

CASTAÑETS AND CONJUGATIONS: SPANISH LINGUISTICS AS CULTURAL CONCEPTS

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Biography:-

Hartmut Heep was educated at the University Of Mainz, Germany. In 1993, he received his doctorate in Comparative Literature from the University of Illinois. He is Associate Professor of German, Humanities, and Comparative Literature at the Pennsylvania State University, and is the author of A Different Poem: Rainer Maria Rilke's American Translators Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, and Robert Bly, as well as the editor of Unreading Rilke: Unorthodox Approaches to a Cultural Myth. Dr. Heep has also published on Rilke, Brecht, Schiller, Flaubert, Apollinaire, Modernism, Gender Studies, Men's and Queer Studies

Abstract:-

Spanish is the most popular foreign language studied at American secondary schools and institutions of higher learning. While French departments throughout the educational landscape in the United States are dwindling, Spanish programs have been growing exponentially. Since Spanish lacks the nasalization of vowels, it is treated as a linguistic relative to English by English-speaking students. Indeed, the omission of personal pronouns in contextualized statements, the phonetic spelling and pronunciation, as well as sufficient cognates within other Romance and even Germanic languages, make Spanish a popular language destination for American students. Although students at the novice level advance rapidly, most students do not move beyond the intermediate level and deprive themselves of the true soul of the Spanish language, the intricacy of Spanish verb tenses, and the Spanish subjunctive. While basic grammar, structure, vocabulary, and etymology are Latin based, Spanish displays unique linguistic phenomena. I will argue that Spanish is not listener focused but speaker based; in other words, it is less important what is said, but how it is said. The impact on Spanish culture of this linguistic hypothesis is the focus of this study.

Keywords:- Grammar, Linguistics, Culture, Second Language, 20th Century, Phonetics

Castañets and Conjugations: Spanish Linguistics as Cultural Concepts

Spanish is the most popular foreign language studied at American secondary schools and institutions of higher learning. While French departments throughout the educational landscape in the United States are dwindling, Spanish programs have been growing exponentially. According to a 2007 MLA survey, enrollment in Spanish classes at U. S. colleges and universities increased by 10.3% since 2002. Spanish constitutes 52.2%, according to the same survey, of all foreign language enrollments. The obvious assumption would equate the 15% Latino and Hispanic population in the United States, a number that is based on the 2010 US census, for the popularity of Spanish. More likely, however, is the myth among American students that Spanish is an easy language to learn. Popular websites, such as www.matadornetwork.com, categorize Spanish as an easy language for English speakers. In a blog Anne Merritt lists Spanish among the nine easiest languages to learn: “Spanish pronunciation is fairly easy for English speakers, with only ten vowel/diphthong sounds (English has 20), and the easy-to-master letter ñ. Like Italian, the orthography is clear and simple; words are written as they’re pronounced, which makes reading easier. Grammatically, Spanish has fewer irregularities than other romance languages too” (Merritt 2013). Moreover, since Spanish lacks the nasalization of vowels, it is treated as a linguistic relative to English by English-speaking students. Indeed, the omission of personal pronouns in contextualized statements, the phonetic spelling and pronunciation, as well as sufficient cognates within other Romance and even Germanic languages, make Spanish a popular language destination for American students. Although students at the novice level advance rapidly, most students do not move beyond the intermediate level and deprive themselves of the true soul of the Spanish language, the intricacy of Spanish verb tenses, and the Spanish subjunctive. In the fall 2013, the Pennsylvania State University at University Park offered 3 sections of beginning Spanish (Spanish 001) with a total of 210 students. Spanish 002 had 880 students enrolled, and Spanish 003 saw 1342 students. The intermediate course Spanish 200, with a heavy focus on advanced grammar, had a total enrollment of 240 students. These numbers are representative of similar sized public universities in the United States, and document that only a small number of students advance beyond the beginning level of Spanish language competency. Thus, beginning students continue to perpetuate the myth of Spanish as an easy language.

While basic grammar, structure, vocabulary, and etymology are Latin based, Spanish displays unique linguistic phenomena. I will argue that Spanish is not listener focused but speaker based; in other words, it is less important what is said, but how it is said. The impact on Spanish culture of this linguistic hypothesis is the focus of this study.

