

# **Validating and Promoting Spanish in the United States: Lessons from Linguistic Science**

María Carreira  
California State University, Long Beach

## **Abstract**

With U.S. Hispanics constituting a culturally, racially, and economically diverse group, the Spanish language represents a key identity factor for this community. Regrettably, the derisive attitudes about Spanish in the United States, as well as abroad, present a serious obstacle to the preservation of Spanish in this country. This paper argues that the Spanish for native speakers (SNS) curriculum represents the single most important forum where such attitudes can be exposed as groundless, and where the dual task of validating the regional variants represented in the classroom while teaching the standard language can be accomplished. Well-chosen linguistic examples hold the key to demonstrating four issues that are vital to the education of bilingual Hispanics and the preservation of Spanish in the United States. These are: (a) the arbitrary nature of linguistic prejudice, (b) the linguistic validity of all dialects of a language including nonstandard variants, (c) the overwhelming linguistic overlap between nonstandard and standard dialects of Spanish, and (d) the instrumental value of learning the standard language.

## **Introduction**

It is widely accepted that U.S. Hispanics constitute a culturally, economically, racially, and even politically diverse group. In the midst of this diversity, the Spanish language represents a key identity factor to members of this community, as well as to outsiders. To U.S. Hispanics, the Spanish language provides a link to their country of origin and serves as an essential tool for communicating with countless other Hispanics in this country, as well as abroad. To American corporations and institutions with an interest in U.S. Hispanics, the Spanish language represents the most comprehensible indicator underlying labels such as Hispanic or Latino.

Much has been made in the popular press of the growing political, economic, and social influence exerted by the totality of individuals classified under these labels. Newly released data from the U.S. Census (2000) reveal that Latinos have a buying power that exceeds \$300 billion a year, and that the United States is the fourth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world. These facts have served to identify U.S. Hispanics as one of this country's most promising communities for commercial, political, and social ventures.

It is arguable that this community's ability to preserve this enviable status hinges on its ability to maintain the Spanish language as one of its markers of group membership. In fact, without a common language, there is little beyond a few scattered cultural notions that serve to unite the various groups that currently fall under the umbrella of U.S. Hispanics or Latinos. The balkanization of U.S. Hispanics that would result from the loss of Spanish in this country would undoubtedly bring about a concomitant loss in the collective power exerted by the various subgroups that currently fall under the umbrella of Hispanic, leaving only the largest (i.e., the Mexicans), or the most affluent (i.e., the Cubans), any influence to speak of. Beyond the United States, the loss of Spanish would render Latinos unable to enjoy, support, and contribute to the music, literature, entertainment, and political activities of the Spanish-speaking world. In light of this, the preservation of Spanish in the United States is more than just a linguistic issue. It is in fact a topic that strikes at the heart of all discussions pertaining to the future of U.S. Hispanics.

Preserving Spanish in the United States presents a number of challenges ranging from the socio-economic to the pedagogical. One particularly serious challenge stems from the low social status afforded the variants of Spanish represented in this country (Bills, 1997; Rodriguez Pino, 1997; Silva-Corvalán, 1997; Zentella, 1990). In particular, the prevalence of negative attitudes about U.S. Spanish in the general media, in educational settings, and even in the home, represents a serious obstacle to the promotion of Spanish among young Hispanics. For this population, standard Spanish represents an unattainable goal, while U.S. Spanish remains an undesirable reality. Therefore, efforts to teach Spanish as a heritage language to this population of students must be accompanied by an educational campaign to demonstrate the linguistic validity of the gamut of linguistic phenomena found in the Spanish of Latinos. Only when they recognize the linguistic legitimacy of their home language will such students (and Latinos in general) galvanize to protect U.S. Spanish as a crucial marker of group identity.

### **General Contributions of Linguistic Science**

Linguistic science has long recognized that all dialects of a language are linguistically complex and rule governed. Despite this, in the eyes of society all dialects and languages are not created equal. Sociolinguistic studies reveal

that most speakers of a language hold strong opinions regarding the prestige value of the variants of language that they come in contact with. By and large, these opinions are not grounded in purely linguistic criteria, but rather on considerations such as the economic, political, and social status of the speakers of such dialects (Silva Corvalán, 1994).

The loss of syllable-final /s/ (entonces-> entonce) and its aspiration (español -> e/h/pañol), two commonly found phenomena throughout the Spanish-speaking world, illustrate the decisive role of these factors in determining linguistic prestige. Typically, large cities, with their cultural, political, and economic clout, exert a great deal of linguistic influence. In Venezuela, for example, aspiration and loss of syllable-final /s/, denote a highly valued pronunciation because of their association with the speech of Maracaibo and Caracas, the country's two most important cities. In Colombia, on the other hand, the same pronunciation traits are derided for their connection to remote coastal regions that are geographically and culturally distant from the country's urban centers, where loss and pronunciation of /s/ are not practiced. Thus, the same linguistic process is at once a marker of high and low social status in neighboring countries (Lipski, 1997).

