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Total Spanish: The Politics of a Pan-Hispanic Grammar

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IN THE LAST DAYS OF MARCH 2007, THE BEAUTIFUL AND CAPTIVATING COLOMBIAN CITY OF MEDELLÍN HOSTED AN OFTEN BLAND YET, ON THIS occasion, surprisingly media-appealing event: surrounded by a generous cohort of reporters, the Association of Academies of the Spanish Language was holding its regular conference, the thirteenth since its conception in 1951.¹ The gathering began on the twenty-first and culminated three days later, at the Teatro Metropolitano, with what could arguably be described as one of the most highly publicized events in the history of the Spanish language: the official approval of the *Nueva gramática de la lengua española* ‘The New Grammar of the Spanish Language’ (henceforth *NGLE*). The Colombian president, Álvaro Uribe, and the head of the Spanish monarchy, King Juan Carlos I, presided over the ceremony, providing the occasion with the solemnity (and media pull) that it so critically required. After a series of opening remarks and speeches, the king stood, faced the academicians—one from Spain, one from the Philippines, and twenty from the Americas—and, as he called their names individually, asked, “¿Aprobáis la Nueva Gramática?” ‘Do you approve the New Grammar?’ Each in turn, with a distinguished assembly of politicians, businessmen, and publishers as witnesses, rose and answered with a simple yet unequivocal “Sí.”²

The journalists covering the ceremony were certainly impressed. For the Argentinean daily *Clarín*, for example, the event was “one of the most revolutionary moments in the history of our language” (Martínez). Undoubtedly, they accepted the grandeur that the event’s mise-en-scène intended to project and subsequently conveyed to their readers the reasons behind the historical importance of the academies’ grammar: not only was it the first approved by all language academies (the previous one, in 1931, had been approved only by the Spaniards), it was also the first to formally recognize Spanish as a pluricentric language.³

It might seem odd, at first glance, that an event as unexciting as a grammar agreement would engage such prominent public officials,

be staged with such solemnity, and trigger such interest from the press. The planning, resources, and security that were deployed in Medellín are normally associated with high-stakes political summits and, perhaps, with the glamorous rituals of the entertainment industry. But processes of language standardization are far from apolitical and ideologically neutral programs of linguistic engineering: technical decisions on selection, codification, and elaboration of the norm in fact emerge from—and act on—complex systems of interests and ideologies.⁴ The *NGLE* is no exception. The grammar, through its paratextual structure and its public celebration in Medellín, reveals itself as a carefully crafted text-event meant to provide the language with an image whose full implications come to light only when placed in the broader political context of its production and reception.

Like all postimperial powers, Spain has always sought to remain a privileged interlocutor for—if not to retain ascendancy over—its former colonies.⁵ However, for much of the past two hundred years (from the time, in the early nineteenth century, when most colonies gained independence), the country's ability to implement anything resembling a coherent and effective policy toward Latin America was severely limited. On the one hand, proclamations of cultural unity were often couched in colonialist rhetoric and, naturally, were received overseas with skepticism and even outrage; on the other, the circumstances of Spain's political and economic development constrained its ability to commit the necessary resources to such a mission. But in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s the country's political and economic conditions were changed drastically by the consolidation of democracy, membership in NATO and the European Union, economic growth, and the international expansion of corporations based in Spain. In a multipolar international scene—characterized by the EU, the United States, Russia, China, and other emerging economies competing for influence and power—it is not

surprising that, in the formulation of Spain's foreign policy, the development of a privileged relationship with its former colonies and the building of an economically and politically operative pan-Hispanic community would become central objectives.

The Ibero-American summits, initiated in Guadalajara, Mexico, in July 1991, became valuable vehicles for the institutional articulation of a transatlantic community in which Spain had to present itself as an equal partner: "It must be very clear that the goal is not to build the equivalent of francophonie or the Commonwealth, in which the former metropolis plays a hegemonic role. In the Spanish case, the relationship is not paternalistic but fraternal" (Sanhueza Carvajal 166). In this challenging environment, Spanish governments and business leaders began to strategically mobilize linguistic and cultural institutions in the hope that, through their contribution to the credible imagining of a fraternal pan-Hispanic community, the presence of Spain's economic actors in Latin America would be perceived not as a contemporary version of the old colonial relationship but as natural and legitimate (del Valle). Grammar (who would have thought!) found itself, much to the delight of academicians, in the midst of this difficult geopolitical maneuvering.