My goal is not to provide a linguistic history of the Spanish language. The excellent etymological annotations in the *Diccionario de la lengua española*, Ralph Penny’s authoritative study *A history of the Spanish language*, among others, have elucidated its complex structure and history. I am interested in the impact of linguistics on Spanish culture, or, more generally speaking, the impact of language on thought. A solid body of research has been created in cognitive psychology and linguistics, focusing on the question whether human cognition depends on language. Philip Wolff and Kevin J. Holmes’s article “Linguistic relativity” points out that “the effect of language on thought, namely, one in which processes associated with language are activated along with nonlinguistic processes. Thus, in this kind of effect, thinking occurs *with* language” (Wolff 2010, 255-256). In other words, thought processes and communication patterns vary depending on the language. Wolff and Holmes’ study is situated at the crossroads between language and culture. Is language a part of culture, or is culture an expression of language?

While American English is receptive to fresh linguistic influences, Spanish follows a more rigid model by enforcing normative standards on their speakers. Franz Lebsanft’s book length study *Spanische Sprachkultur: Studien zur Bewertung und Pflege des öffentlichen Sprachgebrauchs im heutigen Spanien*, discusses the safekeeping of the Spanish language. The implementation of norms that include grammar, spelling, style and lexicon, according to Lebsanft, is necessary, in order to prevent the decay of the language. *The Real Academia Española*, directives such as the *Manual de estilo*, as well as politically centralized educational administrations implement this concept of language maintenance, or *Sprachpflege*. Other linguists, such as Noam Chomsky, prefer to interpret language as an organic whole that can be observed and catalogued without being stifled. Finally, Ana Sánchez-Muñoz compares the impact of normative language rules on Spanish by focusing on *como* as discourse particle. Her study “Style variation in Spanish as a heritage language” confirms that “non-canonical uses are an innovation of the variety spoken by HLS, which has not been illustrated in the Spanish literature” (Sánchez-Muñoz 2007, 169). Education and language innovation, according to Sánchez-Muñoz, are directly proportional. In the case of *como*, the higher educated, canonical speaker of Spanish will eliminate the use of *como* as casual discourse particle. As seen in this example, the systematic application of linguistic conventions to the living organism of a language curtails a natural and organic development.

Language does not only imply making linguistic choices on an individual level, but it also determines social interaction. Rosina Márquez Reiter and María Elena Placencia direct their research to cross-cultural patterns based on dialects and sociolects of various Spanish speakers. Their study offers cultural explanations of linguistic patterns. The basis for this study is what Kevin O’Connor calls contextualization: “the process by which individuals take up positions, and position one another, with regard to the interaction and the broader communities in which they are participating” (O’Connor 2003, 72). Although contextualization studies the linguistic interaction of speakers of the same language, it does not seek to provide answers for specific linguistic expressions and behaviors within the same language community. Eventually comparative, linguistic anthropology offers cultural explanations for linguistic expressions in a contrastive manner. Idiomatic expressions, I would argue, are at the center of the intersection of language and culture.

Each language expresses its relationship with and perception of the other in idioms, such as: “it’s Greek to me.” Greek with its unfamiliar alphabet, and its relative distance to England, made the language look foreign. The French received

