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The Silencing of the Californios: Tracing the Beginnings of Linguistic Repression in 19th Century California

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ABSTRACT

How was Spanish in California silenced? Which were the sociolinguistic decisions that forced Spanish into a secondary place in the history of California? This paper discusses, using contemporary sources, how the linguistics situation in California changed from politically protected bilingualism to strict monolingualism in the nineteenth century, and which were the sociolinguistic consequences for Spanish speakers.

KEYWORDS: *Spanish, California, diglossia*

The history of Spanish Language in California is that of a nonexistence, paraphrasing Lázaro Carreter's affirmation that 'la historia del teatro medieval en lengua española es la historia de una ausencia' (1997). The reasons for this absence are absolutely the same in both cases: the ignorance or lack of proper consideration of the sources. In the case of the Californios, all the documents are waiting for us, piled up in the Bancroft Library and the Huntington Library, and many other smaller archives and repositories. But this is a matter for other venue, and not for today.

In this paper, I intend to explain how the **NEW ANGLO-SAXON RULERS**, as James L. Ord posits it (1874: lines 1–8), silenced, or tried to silence Spanish language in California in the nineteenth century. I firmly believe that understanding how it happened, we would be in a better position in order to comprehend Spanish in California as it is spoken today.

In order to explain so, I will examine contemporary documents and testimonies that offer a clear explanation of how the Hispanic populations of the area moved back from the political and social preeminence, to the catacombs of diglossia, underrepresentation and, more importantly, lack of linguistic self-esteem.

1. **THE SILENCING OF THE CALIFORNIOS.** Native Spanish speakers in California today, if asked, may say that the Spanish they use is *INAPPROPRIATE*, and although this may be due to the lack of use of Spanish in the public sphere—which trains the Heritage users only in domestic situations with a subsequent pragmatic gap—it is also due to historical reasons, as I will show shortly thereafter.

There are not many studies about Contemporary Spanish in California, and even fewer that consider it a legitimate variant. Los Angeles Vernacular Spanish (LAVS), as defined by Parodi (2009) and studied by many of my colleagues in this same volume, is the only serious study about contemporary Spanish in California that is not biased by social or political controversies, and only based on linguistic non-manipulated facts, as her own work and that of some of my colleagues here has manifested. Parodi has defined this dialect as a rur-urban descendent of that of Northern Mexico, mostly used by working class individuals, and one that children acquire in the public system of education, notwithstanding the Spanish dialect spoken in their homes, as Belén Villarreal (2012) suggests.

Was this dialect present in California since the very beginning of the colonization? Although it is impossible to be 100% sure about this, as always happens with historical linguistic research, there are some traces of contemporary LAVS that were already present in the texts of the Californios, especially in those of the last third of the nineteenth century, such as code switching. Aurelio Macedonio Espinosa (1940) worked in the thirties with some Californio informants that defined themselves as descendants of those nineteenth-century Californios, and he concluded that the dialect they used was quite similar to that of other regions historically populated by Hispanics in the United States. His study, and of course the common features it shows, function as a bridge between both contemporary and historical vernacular Spanish.

However, three have been the arguments that have been used in order to explain the devoicing of the nineteenth-century Californios and, in a way, the alleged deprivation of contemporary Spanish speakers in the area:

1. The Californios were unable to express themselves in Spanish.
2. The continuous incorporation of Spanish speakers with different dialects to California erased the original dialect, in the case that it ever existed.

3. The Californios did not have a sense of national belonging to Mexico.

All three imply that there is no Spanish in California and that the real culprits for its disappearance are the mere Californios, unable to fend for themselves and for their language. In interest of space, I will say for now that the three are untrue: the Californios used their language profusely, with many pragmatic registers. And they also had a profound sense of belonging both to Mexico and to California, at the same time. I have studied this topic profusely in other writings (Lamar Prieto 2012).

This idea about the disappearance of Spanish in California is motivated, I believe, by a sociolinguistic politic of appropriation that, with a territorial appropriation as its ultimate goal, developed a series of very efficient sociolinguistic instruments that I will explain immediately.

So now, how was Spanish in California silenced?

Spanish in California was silenced. It disappeared, according to the critical sources (Perissinotto 1998; Perissinoto & Moreno de Alba 1998). It vanished, and so did its speakers. However, there is a long tradition of considering certain groups of New Mexicans or Texans as descendants of the original Hispanic populations. Consequently, we may ask: why did Californios disappear, but not Texans or New Mexicans? One immediate answer may come from the territorial expansion of California. California in 1848 comprised present-day California, Nevada, Utah and some areas of Wyoming and Arizona.

From 1848 onwards, with the signature of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, California became a territory of the United States. The first Constitution as a state was proclaimed in the first days of 1850, and the second in 1880. If we compare its situation with that of other territories involved in the same process, it is clear how the political horizon differs sharply.