This example encapsulates the pedagogical utility of linguistic science in teaching both students and teachers of language about the arbitrary nature of linguistic prejudice and the inevitability of dialectal variation, two issues of vital importance to the linguistic preparation of U.S. Hispanics.

As a field, Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) has long relied on the findings of linguistic science in crafting its curricular goals and pedagogical practices. The four instructional goals set forth in Valdés (1997) evidence this influence. The first such goal, Spanish language maintenance, recognizes the value of heritage languages for individual speakers, their community, and American society in general (Brecht & Ingold, 1998; Fishman, 1991; Krashen, 1998a; Valdés, 1997). By choosing this as one of its primary goals, the SNS field also recognizes the many challenges inherent in maintaining individual and societal bilingualism in the United States. Despite these challenges, with this goal, the field of SNS identifies itself as a principal agent in the effort to preserve and promote Spanish in this country.

The second goal, acquisition of the prestige variety, is grounded in the knowledge that the standard language is the lingua franca of educated communities of speakers (Porrás, 1997; Valdés & Geoffrion-Vinci, 1998). As such, if they are to derive the full range of professional and personal benefits that accrue from speaking Spanish, Hispanic bilinguals must embrace and master the prestige variety.

Expansion of bilingual range, the third goal in Valdés (1997), derives from the understanding that linguistic proficiency is a compendium of many abilities comprising organizational, as well as pragmatic competence (Bachman, 1990; Valdés, 1997). Thus, while traditional methodologies focused primarily on

grammatical accuracy, contemporary approaches that espouse this view of proficiency aim to develop a wide range of abilities underlying not only accurate, but also appropriate use of language (Faltis, 1990).

Finally, transfer of literacy skills, the fourth curricular goal, reflects the findings of educational linguistics, second language acquisition, and bilingual education, regarding the transferability of general cognitive skills from one language to another (Krashen, 1998a; McQuillan 1998; Van Lier, 1994, 1996). Crucially, this goal serves to broaden the impact of SNS instruction beyond the confines of Spanish language proficiency, to encompass abilities central to all disciplines of study.

Recent work by SNS specialists has also highlighted the practical (i.e., pedagogical) value of linguistic activities in the SNS classroom (Gutiérrez, 1997; Merino & Samaniego, 1993; Rodríguez Pino, 1997). Activities that focus on issues such as dialectal variation and linguistic prejudice against U.S. Spanish have been argued to be powerful and much-needed tools in promoting effective communication among the dialectically diverse communities of Spanish speakers in the United States, and in enhancing the linguistic self-esteem of students.

### **Linguistic Prejudice and Students' Self Esteem**

The derisive attitudes about U.S. Spanish that prevail in this country, as well as abroad, represent a particularly serious obstacle to the goal of enhancing students' linguistic self-esteem. Krashen (1998b) documents the detrimental effects of such attitudes on Hispanic bilinguals. A review of these reveals that relatives, classmates, and even teachers, all contribute in varying degrees to the linguistic inferiority that assails many Hispanic bilinguals:

Every laugh and giggle chipped away at my self-esteem . . . the innocent jokes and cracks took their toll on me and began the creation of a barrier between myself and my family. (p. 42)

My self-esteem reached an all-time low in college. Several of my peers made well meaning, but harsh comments upon hearing my Spanish. (p. 43)

The most intimidating and painful experiences I have had . . . while attempting to learn Spanish have been dealt me by native Spanish speaking instructors . . . at the university. (p. 43)

Carreira (1999) documents the ubiquitous nature of derisive attitudes about U.S. Spanish in some of the most prestigious periodicals in the United States. A few examples will suffice by way of illustration. Roberto González-Echeverría (1997), literature professor at Yale, writes for *El Clarín*:

Hablar spanglish es devaluar el español. . . . La literatura en spanglish sólo puede aspirar a una suerte de ingenio basado en un gesto rebelde, que se agota rápidamente. Los que la practican están condenados a escribir no una literatura de minorías sino una literatura menor. [To speak Spanglish is to devalue the Spanish language. . . . Literature in Spanglish can only aspire to a sort of wit based on a rebellious gesture that wears itself out quickly. Those that practice it are condemned to write not a literature of minorities but a minor literature.] (para. 11)

Roger Hernández (1997), the syndicated columnist for *King Features*, calls Spanglish an inside joke—not a language. Writing for the *Albuquerque Journal*, Armas (1999) notes:

Los anunciadores, locutores de noticias y sus editoriales combinan palabras, frases y oraciones en español e inglés. Ellos no traducen; cambian del inglés al español en puntos al azar en su discurso. [Announcers, newscasters and their editors combine words, phrases and sentences in Spanish and English. They don't translate; they change from English to Spanish at random points in their discourse.]