an infusion of about 80,000 Jews from Spain after the inquisition of 1492. Sounds and script of Hebrew were unfamiliar to the French: “C’est de l’hébreu.” Italy’s most exotic linguistic contact were the Moors, hence the expression: “c’è arabo.” The oddness and unfamiliarity of an object or event becomes Spanish to German speakers. In 1530, Charles V became king of the Holy Roman Empire of Castile and Aragon and moved his court to Spain. The Spanish language and customs clashed with German. Hence the idiom in German: “Es kommt mir spanisch vor.” Arabic, on the other hand, was not foreign to the Spaniards who had been occupied from 711 till 1492. Similar to the Normans in England, the Moors introduced a more sophisticated, more complex lifestyle into Spain, and words such as: alfombra, almoada, almuerzo, ajedrez, alcalde, hasta, rehén, and ojala, among others, reflect the elegant lifestyle of the Moors. But Spain remained isolated after the inquisition. Even the conquest of Latin America did not bring a fresh linguistic wave into the Spanish language. Finally, Spanish adopted the expression: “Es chino para mí” much later. When most European nations had contact with each other, Spain had remained isolated after the expulsion of the Moors and Jews. Indeed, the Pyrenees have presented not only a geographic, but also a cultural boundary that kept Spain cut off until Franco’s death in 1975. Consequently, Spain’s geographic isolation is reflected linguistically in the three levels of demonstrative adjectives: *este*, *ese*, *aquel*. We know “los adjetivos demostrativos se emplean para indicar la distancia relativa entre dos ó más personas u objetos” (<http://www.Roble.pntic.mec.es>). whereas German, French, and English rely on only two levels, Spanish added an additional level of differentiation. The demonstrative adjective *este* refers to close and known objects within the sender: “lo que está cerca de la persona que habla, o representa y señala lo que se acaba de mencionar” (www.rae.es). *Ese* within the realm of the receiver: “designa lo que está cerca de la persona con quien se habla, o representa y señala lo que esta acaba de mencionar” (www.rae.es). If we apply geography to the demonstrative adjectives, then *este* refers to objects or persons in the same village, *ese* seems to point to slightly different neighboring villages, albeit still Spanish. *Aquel*, defined by the *Diccionario de la lengua española* as: “lo que física o mentalmente está lejos de la persona que habla y de la persona con quien se habla” (www.rae.es) eventually describes a space beyond the Spanish horizon or comprehension, such as the peninsula Finisterre on the west coast of Galicia. In other words, anything non-Spanish becomes physically and mentally foreign. Matthew Restall explains this linguistic phenomenon with the fact that Spanish culture is intricately connected to urban centers and developments.

According to Restall, “living alone in a country house or on a farm was considered barbaric” (28). Cities provided safety, “independence from kings and other challengers, plus the right to collect regional taxes” (28). Thus the economic, cultural, and geographic reality of medieval Spain is reflected in the formation and use of demonstrative adjectives.

These demonstrative adjectives suggest that Spanish speakers differentiate between various levels of familiarity and distance within their own community but mark off the unknown or mentally incomprehensible. Phillip Wolff sums up M. Bowerman’s observation concerning spatial perception and language. Bowerman proved that distance perception is based on language: “For example, verbs of placement in Korean distinguish between tight and loose fit and ignore the distinction between containment (e.g., ‘put in’) and support (e.g., ‘put on’), while the converse is true for English prepositions” (Wolff 2011, 260). If containment is irrelevant to the Korean speaker, it seems plausible that distance is perceived differently as well for the Spanish speaker, as exemplified by the demonstrative adjectives. What does that mean for the process of communication?

A standard communication model includes sender, message, and receiver. In most communication processes the goal of communication is to transmit a message successfully to the receiver. In other words, the sender modifies the code to allow a successful decoding by the receiver. This model, however, does not apply to Spanish. The focus of a Spanish communication model remains on the sender and the code. The code is measured by standardized and memorized linguistic norms. Consequently, the decoding by the receiver occurs only within narrow parameters without critical cognition. Fant’s contrastive approach to communication models in the form of “turn-taking” reveals the cultural impact on different discourse patterns. Fant examined aspects of turn-taking in Swedish and Spanish. His research showed that Swedish follows a model in which the speaker selects the next speaker. Spanish follows a discourse model based on interruption, rather than turntaking. Fant bases the Spanish model on the need of self-affirmation for the Spanish speaker. Moreover, Fant also found that Spanish speakers use a higher number of self-linked statements than Swedish speakers. Discourse patterns, common in Spanish, are interpreted as aggressive and egocentric by Swedish speakers. Fant’s research provides additional evidence of Spanish as a sender based language. Bou Franch and Gregori Signes’ receiver based research on listener response confirms Fant’s sender focused results. Bou Franch and Gregori Signes compared the listener responses of English and Spanish native speakers. Their research showed that English speaking listeners demonstrate a much higher number of listener responses, compared to Spanish listeners. In other words, the English receiver is actively engaged in a dialogue with the sender, whereas the Spanish receiver appears to be more self focused and less responsive to the message. New inter-cultural research, developed by the University of Stockholm, but also by Fant and Häggkvist, indicates that Spanish speakers present a personal opinion abruptly and immediately, while Swedish speakers will share their personal, particularly controversial, views more reluctantly and much deeper into the conversation. A linguistic example will illustrate this point. Ana Sánchez-Muñoz’ study focuses on discourse particles such as *como*, *así que*, and *entonces*. She concludes that: “so, *así que* ‘so’ and *entonces* ‘so/then’ did not vary across registers but rather across speakers” (Sánchez-Muñoz 2007, 169). Her study supports the thesis of a sender based communication model. Strict language rules eliminate the differences between social registers, channeling the communication along narrow, agreed upon registers. The educated, canonical Spanish speaker is restricted in his linguistic choices. Since individual linguistic expression falls short in the receiver targeted communication model, the speaker can direct his creativity towards the sender, not the receiver. The following random examples will clarify my thesis.