As one would expect, the Royal Spanish Academy (henceforth RAE, from *Real Academia Española*) has received both praise and criticism since its creation in 1713. While we know little about the RAE's social image throughout its history (a history more complex and subtle than is often recognized by critics), it is safe to say that the academy's status in Spain's and Latin America's cultural fields has been shaky. If the academy was acknowledged by sectors of Latin America's intellectual class as the legitimate leader in matters of language correctness and recognized by the institutions of the Spanish state as the legitimate arbiter of the norm, it was also often blamed for espousing a profoundly conservative, elitist, and

Eurocentric approach to language.⁶ An almost permanent thorn in the academy's side has been its relationship with Latin America. In 1870, in an effort to reach out to the former colonies, the decision was made to formalize existing connections with men of letters by supporting the establishment of associate academies in their respective countries. Many enthusiastically joined the new venture; others did not. The Argentinean Juan María Gutiérrez (1809–78) stated in a letter to the RAE's director: "Sir, I believe it is dangerous for a South American to accept a title granted by the Spanish academy. Accepting it would tie me with a powerful bond of gratitude and demand respect for, if not full submission to, the dominant ideas of that body" (qtd. in Rama 133). When the RAE expressed its concern about the possibility that Spanish would become bastardized in America, Gutiérrez replied, "Language, closely related to ideas, cannot become bastardized in any country where intelligence is active and where there is no obstacle to progress. It will change, yes, and by changing, it will simply follow the current formed by the passing of time, which is revolutionary and irresistible" (133).

The year 1951 was a turning point in the history of the RAE's efforts to expand its transatlantic influence. The Mexican president Miguel Alemán (1900–83) hosted a conference of language academies that, despite the RAE's absence, would eventually result in the creation of the Association of Academies of the Spanish Language (henceforth ASALE, from *Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española*).⁷ With this conference, a new climate was created that persuaded Spanish academicians of the need to tackle the American issue not only by working in closer collaboration with the other academies but also by pursuing a geographically broader formulation of the norm. The will to strengthen the language—and its guardians—by providing it with a transatlantic image had been there for some time, but the material and ideological condi-

tions making it possible for the RAE to truly reinvent itself crystallized only toward the end of the twentieth century. In synch with the geopolitical interests of the Spanish government and business sectors, the RAE unshackled itself from the conservative, elitist, and Eurocentric image and embraced instead an open, popular, and, above all, pan-Hispanic identity. From the 1990s to the present, the RAE has been blazing a new trail. First, it embedded all its actions in the ASALE, thus creating the image of a consensual discursive space in which all Spanish-speaking nations could converge on equal terms in order to discuss matters of language; second, it embraced diversity as the guarantor of the type of linguistic unity through which the desired pan-Hispanic community could be imagined.⁸ The old institution, originally charged with safeguarding the language's purity, stability, and prestige, redefined its goals:

Until a few years ago, the strategies advanced to reach these objectives were grounded in a desire to keep the language "pure"—based on the model of the linguistic practices of a small group of its speakers—and to protect it against contamination from foreign words and changes that might result from the language's internal evolution. Now the academies, with a more practical and realistic orientation, have established as their common task the protection of the language's basic unity, which is, ultimately, what allows us to speak of a Spanish-speaking community, making the unity of the language compatible with the recognition of its internal variety and evolution.

(ASALE, *Nueva política* 3)

The *NGLE* is presented as the perfect product of this new orientation. Public discussions of the new grammar—which began long before its approval in Medellín—reveal that the agencies in charge of its formulation and promotion are primarily concerned with highlighting its pan-Hispanic character. The picture of the grammar that emerges from

testimony shows a permanent interaction among the different language academies and foregrounds pan-Hispanic consensus behind the creation of the text:

I write a draft for each chapter, giving the basic ideas. This draft is sent to a group of seven grammarians, both academicians and non-academicians, who write reports and make comments. These reports allow me to correct each chapter and produce the first version, which goes to all twenty-two academies. Each academy has its own grammar committee. . . . We receive their reports . . . and also meet with representatives from all dialect areas every six to eight months somewhere in the world. . . . In Spain we have a team that receives the comments from the academies and creates a shared document that incorporates everything that has been accepted as well as pending issues. (Bosque)

This is how the protocol was described by the *NGLE*'s main author, Ignacio Bosque, a prestigious Spanish linguist from Madrid's Complutense University and member of the Royal Spanish Academy since 1997. Although Bosque suggests that he and his Spanish team are the project's center of gravity, he gives due emphasis to the diverse group of actors who participated in the deliberative process and agreed on the final product. A similar image emerges from an introduction to the grammar available on the ASALE's Web site: "For the first time in the history of Hispanic philology, a new grammar of Spanish has been jointly prepared by all *twenty-two academies of the Spanish language*. . . . This *collective work* provides a map of the Spanish language's unity and variety" (ASALE, *Nueva gramática*). The conspicuous erasure of the leadership role played by the Spanish linguist and his team further reveals the strategic value of wrapping the grammar in an image of collective authorship and pan-Hispanic consensus. It is not surprising that the Medellín ceremony highlighted precisely these features: "The grammar has been elaborated by the Royal Spanish

Academy (RAE) and the other twenty-one academies of the language in the course of nine years of intense work; today we saw a staging of this consensus" ("La RAE").