Without a doubt, these opinions serve to systematically undermine the self-esteem of Hispanic bilinguals and to invalidate instructional messages about the linguistic credentials of U.S. Spanish. The sheer weight of the authority of these writers on matters of language, and the prestige of the publications that give them a voice, constitute a formidable hurdle for SNS instruction. Added to the private messages of relatives, friends, and teachers about the inferiority of U.S. Spanish, the public criticism of these individuals can serve no other purpose but to further alienate Hispanic bilinguals from their linguistic heritage.

### **Creating the Conditions for Language Learning**

If there's axiom of language instruction, it is that learning cannot flourish in an educational environment that undermines the linguistic self-esteem of students (Brown, 1994; Krashen, 1998a; Tse, 1998). Similarly, at the societal level, language preservation cannot take place in conditions in which the perceived value of a given language is in a state of erosion (Fishman, 1991; Hock, 1991).

While Spanish language specialists in this country have yet to formulate a plan by which to enhance the status of Spanish in the United States, SNS specialists have long been focusing their efforts on developing classroom activities to validate the vernacular and raise the linguistic self-esteem of students (Faltis, 1990; Merino & Samaniego 1993; Rodríguez Pino, 1997; Valdés, 1992; Zentella, 1990).

One such activity, *la encuesta sociolingüística* [the sociolinguistic survey] (Rodríguez Pino, 1997) involves students in creating a lexical atlas that is representative of the dialects found in class. Typically, the instructor chooses an object whose name exhibits significant variation in the Spanish-speaking world (e.g., *pavo*, *guajalote*, *guanajo*, etc. for “turkey”). Students are then instructed to collect as many names for this object as possible, by consulting with classmates, community members, and regional dictionaries.

Another popular linguistic activity engages students in a guided analysis of their attitudes and experiences with English, as well as Spanish. The insights gained through this exercise are then collected in an *autobiografía lingüística* [linguistic autobiography], a personal essay that serves the dual purpose of increasing students’ knowledge of their own linguistic heritage, while prompting classroom discussions on the political and social circumstances that characterize the use of Spanish in the United States (Aparicio, 1997).

*La encuesta sociolingüística* and the *autobiografía lingüística* typify the scope and goals of most linguistic inquiries used in SNS classes. In terms of scope, the sample of language which constitutes the focus of exploration of these activities is generally the lexicon, as opposed to the rule-governed modules of language (syntax, phonology, etc.). Also in terms of scope, linguistic activities in the SNS classroom rely on the personal experiences of students, rather than on external linguistic data, as the primary source of information on the status of Spanish in the United States and abroad.

As far as goals, linguistic activities are designed to impact students at an intellectual, as well as an emotional level. Intellectually, these activities are aimed at fostering an understanding of language as a social construction and as a system of communication with significant lexical variation. At the affective level, the pursuit of linguistic knowledge in the SNS classroom is focused primarily on enhancing the linguistic self-esteem of students.

### **Revising The Scope And Goals Of Linguistic Instruction In The SNS Curriculum**

A close analysis of the role of linguistic science in the SNS curriculum exposes a number of limitations imposed by the narrow scope and goals of current linguistic activities. By and large, such activities offer little more than a passing familiarity with a restricted number of linguistic principles. In so doing, they do little to prepare SNS students to function as competent bilinguals in the complex conditions that characterize Spanish in the United States.

With their nearly exclusive focus on the personal experiences of students and the lexicon, existing linguistic activities are limited in their ability to demonstrate three important linguistic principles. These are: (a) the nonlinguistic basis of language prejudice, (b) the linguistic validity of all

dialects of a language, and (c) the relatively small number of linguistic differences that separate the variants of Spanish. Far from being mere intellectual curiosities, these principles hold the key to enhancing the linguistic confidence of SNS students and countering criticism of U.S. Spanish with powerful and explicit linguistic arguments.