Examples:

1. To meet at the corner=encontrarse en la esquina/ el rincón/ el recoveco.

The verb “to meet” can illustrate this sender based model. In English *to meet* and in French *rencontrer quelqu'un* require a direct object. The focus moves from the subject to the object, or from the sender to the receiver, or to the person to be met. In Spanish “encontrarse” is reflexive and reflects the subject or sender without a focus on the object or receiver. If the intent of the action is to meet someone, Spanish communication will fail. The plethora of word choices for “corner,” albeit hyper-precise, presents an additional obstacle in the effective transmission of the message: to meet at the corner. The next example will focus on *ser vs estar*. During the first weeks of Spanish instruction, each novice is introduced to the two forms of to be: *ser vs estar*, and two forms of to have: *tener* and *haber*. While the use of *tener* and *haber* follows linear rules, requiring a single decoding of the sender’s message, *ser* and *estar* allow for sender based nuances, and consequently for multiple decodings by the receiver. The following example will clarify this point.

2. To be blind=estar/ser ciego/a

The message to be communicated is: someone cannot see, someone is blind. The adjective is the main focus in a receiver based communication model, whose primary goal is to convey a message. The arbitrary differentiation, although meaning carrying, diffuses the attention from the adjective to the dual verb possibility. Hence the receiver might ponder the fact whether *estar* or *ser* were used, rather than that someone is blind. Multiple coding and decoding options become finally obvious in the two forms of the verb to be.

3. Ser vs estar=to be

Each Spanish student is presented with the basic rule: *estar* is temporary, *ser* is permanent. A rich research apparatus, in particular Vaño-Cerdá, has focused on the copular verbs. Michelle Salazar’s study of monolingual communities in Mexico and bilingual communities of New Mexico and Los Angeles reveals that “code-switching and the presence of an intensifier favor the use of *estar* as does a lower level of education” (Salazar 2007, 354). Better educated Spanish speakers will embrace arbitrary rules readily, while lesser educated, mostly bilingual, Spanish speakers apply a less normative structure. This arbitrariness of rules apparently is not only a major obstacle for students of Spanish, but also for non-natives. For instance, geographic location, although permanent since Madrid is and will always be in the center of Spain, requires the temporary verb *estar*. Again important factual information about the location of a city is diluted by verb choice and arbitrary rules. The cultural significance of verb tense modes will add to this discussion. The subjunctive is a central feature of Spanish, and a rich research apparatus has explored its grammatical aspects, particularly noteworthy is I. Mackenzie’s article “The Spanish subjunctive: The philosophical dimension.” Traditional grammarians approach the subjunctive mostly etymologically without offering cultural implications of this grammatical mode. W.A. Beardsley agrees that: “most verbal actions expressed in the subjunctive do exist only in the imagination” (Beardsley 1925, 101). The Spanish speaker, however, seems to associate the subjunctive not with a probability/impossibility, but rather, according to Beardsley, with the future: “the future as a tense had its origin in a subjunctive form because the future is *per se* uncertain and indefinite, and should naturally take the mood of indefiniteness” (Beardsley 1925, 101). Furthermore, Mark Goldin bases the use of the subjunctive on two principles: a reaction, and a presupposition. Goldin defines reaction as: “someone’s evaluative reaction to something. He may like it, dislike it, be surprised by it, made sick by it, be frightened by, is appalled by it, delighted by it, happy about it, sad about it, angry about it” (Goldin 1974, 296). Presupposition, according to Goldin is understood as: “the nature of a speaker’s belief about the event or state he is discussing” (Goldin 1974, 296-297). Beardsley and Goldin both confirm a speaker based communication model, in which the subjectivity of the sender is at the core of each message. Although various linguistic authorities and grammarians provide rules for its correct application, the subjunctive allows ample room for coding and decoding nuances, case in point is the conjunction *cuando*. English: When I come home, I will drink a glass of water German: Wenn ich nach Hause komme, trinke ich ein Glas Wasser Spanish: When I might come home, I drink water Cuando llegue en casa, tomo agua. Whereas German uses the present tense in both sentence segments, English applies the future tense in the main clause. Spanish permits an optional present subjunctive, allowing for a grammatically and cultural exchange of future and present subjunctive. The subjunctive moves the action of coming home into the sender’s realm of possibility, without an objective time reference or confirmation for the receiver. The personal flavor of the subjunctive pulls the communication back to the sender. The same is true for the subjunctivo pluscuamperfecto, or Konj II in the conditional phrase.