Another element strengthens this pan-Hispanic image of the grammar. Not only is the grammar presented as the outcome of an interacademy agreement, it is also said to advance a norm with which all Spanish-speakers can identify: "The *New Grammar* clearly shows that the *norm of language correctness* is not provided by one single country; it has instead a *pluricentric character*" (ASALE, *Nueva gramática*). Under the new conditions that have stimulated (and funded) the current language policies, it does not suffice that Spanish be embraced as a diverse language from which the norm is extracted; the norm itself must be diverse and reflect the existence of many centers of linguistic prestige. The media celebrated this pluricentricity: "Definen una nueva gramática para los hispanoparlantes de todo el mundo" 'A new grammar for Spanish-speakers from all over the world is established' (Martínez); "Aprueban la nueva gramática española: las academias de la lengua otorgaron reconocimiento oficial a una variedad de usos y giros propios de países latinoamericanos" 'A new grammar of Spanish is approved: language academies officially recognize a variety of usages and expressions found in Latin American countries' (Reinoso); "La gramática se vuelve panhispanica: España deja de ser el principal referente" 'The grammar becomes pan-Hispanic: Spain ceases to be the main referent' (Geli).

As the RAE and the ASALE have reset their priorities to privilege the preservation of unity through the legitimization of internal diversity, they have also redefined the normative responsibility that was at the root of their creation and that ultimately justifies their existence. In fact, the grammar's introduction strongly suggests a descriptive engagement with the language and an outlook indebted to modern linguistics (a contrast to the strict

prescriptivism typically associated with institutions such as the RAE and ASALE). The *NGLE*'s objectives are:

To describe the grammatical constructions of general Spanish, and to document properly those phonological, morphological, and syntactic variants that each community may regard as educated, even when they do not fully coincide with choices favored in other areas. To record nonstandard conversational variants found in the Hispanic world, as long as they are well documented and relevant to the description of morphological or syntactic structures.

The grammar itself is said to be

a detailed, even meticulous, work that takes into account differences established on the basis of dialectal areas, levels of language, and registers. . . . It pays special attention to the description of the main phonological, morphological, and syntactic variants from all Spanish-speaking areas, as well as to small differences in meaning and conditions of use.

(ASALE, *Nueva gramática*)

The inclusiveness of the project is remarkable: we can discern without much effort the deployment of a complex (and fuzzy) taxonomy of organizing criteria and linguistic varieties through which the authors of the grammar hope to describe and document the language in its totality: dialectal areas, levels of language, registers, conditions of use, general Spanish, educated Spanish, conversational variants. The concern with accurate description, the desire to leave no corner of the language uncharted, has been so intense that the grammar's publicists have come up with a new and most revealing label: the *NGLE* is often referred to as "the grammar of total Spanish."⁹ Yet despite such commitment to descriptivism and the rhetoric that proclaims the grammar's all-inclusiveness, the academies still retain, as they must, a normative identity. The *NGLE*'s third stated objective is, after all, "[t]o provide answers to questions

that may arise with regard to normative issues" (ASALE, *Nueva gramática*).

Espousing a descriptive approach to language while insisting on the authority of a norm (at the same time keeping old-style prescriptivism at arm's length) obviously requires a delicate balancing act. The RAE and the ASALE skillfully perform this act in their efforts to shape the public's reception of the *NGLE*. In the development of a normative grammar, when actual usage (as opposed to, for example, some abstract logical criterion) is identified as the appropriate point of departure, a crucial and often controversial aspect of the process is deciding whose usage will serve as the norm. The selection among variants is a delicate task for any effort that hopes to achieve universal acceptance. In developing the *NGLE* and in response to the "whose usage" challenge, the RAE and ASALE claim to have simply opted out of the selection process. Spanish is presented as a complex linguistic system in which variables and varieties, different usages, are correlated with geohistorical and socio-structural factors. We are told that the RAE and ASALE merely described, documented, and recorded (*describe, refleja, registra*) the language in its entirety. However, although everybody's usage seems to be the base of the grammar, normativity has not disappeared: the language is said to be not just a grammatical structure but also a system of multiple situational, local, and general norms. In this view, normativity is inherent to the system and therefore precedes the academies' intervention. By effacing their agency, the RAE and ASALE can present the *NGLE* as both descriptive and normative and sidestep the dangers associated with privileging some usages over others. They claim to be mere recorders of an agentless norm: "The only thing we did was pay attention to what we hear in the street, make it ours, and send it back to speakers in the shape of a linguistic norm" (V́ctor Garća de la Concha qtd. in Ruiz Mantilla).