Regarding the first principle, the lessons of sociolinguistics demonstrate that language prejudice is not grounded in linguistic reality, but in social considerations. More to the point, these lessons suggest that U.S. Spanish is not the target of persecution because of its linguistic properties, but rather because of the perceived low social status of its speakers. By the same token, the value of standard Spanish does not stem from its linguistic superiority, but rather from its association with favorable social and historical conditions. While these facts do not exonerate the perpetrators of linguistic prejudice, they do serve to place the disadvantageous conditions that characterize U.S. Spanish in a proper perspective for SNS students. In so doing, they enable students to make informed decisions regarding their use of Spanish among the different speakers and social situations they encounter.

Regarding the second principle, the lessons of historical linguistics and dialectology provide the strongest arguments available for the linguistic validity of U.S. Spanish. Specifically, these disciplines demonstrate that all dialects of Spanish, standard or not, share the same core principles and rules. They also demonstrate that the traits of U.S. Spanish that so scandalize its critics, are amply attested in the evolution of Spanish, as well as other languages.

The lessons of historical linguistics and dialectology also have a direct bearing on the third principle. From the comprehensive perspective of Spanish provided by these disciplines, it is not the differences but rather the similarities between U.S. Spanish and other varieties that stand out as remarkable. Viewed in this light, the knowledge of the core rules of standard Spanish that SNS students bring to the classroom, vis-à-vis their knowledge of the vernacular, emerges as truly considerable.

The nearly exclusive preoccupation of linguistic activities with the lexicon has concealed this important fact from SNS students. This is because, among the modules of language, the lexicon is the most susceptible to change and evidences the greatest amount of dialectal variation. In contrast, the rule-governed modules, especially syntax and morphology, are particularly resistant to change and show relatively little dialectal variation. As such, linguistic activities that focus strictly on the lexicon have the effect of amplifying the apparent differences between dialects at the expense of the overwhelming number of grammatical rules shared by all dialects of Spanish. In so doing, valuable pedagogical opportunities are lost for empowering students with a demonstration of the vast reservoir of knowledge of the standard language that they bring to the SNS classroom.

Valuable opportunities are also lost for dispelling the commonly held misconception that U.S. Spanish is plagued by unconstrained and widespread deviation from standard Spanish. This catastrophic view of language variation is at the heart of much of the searing criticism directed against U.S. Spanish and the feelings of linguistic inadequacy expressed by Hispanic bilinguals.

It is very telling that critics of U.S. Spanish, as well as insecure SNS students, share an exaggerated awareness of the linguistic traits that separate U.S. Spanish from other more prestigious varieties. Clearly, an awareness of linguistic variation alone is not a sufficient condition to eliminate linguistic prejudice from mainstream society and elevate the linguistic self-esteem of bilingual Hispanics. It is only when this awareness is coupled with a realization that the differences between dialects are largely superficial, narrowly constrained, and relatively few in number, that both postures can be attenuated and a realistic assessment of the issues pertaining to U.S. Spanish can be undertaken.

Basic training in linguistics can go a long way to foster this realization. However, in order to do so, the role of linguistics in the SNS curriculum must be revised, both in scope and goals.

Crucially, linguistic activities must expand their scope of investigation to include sociolinguistic, historical, and dialectal information spanning a wide variety of linguistic modules (i.e., syntax, morphology, phonology, and the lexicon). This information holds the key to providing a complete and valuable picture to SNS students of the most significant issues pertaining to U.S. Spanish.

The following section will examine what is arguably the most important linguistic decision confronting U.S. Hispanics—whether to accept the standard language for its instrumental value, or reject it at a hefty social cost.

### **The Challenge: Accepting The Standard Without Rejecting The Vernacular**

Despite the irrefutable linguistic validity of U.S. Spanish, Hispanic bilinguals must contend with deeply ingrained linguistic prejudices that are not likely to change any time soon. As Krashen (1998a) points out,

The ideal cure for the weak HL speaker would be to change people's attitudes about correctness in language, to persuade stronger HL speakers not to ridicule or correct, but to tolerate weak HL speakers' errors, and to encourage interaction in the HL, a much better way to develop accurate HL competence. This is not likely to happen. Our standards for language are very high and feelings about correctness are strong (Finnegan, 1980): Group membership requires perfection. (p. 46)



Faced with this reality, SNS students must choose whether to embrace the prestige variety, or to reject it altogether in a gesture of frustration and rebellion. If they reject the standard, it is unlikely that they will reap the full professional and social benefits of knowing Spanish. Embracing it, however, does not necessarily constitute a guarantee of maximum returns to SNS students. If acceptance of the standard is accompanied by a repudiation of the vernacular, students will not only face alienation from their communities of origin, but they themselves will, in all likelihood, become perpetrators of the same linguistic prejudices that they have experienced (Tse, 1998).