Arizona celebrated its centenary in 2012, and so did New Mexico, both being composed of different acquisitions and purchases. Texas, the Lone Star, was a Republic from 1836 to 1845, the date in which it was incorporated into the United States. Nevada acquired the status of state in 1864, five years after the discovery of large silver ores. A large portion of the present-day state belonged to Utah until then. Of course the situation of Utah itself, with the claims to the creation of a State of Deseret, would lead us through a very different path than the one we are pursuing. To sum up, the dates are as follow: Texas (independent since

1836, 1845), California (1850), Nevada (1864), Utah (1896) and Arizona and New Mexico (1912). California was, then, the first of the Mexican territories acquired by war to be accepted as a state by the Union. Why this difference?

The answer is easy: California was extremely rich. The gold rush and the subsequent affluence of new immigrants from the Eastern States meant a complete redo of California's landscape. Let's use an example. If we consider the San Francisco area, by 1880 most of the ranchos had been patented to individuals not of Mexican or Californio origin. The whole area North of the Bay, from Marin to Sonoma including Napa, was 100% non-Spanish-speaking (*Report* 1886). How may this have happened?

The answer is a legal one. The appropriation began with the passing of the 1851 Land Act, whose complete name is "An Act to Ascertain and Settle Private Land Claims in the State of California". Most Californios based their economy on the ranches: farming and cattle, selling hide and tallow to merchants. But the sudden doubts regarding the possession of the land, which by the way was contrary to the spirit of Guadalupe Hidalgo, modified their society.

First of all, and although the law stated differently, there were no courts with bilingual resources. As proof, if one contrasts the amount of legal documents in Spanish held by the Bancroft Library, it is easy to see how they almost disappear from 1850 onwards. Francisco Hernández says, in this same year:

Desde el año de 1849 ha existido cierta animosidad entre los Mexicanos y Americanos, tan agena (sic) de un pueblo magnánimo y libre, de manera que estos han deseado con todo su corazón que los Mexicanos todos no tuvieran mas (sic) que un solo pescuezo para cortarselo (sic). Han sufrido muchas injusticias, y principalmente en las minas, han sido abusados y maltratados impugnemente (sic). Si un Mexicano tiene por desgracia un pleito en las cortes de este Estado está seguro de perderlo. Es imposible negar esta aserción porqué (sic) conocemos a muchos infelices que así les ha sucedido apesar (sic) de los esfuerzos que han hecho para obtener sus derechos y su justicia imparcial (1:11).

Spanish was not a language to be used in courts anymore. If the Californios wanted *sus derechos y su justicia imparcial*, they had to jump

headfirst into the mainstream of using English to communicate with the administration.

With the legal side devoiced, another punch came from public schools. Financing for schools in Spanish vanished (Lamar Prieto 2011), so all students received their classes in English, even those whose families were of Hispanic heritage. This was the very first moment in which the subsequent generation of Hispanics in California began to lose their pragmatic contexts. That is to say, if you only speak Spanish in a limited set of situations, you will eventually be unable to use it outside of these pre-marked contexts.

The feeling of unrest and deception grew exponentially in the Californio community, as we can see in this fragment of the *Proclama al hijo de la nueva California*, a previously unpublished document that I found in the Campos family archive, a repository composed of personal documentation and held by The Bancroft Library. The only section that is actually legible is quite a long fragment, but it deserves to be listened to in full. I transcribed it with the actual orthographic representation. While reading, try to figure out in your mind the actual pronunciation, in order to understand the sociolinguistic gap that the speakers of contemporary California Spanish may confront when they try and use Spanish in a public venue:

El hijo de la nueva California apreciando siempre la libertad que les legaron sus antepasados estuvieron siempre listos a defender su patria cada vez que fue amenazada por el extranjero y esto mismo probó cuando en la ultima guerra entre Mejico y los Estados Unidos del Norte concurrió p^a defender herviente su nacionalidas.

En vano fueron los esfuerzos del pueblo californio y era preciso que tan pequeña fraccion sucumbiera á las fuerzas cuatruplicadas de una nacion poderosa. El Californio vió traspasado su corazon con el puñal de la ignominia cuando rotos los vinculos de un pacto social viera atacada su nacionalidas por un tratado que aunque injusto en parte era preciso sugetarse á sus condiciones.

El Californio tenia a la vista la historia de Tejas y no esperaba otra garantia en su favor que la buena fé p^a el cumplim^{to} del tratado celebrado en Guadalupe Hidalgo. Temiendo el estado de guerra, el Californio creyó lealtad alguna alivió en la paz

establecida y leyes de esta. Desde entonces comenzó á sufrir una serie de padecimientos vejaciones y robos de todo genero. El Californio tiene en la mira á Mejico su madre patria igualmente

So we are in a position of answering both the questions we had considered at the beginning: ‘How was Spanish in California silenced?’ and ‘Which were the sociolinguistic decisions that forced Spanish into a secondary place in the history of California?’

It was set aside in the public sphere, in schools and in the administration, its validity as a language of culture contested, its literary and cultural past forgotten. Adult Californios felt forced to learn English to fight for their properties while, at the same time, Californio children received classes in English. This twofold approach was meant to guarantee a successful implantation of the English language. However, two hundred years after, and also due to the persistent flux of immigrants, Spanish is still in use.

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