Si hubiera (hubiese) tenido tiempo, habría estudiado más= si hubiera (hubiese) tenido tiempo, hubiera (hubiese) estudiado más

The tense sequence in the conditional phrase irrealis is as follows: Pluscuamperfecto del subjuntivo + condicional compuesto OR Pluscuamperfecto del subjuntivo + pluscuamperfecto del subjuntivo First, verbs in imperfecto del subjuntivo occur in two grammatically identically forms: ie *hubiera* and *hubiese*, creating an even richer verb choice for a sender based communication. Thus, the Spanish language moves away from the possibility of an objective possibility of the past conditional towards the personally referenced subjunctive. The subjunctive allows for the individual to construct the message around the sender with minimal regard for the receiver but with multiple linguistic options for the sender. This magical world of dreams and subjective possibilities found a natural literary home in Magical Realism. Silvina Montrul studied the formation of subjunctive in monolingual, bilingual, and heritage speakers. She confirms that only monolingual children fully take advantage, and appreciate the complexity of the Spanish subjunctive. While bilingual children might never develop a full understanding of the subjunctive, heritage speakers: “never fully acquire subjunctive morphology or, those who do, later lose it” (Montrul 2007, 27). In her conclusion she states: “2nd generation speakers,

who may recognize the use of subjunctive versus indicative in obligatory contexts, do not necessarily have the ability to discriminate semantically between subjunctive and indicative in variable contexts, when there is a subtle meaning difference” (Montrul 2007, 37). A sender based communication model makes it effectively impossible for non-natives to ever achieve near-native fluency in Spanish.

Finally, Spanish seems to abandon a basic logic of Western communication. René Descartes’

“Cogito, ergo sum,” opened the door for reason to become a part of Western thinking and speech. Logic became the basis for an objective and factual representation of reality. Such argumentation minimizes subjective opinions and emotions. The concept of cause and effect is linguistically expressed in negations, affirmations, and coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. Spanish, however, violates the Cartesian postulate. First, the causality of why-because is eliminated by the homophones *por qué* and *porque*. Moreover, in Spanish the construction: *es lógico* requires a subjunctive, such as: “es lógico que 2+2 SEAN 4.” The verb *creer*, is situated on the opposite side of logic and objective argumentation and ought to require a subjunctive. In Spanish, however, it requires the indicative and makes statements such as: “Creo que todos los hombres tienen tres cabezas” an incontestable truism. Consequently, grammatically personal opinions, or *expresiones de opinión*, such as *creo que*, and *pienso que* obtain the same validity as *estoy seguro de que/ estoy convencido de que*. Since these expressions require the indicative, Spanish creates the impression that one’s belief is reality and logic remains a hypothesis or suggestion. Thought, opinion and belief become the foundation of a sender based communication. Receiver focused logic and objectivity are abandoned in this model.