Ideally, the standard and the vernacular must both be embraced at once by SNS students, though for different reasons. The former must be cultivated for the valuable, social, and professional opportunities it represents for U.S. Hispanics. The latter must be cherished for its link to the personal history of students, and it must be respected for its linguistic richness and legitimacy.

Therein lies one of the most significant challenges facing SNS instruction—getting students and teachers to recognize the instrumental value of the standard variety, without accepting its inherent linguistic superiority over U.S. Spanish. The expanded role for linguistics in the SNS curriculum, proposed in this paper, makes it possible for students and teachers to do just that. In so far as historical and sociolinguistic examples serve to demonstrate the linguistic validity of U.S. Spanish, they fortify the linguistic self-esteem of SNS students. In so far as they demonstrate the arbitrary and ubiquitous nature of linguistic prejudice, sociolinguistic examples serve to inform students as to the social consequences of rejecting the standard language.

Without readily available linguistically-based materials for classroom use, however, the value of this proposal remains limited. As such, the remainder of this paper will present linguistic information that can serve as the basis of SNS activities at all levels of instruction. The arguments and examples to follow are intended to set the tone for rigorous classroom discussions on the challenges that confront U.S. Hispanics at a linguistic, as well as at a social level.

### **The Linguistic Validity Of U.S. Spanish**

There are many arguments as to the linguistic equality of all variants of a language that are easily accessible to students of SNS at all levels of instruction. The majority of these arguments hinge on the fact that many of the stigmatized traits found in U.S. Spanish are amply attested in other languages, as well as in standard Spanish.

By way of example, let us consider the dropping of word-final /s/ (e.g., *entonces* -> *entonce*), a phonological trait of Caribbean dialects and others, that is stigmatized in many parts of the Spanish-speaking world, including the United States. Loss of final /s/, in fact, is a commonly found process in

languages across the world. Notably, it is widely attested in the development of French from Latin. Modern French orthography retains a lengthy historical record of word-final /s/ that were once pronounced, but are now silent. These are commonly found in plural forms (e.g., *livres* “books”), in the verbal paradigm (e.g., *tu parles* “you speak”), and in words such as *allors* “then,” *depuis* “since,” and *jamais* “never,” that have a final /s/ that does not carry grammatical information<sup>1</sup> (Penny, 1991).

Analogy, another widely attested linguistic phenomenon, is the operative process underlying the insertion of word-final /s/ to the preterit form of the second person singular (e.g., *estuvistes* and *comistes*). This is a stigmatized trait found in U.S. Spanish and in other non-standard varieties throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Analogy arises from an effort on the part of speakers to bring aberrant linguistic forms into compliance with a given paradigm. In the case at hand, the process is triggered by the fact that with the exception of the preterit, the second person singular in Spanish, is characterized by a final /s/: *comes*, *comerás*, *comerías*, *comieras*, *comías*, *comierás*.

On the one hand, by adding an /s/ to the second-person preterit form, speakers demonstrate a lack of familiarity with an irregularity associated with the verbal paradigm of the prestige variety. On the other hand, in so doing, they demonstrate an implicit understanding of the general conjugational pattern of the Spanish verbal paradigm. To the linguistically untrained, it is the former that stands out as remarkable about forms like *comistes*. To the linguistically sophisticated, on the other hand, it is the general knowledge implicit in the use of this word that stands out as significant.

These two points of view present very different philosophical perspectives on the nature of the work involved in teaching SNS students. To the linguistically naïve, SNS instruction is predicated on the premise that a gulf of differences separate the speech of SNS students from that of educated Spanish speakers. As such, it is a task of monumental proportions to which students bring little, if any, background knowledge that is of value to the goals of instruction. To the linguistically trained, on the other hand, the task is minor, relative to what is usually involved in teaching Spanish to students that have no background in this language. This is because, from a linguist’s perspective, SNS students have under their command a tremendous amount of knowledge regarding the core rules of Spanish. The challenge for SNS teachers is to direct students to think about issues of language usage and deviation in linguistically sophisticated ways. Not only is this point of view more consistent with linguistic reality, but it is also one that is more empowering of SNS students.

Analogy has played a significant role in the evolution of the Spanish language from Latin. In the verbal paradigm, analogy created regular preterits *metí* and *rió*, (from *meter* and *reír*) rendering obsolete the irregular forms that existed in Latin: *\*mise* and *\*riso*. (Menéndez Pidal, 1980). Analogy

is also responsible for the presence of the final /s/ in *lunes* “Monday” and *miércoles* “Wednesday,” the only days of the week that etymologically did not carry a final /s/. Hence, while *Martes* “Tuesday,” *Jueves* “Thursday,” and *Viernes* “Friday” come from *Martis*, *Jovis*, and *Veneris*, respectively, each with a final /s/, *lunes* and *miércoles* come from *Lunae* and *Mércurii*, with no final /s/. Crucially, at some point in the development of Spanish, speakers assigned a final /s/ to *lunes* and *miércoles*, in an effort to have all days of the week (though not weekend days) characterized by a final /s/.

