romance scholarship in North America also contributes to and benefits from a range of infrastructural support: conferences such as the Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages, access to scholarly journals such as (need one say it?) *La corónica* or an apparently struggling *Romance Philology*, and various types of bibliographic or electronic support such as that provided by the *Comparative Romance Linguistics Newsletter*, an offshoot of the Comparative Romance Linguistics Section of the Modern Language Association in existence since 1951 and now reinvigorated by Brian Imhoff of Texas A & M University. None of

Those with longer memories may be reminded of the malaise that arose in the 1970s when, following the initially negative impact of generative grammar on historical studies, it was feared that historical linguistics itself was under severe threat, at least in North America (cf. Koerner 1984). Robert Murray has reminded me of these events and the eventual positive outcomes that have slowly re-established and reintegrated diachronic studies.

² As both Craddock (2003: 22) and Maiden (2004: 217), citing Lausberg, note, the need to master several of the relevant languages can also discourage new North American adherents to the discipline, a reluctance reinforced by geographic isolation, the disappearance of Latin from the pedagogical tradition, and a general lack of interest (in some quarters at least) in the study of languages other than English.

³ I limit myself to just five of the best known to me, all distinguished comparatists, knowing full well that innumerable others could easily be added, especially if one included specialists in (the history of) individual languages. It is also perhaps worth noting that, in general, the names that occur most easily to me often belong to scholars who find themselves, shall we say, in the second rather than the first half of their distinguished careers. The demography of our discipline would constitute a worthy independent study.

these is isolated from its European counterparts such as the venerable *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, the Congrès International de Linguistique et de Philologie Romanes, or the *Year's Work in Modern Language Studies*. The composition of or participation in all components is undeniably transatlantic, not to say more broadly international.

The existence of this body of work is impressive, encouraging and reassuring because it appears, to me at least, to have evolved during a period of severe retrenchment of programs of Romance Linguistics in North America, that of graduate programs being the most worrying. Certainly in Canada, one could not find programs specifically devoted to the field, and a comparable investigation of US universities is scarcely more encouraging. We can no longer count on the leadership of such luminaries as Robert Hall, Henry Kahane, Yakov Malkiel, Ernst Pulgram or Leo Spitzer, and while many of their intellectual progeny remain remarkably productive, they do so in a climate where coherent and well-peopled programs are noticeable by their absence. The apparent vitality of the field in such a context requires an explanation that goes beyond the competence and productivity of individuals. I think there are several principal factors to be cited.

First, Romance linguists often continue to find congenial homes in language departments, particularly since such departments regularly conjoin languages: "French and Italian", "Spanish and Portuguese" and even "Romance Languages" on pleasantly frequent occasions, to say nothing of the ubiquitous "Modern Languages" or "Modern and Classical Languages" that mirror many recent consolidations which may themselves reflect unfavourable budgetary decisions. Hiring practices in such bodies also often favour competence in more than one language, so the comparative work, which is part of the very definition of the field, can at least follow normally should individuals be so inclined. It is also my impression that linguistically oriented courses or program components are finding increasing favour with students in many contexts, lending practical numerical support to efforts to maintain disciplinary momentum.

Secondly, the permanent significance of Romance linguistics to a gamut of fields has been continuously emphasized by all commentators. General linguistics itself is the prime beneficiary: the breadth and depth of dependable Romance data and the seminal activities of Romance scholars have been a staple of linguistic studies since their inception. This relevance has found reinforcement, it seems to me, in links to such currently fashionable domains as grammaticalization, computational approaches and data bases, or cognitive linguistics, and particularly in

the wide-ranging impact of sociolinguistics, which takes the study of language beyond formal structures⁴ and situates it in its human context, an orientation that plays directly into the hands of the Romance tradition. However, Romance linguistics also has natural allies in the present-day fervour for multi- or inter-disciplinary studies – comparative literature, cultural studies, film, studies, performance studies, etc.– inasmuch as multidisciplinary (to say nothing of another “hot” word, globalisation) is inherent in the name of our domain itself.

Finally, the just-mentioned importance of global or international matters which many North American universities now seem to be (re-)discovering or reinforcing leads to an increased demand for language and culture courses which Romance linguists and their applied linguistic allies are well placed to serve, both theoretically and practically.

The preceding comments are hardly original – even banal, perhaps – but are intended to provide comment on pragmatic or practical elements partially absent from the discourse so far. And insofar as Romance scholars can create or draw on support from related domains, this tactic may permit the next generation of leaders to develop and emerge into a context where full-fledged programs in Romance linguistics may again occupy the place of honour to which they rightfully aspire. To expand on Maiden’s forthright conclusion (2004: 221), it is not just linguistics that needs us – the liberal arts in contexts where interdisciplinary priorities are increasingly important could do far worse than to embrace the past accomplishments and immediate potential of comparative Romance scholarship.

⁴ Clearly, this is not meant to imply that formal analysis is irrelevant to Romance linguistics, nor that the opposite direction of influence does not hold, witness the regular formal contributions with theoretical impact that appear in the proceedings of the Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages, among others.

Works Cited

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