The fluidity between cause and effect is additionally expressed in the homophones of because and why: *porqué* and *por que*. By assigning identical sounds to contrastive concepts, the Spanish speaker is denied the opportunity of clearly presenting binary oppositions. Finally, the cornucopia of expressions for “maybe,” such as: *quizás/tal vez/puede ser* is an additional indication that Spanish is not only sender or speaker focused, but that the speaker’s personal opinion achieves the status of common truth by creating another world of im-/possibilities. Without a commonly agreed foundation of cause and effect and verifiable facts, any discourse remains in the realm of the subjective hypothesis, or according to the Princeton University website: magical realism: a real truth that is based on personal opinion, a truth: “in which magical elements are blended into a realistic atmosphere in order to access a deeper understanding of reality. These magical elements are explained like normal occurrences that are presented in a straightforward manner which allows the ‘real’ and the ‘fantastic’ to be accepted in the same stream of thought”

(<http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/.../docs/Magic/realism.html>).

In summary, the educated, canonical speaker of Spanish can compensate for prescriptive language rules by utilizing a rich linguistic playground on the verb tense and mode levels, allowing for various coding and decoding options. These multiple decoding options, however, can cause ambiguity and inaccuracy, particularly for a non-native speaker. It appears that such a communication model, in which the message seems secondary, focuses heavily on the sender, rather than the receiver. The cultural implications of this linguistic reality can only be stated as observations.

First, when comparing Spain’s colonizing methods to European powers, particularly England and France, it becomes apparent that Spain did not create major infrastructure systems in the new world. Whereas France and England established extensive, permanent rail and road systems in their colonies, the Spaniards utilized ancient trade roads for exploitation. Spain’s mark on Latin America is largely limited to urban architecture, rather than the creation of interconnected networks, such as the British rail system in India.

Secondly, it seems that a sender based communication model has a negative impact on research and technology. It appears that a sender based communication is directly proportional to research outcome. Physics, for example, was not taught at the prestigious Catholic Seminary of Santiago de Compostela until the 1856-57 course and Natural History was not included until 1868. The distribution of Nobel Prize winners reveals the following statistics, according to the official website www.nobelprize.org: The United States have been awarded 350 Nobel Prizes, out of which 9 are awarded in literature. The United Kingdom has received 120 Nobel Prizes in total, 10 in literature alone. Germany has received 103 in total, 9 are in literature. Finally, France has 66 total Nobel awards, 13 in literature. In comparison: all Spanish speaking countries, including Spain, amount to a grand total of 23 Nobel Prizes: 5 in medicine, 2 in chemistry, 5 in peace, and, not surprisingly, 11 in literature. The lack of Nobel Prizes is multifactorial. Impoverished living conditions, lack of research facilities, and political instability come readily to mind. The disproportionately high number of Nobel Prizes in literature can easily be explained with a sender based communication model which allows for a rich and multilayered literature, particularly poetry and magical realism. Consequently, Spanish literature allows the sender to explore language nuances, while creating pleasure for the receiver in discovering new and uncharted meaning combinations. No other literary work exemplifies the richness of the Spanish language and its cultural application better than Miquel de Cervantes’ masterpiece *Don Quixote*.

Finally, it is noteworthy that no English speaking country has been a dictatorship. Following Wolff and Holmes’ argument that language impacts the cognitive process, language has an important influence on the social and political matrix of a language community. While English-speakers live in de jure democratic systems, most Spanish speaking countries have been or are de facto dictatorships. Indeed, Spanish textbooks in the United States, such as *Mosaicos*, associate Spanish history with dictatorial systems: “A sad part of Spanish and Latin American history has been the rise and fall of numerous dictators. Nearly every Spanish-speaking country in the world has experienced dictatorship at one time or another” (<http://cw.prenhall.com/bookbind/pubbooks/mosaicos2/chapter15/essay1/deluxe-content.html>).

The same webpage asks students of Spanish to read the biographies of the following four dictators: Porfirio Díaz, Francisco Franco, Fidel Castro, and Juan Domingo Perón. The exercise, however, fails to offer any explanation of this historical reality. It appears to be difficult to pursue the common good of a community in a sender based language model.

A linguistic self as center misses the needs of society as a whole. It seems that a dictatorial imperative overwrites the Spanish language model, albeit at the price of suppression and the loss of personal freedom.

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