Analogy is also found in the speech of young children in forms such as *goed* (for *went*), *mans* (for *men*), and *mines* (for *mine*). Far from being proof of children’s linguistic inadequacy, analogy is a demonstration of their mastery of the core rules of English morphology.

Confusion of /r/ and /l/, another stigmatized characteristic of many of the dialects of Spanish represented in the SNS classroom, has also played a role in the development of the Spanish language. Modern day *palabra* “word” comes from the Greek *parabola*, and *roble* “oak,” *carcel* “jail,” and *árbol* “tree” come from *robur*, *carcere*, and *arbore*, respectively (Green, 1988; Penny, 1991). In each case, the current term evidences the fact that /r/ and /l/ have been the object of confusion in the development of Spanish. The history of the English language also demonstrates the positional instability of the segment /r/: *bridd* > *bird*, *frist* > *first*, *pridde* > *third* (Hock, 1991).

The phonological process underlying the creation of diphthongs in nonstandard forms such as *máiz* “corn,” *o.ciá.no* “ocean,” and *pe.liar* “to fight” (from the standard *ma.íz*, *o.cé.a.no*, and *pe.le.ar*, respectively, with no diphthongs)<sup>2</sup> has also played a key role in the historical development of standard Spanish. Specifically, modern day *r/é/ina* “queen,” *tr/é/inta* “thirty,” and *Di/ó/s* “God” (each pronounced with a diphthong), were pronounced in Old Spanish with no diphthong and with primary stress on the /i/: *re.í.na*, *tre.ín.ta*, and *Dí.os*<sup>3</sup> (Menéndez Pidal, 1980).

Like U.S. Spanish, early Spanish exhibited a strong tendency to form diphthongs from contiguous vowels. The *Appendix Probi*<sup>4</sup> evidences this tendency in numerous admonitions such as “*lancea non lancia, lintum non lintium, vinea non vinia, cavea non cavia*” (Menéndez Pidal, 1980, p. 45). The passage of many centuries has erased from the collective memory of Spanish speakers the linguistic deviations from Latin that gave way to modern standard varieties of Spanish. Though the speech of U.S. Hispanics lacks the benefit of time in this regard, the lessons of historical linguistics enable SNS students to maintain a proper perspective about the non-normative traits found in U.S. Spanish.

The pedagogical value of examples such as these for the SNS curriculum cannot be overstated. Faced with the fact that many of the linguistic properties of the current nonstandard dialects of Spanish are formally identical to those that have shaped standard Spanish and other Romance languages, students

cannot help but accept the fact that their own dialect is both rule-governed and linguistically complex.

This is not to say, of course, that all linguistically valid codes are equally acceptable in all social situations. The standard variety is the *lingua franca* of formal communication and as such should be learned by those who wish to make formal use of Spanish. However, as the lessons of comparative and historical linguistics show, the acceptability of the standard variety does not come from its linguistic superiority, but rather, as the next section will illustrate, from the fortuitous confluence of social, historical, and geographical factors.

### The Nature Of Linguistic Prejudice

Historical linguistics provides us with significant insights as to the role of social factors in determining what is prestigious in a language. The history of the pronoun *vos* is particularly telling in this regard.

This pronoun has enjoyed a mixed reputation in its long association with the Spanish language. Though originally a second-person plural form, this pronoun came to be used in Latin as a second person singular form of respect. In the Iberian Peninsula, the pronoun was first adopted by the nobility as a second person singular pronoun for addressing those of equal status. Members of the lower socioeconomic class also used this pronoun as a sign of respect when addressing the nobility. With time, however, *vos* came to be used by the lower socioeconomic classes for addressing members of their own class. This resulted in a loss of prestige for *vos* and triggered the introduction of a replacement term of respect, namely, *vuestra merced*, which later became *usted*. For some time, a three-way pronominal system prevailed in Spain with *tú* and *vos* for familiar situations and *usted* for formal forms of address. By the end of the 17th century, however, its association with the low social classes rendered *vos* extinct in Spain, leaving only *tú* and *usted* as the familiar and formal singular forms of address, respectively. This realignment of the pronominal system made its way to those areas in the New World that were in close contact with Spain but not to the more remote areas of the Spanish Empire.