The RAE has shown an unwavering commitment to the pan-Hispanic project

since the early 1990s, when internal as well as international developments led Spain to commit significant resources to building a pan-Hispanic alliance. Since then, with powerful institutional backing, the RAE has embedded its actions in the ASALE and espoused an open approach to usage that has resulted in the elaboration of a pluricentric norm. This strategy—implemented with help from Latin America’s business, intellectual, and political class and with such staged events as the approval of the Medellín grammar—plays down Spain’s leadership position and erases lingering resentments from its imperial past and nagging reservations about its expansive entrepreneurial present. The RAE wishes to protect the unity of the language and thus strengthen the linguistic architecture that supports the pan-Hispanic community. The grammar is recognized and valued as a code that secures successful interaction among speakers of Spanish; it also emerges as a powerful symbol around which loyalty to the pan-Hispanic community is built. In their zealous guardianship of the language, the RAE and ASALE concern themselves less with establishing strict rules of usage and more with controlling the symbolic meaning of the language and using its potential to command profound emotional legitimacy. In this regard, the *NGLE* is a major landmark—it presents a vision of Spanish agreed upon by all and in which all can see themselves represented. In Medellín, King Juan Carlos left no doubt about it: “It has been made by all and for all” (qtd. in Martínez).

Traditional approaches to language policy and planning have tended to focus on the technical side of standardization and to view corpus and status planning efforts as forms of resource management. More recent critical and discursive approaches have expanded the field in productive directions by focusing instead on the interests and ideologies underpinning language management.¹⁰ The publication of the *NGLE* offers a clear

case in which the classical paradigm cannot adequately explain the conditions under which the grammar is created and received. A text of such significance—in whose elaboration scholars of unquestionable caliber and professional integrity like Bosque have been involved—deserves to be conceived not only as a representation of language structure and usage but also as a cultural artifact intensely engaged in a dialogue with its times.

NOTES

1. The Royal Spanish Academy was founded in 1713 after the model offered by the Académie Française and Italy’s Academia della Crusca. After 1870 the Spanish institution in collaboration with some Latin American men of letters encouraged the creation of associate academies in all Spanish-speaking countries. The 1950s gave rise to the Association of Academies of the Spanish Language. The association, which meets approximately every four years, is led by an executive committee: the president and treasurer are always members of the Royal Spanish Academy; the general secretary and two additional members must come from the other academies. In all academies the election of new members is handled internally. On the history and role of the academies, see Álvarez de Miranda; Guitarte and Torres Quintero; and López Morales. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

2. “The most solemn moment . . . seemed like a well-known school ritual, when fourth-grade students pledge allegiance to the flag: as King Juan Carlos mentioned the name of each representative from all twenty-two Academies of the Spanish Language . . . academicians would stand and offer a formal and symbolic ‘yes.’ Behind this answer to the question, ‘Do you approve the New Grammar?’ there were more than ten years of meetings” (Martínez).

3. The history of the Royal Spanish Academy’s grammars has been traced by Fries; Sarmiento, “De la norma,” “Doctrina [1771],” “Doctrina [1870],” “Gramática,” and “Grammatical Doctrine.”

4. For approaches to standardization that focus on its ideological nature, see Cameron; Crowley; Duchêne and Heller; Joseph; and Milroy and Milroy.

5. On the relation between Spain and its former colonies, see del Valle and Gabriel-Stheeman; Pike; Rama; and Sepúlveda.

6. Use of the RAE’s grammar in Spanish schools was mandated in 1780 and again in 1854, and its orthography was made official in 1844. For debate on the RAE’s prestige in nineteenth-century Latin America, see Rama; Velleman.

7. Because of ideological differences and diplomatic tensions, the Spanish government did not allow representatives from the RAE to attend. Many exiles from the Spanish Civil War were residing in Mexico at the time and enjoyed fruitful relations with Mexican authorities.

8. The process of imagining a pan-Hispanic community is not unlike the processes described by Benedict Anderson in his explanation of the historical emergence of nations (del Valle).

9. "We want to document and reproduce not just Peninsular Spanish, but total Spanish" (García de la Concha qtd. in Francia); "It will be monumental,' not only because it will be more than 3,000 pages long but because it will document 'total Spanish'" ("Nueva Gramática").

10. Ricento offers a nicely crafted overview of the field.

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