Introduction to the special issue on Hispanic linguistics in Canada

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Linguistics in Canada is a vibrant, flourishing field. In the Canadian research context, the social relevance of the formal study of languages and linguistics is well-understood. The Canadian Linguistics Association and the Canadian Journal of Linguistics have a strong tradition of linking the theoretical studies of language with the native languages of Canada and those of regional and immigrant groups.

This issue on Hispanic linguistics is both relevant and timely. Beyond the traditional historical ties between Canada and Latin America, the demographic presence of Spanish speakers in Canada is changing. The last few decades have seen the arrival of successive diasporas of immigrant groups from different Latin American countries, at times tied to political conflict and economic changes, at times the result of active Canadian immigration policies and family reunifications. Recent census data show that the number of residents who declare Spanish as their mother tongue is increasing. The 2006 census, recently released by Statistics Canada, reports that 345,345 inhabitants (i.e., 1.1% of the country’s population) have Spanish as their mother tongue (Statistics Canada 2006). These speakers are unevenly distributed across the country. In the two most populated provinces, Ontario and Quebec, 1.3% and 1.5% of residents, respectively, report Spanish as their mother tongue (Statistics Canada 2006). In Ontario, Spanish has become the fifth most frequent mother tongue, after English, French, Chinese, and Italian (Ministry of Finance 2008).

Within the academic context, Canada has been a pioneer in research into second-language acquisition and learning. Names such as Patsy Lightbown, Nina Spada, Merrill Swain, Jim Cummins, Fred Genesee, among many others, are known internationally by anyone who is interested in bilingualism and second language acquisition. In the 1980s, within this rich research context, the framework of generative grammar was first applied to the field of second-language acquisition. Among the leading researchers in Canada to follow this path were Lydia White at McGill and Juana Liceras, now at the University of Ottawa. Both of these scholars have supported the training of generations of scholars who have focused on the acquisition of Spanish.
and who have helped define the field. At the same time, many of the language departments in Canada, which originally specialized only in literature, have now expanded their offerings to include Hispanic Linguistics. While a doctoral specialization in Spanish Linguistics was initially only available at the University of Toronto, it is now possible to obtain a Ph.D. in Hispanic Studies or Spanish, with a concentration in Linguistics, at Université Laval, the University of Ottawa, and the University of Western Ontario. Many other departments are hiring or have hired specialists in Spanish linguistics, including the University of British Columbia, York University, Dalhousie University, Université de Montréal, and the University of Windsor.

The increased level of research activity is reflected in the organization of conferences. The Hispanic Linguistics Symposium has been organized in Canada on three occasions: at McGill in 1998, at the University of Western Ontario in 2006, and at Université Laval in 2008. It is scheduled to take place at the University of Alberta in 2011. The Conference on Laboratory Approaches to Spanish Phonology was held in Toronto in 2007. In 2005, David Heap of the University of Western Ontario organized a joint session of the Canadian Linguistic Association and the Canadian Association of Hispanists at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, which took place at the University of Western Ontario. The idea for this special edition of CJL originated in that joint session, and all the articles began as papers presented there. Although they cannot do justice to the breadth of work carried out in Canada, we hope they will provide a basis for judging the quality and importance of some of the research carried out in this country.

The article by Antonia Androutsopoulou, Manuel Español-Echevarría, and Philippe Prévost examines quantifiers in the interlanguage grammars of French L1 learners of Spanish. Unlike French, Spanish favours quantifiers that agree in number with the head noun (Spanish bastantes libros ‘enough books’ vs. French assez de livres).

The aim of the authors is to compare the results in relation to the predictions of two different schools of thought. On the one hand, some scholars argue that morphology drives syntax (Vikner 1997, Rohrbacher 1999), and therefore problems in the production of morphology are evidence for a deficit in the representation (Meisel 1991, among many others). In contrast, others argue that it is possible for the learners’ interlanguage to include knowledge of abstract features and categories even when the morphology is not produced consistently (Lardiere 1998, 2000; Prévost and White 2000). This article contributes to this debate by showing that, indeed, learners may know the syntax of quantifiers in Spanish, while at the same time not producing number agreement consistently, an unexpected result if morphology and syntax are inextricably joined.

Alejandro Cuza’s article offers new insights into the thorny question of the acquisition of aspect. The author compares the results of an empirical study on the aspeccual difference between the Spanish preterite and the imperfect by second language learners and attrited native speakers of Spanish who have lived in Canada for several years. He argues that these two groups diverge from the standard language in similar ways, and this is evidence that the problems exhibited by L2 learners cannot be related to age, given that age is not a factor in the case of attrited learners.
A connection with Spanish philology in the tradition of Menéndez Pidal (Pérez Pascual 1998) is evident in Enrique Pato’s article, which examines the diachronic levelling of analogical strong preterits using historical texts and dialect data. Such relatively rare non-standard phenomena are typically missed by synchronic descriptive and theoretical grammars, and only come to light in diachronic studies through attention to large corpora of textual data. Pato shows that these analogical forms are not only present, if very sparsely, in the historical record, they also show up in linguistic atlas data from subjects born in the late 19th century (from the Atlas Lingüístico de la Península Ibérica, now available through a Canadian website, www.alpi.ca) as well as in sociolinguistic surveys from the end of the 20th century, all concentrated in the same regional varieties of northwestern Peninsular Spanish. By using geolinguistic methods of contrastive mapping, his article charts the decline in use of these non-standard forms over the last century.

The last article in this issue examines the acquisition of the Spanish subjunctive in temporal clauses with cuando ‘when’ and antes que ‘before’ by Spanish-speaking children. Jeannette Sánchez-Naranjo and Ana T. Pérez-Leroux find a protracted course of development, comparable to that of other epistemic markers that present a complex mapping problem (Papafragou, Li, Choi, and Han 2007). They propose that the meaning of these functional heads should be treated as a subcase of lexical learning, where initial mappings are partial and are refined by syntactic bootstrapping. They also consider the possibility that cognitive prerequisites may be the source of delay. Their results show that children’s early use of subjunctive in temporal clauses is not dependent on fixed linear distributional patterns between connector and mood, but that tense can be used to bootstrap subjunctive use. They also find evidence that cognitive development in the area of Theory of Mind is associated with children’s ability to select clauses specified for subjunctive mood.

Taken together, these four articles contribute not only to our understanding of many facets of Spanish, but also to our understanding of language in general.

REFERENCES