In the latter, the old three-way pronominal system followed its own course of development. Some areas retained the three-way distinction, while others eliminated one of the familiar pronouns. The retention of *vos* in some areas may have resulted from the creation of new social classes in the New World that were substantially different from those existing in Spain. In such areas, early settlers who used *vos* may have enjoyed greater social prestige and economic power than newer arrivals from Spain who used *tú* (Penny, 1991).

As the history of *vos* clearly illustrates, the prestige of a given linguistic feature rises and falls with that of its users. More often than not, dialects that are not in direct contact with the linguistic centers of prestige are the brunt of criticism while those that follow closely the trends of the centers of prestige enjoy great acceptance. However, as the history of Castilian illustrates, occasionally even isolated dialects rise to prominence given propitious circumstances.

Castilian has its humble origins in the north-central part of the Iberian Peninsula in what is now the northern part of the Province of Burgos. Because of its remote location, this version of vulgar Latin departed more from the prestigious Roman variant than the Iberian variants that had more direct access to the capital of the Roman empire. In its state of isolation, Castilian created new lexical items and retained older linguistic items that fell out of use in Rome and parts of the Empire in closer contact with Rome. Many of these “incorrect” features of speech were perpetuated as the Fall of the Roman Empire all but eliminated any linguistic corrections that may have come from Roman grammarians.

Penny (1991) notes:

Varieties of Hispano-Romance speech which were hitherto peripheral (in both geographical and linguistic terms) are extended southwards at the expense of those varieties which one can presume were previously the most prestigious and the most in keeping with the Romance spoken outside the Peninsula. And among these peripheral varieties of Hispano-Romance, it was one of the most “abnormal,” namely Castilian, which was to have the greatest territorial and cultural success. (p. 13)

Castilian’s rise to prominence arrives by virtue of its association with the “Reconquista,” the movement that resulted in the expulsion of the Arabs from the Iberian Peninsula. This movement has its origin in Castilla la Vieja, the only part of the Iberian Peninsula that escaped Arab domination. As the Reconquista gains ground in the Peninsula, so does Castilian. With the final expulsion of the Moors from Iberia in 1492, the sovereignty of Castilian is firmly established. Subsequent efforts to enrich the production of literary, scientific, and philosophical works in Castilian, serve to further solidify the prestige of this language.

The history of Castilian and of the pronoun *vos* constitute some of the most convincing arguments available to SNS students of the nonlinguistic basis of linguistic prestige. They also provide a glimpse of the powerful social currents that shape the course of language usage in society.

As Andrews (1995) states:

The elevation of one dialect to the standard is simply an accident of history and a matter of social convention, and there is no linguistic basis for equating “nonstandard” with “substandard.” However, deeply ingrained prejudices against nonstandard varieties are a social fact. (p. 31)

U.S. Hispanics that choose to ignore this social fact by failing to acquire the standard variety, must be prepared to pay a hefty social price.

### **Sources Of Linguistic Prejudice**

In 1997, then-president Ernesto Cerdillo of Mexico convened the “First International Congress of the Spanish Language” for the purpose of examining the status of Spanish as a world language. Present at this meeting were Gabriel García Márquez and Camilo José Cela, among other literary figures, as well as journalists, educators, and others that make professional use of language. The conclusions and recommendations of this meeting have far reaching implications for U.S. Spanish.

According to newspaper reports, many conference participants were of the opinion that Spanish in general is in a current state of decay that can only be arrested by the creation of an established body of linguistic authority that can bring into conformity all deviant dialects and registers. Lexical differences loomed large as the marker of deviant linguistic behavior and U.S. Spanish figured prominently in all discussions, as “just about everyone at the conference seemed to feel that the mass migration into the United States represents a serious danger to the (Spanish) language.”

It is not surprising that the very people who believe that the Spanish language is in a state of disarray should be particularly concerned about U.S. Spanish. After all, with its numerous anglicisms and its apparent lack of lexical cohesion, U.S. Spanish seems to hold the established language authorities in blatant contempt. More often than not, however, the preoccupations of the critics of U.S. Spanish reveal a lack of understanding of the nature of linguistic evolution.

As history shows, foreign lexical items are often the target of criticism when they first make their way into a language. However, with the passage of time, the origin of these words is forgotten and they come to be perceived as native to the recipient language. What allows this kind of “lexical naturalization” to take place are the phonological and morphological processes that readily transform the sounds and structures of foreign borrowings into well-formed elements of the recipient grammatical system.

By way of example, let us consider the Anglicism *nursa/norsa*, used widely by many U.S. Hispanics. Though for some speakers the use of this term may denote a lack of familiarity with native *enfermera* “nurse,” the linguistic alterations exacted on this term in the borrowing process evidence an

impressive command of subtle and complex rules of Spanish morphology and phonology. First, a final /a/ has been added so as to fix up what would otherwise be an illicit syllable in Spanish (*\*nurs*). Second, feminine gender has been assigned to this word in correspondence with the added /a/. Finally, the vowels and consonants of the English term have taken on the articulatory properties of their Spanish counterparts.

Indeed, as the above example illustrates, though U.S. Spanish may show significant deviation from the standard varieties in its choice of words, it evidences a great deal of compliance with the core grammatical rules of Spanish. On this point, Silva Corvalán (1997) writes:

Mis estudios y otros similares de contacto en progreso indican que aún en condiciones de intenso contacto y fuertes presiones culturales e ideológicas, los hablantes de español simplifican o generalizan ciertas reglas gramaticales, pero no introducen elementos que causen cambios radicales en la estructura de la lengua. [My studies and other similar ones on ongoing contact indicate that even in conditions of intense contact and strong cultural and ideological pressures, speakers of Spanish simplify or generalize certain grammar rules, but they do not introduce elements that cause radical changes in the structure of the language.] (p. 146)

The history of the Spanish language presents ample confirmation of this conclusion. The Arab occupation of the Iberian Peninsula from 771 to 1492 provided Spanish with intimate and prolonged contact with Arabic, a language of great prestige and cultural achievements at the time. The 4,000 or so words of Arabic origin in the Spanish lexicon manifest many such accomplishments and demonstrate the penetrating influence of Arabic culture in all spheres of life in Spain. Beyond the lexicon, however, the Spanish language shows little if any signs of its longstanding relationship with Arabic. As far as structure goes, Spanish is strictly a Romance language.

Indeed, the historical record of Spanish strongly suggests that the core rules of U.S. Spanish are not in any immediate danger of crumbling by virtue of the influence of English. This does not mean, however, that the Spanish language holds a secure position in U.S. society. Far from it. The social conditions that characterize the use of Spanish in this country are exerting a tremendous pull in the direction of language loss.

### **The Future Of U.S. Spanish: Beyond The SNS Classroom**

The work of Eduardo Hernandez-Chavez (1993) and Garland Bills (1997) presents incontrovertible evidence that second generation Hispanics show a strong preference for English over Spanish, while the third generation retains little knowledge of the language. Bills (1997) writes:

Despite a massive influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants, the shift to English is inexorable. The reasons for the shift are moderately clear in broad outline. The finding of clear associations between using Spanish and low socioeconomic status is repeated in study after study. Furthermore, these associations are transparent to everyone in the society, and the clarity of the evidence to Hispanic youth and young adults surely pushes the process of the shift. (p. 280)

Linguistics can play a crucial role in reversing this shift. By framing linguistic prejudice in a social perspective, it can challenge SNS students to fight against the causes of the low socioeconomic status of U.S. Hispanics, rather than the language of this community. By demonstrating the linguistic validity of U.S. Spanish, it can prepare SNS students to counter the criticism of language purists with well constructed arguments. By stressing the overwhelming similarities between dialects, rather than their differences, it can empower U.S. Hispanics to make better use of their impressive language skills as they strive to attain a fuller command of the standard variety.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, though the fundamental problems that assail U.S. Spanish are not linguistic in nature, linguistic science can play a crucial role in creating conditions in the SNS classroom that are favorable to learning the standard language. In so doing, linguistics in the SNS curriculum can be instrumental in promoting and preserving the Spanish language in the United States.

To the extent that U.S. Hispanics are successful at preserving their language, they will retain a shared sense of group identity. To the extent that they foster this sense of identity, they will wield growing cultural, political, and economic influence in this country and in the Spanish-speaking world at large.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Loss of syllable-final /s/ is a commonly found phenomenon in languages across the world. The process represents a wider process of simplification of the syllable coda position.

<sup>2</sup>A dot indicates syllable boundary. The formation of diphthongs from contiguous vowels represents a common prohibition in languages against starting a syllable with a vowel, as opposed to a consonant.

<sup>3</sup>*Reina* and *treinta* derive from Latin *regina* and *treginta*, respectively. The loss of the intervening /g/ resulted first in hiatus (*re.í.na*, *tre.ín.ta*) and subsequently in diphthongization (*réi.na*, *tréin.ta*) with the accent shifting to the more open vowel.

<sup>4</sup>The Appendix Probi was a linguistic treatise written probably in Africa around the third century after Christ. The manuscript was intended to point out and correct vulgarisms that had entered the Latin language. It provides rich information for historical linguists as to how vulgar Latin was evolving.